

## Biological Aspects of Popular Culture

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### Article abstract

There are various theories for the origins and rise of popular culture, ranging from sociological to political-ideological ones. But given the existence of such forms of culture across cultural spaces and time, they hardly penetrate the *raison d'être* of such forms of human expression. Perhaps the one that comes closest to explaining the universality popular and populist forms of culture was put forward by Mikhail Bakhtin, who claimed that spectacles such as carnivals and texts such as novels are popular because they tap into a psychic need, allowing bodily needs and experiences to gain expression and validation. This paper will explore this idea from a generic biosemiotic perspective, looking at how pop culture is a modern-day expressive version of this need.

# Biological Aspects of Popular Culture

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## Introduction

Although the term “popular culture” emerged around the time of the Industrial Revolution (Storey 2006), it really wasn’t till the 1920s that it gained a concrete social meaning, referring to the kinds of raunchy and comedic performances that typified vaudeville spectacles, and the musical and dance crazes that were considered vulgar and crude at the time. It was also in that era that an entertainment industry crystallized, dovetailing with the rise and spread of a mass media culture. By the 1930s, pop culture had spread to all corners of society. It could not be curtailed, despite the severity of the legislative measures, from the Prohibition to censorship in various forms. It was and continues to be a form of culture that has great appeal, providing a critical psychological outlet for bodily and emotional expression in often vulgar ways. Since its advent as an identifiable culture, pop culture has been a primary driving force behind social, economic, and even political change, triggering an unprecedented debate about the relation between art, entertainment, aesthetics, spectacle, and “true culture” that is still an ongoing one.

The amalgamation of business and the mass media with music, dance, and other popular trends is a modern-day phenomenon; however, the need for a “pop culture” based on laughter and bodily enjoyment goes back to the beginning of time. Indeed, starting in the early civilizations, the opposition between a sacred culture and a profane culture has been a universal paradigm. Pop culture is essentially a contemporary manifestation of profane culture, revealing an intrinsic need for the body’s inbuilt urges to gain expression openly.

The study of pop culture has become its own academic enterprise. The field is necessarily an interdisciplinary one, given the many cultural and psychological factors involved in the constitution and evolution of pop culture. Missing from this mix of disciplines is the ever-broadening field of biosemiotics, for some unknown reason. One could argue that biosemiotics has as its primary focus the investigation of the complex semiotic dynamic between biology and culture, between body and mind. Understanding how this dynamic underlies the evolution of the semiosphere in the human species started with von Uexküll (1909), moving through the Tartu School, and ending up on the research agenda of current biosemioticians. The semiosphere, like the biosphere, regulates human behavior and shapes evolution, indicating that human beings are “world-makers”, to use a common cliché. As the work on autopoiesis by biologists themselves is starting to show this seems to be a law of human nature (Maturana & Varela 1973). It is, as the philosopher of science Jacob Bronowski (1977 : 25) remarked, the feature that makes humans unique among all species. In a phrase, we have the capacity to change the world on our own terms, rather than simply to adapt to it. Culture is an outgrowth of this capacity and within it there are structures and systems that reflect the nature of human consciousness, characterized by two neural forces – reasoning and reflecting as guided by the neocortex and feeling instinctively as guided by the limbic system. In this theoretical paradigm it can be claimed that “sacred” or “official” forms of culture are reflexes of the features of the neocortex, while “profane” forms of culture are reflexes of the limbic system.

Perhaps the first to realize how the body and the mind interacted to produce profane culture was Mikhail Bakhtin (1981, 1984, 1986, 1990, 1993), who showed, to use a biosemiotic perspective, how the human mind (*Innenwelt*) stands out as a force in evolutionary processes (*Umwelt*). Bakhtin astutely argued that human semiosis is best studied as a relationship between body, mind, and environment. Coming before the biosemiotic movement proper, this is indeed a remarkable assertion, suggesting that there is a bodily or neurological basis to all aspects of the semiosphere. The purpose of this paper is to look at the biological aspects of pop culture, from the proto-biosemiotic angle provided by Bakhtin. Understanding why it exists in the first place – at a *prima facie* evolutionary level – is a primary objective of Bakhtinian semiotics and, by extension, of biosemiotics.

## Culture

The emergence of *homo culturalis*, as Danesi and Perron (1999) characterize the culture-making human, can be traced to the development of an extremely large brain, averaging 1400 cc/85.4 cubic inches, more than two million years ago. Humankind’s ability and disposition to think and plan consciously, to transmit learned skills to subsequent

generations knowingly, to establish social relationships in response to need, and to modify the environment creatively are the felicitous consequences of that momentous evolutionary event. The brain's great size, complexity, and slow rate of maturation, with connections among its nerve cells being added through the pre-pubescent years of life, has made it possible for *homo culturalis* to step outside the slow forces of biological evolution and to meet new environmental demands by means of conscious rapid adjustments, rather than by force of genetic adaptation : in other words, it has bestowed upon the human species the ability to survive through intelligent activities in a wide range of habitats and in extreme environmental conditions without further species differentiation. However, in balance, the prolonged juvenile stage of brain and skull development in relation to the time required to reach sexual maturity has exposed neonatal human beings to unparalleled risks among primates. Each new infant is born with relatively few innate traits yet with a vast number of potential behaviors, and therefore must be reared in a cultural setting so that it can achieve its biological potential. In a phrase, culture has taken over from nature in guaranteeing the survival of the human species and in charting its future evolution.

