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 (1909–1972)

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 an exciting popular form of culture. Of course, there was a reaction against the craze from society’s elders and moral guardians. This admonishment is captured cleverly in the 2002 movie *Chicago* (based on the 1975 Broadway musical). A social censure of the Charleston 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 the dance’s spread, as *Running Wild* had predicted. Burlesque and vaudeville theaters, speakeasies (night clubs), and dance halls cropped up in the 1920s to satisfy Americans’ desire to freely express themselves 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 debate about art, sex, and true culture that is still ongoing.

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 media technologies, and how it can be approached. 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 that includes beliefs, rituals, performances, art forms, lifestyle patterns, symbols, language, clothing, music, dance, and any other mode of human expressive, intellectual, and communicative behavior that is associated with a community during a particular time period. 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 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. The term surfaced in the United States in the 1950s when this noncategorical culture had become a widespread social reality. Pop culture’s rise in that era was due, in large part, to post-war affluence and a subsequent baby boom, which gave people, 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 such power. By the end of the decade a full-blown pop culture, promoted by an increasingly affluent population, 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 historians now tend to characterize the periods 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 refer to major musical trends within *pop culture*—rather than, say, *the Truman era*, *the Roosevelt era*, and the like—which are the kind of labels historians once used to designate historically significant periods.
Culture

The term culture requires further commentary. Above all else, it is a phenomenon that reveals that the human species is creative, evolving not only on biology's terms but also on its own terms—through the symbols, arts, technologies, and other artifacts humans make. Culture can be defined essentially as the memorate (memory template) of the artifacts that a particular group of people have made in their history and continue to make in order to evolve. As such, culture produces within group members an emotional (rather than rational) connection to the memorate itself, which is used as a template for evaluating life and people. The American anthropologist Franz Boas (1858-1942) claimed that culture is 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 mindset of anthropology 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 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 shapes their behavior and worldview permanently. 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 methods 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, 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 encoded culturally to serve specific purposes. 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**

In the history of human cultures, pop culture stands out as atypical. It is culture by the people and for the people. In contrast to historical culture, it rejects both the supremacy of tradition and many of the socially based cultural practices of the past, as well as the pretensions of intellectualist tendencies within contemporary traditional culture. Pop culture has always been highly appealing for this very reason, bestowing on common people the assurance that culture is for everyone, not just for an elite class of designated artists or authority figures. It is thus populist, popular, and public. But, since popularity is unpredictable and highly ephemeral, pop culture is beset by a constant turnover of artifacts, expressive and material. Popular forms of culture quickly grow quaint. As American composer Stephen Sondheim has aptly put it, “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, 20 June 1989). At the same time, pop culture’s predictability can give the impression that it is uncreative. The French semiotician Roland Barthes (1915–1980) saw pop culture, 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).

The term *pop culture* was likely fashioned after the *pop art* (popular art) movement that crystallized in the late 1950s, principally in the United States and Great Britain. Many of the works of pop artists were satirical or playful in intent, devaluing what the artists considered to be unnecessarily difficult and private (subjective) aspects of traditional art forms. Pop art instead validated the everyday experiences of common people. Pop artists represented scenes and objects from mass culture, sometimes with actual consumer products incorporated into their works. The movement began as a reaction against expressionism, an obscure and abstract art style of the 1940s and 1950s. Pop artists sought to depict everyday life, using brand-name commercial products, fast-food items, comic-strip frames, celebrities, and the like as their materials and their subjects. They put on *happenings*, improvised spectacles or performances for anyone, not just art gallery patrons. Perhaps the best known exponent of pop art was the American artist Andy Warhol
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Pop art caught on widely because it engaged the masses, not just art connoisseurs. 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 a level considered to have a superior value, socially and aesthetically; low implies a level considered to have an inferior value. The word low is often applied to pop culture generally, along with negative descriptive terms such as slapstick, campy, escapist, exploitative, obscene, raunchy, vulgar, and the like. Many of these descriptors are applicable to a portion of pop art and pop culture generally—perhaps a large portion. However, pop culture has also produced works such as the Beatles album *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967) and Milos Forman's Hollywood version of Peter Shaffer's *Amadeus* (1984), which hardly merit any of these epithets. Indeed, pop culture has been instrumental in blurring, if not obliterating, the distinction between high and low culture. Already in the Romantic movement of the nineteenth century, artists saw low culture 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. Pop culture emerged shortly thereafter and effaced any residue of distinctions between levels of culture.

