

POPULAR CULTURE  
IN THE AGE OF COVID-19

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If there is one thing that the present health, economic, and social crisis has once again highlighted is the growing divide between those who are economically guaranteed and those who are not. By economically guaranteed, I mean the people who can count on some kind of income even as the economy has come to a virtual standstill. These include the wealthy, of course, but also anyone who perceives a steady salary or a pension, rental income, unemployment insurance, and so on, if they are not working. The non-guaranteed are all those unemployed people who do not have any type of income unless they work,<sup>1</sup> who do not have sufficient savings to support themselves for the foreseeable future and who are not part of a household that can guarantee their subsistence. While it is not within the scope of this paper to quantify the exact number of non-guaranteed people, even at such a low bar their number can be assumed to be certainly in the hundreds of thousands if not millions.<sup>2</sup>

This divide is particularly evident in today's popular culture. The reason being that much of it is geared towards the economically guaranteed. They are the ones who can afford to sit out the health emergency and consume cultural commodities, for example, on subscription streaming services like Netflix. In fact, in a recent *Wired.com* piece, Coates argues that streaming services may "soon become the *only* source" of cultural output. Yet, according to a market research company, "book sales overall have been up in April" (Knibbs), thus Coates's claim may be exaggerated somewhat. But regardless of what type of cultural artifacts people are currently consuming, the main point is that the target audience of the culture industries is the economically guaranteed class.

This fact is nothing new as producers from such industries have always crafted their cultural commodities for specific audiences. And even though, as Fiske points out,

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<sup>1</sup> These include gig workers, independent contractors, and the self-employed. The lines between these categories are somewhat blurred because gig workers who, according to Broderick, "make up about 7% of the country's total employment," are sometimes classified as independent contractors (Davidov).

<sup>2</sup> According to a recent Financial Times poll, nearly half of US working Americans said "they would be without any income at all if they were unable to work" (Fedor and Zhang). As of this writing jobless claims are at 33.5 million, putting the US unemployment rate at 14.7% from 3.5% in February, an 11.2% jump. "And because of government errors and the particular way the Labor Department measures the job market, the true picture is even worse. By some calculations, the unemployment rate stands at 23.6%, not far from the Depression peak of nearly 25%" (Rugaber). With a US labor force of 156.5M (<http://www.dlt.ri.gov/lmi/laus/us/usadj.htm>), it means that at least between 23 and 37 million people are currently unemployed. And while many of these people qualify for unemployment benefits, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "over the past decade, only about one-third of the total unemployed, on average, received regular UI benefits" ([https://www.bls.gov/cps/cps\\_htgm.htm](https://www.bls.gov/cps/cps_htgm.htm)); meaning that between 7.6 and 12.3 million people are potentially economically non-guaranteed. Also, since unemployment benefits are temporary, the number of non-guaranteed is destined to grow considerably unless further funding is approved or there is a steep V-shaped recovery.

producers cannot control who ultimately ends up consuming their commodities (507), the fact remains that, generally speaking, those who can consume cultural commodities are the people who have enough disposable income to be able to afford these repertoires of products. As Fiske writes,

this is one reason why the cultural industries produce what Garnham ... calls 'repertoires' of products; they cannot predict which of their commodities will be chosen by which sectors of the market to be the provoker of meanings/pleasures that serve *their* interests as well as those of the producers. (508)

What this statement implies is that, within the current neoliberal phase of capitalism, those who are priced outside the market simply do not exist. And since the non-guaranteed do not exist as a potential target audience for cultural commodities, they also tend not to exist within the life-worlds<sup>3</sup> that these commodities create.<sup>4</sup> This tends to be true not only for those texts produced specifically for the purpose of generating some kind of revenue but also for those texts and paratexts<sup>5</sup> aimed, for example, at generating compliance to government regulations, followers for influencers, publicity for celebrities, and so on. The reason being that all of these professional and non-professional producers, as well as their target audiences, are almost exclusively part of the economically guaranteed.

