

Getting to Know Us An Introduction to the Study of Popular Culture: What is this Stuff that Dreams are Made of?

We Have Seen Our Culture, and It Is Us. Sort Of.

I can't get no
Satisfaction.....

You can't always get what you want,
But if you try sometime
You can get what you need.

Two quotes from The Rolling Stones

The Rolling Stones may have been right about life, but their song would be a funeral dirge for popular culture. Popular culture is about "Satisfaction" all right, but its major concern is in ensuring that people can get what they want regardless of whether they need it or not. Not getting what you want is for monks, communists, and fans of the Cleveland Indians; getting it is why popular culture gave us credit cards.

And popular culture doesn't want you to have to sweat a lot in getting it, either. Stay on your couch and change channels, stay in your car and eat healthily, stay home alone and reach out and touch someone, stay on your Exercycle and listen to a good book. Popular culture has discovered the secret of perpetual motion in the age of relativity: stay in one place and everything will come to you. Around the world in thirty minutes—just stay tuned.

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Popular culture is so easy to get because it's everywhere to be gotten—it surrounds us the way water surrounds a fish, as a transparent environment crucial to our survival. A fish looks *through* the water rather than *at* it and so do we tend to overlook the omnipresence of popular culture precisely because it is such a familiar part of our everyday environment. Consider for a moment, however, that the clothes you are wearing (mass produced, advertised, sold for profit), the mall or store you purchased them in (and the ritual of shopping which shaped the process and got you there and back), the food you eat (from restaurants or grocery store chains), the television programs which inform and entertain you (beamed to over 98% of American homes to be watched for an average of seven and a half hours each day), and the very textbook you are holding in your hands right now are *all* aspects of popular culture and you may begin to see how completely we are suspended in these popular culture seas—deep waters indeed. And just as water is necessary for the fish to survive, so popular culture has us dependent on the vast array of choices it offers for us to select from in satisfying *our* needs as well. The fact that we all get hungry and have to eat is a matter of elementary biology; the fact that American children recognize Ronald McDonald more often than any other figure except Santa Claus is a result of our popular culture and the choices we have made. We need to *understand* this culture, then, so that we can be more than a fish who just eats what's dropped into his tank, watches whatever passes by and ends up in the "big flush"—a passive part of his environment right to the finish.

Popular culture is not merely "present," however; it is also eager to please. "We know what you want..." purrs the soft, seductive voice narrating a promotional videotape for a famous shopping mall chain, and it is indeed part of popular culture's goal to find out what we want—what we think and feel and believe—and then transform its products into the image of our desires. We'll spend our hard-earned dollars to dial 1-900-POPCULT only if we can be certain that the figure on the other end of the line is a flawless reflection of an image shot through the focal point of our hearts and minds. The voice that answers our call should respond with the invitation Julia Roberts offers to Richard Gere in an early scene of the movie *Pretty Woman* (1990): When Gere asks Roberts her name she echoes popular culture's standing offer to all of us—"What would you like it to be?" Thus popular culture unlocks our hearts and then sells the key back to us.

Julia Roberts' willingness and ability to become whatever Richard Gere wanted her to be enabled her to spend "an obscene amount of money," and *Pretty Woman's* similar skill in mirroring its audience's fantasies enabled the movie's producers to do the same. *Pretty Woman* gave Americans a materialistic fairy tale which perfectly reflected the

needs of an audience immersed in the 1980s, the "decade of greed." *Pretty Woman* promises that economic and class differences are merely apparent—not real—that they can readily be overcome by a little love and a lot of money. The film taps the audiences' "champagne wishes and caviar dreams," brings the lifestyles of the rich and famous to a poor "working" girl, and makes certain that love is not sacrificed in the process—the perfect guilt-free-happily-ever-after for an audience that wanted to HAVE IT ALL, materially and emotionally. The movie kept audiences on the line to the tune of 100 million dollars at the box-office and went on to become the number one best selling video early the following year—a pretty tune indeed.

The producers of popular culture will go to great lengths to mold their products to reflect the audience beliefs and values. When the producers of *Fatal Attraction* (1987) screened an early version of their film for a test audience, the response was far from enthusiastic. Audiences were critical of the movie's original ending (in which Glen Close's Alex commits suicide to the haunting strains of *Madame Butterfly* and effectively frames Michael Douglas' Dan in the process by using a knife which has only his fingerprints on it), and registered complaints about aspects of all three of the film's major characters—Alex, Dan and Dan's wife Beth (Anne Archer). The filmmakers listened to the voice (and groans) of the people and returned to the studio to reshoot critical scenes in a manner more reflective of audience desires.

Essential to this process was the filmmakers' belief that their original film had been out of touch with the beliefs and values of mainstream America at the height of the Age of Reagan. The test audiences were "uncomfortable" with a sympathetic portrait of an independent careerwoman, and they were deeply supportive of the traditional values surrounding the sanctity of the home and protecting the nuclear family. While the early version of the movie punished Dan for his callous philandering ways—and ripped apart his home and wife in the process—the revised film highlighted Alex's villainy. Now Alex became the only careerwoman in the movie (Beth's former identity as a schoolteacher anxious to return to work was dropped), and that status was presented in a distinctly unfavorable light—Alex dresses in black leather, lives in a barren loft surrounded by burning oil drums that look like "witches caldrons," and has a "fatal attraction" for the home and family and husband she can never have. Alex proceeds to vent her frustration by attacking that world she cannot join—she pours acid on the family car, boils the family bunny, and concludes with a no-holds-barred slasher assault on the home itself. The new ending is a high noon face-off between the two opposing views of women in which the loyal wife eliminates the independent homewrecker and thus salvages home and family in

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the process. The final shot is of a framed photograph of the family shattered by the battle, but still intact.

