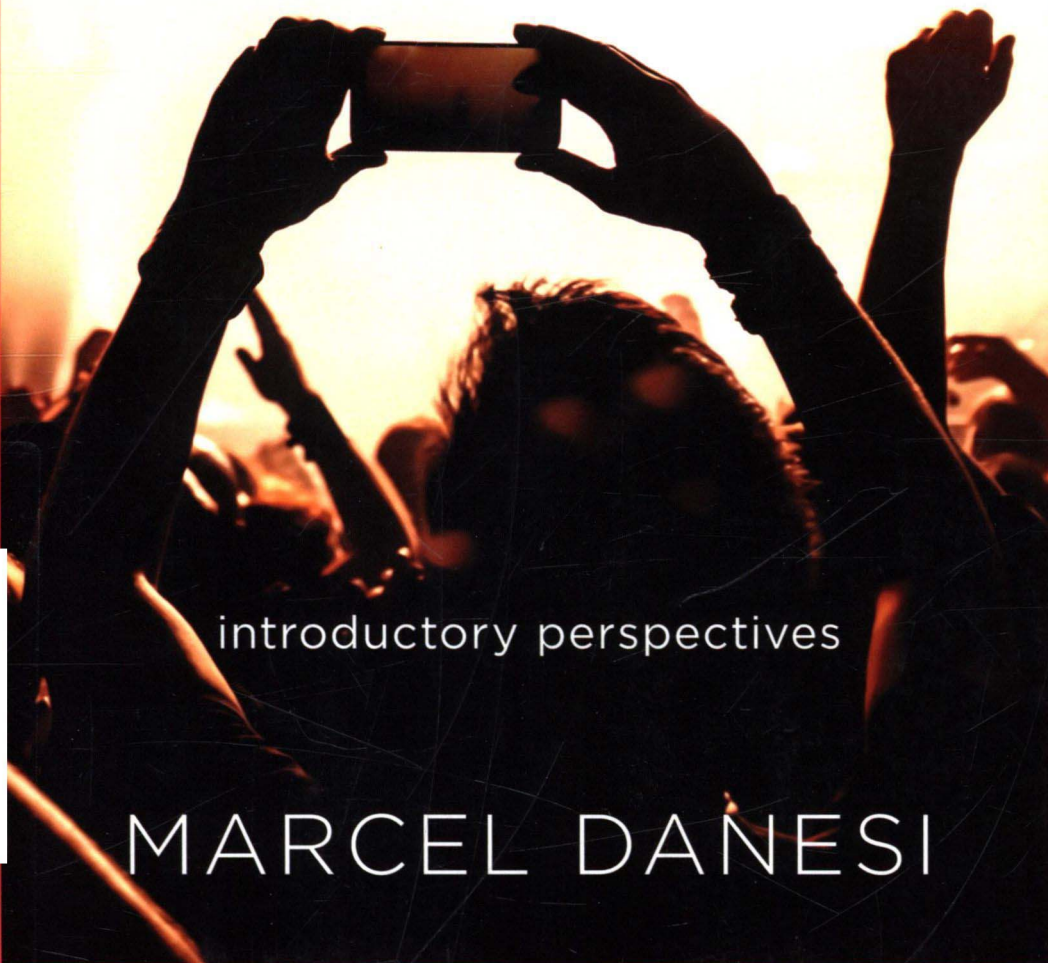


POPULAR THIRD EDITION culture

The background of the lower half of the cover is a photograph showing the silhouettes of a crowd of people at what appears to be a concert or festival. In the center, a person is holding up a smartphone horizontally to take a picture. Other people's arms and hands are visible, some raised in the air. The background is a bright, hazy light, likely from stage lights or the sun, creating a high-contrast silhouette effect.

introductory perspectives

MARCEL DANESI

"With clear organization and easily understandable content, this third edition does a great job of explaining popular culture. It is an excellent introduction and provides solid context for more specialized study."

—**JANET McMULLEN**, University of North Alabama

"An excellent introduction to the ideas, terminologies, and modes of analysis integral to approaching media from a cultural studies perspective. The book is engaging, easy to understand, and within that wonderful range of being challenging but not out of reach."

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"Articulate, intelligent, and very readable. Danesi takes a generous and balanced approach to high, low, and mid cultures and their products and artifacts. Readers will appreciate how he opens the door to discussion of a complex topic."