Culture is an offshoot of the neocortex's capacity for language, symbolism, and sentient cognition. But its development in the brain did not eliminate the instinct-driven limbic system. Indeed, one could claim that the tension or opposition between the neocortex and limbic system is the founding principle of human culture, allowing for this opposition to gain expression through specific rituals and symbolic systems. Culture is thus constituted as a blend of body and mind.

Although interest in the origins of culture is as old as human history, the first scientific approach culture had to await the nineteenth century, when the British anthropologist Edward B. Tylor defined it in his 1871 book *Primitive Culture* as "a complex whole including knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capability or habit acquired by human beings as members of society". Tylor's definition was also one of the first ever to differentiate qualitatively between culture and society. Although these terms continue to be used commonly as synonyms, they are, as Tylor noted, categorically different. Within a social collectivity, there can, and frequently does, exist more than one culture. In an opposite manner, several societies can be thought of as belonging to the same general culture. Societies are simultaneously the geographical and historical reifications of cultures : that is, they have existence in time and space, enfolding the signifying processes that shape and regulate the lives of the people who live within them.

The reason why culture came about in the first place remains largely an enigma, even though various intriguing hypotheses about its origins and *raison d'être* have been formulated on the basis of a veritable stock-pile of paleontological and archeological information. Tylor's approach

came on the coattails of Darwinian biology (Darwin 1858). Shortly thereafter, the idea that culture was a collective adaptive phenomenon that emerged to enhance the survivability and progress of the human species became widely debated. Herbert Spencer (1860), for instance, described cultural institutions as outcomes of natural selection, as explainable and as classifiable as living organisms. The idea that gained a foothold in early theories, therefore, was that all cultures, no matter how diverse they may seem, developed according to a regular series of predictable stages reflecting a predetermined pattern built into the genetic blueprint of the human species. The American anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan (1877) epitomized this view by arguing eruditely in his book *Ancient Society* that humanity had progressed by force of physical impulse from savagery, to barbarism, to civilization. Residues of this view are found in sociobiological and psychological-evolutionary approaches to culture such as those held by Sperber (1996) and especially Richard Dawkins (1976, 1987, 1995).

Needless to say, critiques of this theory have been numerous, ranging from Marxist philosophy to various relativistic anthropological approaches. There is no need to discuss these here, since they are well known ones. However, they are not completely divorced from the Darwinian approaches, sharing the unconscious belief that culture is tied to human evolution in some way, taming its instinctive urges. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973 : 23) has perhaps best expressed the paradox of the human condition by stating wryly that without culture human beings would be “unworkable monstrosities, with few useful instincts, few recognizable sentiments, and no intellect”. The relativistic perspective put forward and defended by anthropologists during the first decades of the twentieth century started with Bronislaw Malinowski (1922, 1939) who argued that cultures came about so that the human species could solve similar basic physical and moral problems the world over. Malinowski claimed that the signs, symbols, codes, rituals, and institutions that humans created, no matter how strange they might at first seem, had universal structural properties that allowed people everywhere to solve similar life problems. Marriage, for instance, was instituted to regulate sexual urges that could otherwise lead to overpopulation; economic institutions were founded to ensure the provision of sustenance; and so on. So, for Malinowski, culture was created by humans themselves as an external regulatory system.

In effect, scientific approaches to the origins of culture incorporate some notion of a mind-body dichotomy that has shaped either how cultures came about naturally (Darwinian theories) or by human ingenuity (the relativistic theories). Recently, the latter theories have been bolstered by the notion of autopoiesis developed by biologists themselves. The term was introduced by Maturana and Varela in their famous 1973 book, *Autopoiesis and Cognition*, where they claim that an organism participates in its own evolution, since it has the ability to produce, or

at least shape, its various biochemical agents and structures, in order to ensure their efficient and economical operation. In the case of humans, autopoiesis seems to know no bounds.

### Pop Culture Theories

There is little doubt that the structure of the brain impels humans to imprint it into their creations. As hypothesized here, the dual structure of the brain, neocortical *-versus-* limbic is mirrored in the sacred-*versus*-profane oppositions that inform cultural systems. This has often been designated as a distinction between *high* and *low* forms of culture. Profane forms of culture have typically been assigned to the *low* pole of the opposition. Pop culture originated, no doubt, to fulfill the limbic tendencies in modern societies; however, it has developed a unique character, neutralizing this opposition somewhat, whereby any popular performative, symbolic, or artistic text can fall on either side of the opposition.