The revised *Fatal Attraction* became the most notable blockbuster hit of 1987 and the "Fatal Attraction phenomenon" was the subject of seven-page cover stories in both *Time* and *People*. Susan Faludi argues that the film was an important example of the *backlash* in the "undeclared war against American women" which helped define the values and beliefs of the Reagan-era mass audience. In her book *Backlash*, Faludi demonstrates that the producers of *Fatal Attraction* managed to tap these feelings in a manner reflected by other box-office successes of the same year:

In all four of the top-grossing films released [in 1987], women are divided into two groups—for reward or punishment. The good women are all subservient and bland housewives (*Fatal Attraction* and *The Untouchables*), babies or voiceless babes (*Three Men and a Baby* and *Beverly Hills Cop II*). The female villains are all women who fail to give up their independence, like the mannish and child-hating shrew in *Three Men and a Baby*, the hip-booted gunwoman in *Beverly Hills Cop II*, and the homicidal career woman in *Fatal Attraction*. (116)

Faludi's bestselling 1992 book demonstrates how similar themes were reflected in a vast range of popular culture—from television and magazines to fashion and politics—and reveals how shrewd and fortunate the makers of *Fatal Attraction* were in revising their film to mirror the spirit of the age.

The German word "zeitgeist" is often used to refer to this "spirit of an era"—the major beliefs and values which describe the particular outlook of a culture during a specific period of time. Many cultural analysts use the dividing yardsticks of decades to describe changing national "zeitgeists" so that the 50s become the Age of Conformity, the 60s the Age of Youth and Rebellion, the 70s the 'Me' Decade, and the 80s the Decade of Greed, for example. But what is most important for our purposes here is that we see that popular culture can become the key to formulating definitions of a "zeitgeist" and can be cited as evidence that our conclusions are sound. This reflective nature of popular culture is similar to Walt Whitman's observation that "the writers of a time hint the mottoes of its Gods" and has been expressed recently by Professor Allan Bloom:

What each generation is can best be discovered in its relation to the permanent concerns of mankind. This in turn can best be discovered in each generation's tastes [and] amusements. . . these culture peddlers have the strongest motives for finding out the appetites of the young—so they are useful guides into the labyrinths of the spirit of the times. (19)

The study of popular culture as a reflective mirror of its audience must focus upon two aspects of this zeitgeist—the “transitory” and the “concrete.” The zeitgeist which characterizes a particular era is composed of “transitory” attitudes and perspectives which last only as long as the era itself and then fade from view—perhaps to return in later times, perhaps not. But an era’s zeitgeist also expresses deep-seated, highly significant “concrete” beliefs and values which transcend the specific time period and represent the fundamental character of the culture itself. Most elements of popular culture reflect both of these zeitgeist levels in important ways. *Fatal Attraction* demonstrates a Reagan Era perspective on independent, single career women, but also displays a firm reverence for the nuclear family and the sanctity of the home which characterizes American culture throughout its history; *Pretty Woman* shows its decade’s delight in shopping as a transforming experience, but it also demonstrates that romantic love is capable of overcoming all obstacles in its path—a “concrete” belief demonstrated by some other “pretty women” in American culture (like Pocahontas and Scarlett O’Hara, for example). Popular culture reflects both change and stability. In other words: it tells us what we are now, what we have been in the past and where the two overlap to define what we may always be.

This “reflective” study of popular culture is guided by the *Popular Culture Formula*. This “equation” states that the popularity of a given cultural element (object, person or event) is directly proportional to the degree to which that element is reflective of audience beliefs and values. The greater the popularity of the cultural element—in an era and/or over time—the more reflective of the zeitgeist this element is likely to be. The formula assumes that audiences choose a specific cultural element over other alternatives because they find it attractive in its reassuring reflection of their beliefs, values and desires. Audiences ‘vote’ in the Nielsen Ratings for one program over another from similar motives to those that caused them to vote for Ronald Reagan over Jimmy Carter in 1986—that is, one choice is more reflective of audience convictions than the other.

When applied to American popular culture the formula suggests that we study football rather than soccer, MTV rather than opera, top-rated television programs rather than select exhibitions of modern painting, fast food restaurants with illustrated menus rather than elegant dining rooms with menus in French, etc. And, most importantly, the formula demands that we examine these cultural elements not as ends in themselves but as means of unlocking their meaning in the culture as a whole. The formula says that *Fatal Attraction* is significant not because we find its plot clever and exciting and its stars attractive or repellent but because of *why* we find the plot compelling and *why* we agree with the rewards and punishments meted out to the characters.

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The popular culture formula is a valuable tool in that it both aids us in selecting cultural elements for examination and reminds us how to examine them. Too many students of popular culture end their studies with conclusions which suggest they have followed Yogi Berra’s advice that “You can observe a lot just by watching” rather than heeding the formula’s demand that they dig more deeply and ask *why* audiences choose one cultural element over another. The study of popular culture is a quest for meaning, not merely facts or nostalgia or entertainment.

The need and desire of the producers of popular culture to reflect audience beliefs and values in order to ensure that their product will be accepted by the masses, and the uncertainty involved in defining the precise nature of this zeitgeist at any particular time (e.g. What might have happened to their movie had the producers of *Fatal Attraction* released it in its original version?), helps to account for another important characteristic of popular culture: popular culture tends to be imitative, repetitive and conservatively resistant to change. Once producers discover a successful formula—a set of ingredients which seems to reflect audience desires—they tend to repeat it as often as it remains successful. Box-office hits (*Rocky*) produce sequels (II, III, IV, V) and imitations of their formula with slightly different characters in somewhat altered settings (*The Karate Kid*—I, II and III). Successful popular heroes (Ronald Reagan) have their sequel imitation (George Bush), and successful popular objects (Nikes) have theirs (Reeboks, L.A. Gear). The popular culture formula may usefully be broadened, therefore, to include the identification and analysis of such trends and patterns as well as the examination of especially popular individual examples of the successful model.

If the producers of popular culture were interested *only* in reflecting our beliefs, values and desires then the world they fashion for our satisfaction and amusement would be a soothing one indeed—a “cafeteria” of goods offered for us to pick and choose from with only our whims and convictions as a guide. The reality is more complex, however, and more often bears a stronger resemblance to a messy food fight than to an orderly cafeteria. Popular culture surrounds us not only in the comforting manner that water does a fish, but also in the way that the flesh-eating zombies encircled the besieged house in the movie *Night of the Living Dead* (1968). The producers of popular culture are promoters as well—they create a product which reflects us and will draw us to the mirror, but they also come chasing after us to instill values and beliefs likely to ensure their success. Listen, for example, to the second part of that mall promotional tape recorded in such a softly seductive voice: “We know what you want... AND WE WANT YOU TO WANT IT.” This is the formative, “attacking” aspect of popular culture which subtly blurs the distinction between needs and wants so

that while “needs” are literally biological (we’ve got to have these things to live) popular culture often convinces us that our “wants” are what we *need* when our needs have been satisfied (we’ve got to have these things to have a life). Popular culture does not merely reflect our hearts and minds—it manipulates them.