Levels of Culture

The categories of high, mid, and low culture merit further discussion, since the sense that certain forms of culture are higher than others has not disappeared from modern society, despite the efforts of the Romantics and the advent and spread of pop culture. Paradoxically, the idea of levels of culture exists within pop culture itself. Most people today share an understanding of an implicit culture hierarchy (which is judged in an intuitive sense rather than in a formal or critical way). People evaluate movies, novels, music, and so on instinctively in terms of this hierarchy, as illustrated in table 1.1.

The encompassing of all three levels of culture, and the constant criss-crossing that is evident among the levels, are defining tendencies within pop culture. Many works are even designed purposefully to crisscross the levels. For example, any episode of *The Simpsons*, the longest running prime-time cartoon sitcom, might contain references to writers and philosophers locat-
Table 1.1. Levels of Culture

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Examples Perceived to Occur at Each Level</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>Shakespeare, James Joyce, Emily Dickinson, Bach, Mozart, opera, symphonies, art galleries, <em>Time</em> magazine, Chanel perfumes, <em>Frontline</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid</td>
<td>newspapers, National Public Radio, Harry Potter, Oprah, CNN, PBS, public museums, jazz, Bob Dylan</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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able at the highest level of the hierarchy, as well as references to trendy rap groups and blockbuster movies. This admixture of styles and forms is often called *bricolage* or simply *collage*. It is a generic feature that sets pop culture apart from virtually all previous forms of culture.

Therefore, pop culture is not a "bastard culture" as Barthes cynically portrayed it, but rather an eclectic culture. As mentioned, a movie such as *Amadeus* is appealing to masses of people as pure entertainment and at the same time is acclaimed by critics as a cinematic masterpiece. It has a storyline that people can follow and understand easily, a soundtrack that moves audiences poignantly, and a visual power that grabs their attention and maintains it throughout the narrative. On the other hand, within the same cultural paradigm, dance fads, magazines, fashion shows, and wrestling matches seem to have little more than a pure recreational function. Pop culture makes little or no distinction between art and recreation, distraction and engagement. Although most of its products are designed to have a short shelf life, some gain permanency as so-called great works of art. Such is the paradox and power of pop culture.

Youth Culture

In the vast literature on pop culture that has accrued over the last half-century, the term *youth culture* surfaces constantly and is often used as a synonym for pop culture. The main reason is that the makers of popular trends have tended to be young people. Already in the 1920s, it was young people who were at the forefront of trends such as the Charleston and jazz music. Although the older generations initially considered these innovations immoral or vulgar, the new forms eventually caught on more broadly for a simple reason—they held great emotional appeal and entertainment value. In that era, therefore, a basic pattern was established—trends in youth cul-
What Is Pop Culture?

The publication of popular magazines and cheap newspapers, starting in the 1820s, coupled with the publication in the 1860s of dime novels—
A Pop Culture Timeline

1821: The Saturday Evening Post is launched, becoming one of the first magazines to appeal directly to masses of people.

1833: The New York Sun is published as the first penny press newspaper, costing only one cent.

1836: Godey’s Lady’s Book is launched as the first modern women’s magazine.

1860s: The New York Morning reaches a circulation of 80,000, highlighting the fact that newspapers had become an integral part of mass culture. The dime novel becomes popular in the same decade.

1887: Emile Berliner develops the gramophone, which can play cheap, mass-produced records.

1888: Guglielmo Marconi invents the first radio transmitter.

1889: Hannibal Goodwin develops film technology.

1894: Thomas Edison opens up the first nickelodeon parlors with coin-operated projectors.

1895: William Randolph Hearst enters newspaper publishing and adopts sensationalistic techniques, promoting so-called yellow journalism. The Lumière brothers show the first short films in Paris.

1896: Thomas Edison invents the Vitascope, which is capable of large-screen projection.

1900: Muckraking (seeking out and publicizing the misdemeanors of prominent people) becomes highly popular in magazine publishing.

1903: Edwin S. Porter’s The Great Train Robbery, an early western, gains popularity, indicating that the era of movie-going is just around the corner.