For this reason, pop culture stands out as atypical. Unlike folk and historical profane cultures, pop culture is constantly renewing itself. It can be produced at any time by anyone. It is thus populist, unpredictable, and ephemeral, reflecting the ever-changing tastes of one generation after another. To some critics, this implies that pop culture is a commodity culture, producing trends that have the same kind of market value as do manufactured commodities, satisfying momentary and fleeting whims. Roland Barthes (1957, 1975), for example, saw the American and European form of popular culture that had spread broadly in the 1940s and 1950s as a “bastard form of mass culture” beset by “humiliated repetition”, and thus by “new books, new programs, new films, news items, but always the same meaning” (Barthes 1975 : 24).

There is little doubt that some (perhaps most) pop culture trends, like commodities, have fleeting value. But it is also true that contemporary pop culture provides a channel for expression and creativity for virtually anyone without any ties to the marketplace. As its history has revealed, it is both cathartic and empowering, allowing common people to laugh at themselves, to seek recreation through music, dance, stories, and other forms of expression. Before the advent of modern-day pop culture, people sought recreation through carnivalesque forms of entertainment, which typically existed alongside religious feasts. Pop culture is basically a modern-day offshoot of these forms, albeit much more ephemeral because of the marketplace. And this is why any trend within it is short-lived and era-specific. But within the mix there has always been the artistic wheat that rises above the chaff, so to speak. The question of whether or not pop culture works are “true works of true art” is a moot one. A work of art is something that people want to pass on to subsequent generations because they sense in it something of value. And, in fact, various works in the areas of jazz and blues are now

classified as art by musical historians because they strike a resounding chord within people to this day. They are studied in conservatories alongside classical music.

The first to be aware of the emotional and social power of pop culture were the pop artists, who visually documented the products (literally and metaphorically) of mass popular culture, thus validating the experiences of common people living in a modern urban consumerist society. The movement began as a reaction against the expressionism movement of the 1940s and 1950s that emphasized forms in themselves rather than the realistic representation of external reality. Pop artists thus used as their subjects fast-food items, comic-strip frames, celebrities, and the like. They put on happenings, improvised spectacles or performances of their art works for anyone, not just art gallery patrons.

Pop art attempted to extinguish the differentiation between *high* and *low*. *High* implies art considered to have a superior value, socially, aesthetically, and historically; *low* implies art considered to have an inferior value. By extension, *low* is often applied to pop culture generally, along with terms such as *kitschy*, *slapstick*, *campy*, *escapist*, *exploitive*, *obscene*, *raunchy*, *vulgar*, and the like. However, that same culture has produced works such as the Beatles' *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* album and Milos Forman's Hollywood adaptation of Peter Shaffer's *Amadeus* (2010). These merit the epithet of *high* art, even though they emerge in a pop culture context. Because of this blend of *high* and *low*, pop culture (alongside pop art) has been instrumental in blurring, if not obliterating, the distinction between levels of culture. Already in the Romantic nineteenth century, artists saw folk culture as the only true form of culture, especially since they associated *high* culture with the artificial demands made of artists by the Church and the aristocracy in previous eras.

But the perception of what is *high* and what is *low* has not disappeared. Paradoxically, they exist within pop culture itself. We all share a sense of an implicit culture hierarchy (which is intuitive rather than formal or theoretical). People evaluate popular movies, novels, music, TV programs, Internet sites, and so on instinctively in terms of this hierarchy. This suggests that there is no escaping the neural dichotomy (neocortical *versus* limbic) that has characterized *homo culturalis* since the outset. This means, concretely, that the conceptual, material, performative, and aesthetic channels of pop culture contain both sacred (*high*) and profane (*low*) features. But this is not an invention of modernity. Indeed, a semiotic reading of the history of art and culture suggests that it has always been an intrinsic feature of *homo culturalis*. Spectacles, for instance, have always formed the basis for a communal form of engagement. These are everywhere in popular culture – musicals, blockbuster movies, sports events, rock concerts, and the like. Some pop culture theorists even trace the origins of pop culture to a specific



kind of theatrical spectacle called vaudeville. Vaudeville was popular from the 1880s to the early 1930s and produced many of the celebrities who gained success in other entertainment media, such as motion pictures and radio. Vaudeville was an offshoot of circus culture, where the term *spectacle* had a specific meaning (Bouissac 2010). It referred to the segment that opened and closed performances and included performers, animals, and floats. As the band played and the ringmaster sang, performers dressed in elaborate costumes walked around the circus tent or arena. The spectacle usually ended with a trick called a long mount, in which the elephants stood in a line with their front legs resting on each other's backs.