The clearest example of the way popular culture strives to alter our thinking in addition to reflecting it can be found in the multi-billion dollar industry of advertising, a mammoth enterprise devoted solely to calling the public’s attention to needs it never knew it had. In her book *Are They Selling Her Lips?—Advertising and Identity*, Carol Moog describes advertising’s encircling assault:

Advertising shapes egos, influences our sense of self-worth. It reinforces our fears that we never have enough; we’re never healthy enough, good-looking enough, or lively enough. . . . It feeds our wishes, profits from our illnesses, plays on our insecurities, cautions us, exhorts us, reminds us of our past and future, and encourages us to behave in ways we have never behaved before. . . . The best we can do. . . is to acknowledge and understand how it’s influencing us. . . and then attempt to separate ourselves from the images, and act objectively. (222-23)

Advertising’s “hidden persuaders” are a valuable example of the formative mode of popular culture because their intentions are so obvious—their goal is to sell us a bill of goods both literally and figuratively. But all popular culture instructs and molds audience beliefs to one degree or another simply because the very values being reflected are necessarily being communicated as well. The increasing violence in movies reflects an increasingly violent society and may then lead that society to become more accepting of violence—which then leads to more violent movies which then affect the society—and on and on in an endless cycle of reflection and reshaping.

Popular culture is a “Funhouse Mirror” because it both reflects our “image” back to us but also alters our image in the process of doing so. Understanding the way that popular culture exercises this dual function makes the study of it a valuable “survival manual,” for we may thereby be able to exercise a greater element of control over what we believe—we may *choose* to believe something rather than merely being led to do so.

The basic themes of our study can be summarized by examining a term crucial to understanding both sides of the Funhouse Mirror. We can perhaps define the concept of “mindset” by illustrating it in another format—a familiar folk tale cast in a new light.

Once upon a time there was a vast unexplored mass of territory which we can term “The Land of Reality”—immense, unknown, unmapped. Three countries—each unknown to the other two—existed across the wide ocean from the land of Reality, and each decided

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independently to explore whatever was across the seas. The first country’s exploring ship landed in the northern wastes of the land of Reality, and the intrepid explorers returned with the news that “Reality is cold, snowy, and bleak and the inhabitants share the chill nature of their environment.” The second country’s vessel arrived in the great center of Reality and found only water—“Reality is a land of lakes and rivers,” the crew reports. The third nation finds the southern tip of the land to be “hot and humid” and the natives there to be friendly, energetic and full of entertaining festival foods and dances.

Each country now defines the entire land of Reality solely based upon the limited evidence they have experienced—Reality is cold, wet and hot. Each country is “correct,” given the context of its limited experience. Each is unaware that its view is incomplete—each is *certain* it is correct in its view of Reality. And each produces objects (e.g. maps) and heroes (e.g. the crusading explorers) to express its view of Reality and to communicate it to the members of its society.

Each country has formed a “mindset”—a view of Reality based upon only limited evidence but believed to be entirely correct by those who hold it. The mindset consists of beliefs (the view of Reality) and values (the judgment or evaluation of that Reality) expressed in material forms (artifacts).

Now let us see how a mindset—once formed—comes to affect both vision and behavior.

Imagine that the King of the land of Reality becomes aware that his land has been visited by three different countries and decides to return the favor. Arriving in the first country the King finds himself placed in a house with no heating and is slightly bored by the fact that he is “entertained” by being escorted to bed before dark and given an extra blanket. Arriving at the second country he is astonished to find that he is never permitted to leave his boat! And in the third country the room he stays in is so hot that he has to sleep naked.

Each country and its inhabitants thus view this new element of Reality through the tinted lens of the culture’s mindset, and that view in turn determines the actions taken and the values attached to the new phenomenon. The distorting lens has been passed along to each inhabitant so that each now shares the essential bias of the culture.

And these are precisely the characteristics which define our own mindsets as well. Our mindsets are formed by two elements: our individual experience (which makes each mindset unique) and our cultural experience (which we share with others and thus makes mindsets of those in the same culture bear a strong resemblance to each other). A mindset is like a special pair of glasses we wear whose lenses are all ground differently so as to meet our individual needs, but which are all tinted the same color—the lenses are ground by our unique experiences as

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individuals, the shading is provided by our culture's beliefs and values. And each of us is all too often unaware of the glasses we are wearing and thus, like each of the exploring countries, becomes convinced that only the vision of *others* needs correcting. It is so difficult to turn our glasses around to examine ourselves that we often echo Butch Cassidy's certainty in the hit movie *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969) that we have "got vision—the rest of the world wears bifocals."

What is needed to examine our own glasses, of course, is simply a mirror and, as we have seen, popular culture can provide the reflection necessary to expose and highlight our cultural beliefs and values. And by reversing the process and using our trained glasses to examine popular culture to expose the beliefs and values it seeks to instill in our mindset, we can exercise a valuable amount of control over what we choose to believe; while it is inevitable that our glasses will be tinted, we can still have some say in how dark a tint we receive and how "blind" we become as a result.

Because Americans view reality through glasses tinted red, white and blue it often leads us to assume that our beliefs and values are "correct" or simply "common sense." Popular culture studies can quickly reveal our cultural biases, however, and thus enable us to *debate* what had previously been merely assumed as we come to see that each culture is "right" within the context of its own history and experience. James Fallows notes in his book *More Like Us* that Americans have always viewed the adage "a rolling stone gathers no moss" in a positive light ("If you keep on moving and being active, you will not get rusty"). A British dictionary, on the other hand, interprets the same proverb as "One who constantly changes his place of employment will not grow rich"—as a warning against the lack of perseverance, in other words (61). And the movie *Fatal Attraction* has been a resounding success in Japan—in its *original* version, reflecting as it does deeply embedded cultural beliefs about the loss of personal honor and the price that must be paid to balance the scales.