1906–1910: Lee De Forest invents the vacuum tube, improving radio reception, and Reginald Fessenden makes the first radio broadcast, from the Metropolitan Opera House in New York City.

1910s: Silent films become popular, and the first movie celebrities emerge.

1916: David Sarnoff, the commercial manager of American Marconi, writes a famous memo, now known as the Radio Box Memo, in which he proposes to make radio a “household utility.” Frank Conrad founds KDKA in Pittsburgh, the first radio station, in 1916. The station’s broadcast of the 1920 presidential election results on November 2, 1920, is generally considered to constitute the beginning of professional broadcasting.
1920s: The Big Five studios (Paramount, MGM, Warner Brothers, Twentieth Century Fox, RKO) and the Little Three studios (Columbia, Universal, United Artists) are established in the late 1920s.

1922: Reader’s Digest is launched. The first uses of radio for commercial purposes begin with the airing of the first commercials, by AT&T on station WEAF. This causes an uproar, as people challenge the use of the public airwaves for commercial messages.

1926: The first radio broadcasting network, NBC, is created by RCA.

1927: Soundtrack technology turns silent films into talkies. The first talkie is The Jazz Singer (1927), starring Al Jolson. Philo T. Farnsworth transmits the first television picture.

1933: FM radio is developed.

1936: The first television service debuts in Britain.

1939: Robert de Graaf introduces Pocket Books. NBC starts regular television broadcasts from New York City.

1947: Radio starts to lose audiences to television. Magnetic audiotape is developed by 3M. Wynonie Harris records “Good Rockin’ Tonight,” probably the first rock-and-roll song.

1948: 33 1/3 records are introduced by Columbia Records and 45 rpm records are introduced by RCA Victor. The DJ radio era takes off. Milton Berle and Ed Sullivan go on air with the first television variety shows, ushering in the golden age of television. The first community antenna television channels (CATV) are established.

1949: Red Hot ’n Blue becomes one of the first radio rock-and-roll shows.

1950s: Television becomes a dominant medium as previous radio genres and personalities making the move over to television.

1954: Sports Illustrated begins publication.

1955: The Village Voice is launched as the first underground newspaper in Greenwich Village. Top 40 radio becomes popular, indicating that radio is becoming more and more a marketing arm of the recording industry. Rock-and-roll defines youth culture in the mid-1950s.

1960s: Rock music is linked with social protest, spearheading the counterculture movement.

1962: The first communications satellite, the first digital phone networks, and the first pagers are introduced.

1967: Rock-and-roll gets its own magazine with the launch of Rolling Stone. The Beatles release Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band, the first true concept album.

1968: 60 Minutes starts broadcasting, showcasing the power of television to influence public opinion. The National Commission on
Chapter 1

the Causes of Violence concludes that television violence encourages violent behavior.

1971: Borders opens its first store in Ann Arbor. Chain bookstores and superstores start springing up across America shortly thereafter.

1972: The first video game, Pong, is introduced.

1974: People magazine starts publication.

1976: VCRs are introduced, creating a new rental and purchase industry for movies. Star Wars initiates a new era of big-budget blockbusters.

1978: Cellular phone service begins. Nicholas Negroponte of MIT introduces the term convergence to describe the intersection of media.


1980: Ohio's Columbus Dispatch is the first newspaper to go online. CNN premieres as a twenty-four-hour cable news network, owned originally by Ted Turner, which revolutionizes newscasting and television formats generally.

1981: Music Television (MTV) is born, becoming a new arm of the recording industry.

1982: USA Today is launched, the first paper modeled after television. Compact discs are introduced. Rock fragments into many genres. Rap rises to the top of the pop music industry.

1987: WFAN is launched as the first all-sports radio station.

1989: Tim Berners-Lee develops concepts and techniques that a few years later lead to the establishment of the World Wide Web. A new company called AOL (America Online) is formed, later becoming the first successful Internet service provider.

1991: The Internet opens to commercial uses. The World Wide Web is launched.

1994: The direct broadcast satellite (DBS) industry debuts.

1995: Amazon.com is established, turning its first profit in 2002. The first megaplex movie theater is built in Dallas, leading to a wave of megaplexes and a new cinema-going culture. Toy Story is the first completely computer-generated movie, starting a new trend in movie-making.

1997: DVDs make their debut, offering more storage space than VHS.