Because of the blurring of the lines between *high* and *low*, the mind and the body, the words *collage*, *bricolage*, and *pastiche*, are often used today to describe pop culture (Danesi 2014). Collage is taken from painting, describing a picture or design made by gluing pieces onto a canvas or another surface. By arranging them in a certain way, the artist can create strange or witty effects not possible with traditional painting techniques. Many pop culture spectacles, from early vaudeville to *The Simpsons*, are created by an analogous collage technique. Vaudeville consisted of a combination of acts, ranging from skits to acrobatic acts; *The Simpsons* sitcom "cuts and pastes" diverse elements from different levels of culture in the same episode to create a satirical collage. The term *bricolage* emphasizes a unifying structure, not just a mixture of elements. It was first used in anthropology by Claude Lévi-Strauss (1962) to designate the style of many tribal rituals that mix various symbols and myths holistically in order to evoke magical feelings and a sense of communal harmony. The disparate elements become unified in the act of admixture itself. *Bricolage* has been used to describe the power of sub-cultures among youth (Hebdige 1979). It certainly seems to be operative for distinctive communities (called "fan") within pop culture. Finally, in painting *pastiche* refers to an admixture of elements intended to imitate or satirize another work or style. Many aspects of pop culture display a *pastiche* pattern. A daily television newscast is a perfect example of this pattern. A typical newscast amalgamates news about crime and tragic events with those involving achievements of pop stars, creating a veritable *pastiche* of emotions and meanings. Indeed, the defining feature of all pop culture spectacles and texts may well be *pastiche*.

Pop culture – especially in its American and Western European versions – has been the target of critical attacks from all kinds of intellectual and ideological quarters. Among the first to criticize pop culture as a negative force in social evolution were the scholars belonging to the Frankfurt School, who saw it as a banal commodity culture, produced in the same way that material products are, and thus made and sold in the marketplace. It was thus ephemeral and always in search of the new – a situation that Roland Barthes (1957) designated "neomania". They thus saw capitalist societies as tying artistic forms to a "culture



industry" obeying only the logic of marketplace economics. In line with Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci's (1947) later concept of "hegemony", they claimed that the commodification of culture was controlled surreptitiously and manipulatively by those who held social-financial power. Clearly, there was no sense of pop culture as a product of biological forces at work – just a sense that social ideologies were at the root of commodification and its cultural offshoots.

The Frankfurt School theorists were, overall, pessimistic about the possibility of genuine culture under modern capitalism, condemning most forms of popular culture as crude spectacles that pacified the masses because of their ephemeral entertainment value. They saw the rise of pop culture in the 1920s as the result of a partnership that it made with the mass media and the business world. Early radio broadcasting made songs selected for broadcasting popular, leading to an increase in sales of records, new performance possibilities for the singers, often leading to celebrity status for the artists. Record labels and radio broadcasters formed a tacit alliance to showcase new songs of selected artists. The same story can be told about radio stars, movie actors, sports figures, and even politicians. If they made it to radio, they became famous and this allowed the business side of their activities to literally "sell" them to an increasingly large market of consumers.

In his 1922 book, *Public Opinion*, the American journalist Walter Lippmann argued that the growth of mass media culture had a powerful direct effect on people's minds and behavior. Although he did not use any empirical method to back up his argument, it is still difficult to find a counterargument to it. Lippmann saw the world of commodity culture as producing "pictures in our head" (Lippmann 1922 : 3), implying that the mass media shaped our worldview by providing us with images of things that we had not experienced before. In effect, the media control us, not us the media. Years later, in *Manufacturing Consent*, Herman and Chomsky (1988) argued that since the ownership of the mass media is concentrated in the hands of a few powerful and wealthy elite (the mega companies), agenda-setting in politics and culture is largely controlled or at least influenced "from above", contrary to the grassroots origins of both in America. Because media depend on advertisers for their revenues, they will focus on simplistic and light-hearted programming that support a consumer mood in audiences. The experts used in news sources are likely to be members of the elite themselves and if news stories contradict or dismiss the elite's viewpoint, he or she uses various forms "flak" to keep the media in line. Ideologies are formulated in people's minds in the form of enemies or alliances that help justify the elite's political strategy.

But the situation has changed drastically since the Frankfurt School, Lippmann, and Herman and Chomsky. In the current mediasphere, audiences are not monolithic or homogeneous as they were in pervious

eras. For this reason it is harder to control people who belong instead to niche audiences and virtual communities, influenced by social media networks. Indeed, the cart has been so overturned that it may signal the end of pop culture as we have known it since the 1920s. YouTube, for example, has created a blur between consumers and producers of content as well as between experts and novices.

What the traditional critics of pop culture neglected is also the fact that there have always been elements in human cultures that have a populist origin. The appropriation of these elements by the business world was an inevitable one, but also a convenient one for artists and performers. And, as some have claimed, pop culture has often been a site of resistance against dominant groups in society. This certainly was the case of the counterculture movement of the 1960s and early 1970s, when popular music was not only a money-making enterprise but also part of a political resistance movement against what the hippies called the “military and business complex”. So, pop culture is not just a trivial entertainment culture, as the ideologues have traditionally claimed; it is an empowering culture that, as mentioned, may have its roots in the structure of the brain.

