

Introductory Perspectives

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ULAR
CULTURE**

**SECOND
EDITION**

Marcel Danesi

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—**Prisca Augustyn**, Florida Atlantic University

Popular 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 friends, loving to hate it and hating to love it. But what, exactly, is it?

Popular Culture: Introductory Perspectives seeks to answer that question by exploring our human desire for meaning and the ways that pop culture embodies meaning for us. In this text, Marcel Danesi delves into the social structures that have led to the emergence and spread of popular culture, showing how it validates our common experiences and offering a variety of perspectives on its many modes of delivery into our everyday lives. This second edition offers analysis of current contexts for popular culture, including the rise and dominance of the digital global village through technology and social media, as well as up-to-date examples that connect with today's students.

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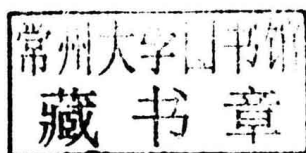
POUR

Popular Culture

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Second Edition

Marcel Danesi



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Popular Culture

Preface

History records that popular forms of entertainment have always existed. In his *Historia*, Herodotus (circa 485–425 BCE) wrote about amusing performances and songs that he encountered as he traveled the ancient world that seemed rather odd to him. Today amusing spectacles, popular musical trends, and the like are everywhere. They make up what is called *pop culture*, a culture that is everywhere, having largely replaced traditional forms of culture and lifestyle. 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 art”? Is high art hidden away in the record libraries of a few aficionados or staged for an exclusive group of people in the few remaining opera houses and symphony halls?

These are the kinds of questions that have implicitly guided the writing of this book. In a world that is managed by those who hold the levers of media power, it is little wonder that the study of the relation between the media and pop culture has been flourishing. Many scholars seek to give ideological, political, or sociological explanations of the pop culture phenomenon. Only a few have attempted to explore the unconscious structures that have led to the emergence and spread of pop culture. The purpose of this book is to explore these structures, 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 experiences of the pop culture phenomenon. So, it is bound to leave gaps, to occasionally venture into the subjective, and to be somewhat selective. Nevertheless, 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.

I have tailored this book for the general reader, and especially for students taking beginning courses in pop culture 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 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 a second 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 two chapters introduce key theoretical and historical facts and ideas, including its expressions in print, radio, recordings, cinema, television, the Internet, and so on. Chapters 3 through 7 discuss the synergy between pop culture and the mass media. Chapter 8 looks at the role of advertising in the rise and spread of pop culture, and chapter 9 at the role of language in pop culture. The last chapter pulls together the various thematic threads weaved in the previous chapters, offering an overall assessment of the pop culture phenomenon, especially from its contextualization today in cyberspace.

I should mention from the very outset that I love pop culture, no matter how crass it 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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Chapter One

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 the American psyche had started to yearn for a new, carefree, public form of sexuality. This yearning found its expressive vehicle in the form of a dance that symbolized the birth of a fresh and exciting popular form of culture. Of course, there was a reaction against the craze from society's elders and moral guardians. This was captured skillfully in the 2002 movie *Chicago* (based on the 1975 Broadway musical). A social censure of the dance and its attendant lifestyle and fashions—considered to be vulgar and crude—was the main consequence of the adverse reaction.

But the condemnation could not stop its spread, as *Running Wild* had predicted. Burlesque and vaudeville theaters, speakeasies (night clubs), and dance halls cropped up in the 1920s to satisfy America's desire to freely express itself sexually. As a consequence, the 1920s came to be called the Roaring Twenties. The decade marked, in fact, the crystallization of *pop culture*, as we now call it. By the 1930s, pop culture was spreading 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 movie censorship. It was then, and is now, unstoppable as a form of expressive culture, challenging moral stodginess and aesthetic

pretentiousness, while entertaining masses with its earthiness. Pop culture has been the primary driving force behind social evolution since the Roaring Twenties, simultaneously triggering an unprecedented society-wide, and worldwide, debate about the relation between art, sex, entertainment, aesthetics, 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). Along with the next one, this chapter is designed to set the stage for discussing the expressive manifestations of pop culture in subsequent chapters.

