

Intro:

In our last session, we discussed how the world attempts to overthrow God's created order, even in the arts. We used the imagery of the unraveling of a tapestry. There are three ways God's order is overthrown, diminished, or unraveled in our world.

1. Truth, goodness, or beauty are isolated (it is said one can be true without being good or beautiful, one can be good without truth or beauty, one can be beautiful without truth or goodness).
2. Truth, goodness, and beauty are attacked (the arts are used to say nothing is true, nothing is good, and there is no beauty).
3. Sin is glamorized (the arts are used to make sin appealing).

Our discussion today will focus on the popular culture.

I. Critiquing content (shooting at the low-hanging fruit)

- A. "Popular culture is the commercially driven culture of media and entertainment shaped by the tastes of ordinary people." [Ward, 411]
- B. Pop culture entertains with sins for which our Lord died

II. Critiquing the sensibilities of pop culture

- A. Sensibilities are the "ability (or inability) to appreciate some artistic or cultural work" [Ward, 412]
- B. Sensibilities operate at the level of affection...
- C. The level of affection is the level of our deepest personal commitments – the things we love, that we have a heart for
- D. Sensibilities are shaped by the zeitgeist of culture (the spirit of this age) which drives people towards constant entertainment

III. The power of culture

- A. Any given culture defines the reality in which its people live.
 1. Expectations, assumptions, and sensibilities molded by surrounding culture
 2. "All [cultural] institutions are character shaping. Today, entertainment [is] especially important." [James Davison Hunter, "The Backdrop of Reality: James Davison Hunter in Conversation with James K. A. Smith," *Comment* (Fall 2013): 39.]

3. Both high culture and pop culture are able to shape character
 - a. You will not usually hear high culture playing in the background at the mall, nor will most share it on-line.
 - b. Pop culture is everywhere in our media.

B. Illustration 1 – *Sense and Sensibility*:

“Actress Emma Thompson spent five years writing the screenplay for a movie adaptation of Jane Austen’s classic novel *Sense and Sensibility*. It became one of her biggest hits, but some reviewers complained that she was too old for the role of Elinor Dashwood. At thirty-five, she was indeed a good deal older than the nineteen-year-old Elinor in the original story. But oddly enough, no one seemed to have the same complaint about Thompson’s male love interest in the film, who in the book was twenty-three but in the movie was played by an actor (Hugh Grant) the same age as Thompson.” [Ward, 413]

1. Popular culture reinforces a culture that holds women to youthful ideals.
2. Those who view popular culture are aware of these ideals, thus find an apparent “violation” of the ideal unsettling.

C. Illustration 2 – artists conceptions of women

1. From the 1500s to 1800s, Eve in paintings looks ... “a little fat” to modern sensibilities.
2. In the 20th century, Eve lost a good deal of weight, according to Bible storybooks.
3. Additionally, have you noticed in Western movies depicting the 1800s that the women wear makeup like modern women?

4. What does television communicate to our sensibilities (expectations) when almost all its characters are “beautiful people”?

“Watching one TV show won’t make you believe that all dads are stupid and premarital sex has no consequences. And pop culture in the West isn’t all lies. But even ‘reality’ TV is heavily edited by producers to tell stories and make points that shouldn’t be taken as gospel. Pop culture ‘ain’t necessarily so.’ It isn’t all true. It isn’t all good, and it can skew your view of (feminine) beauty.” [Ward, 413]

IV. Culture of instant gratification

- A. Pop culture teaches us that we can have anything worth having right away.

“There is no distance between you and any good thing.”
[Kenneth Myers, *All God’s Children and Blue Suede Shoes* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1989), 114.]

- How does pop culture define “good”?
 - Something requiring the investment of time and patience not worth much in pop culture.
- Experiencing the good life now is of great value.

- B. How does pop culture affect sensibilities?

Remember, we are not talking about content of pop culture here, but deeper meanings.

- Pop culture doesn’t blaspheme God as much as ignore him.
- God doesn’t matter; we can enjoy life without him.
- God makes token appearances in some venues (before NASCAR races, or when a football player “thanks God” for his touchdowns) but then goes back to his place on the shelf
- John Lennon: “Imagine there’s no heaven.” [John Lennon, “Imagine,” Chappell Music, 1971.]
- Compare Matthew 7.14 For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it.

C. How much pop culture does it take to shape my sensibilities?

1. One song or one movie or one book will not immediately revolutionize your thinking.
2. But cultural immersion makes you accustomed to cultural values and can shape your sensibilities
 - a. How did you react when you first saw someone with a diamond stud in their nose?
 - b. How do you react now?
3. The question isn't so much, "What's wrong with this song? Or movie? Or book?" but "Will this song/movie/book draw me closer to God?"

D. High culture is better; it will train sensibilities in a nobler direction, but it is also a mixture of good and bad.

1. High culture takes more effort to comprehend and as such will stretch you in ways you could not experience otherwise.
2. High culture requires purposeful cultivation of sensibilities for real enjoyment.

V. Making decisions about culture

A. What is the appeal of pop culture?

1. We want background noise to soothe the stress of the day
2. We want amusement to relax at the end of the day ("amuse" — a + muse = not + think)

B. Better to take care to analyze what we take in

1. Is it true that sports are worth what we pay to watch them?
2. Is it good that news programs focus on celebrity? Or that they use celebrity news anchors?
3. Is the singing on competition shows actually beautiful?

C. Better to make an effort to appreciate higher culture

1. Take time to cultivate an understanding of true, good, and beautiful art
2. Be sober — we are "of the day" (1 Thess 5.7-8)

3. Make good choices about diversions – we need rest, but we need our rest to refresh, not deaden

Conclusion:

“What, after all, are you trying to construct in your life? What’s your goal? To make it to death without too much pain? Or to lay up treasures in heaven, treasures no moth or rust can ever get to, treasures that will pay out interest for eternity? Good art is entertaining, but it isn’t mere diversion—just killing time. It forms the sensibilities in you that are necessary for good dominion over God’s world. We are not called to inertia.” [Ward, 415]