

# Urban culture

Jakub Machek

**The gradual urbanisation of the village in the second half of the 20th century can be understood mainly as the spreading out of popular culture to rural areas through media, consumer products and life style (everyday practices).**

## Urban culture as popular culture, Jakub Machek

**Annotation :** The aim of this article is to show that the emergence of urban culture is closely related to the processes of urbanisation and industrialisation. A portrayal of the development of modern everyday culture and practices of city-dwellers is presented in the text. Some specific manifestations such as subcultures and brass music are discussed and supplemented with Michel de Certeau's notion of everyday spatial practices in urban space.

**Keywords :** urban culture, popular culture, urbanization, common people, dominance resistance, (rhetoric of) walking, everyday practices, city, subcultures

The gradual urbanisation of the village in the second half of the 20th century can be understood mainly as the spreading out of popular culture to rural areas through media, consumer products and life style (everyday practices). To illustrate, we can take brass music as an example. Brass music emerged in urban environment in the second half of the 19th century as a result of mingling military march music and regionally different folk music traditions. Paradoxically, one hundred years later in the Czech Republic, it became a typical rural phenomenon that has driven out the original live folk music to the least developed and thus most traditional regions of Eastern Moravia.

## I.

There are various theories of what to consider popular culture and where to look for its roots. According to some, popular culture can be already identified in antiquity and blossomed in Elizabethan England. However, according to the concept most widely acknowledged today, it is the turn of the 18th and 19th century that was crucial for the formation of popular culture. In that period, the development of popular culture achieved a number of characteristics associated with it until today (Storey 2001: 13). As Peter Burke describes it, popular culture had been gradually incorporated into early popular newspaper since the 15th century. Popular press, which at the beginning emerged from oral traditions and reproduced the spoken culture, created a medium enabling the expansion of popular culture after its separation from the early forms of folk culture. A subtle and reflective relationship with popular culture became an important element of its success. Popular culture in printed form developed to such an extent that it enabled it to incorporate elements of the preceding folk culture as well as elements of the so called "great tradition" of "elite culture", commercially adapted for broad readership. Before the rise of newspapers, it was the culture of chapbooks and printed ballads, which linked the old traditions with the modern capitalist culture of printed information and entertainment. It was thanks to the ability of popular culture to incorporate elements of old traditions into the new cultural environment that popular culture became representative of the rural classes (Conboy 2002: 3, 23).

However, it was not until the 19th century that industrialisation and urbanisation brought about deep and permanent changes in the development of culture. Technological progress allowed for the emergence and development of cheap mass media. At the same time, a tidal wave of people came to the cities from rural areas, which led to the destruction of many traditional cultural bonds. The new urban population began to become more economically and culturally homogenous and to form a new unifying culture satisfying the people's needs

and demands. Apart from the democratisation of political systems, which turned the attention of the broad public to public affairs, an important factor was the rising income. Thanks to rising wages, common people gained free time and means for cultural activities.

According to Walter Benjamin, the uniqueness of a work of art, its aura, was lost and substituted by mass production. In this way, culture became more democratic, even though for a long time the new culture of the masses had still been refused by the elites (Conboy 2002: 56, 62). A record of an event in the form of photography or a piece of news had a democratising effect, because it made the events accessible to a greater number of people and invited the readers to form their own opinion on what they were reading. Since the moment the world began to seemingly speak directly to the reader, no special abilities or knowledge is required anymore for the readers to understand and react to a photography or a piece of newspaper news. The most typical representatives of mass/popular culture in the 19th century were dime novels, popular magazines and penny press. The development of mass media and popular culture was the fastest in the United States, from where it inspired the rest of the world (Schneirov 1994: 71).

An explanation of the global dominance of American popular culture can be found in Fiske's proposition that popularity is a measure of a product's ability to serve the desires of its customers, i.e. of its ability to serve both the manifold desires of people and the desires of the producers (Fiske 1987: 310). In the 19th century, the United States was not only a region with the fastest economic, political and social development, but also a country with the most permeable social classes. The American elites were (and still are) much more open to the popular culture than the European ones. Thanks to that, there were not as many obstructions to its development and commercial propagation (compare the private beginnings of radio and TV broadcast in the U.S. with state monopoly in Europe). Therefore it was in America that, without outward restrictions and interference, such popular culture that serves the desires of common people all over the world could most freely develop. Because of that, foreign elites reacted with a fierce opposition to American popular culture.

In the emerging city environment, the traditional oral way of spreading information ceased to exist and mass media became the main means of communication. They spread awareness of the city, its events and its important or interesting residents. Mass press created a new city communication environment, employed by the broadest classes of common people who became the main reader group. Popular culture began to disintegrate the cultural monopoly of the elites. It also began to conform its contents as well as its opinions to the attitudes and convictions of the readership.

## II.

Ian Chambers assigns to popular culture a central role in the emergence of the urban culture in its entity. He describes the parallel development of the urban environment together with the popular culture and he depicts the history of daily life as an example of the other side of British cities. The development of popular culture was accompanied by an increasing and complex visual and acoustic response of the city space. Chambers shows that the phenomena immanent to the popular culture of today – shopping arcades, video games, cinema, clubs, supermarkets, pubs and also shopping on Saturday to get dressed for Saturday night – are at home in the city. In this way, popular culture shapes the city space and it is impossible to separate it from it (Chambers 1986: 17, 18).