There are those who exorcise a return to the past and “real” literature, philosophy, music, and art. The disappearance of what have been called the “grand narratives” and the appearance of “commodity narratives” that require little or no reflective thought is a major strain of new criticism leveled at pop culture. But although the deconstruction of authoritative voices and their replacement with pop voices, such as Bart on *The Simpsons*, is somewhat troubling, it is correct to say that this was always the case in ancient and medieval cultures. People expressed their voices in the form of graffiti, carnivalesque performances, and the like. Comic books are read today for both insight and entertainment. The phenomenon of oppositional culture, sacred-*versus*-profane, is not an invention of modernity. As Marshall McLuhan (1964) argued, pop culture was tied to technological changes – radio stars gave way to television stars, and so on. Because the Internet has united the entire planet, and because the mediasphere has embraced pop culture as a substantive part of its content, alongside other cultures (academic, scientific, and so on), it comes as no surprise that everything is being popularized more and more, including academic disciplines.

## Mythology Theory

Semiotics entered the scene of pop culture study in full force in 1957, when Roland Barthes wrote his classic book *Mythologies*. Indeed, one can argue that the book introduced the formal critical study of pop culture. Barthes claimed that pop culture gains a large part of its emotional allure because it is based on the recycling of unconscious mythic oppositions. In superhero stories, for instance, the heroes and villains

are modeled after ancient mythic heroes and their opponents. The heroes are honest, truthful, physically attractive, strong, and vulnerable; the villains are dishonest, cowardly, physically ugly, weak, and cunning. The hero is beaten up at some critical stage, but against all odds he or she survives to become a champion of justice. Because of the unconscious power of myth, it is no surprise to find that early Hollywood cowboy characters such as Roy Rogers, John Wayne, Hopalong Cassidy, and the Lone Ranger, became cultural icons, symbolizing virtue, heroism, and righteousness as did the ancient narrative heroes.

The Superman character is a perfect example of the recycled mythic hero, possessing all the characteristics of his ancient predecessors but in modern guise – he comes from another world (the planet Krypton) in order to help humanity overcome its weaknesses; he has superhuman powers; but he has a tragic flaw (exposure to kryptonite takes away his power); and so forth. Sports events, too, are experienced mythically, with the opposition of *good* (the home team) *versus evil* (the visiting team) guiding the whole event. The fanfare associated with preparing for the “big battle”, like the Superbowl of American football or the World Cup of soccer, has a ritualistic quality to it similar to the pomp and circumstance that ancient armies engaged in before going out to battle and war. Indeed, the whole spectacle is perceived to represent a battle of mythic proportions. The symbolism of the team’s (army’s) uniform, the valor and strength of the players (the heroic warriors), and the skill and tactics of the coach (the army general) has a powerful effect on the fans (the warring nations). As Barthes observed, this unconscious symbolism is the reason why modern popular spectacles are powerful. Like their ancient ancestors, contemporary people subconsciously need heroes to “make things right” in human affairs, at least in the world of fantasy.

Another semiotically-oriented scholar, Jean Baudrillard (1983), saw the mythological structure of pop culture as generating a *simulacrum*, hereby the real and the imaginary are no longer perceived as necessarily distinct. The 1999 movie *The Matrix* (Wachowskis) treated this theme in a brilliant way. The main protagonist of that movie, Neo, lives “on” and “through” the computer screen. The technical name of the computer screen is the *matrix*, describing the network of circuits on it. But the same word also means “womb” in Latin. The movie’s transparent subtext is that, with the advent of the digital universe, new generations are now being born in two kinds of wombs – the biological and the technological. And the difference between the two has become indistinguishable.

Baudrillard maintained that the borderline between fiction and reality has utterly vanished, collapsing into a mindset that he called the *simulacrum*. The content behind the screen is perceived as hyperreal, that is, as more real than real, as are all kinds of pop culture spectacles. Popular spectacles and texts are “simulation machines” which reproduce past images to create a new environment for them. Eventually,

as people engage constantly with the hyperreal, everything becomes simulation. This is why, according to Baudrillard, people are easily duped by advertisers.

The idea that simulated myth underlies cultural spectacles, codes, and texts is an insightful one beyond its critical intent. It suggests that there are historical, psychic forces at work in culture that mark it as a cyclical, rather than linear, phenomenon. Pop culture is thus a modern-day version of ancient mythic culture – it recounts and enacts tales that reveal oppositional structure (good *versus* evil, male *versus* female, and so on) in new forms and guises. But this ignores the fact that narrative and especially myth may have a sensory or bodily-based origin transformed by the imagination into cultural artifacts. By this, the implication is that the human mind is unique in semiotizing biological instincts via the imagination. So, simulacra are the products of the blurring of the line between neocortical and limbic states of mind. Culture is the environment these states are expressed and given form.

### The Bakhtinian View

Bakhtin entered the scene at the same time that contemporary pop culture was starting to spread and become a major state of affairs in modernity. He saw it essentially as having dialogical structure – allowing for many voices to express themselves, not just authoritative ones (heteroglossia). It thus evoked the same feelings of the ancient carnivals, when profane dialogue became a means of eliminating (perhaps even “exorcising”) the limbic urges within us. This is why the festivities associated with carnivals are visceral; in them the sacred is “profaned”. and the carnality of all things is proclaimed through the theatricality of spectacles. At the time of carnival, everything authoritative, rigid, or serious is subverted, loosened, and mocked. It is little wonder, therefore, that pop culture studies are now turning to Bakhtin for insights. Carnival is part of populist traditions that aim to disrupt traditional symbolism and abolish idealized social forms, bringing out the crude, unmediated links between the body and the mind that are normally kept very separate. Carnavalesque genres satirize the lofty words of poets, scholars, and others. They are intended to fly in the face of the official sacred world – the world of judges, lawyers, politicians, churchmen, and the like.