The cognitive dissonance<sup>6</sup> particular to the present moment is that, from the United Nations on downward, people are constantly reminded how they “are all in this together” (Guterres), that they “must stay home,”<sup>7</sup> and that “everything will be OK.”<sup>8</sup> The dissonance is caused by the fact that, in reality, people are clearly not all in this together (Guarnieri), that homeless people and essential workers cannot stay at home, and that surely for the non-guaranteed everything will not be OK. In fact, millions of people are losing their jobs, their healthcare, their homes, and their loved ones. Thus, such platitudes can be seen as an effort

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<sup>3</sup> The term life-world is used by Habermas to describe, according to Elliott, “that everyday space of symbolic interaction and communicative dialogue in which individuals generate particular practices and encounter social structures that become incarnate in their daily activities” (164).

<sup>4</sup> This does not mean that the life-words of the non-guaranteed are never represented but simply that they are minimized and not represented proportionally.

<sup>5</sup> These include online reviews, comments, fan fiction, fan videos, and memes.

<sup>6</sup> “The psychological discomfort we feel when two of our beliefs, attitudes, or behaviors are in conflict” (Eidelson, 169).

<sup>7</sup> A Google search on May 8, 2020 for this phrase plus the term coronavirus produced about 5.29 million results.

<sup>8</sup> I have heard this exact phrase in every single movie or series I have personally watched since the beginning of the lockdown. In Italy this phrase is translated with “andrà tutto bene,” and it can currently be seen on banners outside people’s windows, on sidewalks painted by children, on corporate and government infomercials, and on countless memes circulating on social media.

to mask, at least to the eyes of the guaranteed, the profound structural inequalities that are being exacerbated by the current crisis (Lenihan). And by masking these inequalities the solutions that could correct them are also kept out of the realm of the possible.<sup>9</sup> This is what Grossberg and Hall have termed the “ideological effect.”<sup>10</sup>

What does this all mean for the future of popular culture? What kind of changes, if any, can be expected? An exhaustive answer to these questions would require a broader kind of inquiry, something that goes beyond the scope of a short essay. Yet, it is still possible to sketch some probable scenario.

In light of the Marxian relationship between base and superstructure — according to which cultural products “implicitly or explicitly support the interests of dominant groups who, socially, politically, economically and culturally, benefit from this particular economic organization of society” (Storey, 3) — the Gramscian concepts of *hegemony* — “the way in which dominant groups in society, through a process of ‘intellectual and moral leadership’ [75], seek to win the consent of subordinate groups in society” (10) — and *interregnum* — the apparent lack “of any conjecturable alternative to the imperial status quo of a consumer capitalism”<sup>11</sup> (Nelson and Grossberg, 332) — and the Bourdieuan concept of *habitus* — “a common system of dispositions” shared within each social class (McCoy and Scarborough, 43) — we should not expect that much will change, at least on the structural level.<sup>12</sup>

As an increasing number of people become disenfranchised and join the ranks of the non-guaranteed, we can expect an exacerbation of existing class conflicts. The tensions resulting from this will be somehow expressed in the popular culture. As these tensions increase, we are likely to see a further tightening of the *encoding* “limits and parameters within which decodings will operate,”<sup>13</sup> meaning an increase in both conscious and unconscious

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<sup>9</sup> For example, the Democratic presumptive nominee to the presidency, Joe Biden, has suggested he would veto ‘Medicare for All’ (Higgins).

<sup>10</sup> “The question of the relative power and distribution of different regimes of truth in the social formation at any one time — which have certain effects for the maintenance of power in the social order — that is what I call ‘the ideological effect’” (Grossberg and Hall, as quoted in Littler).

<sup>11</sup> In Gramsci’s own words: “The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appears” (Nelson and Grossberg, 332).

<sup>12</sup> By structural level I mean the fundamental ownership arrangements within a society and the power relations within them.