We must be careful to heed the lesson of "mindsets," therefore, and never assume that popular culture studies of the *American* mindset simply reveal that which is "obvious," "right," or "common sense." Popular culture reflects and molds beliefs and values that are so deeply embedded that their truth is assumed rather than proven. The study of popular culture brings these assumed-to-be-true beliefs and values to the surface and into the light of day—reflected in our mirrors, refracted through our lenses.

The major themes of our study of popular culture, therefore, will revolve around several important characteristics of our subject. The themes we have examined suggest that popular culture:

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- 1) consists of artifacts (objects and people) and events (activities surrounding the objects and people).
- 2) reflects audience beliefs and values (it satisfies us—"We know what you want...").
- 3) shapes audience beliefs and values (it arouses and frustrates us—"... WE WANT YOU TO WANT IT").
- 4) is commercial (it is produced with the goal of making money).
- 5) is often imitative (of itself)—it hopes that what has worked before will work again.
- 6) surrounds us—it forms the fabric of our everyday lives.

While these characteristics help us study and identify popular culture, they leave open a very significant question: What is the stuff we are examining? What does *popular culture* mean?

The answer is that it means different things to different people—and when that happens a fight usually breaks out. It has.

The Battle Over Definitions

Popular culture and pornography have at least one thing in common: few people can define either one but everybody knows them when they see them. And some would go one step further and argue that the two share a second important characteristic as well—namely that we should be ashamed of ourselves for experiencing either one. The debate over definitions is between those who believe that popular culture is junk food for the minds of the masses (that two hundred and fifty million people can't be right) and those who believe that just because everybody likes something is no reason for us to hate it (and is probably all the more reason for us to pay attention to it and attempt to understand its meaning and appeal). It's the *snobs* vs. the *rest of us*, and there is more at stake than merely the meaning of a few words. Whose culture is it, anyway?

Let's begin with the part of the definition which arouses little argument. "Popular" simply refers to that which is (or has been) accepted or approved of by large numbers of people; in America, Madonna is popular, Saddam Hussein is not. In Iraq, the situation is reversed, which can tell us similar important things about the "popular" Iraqi mindset. The object of our study becomes the specific group which has made a particular cultural element "popular" by accepting or approving it.

This definition of "popular" necessarily implies an important element of choice as well. Because no one can choose to do otherwise, we cannot properly term "breathing" or "eating," for example, to be "popular" even though each is certainly accepted by and approved of by large groups of people. People must select a cultural artifact or event

because they are voluntarily attracted to it—because they view it as an acceptable or appealing way of fulfilling a need or want—in order for it to be truly “popular” and meaningful. A “popular” culture which was coerced—forced upon a group by tyranny or biology—would tell us nothing since an offer that can't be refused isn't really an offer at all, and an “election” with only one candidate cannot be an expression of the people's voice.

It is also important to note that our definition of “popular” does not limit it to that which is presently accepted or approved of. “Popular” refers to the specific group which selects an artifact or event, and it does not matter whether that group consists of our neighbors or our ancestors. This definition allows us to examine the mindset of the young people who idolized The Beatles in the 1960s (“All You Need Is Love”) and that of their children who compete for tickets to the latest concert tour by Guns and Roses (“Welcome to the Jungle”) in the 1990s. “Popular” culture is as much about history as it is about news, as much about what we were as about what we are.

How much of history can be examined through the funhouse mirror of popular culture, however, is a matter of dispute. Some critics argue that popular culture has been around as long as there have been groups of people available to be entertained and instructed by its appeal. Chief among these “Classicists” is Ray Browne, who finds “popular culture” to be very old indeed:

As the way of life of a people, popular culture has existed since the most primitive times, when it was simple and uncomplicated. It has obviously become more complex and sophisticated as means of communicating and ways of life have developed. (13)

Browne's perspective is especially valuable because it rescues from oblivion a vast world of daily existence which historians often ignore. If “history” is a river of infinite length upon which floats “great” men and women and their significant deeds and words, then Browne would ask us to remember the masses of people who lived along the banks of that river and produced their own culture as a reflection of their hopes and dreams, fears and fantasies. Browne enables us to examine the ways the great majority of people have lived their lives in the teeming background of history in the same way that most of us today play our games, listen to our stories and dream our dreams as the river of leaders and thinkers flows past. The “Classicists” include in their vision of the popular culture audience the Athenians eager to laugh at Greek plays of the comic master Aristophanes, the standing-room-only crowds which pressed into the Globe Theatre to see the latest hit by Shakespeare, and the massive Nielsen audience which made *Roseanne* the number one television program in America in 1991.

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The other side of this dispute is presented by the “Modernists” who are represented notably by Russell Nye. Nye believes that popular culture is of relatively recent origin and argues that three conditions characteristic of late eighteenth-century Western Europe were necessary for its rise—masses, money and mechanics:

1) Masses— A mass culture demands the existence of a mass of people whose way of life it reflects and shapes. The rapid increase in population during the late eighteenth century produced the numbers, and the rise of cities gathered them together into large groups. The movement away from the countryside helped disrupt or destroy many cultural traditions and thus left a huge collection of people in need of a new culture to match their new lives.

2) Money— A significant portion of the new urban masses was able to profit from the Industrial Revolution to form a new middle class—a group neither peasant nor aristocrat but somewhere in between. A new class demands a new culture and just as the economy gave them the money to pursue it, so the democratic revolution helped ensure the increases in education (especially in literacy) and leisure time, which were equally necessary.

3) Mechanics— The “mechanics” of this new culture refer to the means of communicating it to the monied masses. In the late eighteenth century this meant the spread of high speed printing presses, but it can be extended at a later date to include all of the methods we associate with the mass media—radio, movies, television, etc.

Nye is valuable because he identifies an important stage in the evolution of popular culture which determined many of the characteristics we associate with it today. We have already noted that popular culture is commercial, appeals to large groups of people, and tends to be repetitive, and each trait can be traced back to the money, masses and mechanics identified by Nye. The dispute between the “Classicists” and the “Modernists” is really over the significance of the changes which took place in Western life around the eighteenth century and not over the fundamental nature of what it means to be “popular.” The Classicists argue that an old culture changed while the Modernists believe that a new one was created. Both groups agree that we need to examine that which is (or has been) accepted or approved of by large groups of people; they disagree only about the additional characteristics which ought or ought not to be associated with that definition.