—**TIM BLACKMORE**, University of Western Ontario

Pop culture surrounds us. Its products are the movies we watch, the music we listen to, and the books we read; they are on our televisions, phones, and computers. We are its fickle friend, loving to hate it and hating to love it. But what, exactly, is it?

Popular Culture: Introductory Perspectives tackles that question by exploring our human desire for meaning and the ways that popular culture embodies meaning. In this core text, Marcel Danesi delves into the social structures that have led to the emergence and spread of pop culture, showing how it validates our common experiences and offering a variety of perspectives on its many modes of delivery into our everyday lives. The third edition features two new chapters: one on the commercial context of pop culture and another explicitly considering digital culture. New exercises and discussion questions serve to deepen understanding, while updated examples connect with the current generation of students.

MARCEL DANESI is professor of anthropology, semiotics, and communication theory at the University of Toronto.

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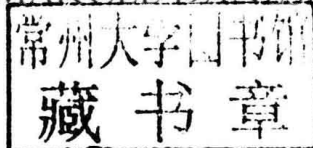
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POPULAR CULTURE

Introductory Perspectives

Third Edition

MARCEL DANESI



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POPULAR CULTURE

PREFACE

Popular forms of entertainment have always existed. In his *Historia*, Herodotus (circa 485–425 BCE) wrote about amusing spectacles and songs that he encountered as he traveled the ancient world, commenting that they seemed rather odd. Today, amusing spectacles and popular songs are everywhere. Together with various kinds of television programs, movies, YouTube videos, changing lifestyle trends, fads, and the like they make up what is called *popular culture*, a culture that is everywhere in modern urbanized societies, sustained by electronic media and digital platforms. How did it come about? What is it? Why do we hate to love it and love to hate it? What has happened to “high culture”? Is it hidden away in the libraries of academies and conservatories and staged for an exclusive group of people?

These are the kinds of questions that implicitly guided the writing of this book. In a world that is managed by those who hold the levers of media and digital power, it is little wonder that the study of the relations between the media and popular culture has been flourishing in several disciplines, including psychology, anthropology, sociology, and cultural studies. Many scholars seek to give ideological, political, or social explanations of the phenomenon. Some have attempted to explore the unconscious structures of the psyche that undergird the appeal and lure of pop culture. The purpose of this book is to look at the explosion of pop culture through the lens of history, focusing on the relationship between the media stages for the delivery of pop culture and the contents and forms of pop culture itself. Needless to say, the exploration is based on my own subjective interpretations. So, it is bound to leave gaps, venture into the speculative, and be somewhat selective. I have tried to cast as wide a net as possible, so as to offer the reader as complete a menu of ideas and analyses as is possible within two covers. And, of course, the study of pop culture is not a precise science, so

treatments such as this one are themselves open to differing interpretations. I believe that the ultimate purpose of such a treatment is to open up debate. If I have done that, I will feel that the writing has been worthwhile.

I have tailored this book for the general reader, and especially for students taking beginning courses in cultural studies or in related fields such as semiotics, psychology, mythology, education, literary studies, sociology, cultural anthropology, communication studies, and media analysis. In all chapters, I have used a historical framework to introduce the subject matter, leading to various analytical perspectives. To facilitate its reading, I have avoided making constant references to the technical literature. The works that have informed my various commentaries, descriptions, and analyses are listed at the back. I have also used a simple writing style and have made absolutely no assumptions about any prior technical knowledge on the part of the reader. A convenient glossary of technical terms is also included at the back.

This is the third edition of the book. I had no idea when I wrote it for use in my own classes that it would be adopted by other instructors in universities across North America. I have revised it according to the many insightful comments made to me by my colleagues directly or through the publisher. The revision has been extensive in parts, taking into account the rise and dominance of the digital global village as a new context for the delivery of pop culture. The first three chapters introduce key theoretical and historical facts and ideas, including their expressions in print, radio, recordings, cinema, television, the Internet, and so on. Chapter 3 is completely new, dealing with the business of pop culture. Although I had avoided this topic in the past, preferring to focus on the content of the popular imagination, I now realize that the commercial part of pop culture intersects with its content and thus cannot be avoided. Identifying the distinguishing characteristics of pop culture necessarily involves understanding their association with commercial products, the business of changing technologies, and the marketplace changes that invariably affect the content and delivery of pop culture forms (and vice versa). The remaining chapters discuss the synergy between pop culture, mass communications technologies, and the mass media, along with the role of advertising in the rise and spread of pop culture. Of these, chapter 11 on digital culture is completely new. The last chapter then pulls together the various thematic threads weaved throughout the previous chapters, offering an overall assessment of the pop culture phenomenon. Finally, I have added an appendix of exercises and discussion topics that can be used optionally in any classroom environment or for personal reasons in order to increase the book's pedagogical usefulness.

