

I. Introduction: Culture in Times Square

Here we are ... at the center of pop culture. Take a look around ... All kinds of things and people vying for our attention. Different people from different places come here from all over the world to try and take their bite of the Big Apple. To make it their way. To influence the world. To be influenced by the world. But every one of them is different.

That's what I want to talk to you about. Our differences. Our influences. What makes you "you"? You are an individual; there's nobody else in the world like you. But there is something big that is influencing who you are becoming. It shapes the way you think, your values, your behavior, your dreams. And it is not just you – it affects all of us. And if we're honest with ourselves, we are not aware of this influence on our thinking and living. What is this massive influence on all of our lives? I am talking about culture.

II. What is Culture?

Culture is the ocean we swim in. Like a fish in the middle of the Pacific, the fish doesn't even know he is wet. But even more, everything that the fish sees, he sees through the water.

Culture is not a fish thing; it's a people thing. We see it at school, at our jobs, in our music, movies, sports, and clothes.

Sociologists tell us that culture is made up of patterns of behavior and beliefs that are passed on from generation to generation. These behaviors and beliefs give identity to a group or society. It's our collective memory and what we choose to celebrate: birthday parties, weddings, graduations, Independence Day, Easter, Memorial Day, Halloween, Thanksgiving, and Christmas.

Every country and society gives birth to a culture that makes it unique. From the tropical jungles of Papua New Guinea to the urban jungles of New York, from the temples of Japan to the churches of Nairobi, a people's culture explains and shapes their behavior and their values. You are a child of your culture. It is inescapable.

Look at the people around you right now. Everyone is communicating an identity by how they are dressed. Now, if you were dressed this way in a different culture, say in New Delhi or Cairo, you would be communicating something completely different.

We see and judge the people and the world around us through our culture. And, if we are honest with ourselves, it changes us and we don't even realize it.

III. Culture and Worldviews

All cultures derive from our worldview. We'll talk about this later. Different worldviews give rise to different cultures. As the foundational worldview changes, the culture of a society changes as well. We see that happening in many countries around the world. We see that happening in our own country.

IV. Culture and Values

What do you think is the most obvious value in American culture today? It's at the foundation, not only at how we live our lives, but it affects government, entertainment, and education. It's the **freedom to choose**. We Americans want to be able to choose everything about our lives; from what we wear to what we eat, from what we study to what we watch. This act of choosing goes beyond the externals even to the most basic questions in life. We want to be able to choose what is true and is not true, what is moral and what is not moral. We get angry when anyone takes away or questions our right to choose everything about our lives. This freedom to choose has become the American way. We want to be Pro-choice about everything. That's why we have hundreds of television channels and 26 different brands of ketchup.

You can probably think of other values that are part of your experience in society. You see them portrayed all the time in movies, music, and television.

So here's the question: are you buying it? A lot of us like to think we are our own person, but if we are honest, we are children of our culture.

V. American Pop Culture

In America, we have an even more powerful form of culture at work all around us. We call it "popular culture". It is like a matrix that hides reality from us.

So what puts the "pop" in pop culture?

Pop culture is not really "culture." It's more a collection of commodities, stories, and people. Pop culture is driven by technology and entertainment. It is on the one hand a set of ideas and values, and on the other, a means of communicating these ideas and values to everyone in the culture. That's what makes it popular.

I'm talking about movies, television programs, music, and entertainment technology in all of its forms. This includes the Internet and video games. You may not realize it, but every pop culture expression has at its root a set of values and beliefs. Every movie and every song is encouraging us to believe certain things and behave a certain way. You really can't say, "It's just a movie" or "I don't listen to the words." Like it or not, a lot is being communicated.

VI. Conclusion: Why is This Important?

How well do you recognize the worldview messages in the culture around you? How much of an impact is it making in your values and behavior? How much does it influence the way you dress, the way you talk, and the way you evaluate the people around you? It's happening; you are being carried along by the ocean of popular culture.

Too many people today uncritically watch movies and listen to music. They don't take the time or the effort to discern and to evaluate. As a result, the shaping influence of entertainment is so powerful because it happens so subtly. Karl Marx once said that religion is the opiate, the numbing drug, of the people. Aldous Huxley said that entertainment is the opiate of our modern culture. It keeps us happy enough to avoid asking the important questions about life, the world, and ourselves.

That's why this series is so important. We want to give you the knowledge and skills to be able to discern the culture around you. We want you to be able to recognize the worldviews behind every movie, song, and television program. We want you to think deeply and broadly about your life and the world around you. We don't want the world to shove you into a mold to make you think a certain way. We want you to think for yourself and, in the process, find truth.