

## American Pop Culture and *Bob's Burgers*

### **Section 1 - America's Culture**

When engaging with endless forms of media, it's interesting to reflect upon how pop culture molds one's ideas and perspectives about the "fundamental" topics within American society. Topics like advertising, the American Dream & dystopian dream, violence in media, as well as the concept of "economic censorship" all pop up in pop culture. These concepts will be outlined and explained in relation to popular culture, American culture, and how it shapes peoples' ideologies about society.

Starting with advertising, the whole industry of advertising's goal is appealing to prospective customers, returning customers, and the public. Older and modern ads have been everywhere. Whether it be on the radio, product placements in TV and film, or even on a tower billboard. It's no secret that advertisements saturate the media. From long-time community activist and English professor at California State University, Northridge, Jack Solomon's essay, *Masters of Desire: The Culture of American Advertising*, he states, "The logic of advertising is entirely semiotic: It substitutes signs for things, framed visions of consumer desire for the thing itself. The success of modern advertising, its penetration into every corner of American life, reflects a culture that has itself chosen illusion over reality" (Maasik & Solomon, 2021, p. 259-260). In Solomon's piece, he highlights how ads create the foundation of how Americans wish to be seen. Considering the concept of duality, advertisements tell people that there is a need to be accepted into the majority of people, but in other ways, they must stand out, and be their own individual person. Advertisements create this concept that people need to show their social statuses through the material items they have. This leads into the topic of the American Dream.

The American Dream is a well-known concept that is brought up countless times in media and pop culture. pop culture author, John Perich writes, "The American Dream boils down to one core: if you work hard, you can get anything you want... work hard, provide for your family, and success is yours" (2013, p. 1 & 3). Perich's point is that the American Dream is designed to feed into materialism, consumerism, and superficiality. Many Americans' dreams include monetary value, because of this idea. The system in which America was built on is based on consumption and its correlation to societal success. A couple of examples of media that exhibit the American Dream include *Parasite*, a comedy thriller, ranging to the adult sitcom such *Bob's Burgers*.

A concept that comes from the American Dream is the dystopian dream. Some features of the dystopian dream are that it tends to feature white male characters who are emasculated by the white collar jobs that they have chosen, and women are portrayed to be a problem. Similar to the characters in Don Draper in *Mad Men*, Walter White in *Breaking Bad* (Perich, 2013, p. 1-4) and Joel Miller in *The Last of Us*, the main characters in a dystopian dream go against what they "should" do in pursuit of chasing a

“better” future for them but go about doing so by completing actions that counteract what society may seem as justifiable. These characters exemplify the role of an outlaw but are praised for their actions because of their individuality. The dystopian dream reinforces the American Dream by covering the bases of a person’s craving for uniqueness but still perpetuating a common community.

As for violence in media, the music industry is a great example of how pop culture shapes public opinion and perception. Emeritus Professor and researcher of Anglo-American popular music, Claude Chastagner states that the Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC) was an American committee made in 1985 with the goal of increasing parental control over the access of children to music that is deemed to be violent, implies drug use, references sexual acts, and “raunchy” lyrics that can be seen as explicit (1999, p. 181). Violence in the entertainment industry is prevalent. Rating of such media is governed by what people within the industry envision to be “explicit,” creating a cycle of hegemony in the context of American popular culture. This brings up the topic of economic censorship.

Last, economic censorship is censorship that is governed and motivated by the specific industries in which the censorship is taking place in, such as music, film, TV, etc. Jack Solomon makes a point in his essay and says, “If the American dream encourages the desire to *arrive*, to vault above the mass, it also fosters a desire to be popular, to *belong*” (Maasik & Solomon, 2021, p. 253). Solomon’s statement boils down to what Americans want from participating in popular culture. This yearning for the status quo connects to economic censorship because people want control over what is “good” and what is “bad” for them. People choose to create limitations for themselves and the greater public in hopes to create a structure to which they wish others to integrate into their own lives.

All these topics relate to how pop culture shapes individuals’ ideas about American society in that they all contribute to the framework that many Americans follow subconsciously. From buying a product because of a social media influencer (advertisements), to consuming media that showcases the American and dystopian dream, to censoring violence in media, as well as creating guidelines within specific industries—they are all connected to popular culture and molding peoples’ outlooks on life.

## **Section 2 - Bob’s Burgers**

In the [first episode of season one of the adult sitcom, Bob’s Burgers, titled Human Flesh](#), written by Loren Bouchard and Jim Dauterive, and directed by Anthony Chun, evidence of social normalcies being affirmed can be found using a rhetorical, narrative, dramatist, Marxist, and feminist perspective.