One of the crucial manifestations of popular culture, which are not imaginable aside the city space, are youth subcultures. At the same time, they present one of the most exciting examples of how the products and practices of the culture industry are transformed by the active consumption of these products. The mechanism of appropriating the commercial commodities by the youth for their own plans and intentions is described by Dick Hebdige as "bricolage". In a way the producers did not intend, the products are transformed, combined

and rearticulated so as to carry opposing meanings. Resistance to the dominant culture and to the culture of parents is expressed in the symbolic form by the way of speaking, music taste etc. Of course, once the culture industry recognises a commercial potential of the products and manifestations of a subculture, the originality and opposition is doomed to become ideologically vague and to end up as a part of the commercial sphere (Storey 2001: 105; Hebdidge: 1979: 209-212).

Michel de Certeau studies everyday practices. He, too, maintains that it is important to distinguish between the strategy of popular culture production and the tactics of its use by people. Active consumption of a text is characterised as poaching, a nomadic movement in someone else's area. He addresses the procedures of everyday creativity and the creative procedures of groups or individuals subject to disciplination. He analyses the city space practices and the operation forms which serve to its recomposition (Certeau 1984: xiv, xv).

A city can have a number of functions and attributes that in the past used to be attributed to many different real subjects – to groups, societies and individuals. A city generates its own space, a rational organisation that suppresses all physical, mental and political pollution. Everything not fitting in the concept is in the functionalist administration disposed of as waste (abnormality, diseases, deviation, death) (Certeau 1984: 93, 96). Movement around the city is a social experience of missing a place, since a city consists of a number of areas only temporarily “rented” to the pedestrian. Thus, walking becomes a way of appropriating a topographic system. There are very many gestures in the city - signs, graffiti, traces of violence etc. – that a pedestrian passes. At the same time, walking is controlled by the city through the technocratic signs (street names, house numbers). These helped the city planners to label the city in compliance with their discourse and to gain control over the city's residents. Official signs are emblems, ideas woven over the city (Concord Square, Red Square). These names open meanings and instructions, but they also exhaust and deplete their original function. Thanks to them, the places become a free space, which can be occupied. Even though intimate names are being repressed, the pedestrians/ users employ the names in their own way. Places keep their character also by the series of their past invisible names and shapes ("there used to be a shop with...") (Certeau 1984: 102, 104).

When looking from above, when walking, pedestrians create an urban text. The network of their movements comprises a multifaceted story without an author or an audience. According to the author, there is such a thing as the rhetoric of walking. In actuality, pedestrians often create sentences through the use of series of movement signs. Rhetoric of walking is, as in language, a combination of styles and habits – of series of roundabout ways, detours, various compositions of a route. What is characteristic of walking are the present time, discontinuity and emotivity. Important is not only the route you walked on but also all the ones you did not choose, the forbidden and the other possible ones (Certeau 1984: 93-100).

#### REFERENCES:

- CERTEAU, Michel de (1984). *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: U of California P.
- CONBOY, Martin (2002). *The Press and Popular Culture*. London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage.
- HEBDIDGE, Dick. (1979) *Subculture: The Unnatural Break*. In *Media and Cultural Studies: KeyWorks*, eds. Meenakshi Gigi Durham, Douglas M. Kellner. Malden, MA, Oxford, Carlton: Blackwell Publishing, s. 207-216.
- FISKE, John (1987). *Television Culture*. London, New York: Methuen.
- CHAMBERS, Ian. (1986). *Popular Culture: The Metropolitan Experience*. London: Methuen.
- SCHNEIROV, Matthew (1994). *The Dream of a New Social Order. Popular Magazines in America*. New York, Chichester: Columbia U P.
- STOREY, John (2001). *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction*. Harlow: Pearson.

The research was supported by the GAUK 57970 grant.

Jakub Machek, The Institute of Economic and Social History of the Faculty of Philosophy and Arts, Charles University in Prague, jakub.m(at)post.cz

The author studied social history, Czech literature and cultural studies. Currently, he is a PhD student at the Faculty of Philosophy and Arts, Charles University in Prague. He specialises in the emergence of popular culture in the Czech lands and in the everyday culture of an era called *normalisation*. Recently, he has published articles about first Czech mass press and about *household art*.

**City**  
**focusing on integration in the Urban Space**  
<http://www.evropskemesto.cz/cms/index.php>  
**ISSN 1803-5191**

### **About us**

The European city is an urban concept grounded in the tradition of European sociology. The concept aims to summarise the specifics of European urban settlements, such as high population density, a mixture of functions and populations, and the city's active role in ensuring social cohesion.

The original idea of this website was to present the results of the workshops organized by seven European NGOs working in a joint project Cultures from Around the Block financed by The European Year of Intercultural Dialogue 2008 (a key sponsor of the website). The workshops were targeted especially to the immigrant but in some cases also to non-immigrant youth. You can find the information on the workshop in the section Media.

Beside this, the website will try to become a platform for the interdisciplinary urban studies.

The editors of the web are Ondřej Daniel, Multicultural centre Prague and Peter Drál, Nadácia Milana Šimečku.

**City**  
<http://www.evropskemesto.cz/cms/index.php>  
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>