The dispute over the meaning of “culture” is much more basic, however. “Culture” is the focal point of a dispute between those who would decide for the rest of us what is “good” or “bad” (we can term these writers the “critics” because they evaluate, judge and label), and those who would vastly expand the definition of culture but then limit themselves to describing and analyzing their subject (we can term this

group the "cameras" as they record, examine and illuminate). The conflict between these two groups has heated up in recent years as popular culture studies have been increasingly accepted in schools around the world. The critics view the encroachment with alarm—a poisonous vine creeping up the walls of their Ivory Tower—and they seek to forestall it by striking at the roots of the process—namely, at the very definition of "culture" itself.

The "Godfather of the critics" is the nineteenth-century British writer Matthew Arnold. Arnold gave the critics their rallying cry when he defined culture as "the best that has been thought and written" and critics have been trying to identify culture ever since. The spiritual heir to Arnold, and the chief critic of contemporary times, is Allan Bloom, whose book *The Closing of the American Mind* was (ironically) a surprise bestseller in 1987. Bloom's book is a frothing-at-the-mouth, closeminded diatribe against the "gutter phenomenon" and "voyage to the underworld" resulting from our failure to live up to Arnold's standards. Bloom picks up where Arnold left off, dismissing popular culture and producing in dictatorial tones a definition which limits culture to "the peak expression of man's creativity," "everything that is uplifting and edifying," and "that which is high, profound, (and) respectable." Bloom and his fellow critics sort things out until they produce a "canon" of classical, "timeless" works of especially high quality which they then argue need to be studied by each generation as a means of learning the everlasting truth of the ages. The fact that the critics often disagree, and thus produce canons to the left of us and canons to the right, might suggest that such lists are more reflective of the mindsets of those who draw them up than they are of any universal truth. But the critics' position remains clear even if the application of it is somewhat muddled: critics believe culture to be something which is taught rather than experienced, is mostly past and barely present, and is only a tiny number of works which have been judged to be worthy of being "canonized" as "the best."

The cameras see a great deal more in their picture of culture because they view it through a wide angle lens. These writers, influenced by the twentieth-century development of the social sciences, favor an expansive and inclusive definition of culture which allows them to examine all of the products of human work and thought produced by a given society. The cameras find their inspirational sources in the hands-on sciences of anthropology and archaeology rather than in the theoretical realms of ideology—in the field rather than the ivory tower. An anthropologist seeks to understand the lives of the people being studied, not to evaluate them; an archaeologist attempts to describe a society, not judge it. And both groups eagerly examine all bits of evidence they can find as they struggle toward their understanding and description. Both are seeking not to reveal timeless truths which somehow characterize

all humankind, but rather to determine the specific truths of the single culture being examined—the mindset of a people rather than of humanity—and thus ignore restricting labels such as "good" or "bad" to look at everything which might be helpful in gaining understanding.

The cameras postulate a definition of "culture" which is expressed in recent times by E.D. Hirsch, who coined the term *Cultural Literacy* as the title of his 1987 bestselling foray into the hot battle over definitions. Hirsch argues that Americans share a vast range of cultural references which they use to communicate their shared beliefs and values, and in describing this "dictionary," Hirsch ignored distracting notions of "quality" to produce a list which moves effortlessly between the canon and the streets. Hirsch's catalog—as Robert Ray points out, "... included Saint Thomas Aquinas and Fred Astaire, Beethoven and the Beatles, Chaucer and Ty Cobb, classical music and Currier and Ives, Dante and Disney... Goethe and Grandma Moses, King Lear and King Kong..." And Hirsch himself argues that "a work may be selected because it's great or because it's just habitually there. The *Wizard of Oz* is in the ken of most Americans not because it is a great work but because it is a popular movie."

The battle over definitions, then, is between those who would argue that culture is *only* that which is "great" work and "good" for us, and

... those who... believe that worthy, enduring culture is not the possession of any single group or genre or period, who conceive of culture as neither finite nor fixed but dynamic and expansive and who [do not] believe that the moment an expressive form becomes accessible to large numbers of people it loses the criteria necessary to classify it as culture. (Ray 255)

Perhaps the dispute between the critics and the cameras can best be summarized in the following manner:

Critics decide what is "good" and then seek to determine the universal truths inherent in what they have selected.

Cameras describe what is and then seek to determine what function it performs and what it can tell us about the people and the culture which produced it.

If we combine our previous definition of "popular" with the camera's view of "culture" then we have a "popular culture" which refers to "the products of human work and thought which are (or have been) accepted and approved of by a large community or population." This definition ignores notions of "quality" in the culture being examined, includes the study of the culture characteristic of important subgroups within the larger mass society (e.g., we can study the meanings of the popular culture of "youth," "women," "African-Americans," etc. and not be limited to that characteristic of "America" as a whole), and embodies all of the descriptive traits we have previously identified as

being associated with popular culture (Funhouse Mirror, commerciality, imitativeness).

Popular culture forms the vast majority of the artifacts and events which compose our daily lives, but it does not consist of our *entire* culture—it surrounds us but does not drown other opportunities for existence apart from it. All of us participate in at least two other kinds of culture which we need also to understand and identify as a means of illustrating several other significant characteristics of the popular culture which forms the bulk of our cultural existence.

The first alternative culture is best termed "folk culture." Folk culture refers to the products of human work and thought (culture) that have developed within a limited community and that are communicated directly from generation to generation, between "folk" who are familiar to each other. The means of communication is usually oral, the "author" or "creator" of the artifact or event is often unknown (the one communicating it being more properly termed a "spokesperson"—telling or demonstrating something which had previously been told or demonstrated to him or her), and is typically simple both thematically and technologically. We participate in folk culture when we learn a family recipe for baking bread from our grandmother, when a friend tells us the bloodcurdling legends surrounding the haunted house on the edge of town, and when Uncle Fred sings a song detailing the adventures of some local hero or rogue. We are all part of a "folk" as well as a member of the "masses."