1998: The Dallas Morning News is the first newspaper to break a major story on its website instead of its front page. Increasing use of the Internet leads to the development of blogs, online chat groups, and the like, which take on many of the functions of rubrics in traditional newspapers.
**2000s:** Microsoft and Adobe start making online books (e-books) available. E-zines, e-toons, and other magazine genres also start proliferating. Movies integrate with the Internet, where trailers are shown and where even full features can be seen. Specialty channels become the norm in the world of traditional television.

**2001:** MP3 technology shakes up the music industry as Internet users share music files on Napster. Instant messaging services appear.

**2002:** Satellite and web-based radio and television programs emerge. File-sharing becomes highly popular. Rap and hip-hop remain popular but start losing their market domination.

**2003:** Apple Computer's iTunes music store makes its debut, making it possible to buy music on the Internet. VOD (video on demand) is introduced.

**Mid-2000s and continuing:** The Internet converges with previous media (radio, television, etc.) to produce online versions of all media forms. It also becomes a source of new forms of communication and pop culture, including websites such as MySpace, Facebook, and YouTube.

Inexpensive novels that dealt mainly with adventure, crime, or romance—planted the seeds from which pop culture would eventually sprout. With the launch of *Reader's Digest* in 1922, the leisure activity of reading for pleasure established a synergy between print media and pop culture that has remained solid to this very day. Magazines and newspapers continue both to propel the spread of pop culture through the stories and images they print and to be shaped by trends within that very culture.

Especially critical in the rise and spread of pop culture were movie theaters, which began as nickelodeons in 1894. By 1905, these early theaters, which opened mainly in commercial areas and in immigrant neighborhoods, attracted large audiences because admission was only five cents. Affordability and popularity have always been decisive factors in promulgating pop culture. Nickelodeons laid the foundation for the expansion of the movie industry and a further spread of popular cinematic genres, from adventure serials to comedies and romance. By the 1910s, the first movie celebrities appeared on the scene. Cinema and pop culture had formed an intrinsic bond. In the 1920s, this bond was further cemented by the institution and rise of the Big Five studios (Paramount, MGM, Warner Brothers, Twentieth Century Fox, RKO) and the Little Three studios (Columbia, Universal, United Artists),
The phenomenon that we understand today as pop culture could never have materialized, however, without jazz. In the early 1920s jazz, once strictly background music in the brothels of Kansas City and New Orleans, started to flourish across America as the musical idiom of young and fashionable people. By the end of the decade, spurred by the cheapness and availability of mass-produced records and the emergence of the radio as a promoter of recordings, a true paradigm shift occurred, resulting in the entrenchment of jazz and its derivative, swing, as culturally dominant music styles. People simply loved the music. Swing band leaders like Glenn Miller, who boasted hits such as “Little Brown Jug,” “Sunrise Serenade,” “Moonlight Serenade,” and “In the Mood,” became icons of an ever-expanding pop culture, as did jazz singers and musicians.

Miller disbanded his orchestra in 1942 and enlisted in the U.S. Army, where he formed the forty-two-piece, all-star Army Air Force Band, which entertained World War II service personnel with regular radio broadcasts. His influence on the spread of pop music cannot be underestimated. To this day, his recordings sell in the millions.

The 1950s–1960s

In the years subsequent to World War II, music and fashion trends seemed to spring up on a daily basis. As in previous decades, young people led the trends. By then, the entire society had become aware of pop culture and had begun to tacitly accept it. In 1948, Life magazine ran a cover story on this phenomenon, underscoring the fact that, for the first time in American history, young people constituted a demographic unto themselves. The article also pointed out that, due in part to the many extra jobs that were created by World War II, the new market category of teenagers had plenty of spending money. It became Madison Avenue’s avowed mission, shortly thereafter, to get them to spend it on clothing, movies, and recordings. By the mid-1950s, the average American teenager had more pocket money than any young person has probably ever had in the history of civilization. In 1955, the movies Rebel Without a Cause, starring teen idol James Dean, and Blackboard Jungle, starring Marlon Brando as a motorcycle gang leader, made it obvious to one and all that the Life article was indeed prophetic. Teenagers had not only become a distinct market category but had also established a youth culture of their own. Elvis Presley became the king of this culture, symbolizing its brash attitude with his hip-swinging style. Television further spread the fledgling youth culture as programs such as Ameri-