The dialogue of carnivals is “polyphonic”, allowing many common voices to be heard in tandem. For Bakhtin, therefore, carnival is a powerful form of dialogue. People attending a carnival do not merely make up an anonymous crowd. Rather, they feel part of a communal body, ceasing to be themselves. Through costumes and masks, individuals take on a new identity and are renewed psychologically in the process. It is through this carnivalesque identity that the “grotesque” within humans can seek expression through overindulgent eating and

laughter, and through unbridled sexual behavior. If we change the terms, from grotesque to limbic and authoritative to neocortical, we can see within Bakhtin's system of thought a biological basis to the *raison d'être* of pop culture.

Bakhtin asserted that transgression is instinctual. By releasing rebellion and transgressive symbolism in a performative, linguistic, artistic, or other creative way, it actually validates social norms. Carnival theory thus explains why pop culture does not pose any serious subversive challenge to the moral and ethical *status quo*. It is part of the profane instinct that spurs us on to laugh at ourselves and at our most revered institutions. Many pop culture performers are modern-day carnival mockers who take it upon themselves to deride, confuse, and parody authority figures and symbols, bringing everything down to an earthy, crude level of theatrical performance. As the Greeks knew, we need comedy to balance tragedy, laughter to offset tears, and mischief to counteract propriety. The tragic performance is *cathartic*, the comedic one is *cathectic*, allowing for the release of libidinal forces within us. In this way a true balance between the sacred and the profane is maintained, guaranteeing continuity to the social order.

The difference between the carnival and pop culture lies in the fact that the latter has blurred the line between the sacred and the profane. In many religious cultures there are periods of fasting (in Catholicism, Lent) preceded by periods of indulgence in all kinds of carnal pleasures (the carnival period that precedes Lent). In the contemporary world, these are hardly seen as dichotomous. Indeed, we have even made religious feasts, such as Valentine's Day, into popular spectacles and traditions. For Bakhtin there is a disjunction between immediate experience (instinctual needs) and the *a posteriori* symbolic representations of it. But this disjunction seems to have collapsed, as even religious events are characterized by pop culture textualities – for example, the use of rock music in religious revivals. This means that anything that was once considered *low* is now *high*. Even classical music sits on the boundary of the sacred-*versus*-profane dichotomy. A Beethoven symphony would still be construed as an expression of *high* musical culture; but it is also something that anyone can enjoy and download from the Internet. Indeed, Beethoven's symphonies have spread throughout mass culture as both *high* forms of music and popular forms used in commercials and other commercial venues. Art is thus both *high* and *low* – it is *dialogical* – putting people in relation to each other, and to the world at large.

Bakhtin actually perceived the same blending of *high* and *low* in literature. Dostoevsky's novels were particularly important for Bakhtin because of their "polyphonic" quality, a "plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices" (1984 : 6). We can literally hear the different voices in Dostoevsky's novels. Sacred culture is characterized instead by the mono-

logue – speeches, laws, and so on. The battle between the monologue and the dialogue reached its apotheosis historically in the work of Rabelais (Bakhtin 1984), where boisterous, transgressive and libidinous language ushered forth the modern world, marking the collapse of rigid medievalism. Rabelais' sixteenth-century novel *Gargantua and Pantagruel* captured the everyday culture of the common folk that “was to a great extent a culture of the loud word spoken in the open, in the street and marketplace” (Bakhtin 1984 : 182). Rabelais' work was thus as much a socio-political statement as satire; it attacked the pompous attitudes of the self-appointed moral guardians of order and respectability, thereby undermining the already-moribund medieval system. Asceticism thus competed with a folk-festive culture based on an everyday, informal socialness. What Bakhtin seems to have missed is the source of this narrative transgression in Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*, which was perhaps the first every work of fiction to give voice to common folk and deal with everyday peccadilloes and problems.

Although Bakhtin's claims have been critiqued, there is little doubt that his theory of pop culture as a response to a psychic need is certainly valid and in line with biosemiotic theory. His notion that communal bodies are required to be present at carnivalesque performances for them to serve the psychic need may also be a predictor of the demise of modern culture in cyberspace. Carnivals need communal bodies; so too does pop culture. But its fragmentation in time and space may have brought an end to it as a kind of experiment of modernity – an attempt to unite the body and the mind in a modern way.

### “X” as a Microcosm of Bakhtinian Theory

Despite its acclamation, rarely has a Bakhtinian framework been adopted by semioticians to penetrate the essence of pop culture by studying specific signs and symbols in a Bakhtinian fashion. Bakhtin is thus mainly a footnote rather than a source of analysis. It is thus interesting and relevant to attempt an analysis “Bakhtinian biosemiotics” in one specific domain – the use of the letter X in pop culture (Danesi 2009; Pelkey 2017).