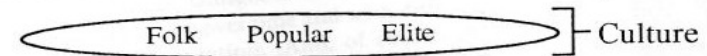
It is equally important to recognize what folk culture is *not* as well. Folk culture is *not* merely the culture of the poor or uneducated, or of quaint primitives living in mountain hollows carving dulcimers and singing "Barbara Allen." Students at most universities have a rich lore of folk culture which each class (or "generation") has learned from those who have passed before and can now pass along as information concerning easy courses, good and bad instructors and weekend party rituals. Students share stories, songs, skills, legends and advice as part of a living, functioning folk culture which has nothing to do with poverty or stupidity.

The second type of culture we all experience is termed "elite culture." This category refers to the products of human work and thought produced by and for a limited number of people who have specialized interests, training or knowledge. If we restrict ourselves to elite art as our primary example of this type of culture then we can identify several other characteristics as well. The elite artist is known by the audience, and his identity is vital to understanding and appreciating his work—the artist is using his art to express his unique interpretation of the world (of society or all of reality) and the more we know about him the more meaningful his work becomes: the art attempts to be "new" and

challenging. We also need to understand the aesthetic tradition in which the artist is working—the history and standards which he is attempting to meet and extend. Elite art is produced "for the ages," not for a tiny folk community or for the entertainment and diversion of the masses.

Just as folk culture is not tied to poverty or stupidity so elite culture has no necessary identification with wealth or intelligence. It requires a certain amount of interest and training to understand and appreciate a play by Shakespeare, for example, but anyone willing to read footnotes, examine the conventions of Elizabethan drama and perhaps see what a few writers have had to say about the play at hand can come to enjoy thoroughly the entire body of plays, and Will's *Collected Works* can be picked up for \$10.95 at the bookstore (or free at your local library). "Elite" is specialized and limited to those interested enough to learn the specific knowledge needed, but not merely the culture of the rich and intellectual.

The relationship among the three types of culture is especially important in understanding the study of popular culture and the approach taken by its students. This relationship among folk, popular and elite cultures has been illustrated by Ray Browne in the following manner:



This disarmingly simple diagram actually represents several significant aspects of the way the cultures interact with us and with each other as well.

1) The relationship among the three is *nonevaluative*. The diagram places all three cultures on the same level—there is no designation of low, middle or high, and no one culture is to be considered better (or worse) than any other.

2) The shape of the representative "egg" indicates that popular culture is the major portion of a society's total way of life—that it surrounds us and forms the fabric of our everyday lives in a way that folk and elite culture do not.

3) The relationship among the three is *fluid*—there are no hard and fast lines separating the cultures from each other, but rather, each culture seems to 'flow' almost indefinitely into its neighbor. This fluid relationship in turn has two important elements:

a) Each member of a society experiences all three types of culture. There are no lines to prevent an individual from moving freely from one cultural type to another. You might, for example, have a breakfast prepared at home by a mother who prides herself on cooking "from scratch" with family recipes, rush to a McDonald's to inhale some mass produced burgers and fries for lunch with your friends and then have

dinner at a French restaurant where you must order the proper wine and know how to taste and appreciate it when it arrives.

b) A given cultural artifact or event can change culture categories over time or because of changes in its mode of presentation or audience. The role-playing fantasy game called Dungeons and Dragons provides a nice example of the fluidity of cultural identities. The game began in a small town where it was developed by a group of rabid followers and creators who invented it as they played. Few rules were written down, new players were instructed orally and through their early trial and error play, and the players manufactured their own maps, adventures, characters and relatively simple mechanisms of play. As the game developed, however, rules became increasingly complex and had to be written down and studied, several players began restricting themselves to playing the role of "dungeonmaster"—the designers and orchestrators of the game's multiple scenarios—and a language was formulated which made sense only to those interested and willing enough to learn its vocabulary (e.g., "hit points," "attack quotients," "lines-of-sight," etc.). Finally, the game was taken out of the realm of pure imagination and placed instead on a foldout board outfitted with plastic heroes and villains and marketed to the masses in K-Mart as an "easy-to-learn" quick-playing game designed to be learned and played in under two hours and—especially important—learned and played in essentially the same way with similar results in homes across the country. Thus, Dungeons and Dragons had "moved" from folk to elite to popular culture over time and with different audiences and changing methods of presentation. (And, of course, the game exists today in all three categories simultaneously, depending upon the context in which it is played.)

There are countless examples of this fluid relationship between and among the three cultures—our earlier use of Shakespeare as an example of this elite culture changes significantly, for example, if we consider the plays as they were produced in Elizabethan times before mass audiences in which even the illiterate "groundlings" standing in the pits could laugh at the bard's vulgar puns and marvel at the twisting plotlines putting an entertaining spin on familiar stories and contemporary events. But the primary lessons of this cultural fluidity in a society and over time are twofold. We need to examine all aspects of a cultural artifact or event to determine in which category it belongs, and we must be prepared to discover characteristics of each culture in complex interplay in any given artifact or event. The three cultures give us many rewarding questions—and remind us of how intricate our subject becomes when we examine it closely.

