

In 1957 Richard Hoggart wrote *The Uses of Literacy*. His book was split into two parts, the first looking at the era in which he grew up, the 1930's and the second looking at the contemporary time, which was of course the 1950's. The aim of the book was to analyse what Hoggart saw as the decline of the popular culture of the working class. He discussed what was 'good' and 'bad' popular culture and what part they played in the two times. These things are obviously a matter of opinion and Hoggart puts his case to argue against the changes which were occurring in the 1950's, particularly with regards the moral standards of the mass entertainment. In this essay Hoggart's book and arguments will be considered and then they will be evaluated.

In the first part of his book Hoggart looks at the popular culture of the English working class of the 1930's. He depicts the distinct characteristics of the working class at that time and outlines in detail a typical wedding and an example of a recreational activity of them. He claims that the pastimes of the 1930's working class were generally group activities with everyone taking part at the same time. The popular culture was therefore a reflection of this. As such activities were a communal event they relied heavily on conventions and everybody knowing what was expected of them and doing it.

The second part of the book looks at the contemporary (to the 1950's) working class. This part looks more at the popular culture of the time rather than relaying the norms of it. It considers two sub cultures and the popular cultures of them, one he critiques in detail, that of the Teddy boys, who he calls the 'Juke Box Boys'. This culture, the culture of the 1950's is where Hoggart introduces his theories on 'bad' popular culture. He is not claiming that it is the standard at that point but that it is the beginning of the decline of what he considers to be 'good' culture'.

To evaluate Hoggart's distinction between 'good' and 'bad' popular culture it seems obligatory to first consider what he means when referring to popular culture. As explained in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture An Introduction* (2001: 5-6) Williams suggests four definitions for the term popular culture; 'well liked by many people', 'inferior kinds of work', 'work deliberately setting out to win favour with the people', culture actually made by the people for themselves'. It would be difficult to identify a single supreme characterization as a composite of several of those definitions offered is likely to represent any individual's understanding of popular culture. It is clear that Hoggart considers the 'good' culture of the 1930's to be made by the people whilst the growing popular culture of the 1950's he regards more as setting out to be popular, he obviously also sees it as inferior.

Hoggart felt that the popular culture of the 1950's was becoming 'bad'. He felt that the youth, who were more susceptible to the influence, had become submerged in a new mass culture, that of America. This new culture was lacking in morals and therefore as a consequence so were those who accepted it. Hoggart cited two extracts of 'good' writings one from East Lynne the other from Adam Bede and compared their 'moral tone' with what he offered as an example of contemporary writing. Hoggart argued that the contemporary was of poorer quality than the other two due to a lack of 'moral tone'. However the other pieces were, in Hoggart's own words, 'oratory'. As identified in Cultural Theory and Popular Culture an Introduction the contemporary piece's lack of moral leadership could be considered by some to be enriching to the audience as it encourages them to have to truly consider and evaluate the issues for themselves rather than being lead to a conclusion.

The new mass culture which Hoggart was so opposed to was one of constant pleasure-seeking where huge emphasis is put on enjoying ones self. This hedonism, in Hoggart's opinion, meant that people became accustomed to having fun, it became a matter of routine and therefore the quality became less important as it became more difficult for the people to judge. 'The strongest argument against modern mass entertainment is not that they debase taste...but that they over excite it, eventually dull it and finally kill it...the audience is almost entirely unable to look up and say, 'But in fact this cake is made of sawdust.' (Hoggart 1957 cited in Storey 2001, 41). The 1950's culture went against that of the traditional working class as it was one much more of mass entertainment, putting an end to the community spirit of the culture Hoggart grew up in. Hoggart feels it is necessary to fully participate in an activity to gain something back from it, he uses as an example of a 'good' cultural activity a day at the seaside arranged by a working men's club for a group of working class people.

In his criticism Hoggart's main emphasis is on the literature of the 1950's. He spoke of young men in the National Service and of their reading habits. Due to conscription, in the 1950's, many men in the army were not there by choice and as a result were just waiting for their two mandatory years to end, with no genuine financial responsibilities their wages were free to be spent recreationally. As they are also away from home they do not feel any real constraints on what is and is not a socially acceptable past time. Hoggart believes that these circumstances encouraged the young men to read, what he considered to be substandard, literature. He lists what were the most popular publications with the young soldiers, the majority of which are magazines made up of articles and the only books of which are crime novels.

This literature, which Hoggart criticises so is also popular with the youth sub-culture of the time, the Teddy Boys. Unlike the majority of boys who soon enough, grow up into men and

take on the related responsibilities of marriage, the Juke Box Boys, as Hoggart refers to them do not. They work only to fund their social activities which are mainly sitting in milk bars playing music on the juke boxes. They do not have the social competence to interact with others or form a useful part of society. Though Hoggart does not believe that they are the majority by any means it is his opinion that these adolescents are a sign of what is to come because of course the youth of today are the society of tomorrow.

Hoggart's book does raise some interesting and in my opinion valid points but does not make as definite a conclusion as he feels he wishes it to. The first part, of the 1930's is very romanticised, it speaks of fond memories, which it is based on. The second part, in the 1950's is based instead on research as an academic so clearly the perspective from which Hoggart is looking at and more importantly judging them is drastically different. Another issue which would have affected his opinion is that in the 1930's Hoggart was part of the working class, by the 1950's his personal situation had changed dramatically, he was by then a university tutor, an academic. This distancing would clearly make it much easier for him to judge the working class of 1950's which, with him not being part of, it would be much more difficult to relate to. This inconsistency in his point of view is apparent in the book and made it difficult to directly compare the two eras therefore I found it difficult to fully assess his 'good' and 'bad' popular culture definitions.

The argument that too much emphasis is put on trying to enjoy one's self all the time causing a numbing of senses is one I am very interested in. I feel it is a curious notion, it at first consideration makes sense to me; over stimulate something and you will deaden it. However after further consideration I began to contemplate what else is one to consider if not how much one wants to do something and how enjoyable it will be, what other point to something could there be. I think though Hoggart's line of reasoning was that the constant need for instant gratification will have this negative effect.

Bibliography

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