I should mention from the very outset that I love many aspects of pop culture, no matter how crass they can sometimes be. It is liberating to know that entertainment can be as much a part of everyday life as anything else, including religious rituals and serious art (whatever that is). One does not preclude the other. On the other hand, I also feel that there must be a balance between entertainment and serious artistic engagement, between distraction and philosophical reflection. It is that balance that will be the target of my concluding remarks.

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1

WHAT IS POP CULTURE?

The bosses of our mass media, press, radio, film and television, succeed in their aim of taking our minds off disaster.

—Ernst Fischer (1899–1972)

In 1923, a landmark event occurred, changing American society radically. The event was a Broadway musical, *Running Wild*, which helped turn a sexually suggestive dance called the Charleston into a craze for the young (and the young at heart) throughout the nation. It was evidence that America had started to yearn for a new, carefree, open, nontraditional popular form of culture. This yearning was symbolized by a dance that society's elders, politicians, and religious institutions condemned as vulgar and crude. This was captured skillfully by the 2002 movie *Chicago* (based on the 1975 Broadway musical).

But the condemnation could not stop its allure to common people (especially young persons), as *Running Wild* had predicted. Burlesque and vaudeville theaters, speakeasies (Prohibition-era night clubs), and dance halls cropped up in the 1920s to satisfy America's desire to freely express itself sexually in public. The 1920s came to be called, appropriately, the Roaring Twenties. It was the decade when *pop culture*, as we now call it, became a new type of recreational culture and a huge business. By the 1930s, it spread to all corners of American society and to other parts of the world as well. It could not be curtailed, despite the severity of the legislative measures taken, from Prohibition to censorship in various forms and guises. It was then, and is now, unstoppable as a form of culture that appeals to our corporeal selves, challenging moral stodginess and aesthetic pretentiousness, while entertaining us with its earthiness. Because of its populist grassroots,

pop culture has been a primary driving force behind social, economic, and even political change since its appearance, simultaneously triggering an unprecedented society-wide, and worldwide, debate about the relation between art, entertainment, aesthetics, spectacle, and “true culture” that is still an ongoing one.

The purpose of this opening chapter is to trace the origins and evolutionary tendencies of pop culture, discussing its basic features, its close relation to the media and mass communications technologies, and how it can be decoded (or at the very least recognized as distinctive from other forms of culture). Along with the next two chapters, this chapter is designed to set the stage for discussing the expressive manifestations of pop culture through various media stages and platforms.

DEFINING POPULAR CULTURE

What is *pop culture*? The term is not as easy to define as it might seem at first blush. Let's start with a working definition of *culture*. Most anthropologists would define culture as a means of organizing and stabilizing communal life through specific beliefs, rituals, rites, performances, art forms, symbols, language, clothing, food, music, dance, and any other mode of human expressive, intellectual, and communicative behavior that is associated with a group of people at a particular period of time. In Western tradition, it is common to subdivide culture into *high* and *low*, according to historically based perceptions associated with aesthetic movements. High culture is considered to be a form of culture that purportedly has a more profound import on human life than does low culture, which is seen as simply recreational and perhaps even base. *Pop culture* alludes, on the other hand, to a form of culture that makes little, if any, such categorical distinctions. Its emergence in the 1920s was due, in large part, to unexpected affluence, which gave people in the mass, regardless of class or educational background, considerable buying power. Its spread was made possible by an ever-expanding and ever-reinforcing media-technology-business partnership. Since then, it has played a pivotal role in the overall evolution of American society (and virtually every other modern society). This is why cultural historians now tend to designate historically significant periods of social change in the modern era with terms such as the *hippie era*, the *disco era*, the *punk era*, the *hip-hop era*, and so on—all of which are references to major musical trends within pop culture. These designations stand beside political and technological characterizations such as the *Kennedy era*, the