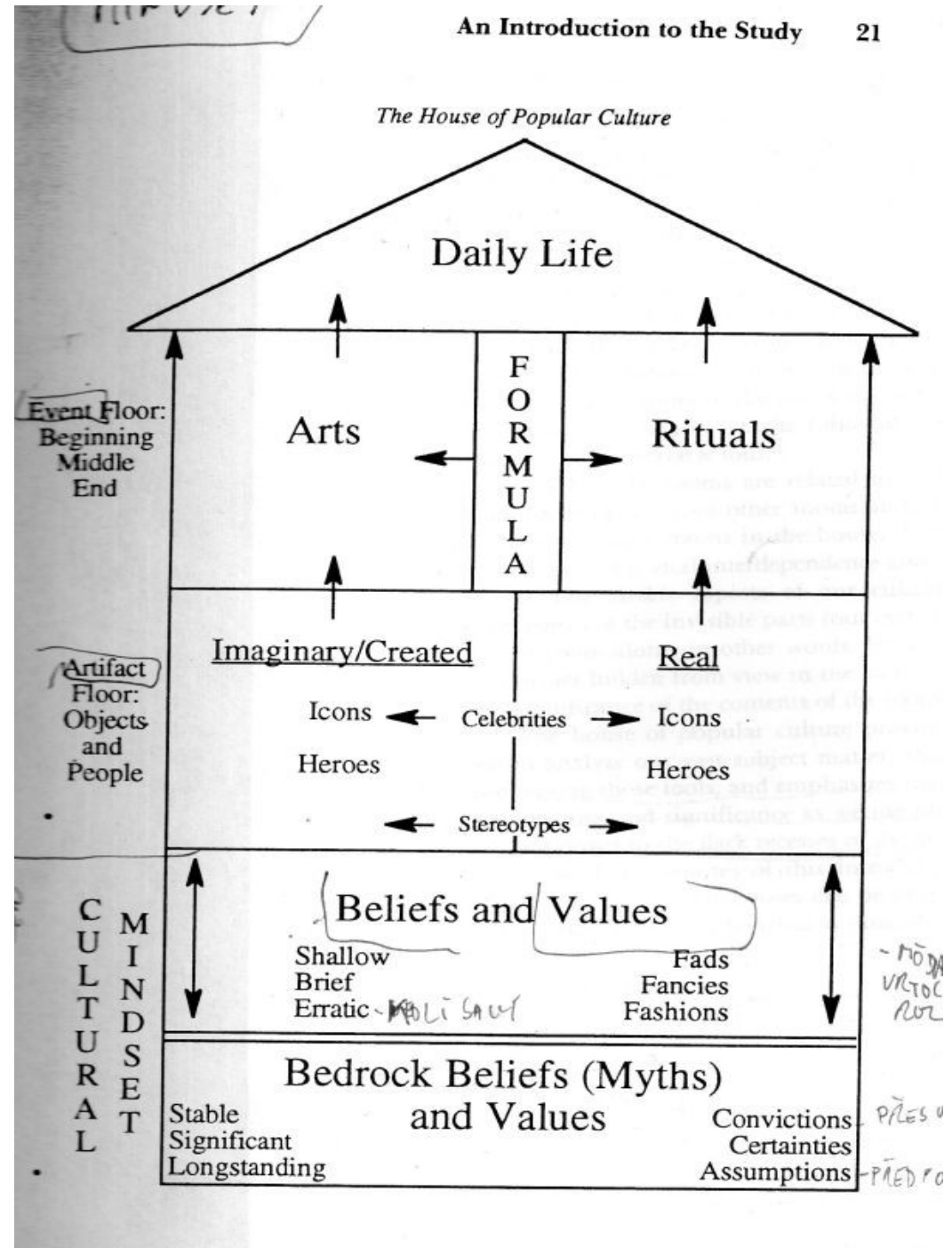
The chart on the following page summarizes important aspects of the three cultures by illustrating how the same cultural artifact/event (i.e. a story and storytelling) assumes a very different identity, purpose AND MEANING AS IT FUNCTIONS IN FOLK, POPULAR AND ELITE CATEGORIES.

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Cultural Artifact: Story (and storytelling)

	Folk	Popular	Elite
Means of Transmission	Usually Oral	Mass Media (Movies, TV, books, etc.)	Written and limited (e.g., small literary magazine)
AUDIENCE	Small Homogenous Immediately Present (face-to-face)	Large Distant (but Known—analyzed by author to determine what will please/attract them)	Small Distant (Unknown—author writes "for the ages")
AUTHOR	Original is Unknown—Teller is spokesperson for a known tale—teller must relate only the story and details the Audience expects	Known or Unknown (If Known, then often a "star"—e.g. best-selling authors, big-name movie directors). Balances His/Her own point of view with Audience Expectations	Known Vital to understanding the Story—story expresses Author's point of view and strives to impress it upon audience
THEME	Reflects Audience Mindset	Reflects and Molds Audience Mindset (Funhouse Mirror)	Seeks to Mold Audience Mindset
FUNCTION	Cultural Continuity—binds group together	Escapism and Reassurance of cultural mindset	Involvement—strives to disturb Audience and cause them to re-evaluate their mindset

and meaning as it functions in folk, popular and elite categories. This chart may be used in conjunction with an examination of the 1990 movie *Misery* (based upon the bestselling novel by Stephen King) as an example of how important and distinct the differences among cultures may be—as a certain author learns to his horror.



Misconceptions About Popular Culture

In the course of introducing the study of popular culture, we have touched upon a number of the criticisms which have been levied against our subject. In each instance we have shown how the criticism simply evaporates once the misconception upon which it is based is revealed—i.e., the vast majority of critics are attacking a phantom popular culture which haunts only their house, not ours. A review of the four major misconceptions, then, will serve as both a useful summary of the nature of popular culture studies and as an elaboration of our subject as well in a new context.

Misconception Number One: Popular Culture is Simple.

While no one argues that the bulk of popular culture's artifacts and events are as intrinsically complex as many of those listed in the various "canons" of classical works, the study of this world is far more difficult and challenging than it may first appear. This can be seen in two ways:

1) Lack of distance between student and subject. Popular culture is our culture and it is much more difficult to achieve the perspective required for objective analysis when you are directly involved in and surrounded by the very thing you are seeking to understand. The works in a "canon" exist before critics the way that a football game is played out before the announcers who describe and analyze from on high in the broadcasting booth—the long tradition of past criticism and knowledge is spread out before them, they can "instant replay" the work as many times as necessary or desired, and they have a clear view of how all the various elements work and interact together. The student of popular culture, on the other hand, is right down on the playing field itself and is often too busy simply trying to "win" the game—to survive as an individual and to make proper choices under pressure—to be able to analyze the swirl of action, sounds, and messages which surround him/her. Even when we turn our attention to the popular culture of past times we still encounter this problem of achieving distance and perspective since much of our evidence is often tied directly to the

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perceptions and experiences of those who were directly involved in the culture we are seeking to analyze. And in both past and present the students of popular culture are often the first to attempt a given analysis and therefore have nothing to guide them but their own perceptions and the framework provided by their discipline like the house of popular culture. There are no *Cliff's Notes* defining the critical consensus about the meaning of *The Simpsons*. Popular culture is widely experienced but little known—well traveled, but uncharted.

2) Complex messages are carried by popular artifacts and events. While the products of popular culture may be intrinsically "simple" in that they are imitative, predictable, and familiar, the meanings they carry are usually quite complex. Popular culture reflects and shapes the cultural mindset in a delicate dance which is itself often impossible to pin down precisely, and it magnifies the challenge of analysis by often mixing its messages in a complicated web designed to appeal to as wide an audience as possible. A persistent theme in our studies will be the way that the same cultural artifact or event can convey contradictory meanings at the very same time—the way that tractor pulls celebrate both the land and the machine, the individual and mass technology, cooperation and competition. Cultural mindsets are mysterious masses of truth and fiction, tradition and fad, past and present, and there is no reason to expect the popular culture which reflects such a complex mixture to be any less mysterious or complex.