Movie heroes named Triple XXX, drinks named Xenergy, TV programs named X-Files, automobiles named X-Terra, and so on and so forth, are scattered throughout the cultural landscape of modern society. The use of X in pop culture reveals something rather interesting about the modern world which has both Barthesian and Bakhtinian overtones – it taps into an unconscious reservoir of cultural meanings. In Joseph Conrad's *Secret Agent* (1907) a character who is portrayed as a suicidal anarchist is called, appropriately, Professor X. In James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), a mysterious house is named, just as appropriately, X. And even further back in time, Miguel de Cervantes, in his *Don Quixote* (1605, 1615), noted that the letter X was a “harsh letter” and, thus, to



be avoided. There have been so many meanings attached to this letter in narratives and poetry that an entire treatise could be written about it. This is, in fact, what Marina Roy did in 2000, with her book *Sign after the X*, in which she demonstrates that X taps into a complex and ancient system of meanings that reaches back to the mystical origins of language and culture. It is thus an opposition in and of itself – it stands for both the sacred and the profane.

The letter X has been around for centuries as the mathematical variable *par excellence*, as an vicarious signature used by those who cannot write, as a blasphemous letter assigned to cartoons, as a sign of danger on bottles of alcohol and boxes of dynamite, as a sign for a kiss, as the mark of a mistake, as a technique for crossing out something, and as a symbol indicating a secret treasure on a pirate's map. In a phrase, X has always constituted a "pictography" of danger, mystery, the unexplained, illicit desires, and other such meanings from times that predate X-File television programs and Triple XXX action heroes. What gives this sign a strange magnetism and sense of aesthetics – a sense of both something mysterious and pleasing, sacred and profane at once – is its cross form, visually depicting the inner conflict we feel between the sacred and the profane. Among the first to recognize its strange appeal was Plato, who observed in the *Timaeus* that X probably represented the substance of the very universe in which we live (Conley 2005 : 212). Although he did not elaborate upon his idea, it does indeed seem to strike a resounding chord within us today as we look at and use this enigmatic symbol.

The vertical cross sign (a sign made up of a vertical straight line crossed by a horizontal one at right angles) has been used since pre-historic times to evoke the sacred. But so has the X, strangely enough, which is a diagonal cross (a cross figure rotated 45 degrees). This is why Christ is often represented with X and why we write Christmas also as X-mas in English. It is interesting to note, in this regard, that the apostle Andrew, not feeling worthy of being executed on the upright cross like his Master, is said to have asked for crucifixion on the diagonal cross. To this day, it is known as the St. Andrew Cross. The upright cross, as Liungman (1991 : 10) aptly points out, "stands for death and sorrow and their opposites : eternal life and salvation", and, thus, the sacred dimension in human perception. The diagonal cross produces, as does any modification of a form, an opposition, a tension of meaning standing, likely, for "earthly life and damnation", and, thus, the profane dimension in human life. Like the yin and yang of ancient Chinese philosophy, it would seem that we perceive the world's most basic relations as a balancing act between these two opposing life forces represented by the upright and diagonal crosses respectively.

The cross structure has always been part of symbolic practices, showing up not only in religious symbolism, but in many areas of human



knowledge and understanding (or lack thereof). The Cartesian plane, with two axes crossing each other at right angles, is really a cross figure with mathematical uses. Many diagrams and charts in science and mathematics have the same structure. These are “ideational models” of the world – or *ideographs* for short. The cross is, in fact, one of the oldest and most common of all the ideographs used by humans across the world, having been found throughout ancient caves going back to the Bronze Age. It is also crystallizes as an Egyptian hieroglyph called the *ankh*, which was a symbol for both life and rebirth (Liungman 1991 : 46).

The diagonal cross (X) is also an ancient sign, being found on pre-historic caves throughout Europe. In ancient cultures it had a wide spectrum of meanings, including the unknown and the earthly. It thus represented one of the parts of a basic dualism with the upright cross representing thee other – a dualism that finds expression, not only in the opposition of two simple cross signs, but also in many artifacts, rituals, representations, works of art, and religious traditions throughout the world. As even the Marquis de Sade commented on this inbuilt dualism : “Nature, who for the perfect maintenance of the laws of her general equilibrium, has sometimes need of vices and sometimes of virtues, inspires now this impulse, now that one, in accordance with what she requires” (1795 : 12).

Modern day marketing practices have simply provided a new channel for expressing the ancient dualism embedded in the X form. As Sacks (2003 : 343-344) puts it : “X has been drafted for marketing and advertising; it now signifies something like ‘computer magic and control’ or ‘cutting edge’”. The appeal of X is, thus, the sense that it reverberates with an ancient opposition. X is, in a phrase, is a perfect emblem of pop culture itself. And the reason is that it reaches deeply into an unconscious reservoir of connotations that reach back into prehistory. It emblemizes the Bakhtinian dichotomy in microcosm.