DEFINING POP 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 agree that what we call *culture* is a system for communal life that includes specific beliefs, rituals, performances, art forms, lifestyle patterns, symbols, language, clothing, music, dance, and any other mode of human expressive, intellectual, ritualistic, and communicative behavior that is associated with a group of people in a particular period of time. Culture is sometimes subdivided into such categories as *high* and *low*, on the basis of preferences within the system that are associated with differences in established aesthetic canons, social class, education, and other variables within the community. *Pop culture* alludes, essentially, to a form of culture that makes little, if any, such categorical distinctions, making it a nontraditional form of culture in this sense. The term surfaced in the United States in the 1950s, when it had become a widespread social reality, breaking down differential categories of taste and lifestyle and, consequently, uniting the nation in a populist fashion. Pop culture's emergence as a default form of culture in that era was due, in large part, to postwar affluence and a subsequent baby boom, which gave people in the mass, regardless of class or educational background, considerable buying power, thus propelling them into the unprecedented position of shaping trends in fashion, music, and lifestyle through the marketplace. By the end of the decade a full-blown pop culture, promoted by a savvy media-technology-business partnership, had materialized. Since then, it has played a pivotal role in the overall evolution of American society (and every other modern society). This is why cultural historians now tend to designate the historically significant periods of social change since the 1950s 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 ones such as the *Kennedy era*, the *Nixon era*, the *Bush era*, the *television era*, the *Facebook era*, and the like.

Culture

The term *culture* requires further commentary. Above all else, it reveals that the human species is a social one that bases its social systems on creative and expressive structures, evolving not only on biology's terms, but also (and primarily) through these systems, that is, through the symbols, arts, technologies, and other artifacts that make them up. Culture can be defined essentially as the *memorate* ("memory template") of the expressive structures that a particular group of people have made in their history and continue to make in order to evolve. As such, the systems of culture in which groups are reared largely determine how they will come to understand the world and evaluate themselves and others. The American anthropologist Franz Boas (1858–1942) claimed that culture was the primary template through which worldview is formed. This theory has come to be known as *cultural relativism*. Several of Boas's students at Columbia University in the 1920s and 1930s—Edward Sapir (1884–1939), Margaret Mead (1901–1978), and Ruth Benedict (1887–1948)—entrenched relativism into the mind-set of anthropologists generally. Sapir devoted his career to determining the extent to which the language of a culture shaped the thought patterns of its users. Mead sought to unravel how child-rearing practices influenced the behavior and temperament of the maturing individual. Benedict was fascinated by the fact that every culture developed its own particular canons of morality and lifestyle codes that largely determined the choices individuals made throughout their life cycles. From the moment of birth, Benedict asserted, the culture into which individuals are born unconsciously shapes their behavior and outlook on life. By the time children can talk, they have become creatures of their culture—its habits are their habits, its beliefs are their beliefs, its challenges are their challenges.

The Polish-born British anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942) contended that cultures originated to provide creative strategies for solving basic physical and moral problems. He claimed that cultures across the world, no matter how divergent they might at first seem, encoded universal concepts of ethics and expressed basic needs through rituals, art forms, artifacts, and the like, allowing people everywhere to solve life problems in remarkably similar ways. The British anthropologist Alfred Radcliffe-Brown (1881–1955) noted that in a specific cultural context even a physical response

like weeping was shaped culturally to help solve emotional problems. Among the Andaman Islanders in the east Bay of Bengal, for example, he found that weeping was not primarily an expression of joy or sorrow, but rather a response to social situations characterizing such meaningful events as peace-making, marriage, and the reunion of long-separated intimates. In weeping together, the people renewed their ties of solidarity.

Pop Culture versus Folk Culture and Recreational Culture

In the history of human cultures, pop culture stands out as atypical. It is culture by the people for the people. In contrast to historical (traditional) culture, it rejects both the supremacy of tradition and of established cultural norms, as well as the pretensions of intellectualist tendencies within contemporary artistic cultures. Pop culture has always been highly appealing for this very reason, bestowing on common people the assurance that cultural trends are for everyone, not just for an elite class of artists and cognoscenti. It is thus populist, unpredictable, and highly ephemeral, reflecting the ever-changing tastes of one generation after another. As American composer Stephen Sondheim has aptly put it, popular trends in culture quickly grow quaint: “How many people feel strongly about Gilbert and Sullivan today compared to those who felt strongly in 1890?” (cited in the *International Herald Tribune*, Paris, June 20, 1989). This might give the impression that pop culture is a commodity culture, producing trendy works in music, writing, visual art, and so on that have the same kind of market value function as do manufactured material goods and commodities, satisfying momentary and fleeting entertainment and recreational needs. The French semiotician Roland Barthes (1915–1980) saw it, in fact, 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 pop culture trends and products have largely entertainment and recreational value. But people have always sought the means for obtaining recreation and incorporating it into cultural structures linguistically (such as in jokes, witticisms, and the like), theatrically (such as in satirical and parodic works), musically (through dance and other bodily forms), ritualistically, and so on and so forth, long before the advent of contemporary pop culture. Most of the world’s traditional folk cultures are recreational and ritualistic (repetitive in Barthesian terms), exemplifying an unconscious need to engage in profane forms of culture alongside sacred forms. This is why carnival traditions exist throughout the world and across time alongside religious feasts—comedy and tragedy as, the Greeks certainly understood, are two sides of the same psychic coin. Pop culture has a two-sided character—it is basically recreational, designed to appeal to our profane (fun-loving) side,