We should also note that it is the very "simplicity" of popular culture artifacts and events which accounts for their usefulness in revealing cultural beliefs and values. In order to be attractive to a mass audience such popular culture elements strive to avoid anything which might confuse or unsettle potential viewers or participants like the complicating presence of an author's "unique" perspective on reality or experimental modes of presentation. Popular culture attempts to shine directly on the hearts and minds of its audience—and it is from those depths that it draws its meaning and complexity.

Misconception Number Two: Popular culture is trivial.

This misconception usually arises from the mistaken notion that Popular Culture consists only of one of our rooms in the house—that holding the wide variety of popular arts. Critics charge that the room is devoted exclusively to "entertainment" and the transitory escapist art which fades from view the moment a fickle public turns its restless attention to some other mindless distraction.

Much like the accusations of "simplicity," this misconception is based upon a confusion between the artifacts and events forming popular culture (which often are "simple" and "transitory") with the study of

that culture (which is neither simple or "mindless entertainment"). The misconception can be countered in three ways:

1) We do not study the artifacts and events of popular culture as ends in themselves (as the fans of a TV program or film star often do, for example) but as a means of examining the underlying cultural mindset which those artifacts and events both reflect and mold.

2) Popular culture includes far more than the popular arts; it also encompasses icons, heroes, stereotypes, rituals, and, most importantly, the beliefs and values of the masses. While any single example of popular culture may (or may not) be "trivial," the culture as a whole both surrounds us and forms the great majority of our cultural experiences—a far from "trivial" entity.

3) Popular culture's seemingly trivial characteristics as imitative and repetitive actually enhance its performance of a very serious function. Because popular culture is familiar and accessible it serves to provide people with both a comforting escape from the weary routines and problems of daily life and imposes an order upon the chaos of existence as well. A popular ritual like eating out, for example, relieves us of preparing our own meals after a tiring day, enables us to escape our cares by entering a fun environment where we are served quickly and without undue fuss, and orders this part of our lives by providing familiar food prepared the same way every time.

Misconception Number Three: Popular culture is immediate—it deals only with that which is popular right now.

We already know that we can study the popular culture of past times to unlock the mindsets of people in earlier eras; and we know that we can compare past mindsets with the present in an important effort to define the most deep-seated and enduring beliefs and values which characterize a culture over time.

But there is another sense in which this misconception is in error which we have not mentioned previously. We not only study that which is immediately popular and that which has *been* popular, but also often examine that which has *never* been widely accepted or approved of. If a given cultural artifact or event is an *unsuccessful* example of a popular form then we can learn a great deal about the cultural mindset by analyzing why this specific attempt failed to attract an audience. The flip side of the popular culture formula tells us that the message carried by an unsuccessful artifact or event in an otherwise popular form is one which is quite probably not part of a cultural mindset at that particular time—a valuable bit of evidence in our attempt to determine what the masses do believe. On television, for example, the dramatic mystery series has been one of the most consistently popular forms—successful examples can be found in all eras, from *Dragnet* to *Columbo* to *Magnum P.I.*

In spite of this track record, however, the technically accomplished, highly publicized mystery drama program *Twin Peaks* (1990-91) never managed to attract an audience large enough for the series to be listed in the Top 50 programs of either season in its two-year run. *Twin Peaks* challenged American beliefs in the simplicity and inherent decency of small town rural life (Twin Peaks, U.S.A. was a cesspool of violence, dangerous sex, and unexplained phenomena in the woods), the fundamentally supportive and protective character of the nuclear family, and the assurance that justice will triumph through the courageous fortitude of a righteous individual even when the law has failed (investigator Dale Cooper never solved anything and ended up being possessed by the very evil forces he was attempting to destroy). The failure of *Twin Peaks* suggests that these values still have a powerful hold on the American consciousness, and the fact that successful contemporary examples of the form *uphold* these same beliefs is even more evidence for such a conclusion—*Murder, She Wrote* and *Matlock* are two recent examples of small-town folksy heroes who protect their families and solve crimes.

Misconception Number Four: Popular culture is exclusionary.

This misconception criticizes students of popular culture for examining popular artifacts and events *instead* of studying the "classics." Such critics often go so far as to claim that popular culture is an attempt to place popular works into the "canon"—to place *The Beverly Hillbillies* side-by-side of *Moby Dick* and *Oedipus Rex*.

Much like the previous misconceptions, this final one is also based upon a confusion of the artifacts and events which form the raw data of popular culture and the *study* of that data. The clarification of two points stemming from this important distinction can easily lay this charge to rest:

1) Popular culture is not evaluative. The study of popular culture is not an attempt to argue that popular artifacts are as "good" as those of a "classical canon"; popular culture says little or nothing about the quality of the materials it examines but only comments upon their meaning and significance. *The Beverly Hillbillies* is not as "good" as *Oedipus Rex* from our standpoint—it is an entirely different kind of artifact and is examined in a completely different manner. A "canon" looks for eternal truths; a popular culture student seeks evidence to define a cultural mindset.

2) Because "canon" works and "popular" works are examined in different ways and provide different answers and information, they both need to be studied. Popular culture does not seek a place in the "canon" but beside it.

A Final Word from Our Sponsor

The readings which make up the rest of this book introduce the rooms of the House of Popular Culture in greater detail and provide you with several examples of how different writers analyze artifacts in those rooms. If you want readings that will make you a better person, or show you the aesthetic perfection of great art or teach you to succeed in business without really trying, sorry. Maybe you should stop reading right now. As we have stressed all through this introduction, popular culture studies are not about any of these things, although, hopefully, studying popular culture may help you move yourself in the direction of all these things. Studying popular culture will not tell us who we ought to be. On the other hand, if you want to know more about who we really are, both good and bad, then keep reading. Popular culture is what most people choose to do most of the time. As you gaze into the funhouse mirror of popular culture you are therefore getting to know yourself and you are getting to know us, all of us.