To begin, taken from *The Rhetorical Power of Popular Culture*, Dianna Sellnow states that rhetorical criticisms come from rhetoric. Rhetorical criticism is the systemic analysis of an argument about what things are, and/or what things ought to be, conveyed in a text through signs and artifacts. (p. 28-30). In this episode of Bob’s Burgers, within the first minute of the show, the Belcher family is introduced in their grand “re-re-re-opening” of their family-owned burger shop called *Bob’s Burgers*. At the very beginning, Tina shares with her dad that her crotch is itchy. In response, Bob says that she probably shouldn’t share the info with him, but her mother instead. This small,

comedic portion of the show affirms the concept about women being sought to be disgusting when talking about personal hygiene. It also affirms the idea of a nuclear family that consists of a dad who is emotionally detached and is the main worker of the family, while the mom is the assistant role to the dad who is more emotionally available and caring toward the children.

Sellnow also describes narrative theory to be a rhetorical method for examining ideological arguments that are conveyed through storytelling. "It identifies arguments proposed as morals through storytelling, complete with characters, plot, and actions" (p. 49-52). The overall plot of this episode is that the Belcher's family restaurant, Bob's Burgers, is facing public uproar and image destruction after the youngest child, Louise spreads a rumor that their burgers are crafted out of human remains. Because of this, business is slower than ever before for the Belcher family, causing them to face struggles monetarily. From this narrative, the American dream is prevalent. There is a specific scene where Bob is verbally putting himself down because of the failure of his restaurant. He is basing his success off of the consumption of his burger products, as well as how much money he is making (and lack thereof). This story affirms the concept of the American dream in that success is based off of how hard one works, how well they take care of themselves, how well they take care of their family, etc.

Next, Neo-Marxism is the idea that the ruling class are always the ruling ideas. Marxism allows people to analyze the media because they can see what the status quo is and what the morals/beliefs are at a certain time (Sellnow, 2018, p. 116). In the episode, there are a couple of health inspectors who get on the Belchers' case about the rumor of their food containing human flesh. The inspectors, Hugo and Ron, are avidly visiting Bob's Burgers because of the potential harm they are causing to the public. Hugo and Ron are the people who are setting the status quo in the episode. At one point, Hugo "calls the media" and reports that the rumor is true to spite Linda. They are the ones who planted the belief of human flesh burgers to be real to the public. This is a more meta take of Marxism that is occurring within the episode itself.

Lastly, Sellnow defines a feminist as anyone whose beliefs and actions challenge hegemony by respecting and valuing women, as well as respecting and valuing both men and women who embrace and enact multiple gender styles and sexual orientations. Sellnow defines the feminist perspective to focus on the assumed "normal" rules for men and women in society (Sellnow, 2018, p. 1). This episode rejects feminism in a scene where a joke about child molestation comes up. There is a perceived child molester in the burger shop and Bob tells Gene to serve him instead of Louise because, "[To Gene] He's not going to molest you." In this scene, Bob insinuates that the predator would not prey on Gene because he is a young boy over a young girl.

In summary, season 1, episode 1 of *Bob's Burgers* titled *Human Flesh* contains many takes on normalities in American society. It's important to consider the context in which this series was created, as it is a comedy adult series, which often are made to create conversation about topics that are surface level ranging to more "sensitive" topics.

### **Section 3 - Personal Effects**

Concepts that recur in our everyday lives like advertising, the American Dream, and representation in media have influenced me greatly.

Advertising has affected me at a young age. I would watch TV as a child and beg my parents to get me the newest and coolest toy I saw. I wanted to be the most popular kid in school because I had the newest barbie toy, or the fanciest digital coloring book. Subconsciously, I was basing my worth and structuring status in correlation to what material items I had. Consumerism still gets me to this day in that way. With influencer marketing in popularity, real people are walking advertisements for certain brands/companies. I get more connected to these people because I see similarities between them and me. Ads are inevitable to me at this point. They continue to influence what I want and don't want to purchase, because of my yearning to either fit in and/or be different.

As for the American dream, this concept has been in my life since I was born. As a daughter of two immigrants from the Philippines, there has not been one day where my parents have yet to remind me to work hard and get the shiny job and material items to showcase my success. It's been engrained in my mind that pursuing the American dream is the continuation of what my parents worked for when they came to the U.S. It's difficult to navigate, but I am glad I can reflect and critically think about this subject.

Lastly, representation in media has affected me a lot because I am seeing more and more people who look like me on the screens in front of me. I used to wish I was White because most of the entertainers I saw were. Now, with more Asian women in the entertainment industry such as Beabadoobee, Olivia Rodrigo, Hayley, Kiyoko, Michelle Yeoh, Stephanie Hsu, etc. have shown me that people can look like me and go into creative fields, which inspires me greatly.

Popular culture has impacted me and has shaped my perceptions of myself and the world around me.

## **References**

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