as do traditional recreational and folk cultures, but it also provides the forms and structures that creative individuals (artists, musicians, and writers) are able to turn into what we call lasting and enduring art. Admittedly, most of pop culture is a commodity culture and thus easily discounted in terms of having any timeless and universal appeal. But within the mix there has always been, since the 1920s, the proverbial artistic wheat that rose above the profane chaff. Like composers such as Mozart and Beethoven, who wrote many of their works to have broad appeal and thus to make them some money, so too the jazz works of a Louis Armstrong or the blues works of a B. B. King were produced to have broad appeal and thus to sell in the marketplace. But this fact has not precluded us from redefining them as “works of true art.” The works of a Mozart or Beethoven, like the works of a Louis Armstrong or a B. B. King, have become classic because they strike a resounding chord within the psyche, no matter how much money they garnered for their creators.

The term *pop culture* was likely fashioned after the *pop art* (popular art) movement that took shape in the late 1950s, principally in the United States and Great Britain. Many of the works of those artists were satirical or playful in intent, devaluing what they considered to be unnecessarily difficult and the role of the private or subjective experience, emphasized by traditional aesthetic philosophy. They validated the everyday experiences of common people, emerging as part of a communal art movement. Pop artists represented scenes and objects from within mass culture, sometimes with actual consumer products (soup cans, comic books, detergents, and the like) incorporated into their works. The movement began as a reaction against expressionism, an art movement of the 1940s and 1950s that emphasized forms in themselves rather than the realistic representation of external reality. Art critics loved it; common people ignored it. Pop artists sought instead, to depict the reality that common people experienced on an everyday basis—a reality consisting of brand-name commercial products, 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. The unnamed leader of the pop art movement was the American artist Andy Warhol (1928–1987), whose paintings and silk-screen prints emblemized the whole movement, as did his famous (some would say infamous) portrait of a Campbell’s soup can, painted in 1964.

Pop art caught on widely because it engaged the masses, not just art critics. But was it art, as the critics asked and continue to debate? The terms *high* and *low* have been used constantly in this debate. *High* implies culture considered to have a superior value, socially, aesthetically, and historically; *low* implies culture considered to have an inferior value. *Low* is often applied to pop culture generally, along with negative descriptive terms such as *kitschy*, *slapstick*, *campy*, *escapist*, *exploitive*, *obscene*, *raunchy*, *vulgar*, and the like. Many of

these are applicable to a portion of pop art and pop culture generally—perhaps a large portion. However, that same culture has produced works such as the Beatles’ *Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967) album and Milos Forman’s Hollywood version of Peter Shaffer’s *Amadeus* (1984), which hardly merit any of these epithets. Indeed, pop culture has itself been instrumental in blurring, if not obliterating, the distinction between high and low culture. Already in the Romantic nineteenth century, artists saw *low* or *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 the previous classical era. Pop culture emerged shortly thereafter, effacing any residue of distinctions between levels of culture.

As O’Brien and Szeman (2004: 7) aptly point out, pop culture is popular because it consists of “what the people make, or do, for themselves.” This includes material forms (magazines, videos, bestselling novels, fads, etc.), art and representational forms (music, movies, TV programs), and activities such as shopping for fun, going to sports events, and so on. It reflects something deeply embedded in our psyche—a need to balance sacred culture with kitschy profane culture. As writer Milan Kundera (1984: 234) has perceptively observed, pop culture is something that appeals to us instinctively because “no matter how much we scorn it, kitsch is an integral part of the human condition.”

Levels of Culture

The categories of *high* and *low* culture merit further discussion, since the sense that certain forms of culture are higher than others has not disappeared from modern societies, despite the efforts of the Romantics and the advent and spread of the marketplace-based American pop culture. Paradoxically, the idea of levels exists within pop culture itself. We all share a sense of an implicit *culture hierarchy* (which is judged in an intuitive rather than formal or critical way). People evaluate movies, novels, music, and so on instinctively in terms of this hierarchy:

Table 1.1. Levels of Culture

Level	Examples Perceived to Occur at Each Level
High	Shakespeare, James Joyce, Emily Dickinson, Bach, Mozart, opera, symphonies, art galleries, <i>Time</i> magazine, Chanel perfumes, <i>Frontline</i> , <i>Psychology Today</i> magazine, the Discovery Channel
Mid	many daily newspapers, National Public Radio, Harry Potter, Oprah, CNN, PBS, public museums, jazz, Bob Dylan, the Beatles, <i>American Idol</i> , TLC programs such as <i>Intervention</i> and <i>Hoarders</i>
Low	tabloids, Howard Stern, infomercials, 50 Cent, the Kardashians, porn magazines and movies, movies such as <i>Hangover</i>