<sup>13</sup> Hall, 173, as quoted in Gorton, 19.

efforts aimed at controlling the message. In fact, we are already witnessing drastic changes in the ways audiences are *decoding* cultural texts.<sup>14</sup>

In a situation where people, both guaranteed and non, are bearing the consequences, albeit in different measure, of the inefficient response of federal, state and local governments to the Covid-19 pandemic, the ripple effects of this are manifesting in the culture. These can be seen, for example, in the way fans have been castigating the self-indulgent videos of celebrities who complain for being house-bound in their comfortable mansions (Engle). Regarding this type of oppositional *decoding*, Hess writes:

Among the social impacts of the coronavirus is its swift dismantling of the cult of celebrity. The famous are ambassadors of the meritocracy; they represent the American pursuit of wealth through talent, charm and hard work. But the dream of class mobility dissipates when society locks down, the economy stalls, the death count mounts and everyone's future is frozen inside their own crowded apartment or palatial mansion. The difference between the two has never been more obvious.

Whether this will be a temporary reflux or a permanent shift depends on the capacity of the non-wealthy guaranteed to remember what just peeked from behind the curtain, if only for a brief traumatic moment. Certainly, the non-guaranteed will not likely forget. What is also sure is that, when the emergency will be over, the powers that be<sup>15</sup> will mount a public relations campaign urging for a quick return to the *status quo ante*. As Gambuto writes,

what is about to be unleashed on [US] American society will be the greatest campaign ever created to get you to feel normal again. It will come from brands, it will come from government, it will even come from each other, and it will come from the left and from the right. We will do anything, spend anything, believe anything, just so we can take away how horribly uncomfortable all of this feels. And on top of that, just to turn the screw that much more, will be the one effort that's even greater: the all-out blitz to make you believe you never saw what you saw.

In light of this, if there is one thing that the post-Great Recession and the general apathy *vis-à-vis* the existing climate crisis can teach us, is that the willingness of the non-wealthy guaranteed to accept the hegemonic 'compromise equilibrium' with the dominant class<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> According to Hall, audiences may decode texts in three distinct ways: dominant-hegemonic position, negotiated code, and oppositional code (Gorton, 19).

<sup>15</sup> The dominant class, its managers, the political system representing their interests, and the Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs). For a description of the latter, see Althusser, 127-86.

<sup>16</sup> Here, again, I am referring to the Gramscian concept of *hegemony*: the dynamic control of cultural discourse by the dominant capitalist class. Given its limited size in relation to the population, this class needs to forge alliances with large sectors of the middle and working classes — what Gramsci termed the 'concrete historical bloc' — in order to maintain its dominant social position (Gramsci, Hoare, and Nowell-Smith, 56-7; 183-4). This 'compromise equilibrium' is also the space within which "the texts and practices of popular culture move" This space is constantly being renegotiated, particularly in times of crisis, and its balance "is mostly weighted in

seems to have no limit —regardless, apparently, of the consequences as long as it guarantees a modicum of material comfort and the endless escapism that popular culture provides. If true, then it will be up to the non-guaranteed to develop radical and creative tactics aimed at undermining the current concrete historical bloc in order to bring the present interregnum to an end. This may seem no small feat but, if anthropologist Margaret Mead was correct, people should “never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has” (Mason, 67). Popular culture, as always, will be a site of struggle but the motor must be the economically wretched<sup>17</sup> and the sparkle must come from without.

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the interests of the powerful” through the normalization of their cultural capital and through the neutralization through cooptation of emergent oppositional cultural formations (Storey, 10). In this manner, the dominant class is able to universalize its *habitus* (Bourdieu, 72). Currently, the practical effect of such practices has resulted in the nearly total marginalization and sterilization of emergent cultural formations in favor of those dominant and residual currents promoting social conformity, consumerism, and tyrannical institutions such as the corporation, the military, and the police (Scherzinger, 52) — often under the guise of liberal identity politics. The concepts of dominant, emergent, and residual were postulated by Raymond Williams. In his conception, three types cultural currents can be identified at any given moment in the historical process: dominant is the hegemonic culture while residual “has been effectively formed in the past, but it is still active in the cultural process;” emergent are those “meanings and values, new practices, new relationships and kinds of relationship” that are not solely novel within the dominant culture but also in opposition to it (Williams, 121-127).

<sup>17</sup> A purposeful allusion to the title of Fanon’s book meant to draw a parallel between the struggle against the colonialisms from without and the struggle against the cultural and economic colonialisms from within.

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