As is well known, Carl Jung (1921) divided the unconscious into two regions : a personal unconscious, containing the feelings and thoughts developed by an individual that are directive of his or her particular life schemes, and a collective unconscious, containing the feelings and thoughts developed cumulatively by the species that are directive of its overall life pattern. Jung described the latter as a “receptacl”. of primordial images shared by all humanity that have become such an intrinsic part of the unconscious as to be beyond reflection. So, they gain expression instead in archetypes, that is as the symbols and forms that constitute the myths, tales, tunes, rituals, and the like that are found in cultures across the world. In a sense, the letter X is an archetype, an unconscious symbol evoking the universally-felt dichotomy between the sacred and the profane. The appeal and staying power of this sign today is due to this inbuilt ambiguity. Ambiguity is what makes signs psychologically powerful. By not being able to pin down what a particu-

lar sign stands for at a conscious level, we start experiencing it more holistically and, thus, sensing great significance in it.

The X is a model of the connection between the *Umwelt* and the *Innenwelt*. Model-making constitutes a truly astonishing evolutionary attainment, without which it would be virtually impossible for humans to carry out their daily life routines. The central purpose of biosemiotics is, arguably, study the manifestation of modeling behaviors that produce such meaning-bearing forms like the letter X (Sebeok & Danesi 2000).

### Concluding Remarks

Biosemiotics investigates the emergence of semiosis as an interaction between the body, the mind, and the environment. As has been argued in this paper, this interaction is saliently obvious in the emergence of pop culture – a culture that neutralizes the Bakhtinian opposition of sacred-*versus*-profane, making the *high versus low* dichotomy a moot one. It suggests, perhaps, that oppositions evolve through neutralization or, more accurately, through the compression of meaning into singular models. Meaning systems are convergent not divergent.

But systems evolve and may even dissipate. In the current online Mashpedia form of pop culture the modern cultural experiment may be coming to an end. As Manuel Castells (2001) has cogently argued, in making it possible for everyone to put themselves on display and to establish their identities in public, cyberspace is altering traditional notions including cultural ones. In the global village, pop culture, as we have known it for over a century, has become fragmented. In an influential study, the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (1996) describes the flow of capital, images, ideas, and artistic textualities in cyberspace as disjunct, crisscrossing constantly along an unpredictable variety of paths. This has set the stage for the past to crumble under the weight of fragmentation.

Whether or not pop culture as we have known it since the 1920s will exist, there is little doubt that some form of profane culture will emerge, given the constitution of the human brain. Pop culture has always been, and in future forms will likely continue to be, a collage culture that blends the parts of the brain effectively – laughter with seriousness, enjoyment with engagement, and so on. Marshall Fishwick has commented appropriately on this aspect of pop culture as follows:

Popular culture has many facets, like a diamond, and can be subversive and explosive. Scorn may be mixed with the fun, venom with laughter; it can be wildly comical and deadly serious. Popular culture is at the heart of revolutions that slip in on little cat feet. Those most affected by them – the elite and the mighty – seldom see them coming. Popular culture sees and hears, being close to the people. If the medium is the message, then the reaction might be revolution. (2002 : 24)

It is appropriate to conclude with one more observation on the X

symbol. In his marvelous poem *Xanadu*, a mythical region represented by the initial X of its name [no coincidence here], the words of the great poet Samuel Coleridge ring especially true today : “And in this tumult Kubla heard from far, ancestral voices prophesying war!”. Those voices are heard each time X is used today and they will not be stifled by cyberspace, given the nature of the human brain.

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## Abstract

There are various theories for the origins and rise of popular culture, ranging from sociological to political-ideological ones. But given the existence of such forms of culture across cultural spaces and time, they hardly penetrate the *raison d'être* of such forms of human expression. Perhaps the one that comes closest to explaining the universality popular and populist forms of culture was put forward by Mikhail Bakhtin, who claimed that spectacles such as carnivals and texts such as novels are popular because they tap into a psychic need, allowing bodily needs and experiences to gain expression and validation. This paper will explore this idea from a generic biosemiotic perspective, looking at how pop culture is a modern-day expressive version of this need.

**Keywords** : Popular Culture; Mikhail Bakhtin; Sacred Versus Profane; Body Versus Mind; Semiosphere.

## Résumé

Diverses théories concernent l'origine et l'ascension de la culture populaire, notamment des théories sociologiques ou des théories de nature politico-idéologiques. Mais si l'on considère l'étendue de ces formes culturelles, au travers le temps et l'espace, force est d'admettre que ces théories expliquent bien superficiellement la raison d'être de ces formes d'expression humaine. Mikhaïl Bakhtine a peut-être abordé de manière la plus convaincante l'universalité de la culture populaire en affirmant que les spectacles, comme les carnivals, et les textes, comme les romans, sont populaires puisqu'ils exploitent un besoin psychique, celui d'exprimer et de valider des besoins corporels. Le présent article examinera la théorie de Bakhtine à l'aune de la biosémiotique, en examinant la culture populaire comme une version expressive contemporaine de ce besoin.

**Mots-clés** : Culture populaire; Mikhaïl Bakhtine; sacré versus profane; corps versus l'esprit; sémiotique.

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