



# Popular Culture

The old notion that real culture should never aspire to be popular has itself lately become unpopular, even in the academic world. Despite the strong skepticism of some scholars, many researchers have begun to see "pop culture" (everything from dime novels to Hollywood films and top-40 music) as a kind of Rosetta stone for deciphering the myths, hopes, and fears of American society. "There are two ways of spreading light," Edith Wharton once said, "to be the candle or the mirror that reflects it." Is popular culture a good mirror? Here critics Thomas Cripps, Jeff Greenfield, Arthur Asa Berger, John Cawelti, and Frank McConnell discuss, respectively, the pop culture boom, daytime television, the comic strip, the romantic novel, and blockbuster movies.



## THE FOLKLORE OF INDUSTRIAL MAN

*by Thomas Cripps*

Scholars cannot agree on the nature of "popular culture," but they *do* seem to know its sources.

They point, for example, to a demographic bulge toward the end of the 17th century that restored Europe's population to the high levels of 1348—the year of the Black Death. This emergence of a new mass audience coincided with the first industrial revolution; cheaper printing and increased literacy soon helped nur-

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ture the rise of popular literature. By the 18th century, graphic material could be reproduced; by the 20th, so could photographs. And shortly after physics unveiled quantum theory, popular culture made a quantum leap into radio, motion pictures, and television—all promoted with that sophisticated mixture of marketing and salesmanship made possible by the convenient concentration of mankind in cities.

What are we to make of the cultural fruits of this evolution—a peddler's sack filled with everything from *High Noon* and *L'il Abner* to Gothic novels and molded plastic replicas of Dürer's *Praying Hands*?

Intellectuals, except for such occasional mavericks as Gilbert Seldes, author of *The Great Audience* (1950), for many years stood aloof from the marketplaces and bazaars. Rather than studying popular culture as an expression of the values of a vast, otherwise inarticulate population, many critics were offended by its surface excesses: its directness, shrillness, and apparent simplicity. Others shared a contempt for any art that was "available" and "cheap," hence vulnerable to mass taste and easily corruptible.

And yet popularity, by definition, is what the student of popular culture most wishes to understand, and accessibility and cheapness are its generic traits. These popular arts are built on a new sort of creativity that depends for its success on imaginatively repeated and rewoven formulas and archetypes. Thus, through movies, television, the popular novel, and comics the serious critic of popular culture invites us to see reflections of many values and attitudes—the furniture of the mind—of American society.

Whatever their convictions, most scholars in one way or another regard popular culture as, in Marshall McLuhan's apt phrase, "the folklore of industrial man." Before the industrial revolution, the cultivation of faddish tastes was a perquisite of the rich. A rage for "Chinoiserie" followed 16th-century advances in navigation that allowed costly Chinese *objets d'art* to be brought to the bric-a-brac shelves of the rich. In Holland and

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*Thomas R. Cripps, 45, is professor of history and coordinator of the graduate program in popular culture at Morgan State University in Baltimore. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Maryland in 1967, and has written numerous television shows and journal articles dealing with TV, movies, and the popular arts. As a Wilson Center Fellow (1976), he began work on the second volume of his history of blacks in the movies. Volume I, *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film, 1900–1942*, was published in 1976.*

### CANNED ARTS, PASSIVE MILLIONS

*Popular culture has always been unpopular among many intellectuals. Distressed by the stage and literary offerings of his day, Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882) allowed that “my idea of heaven is that there is no melodrama in it at all.” One hundred years later critic Paul Goodman assayed the state of the popular arts and found it wanting:*

Half the population sees a two-hour drama every week; the radio nightly presents long hours of vaudeville to millions; records beat out music everywhere; there is no measuring the floods of printed matter, merchandising pictures, cartoons, that have, whatever else, an artistic purpose.

Now this sheer quantity itself is the first thing to explain. But the explanation seems to me to be obvious: people are excessively hungry for feeling, for stimulation of torpid routine, for entertainment in boredom, for cathartic release of dammed-up emotional tensions. . . . The life the Americans lead allows little opportunity for initiative, personal expression, in work or politics; there is not enough love or passion anywhere; creative moments are rare. But they are still feeling animals; their tensions accumulate; and they turn to the arts for an outlet.

They are a passive audience; they do not strongly or overtly react, nor do they artistically participate themselves. There is, of course, no point in overtly reacting to a movie-screen or radio; but it is the audience passivity that has made these canned arts become so important. . . .

And this passive reaction is superficial—this is why it is perpetually sought for again. It does not unleash, like the tragic or comic theater of old, a violent purgation of the deepest crises and thwartings, death, lust, scorn. These things are not purged every morning and night. Rather, *the American popular arts provide a continual petty draining off of the tensions nearest the surface.* Their workings can be fairly compared to chewing gum as a means of satisfying an oral yearning for mother love and sustenance.

Reprinted from *Creator Spirit Come!*: The Literary Essays of Paul Goodman edited by Taylor Stoehr (New York: Free Life Editions, 1977).

England, the preindustrial rich risked fortunes on the tulip craze, yet another precursor of popular culture.

More than any other factor, technology gave the middle classes access to culture. The combination of leisure, discretionary income, and books made cheap by advances in printing contributed to the growth of the novel and to making the 19th century the first great age of popular culture. Developments in structural steel, power sources, and transportation led to

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world's fairs and, by the 1890s, to professional sports. In the next century, continuing advances in mass-produced color lithography and electronics gave rise to graphic magazine journalism, comic strips, motion pictures, and broadcasting. Symbolic of classless access to popular expression was the generic name of the earliest film theaters, the nickelodeon—a pleasure palace for a nickel.

### Boosting Enrollment

And yet, although we are now awash in a great age to which historians might someday give a name (as flattering as “the Renaissance” or as contemptuous as “the Dark Ages”), we know so little that a precise definition of popular culture eludes us. What are its boundaries, its sources, its mythic systems? And what is the secret of its current success as a mode of inquiry on American campuses?

In German universities it is studied as *Trivalliteratur*, and England's University of East Anglia is a center for the study of pop culture. In America, nearly every college makes some gesture toward offering work in the subject, some of them admittedly to bolster declining undergraduate enrollments in, say, “The Victorian Novel.” (Just change the title of the course to read “The Victorian Novel in the Movies.”) And yet highly motivated students, too, take up popular culture with a brave disregard for consequences to careers or respectability. For them, the top of the heap is the doctoral program in “American Culture” at Bowling Green State University in Ohio. But at least 500 other universities offer work in the field, with the total number of courses approaching 1,000. Still more courses appear under such rubrics as “American Studies,” “Mass Media,” and even “The Absurd Arts.”

The Popular Culture Association—the guild that represents the scholarly community—encourages inquiry so broad as to defy definition. In one recent meeting, an audience heard a prosaic academic paper on the depiction of Jews in silent movies, an analysis of the Wolf Man as tragic hero, and a discourse on matchbook covers. The territory covered by the *Journal of Popular Culture* and the Popular Culture Press is just as extensive, taking up with considerable rigor the iconography of the Coke bottle and the esthetics of the '57 Chevrolet.

If the interests of pop culture scholars are catholic, they are also colloquial. Like a postcard from Atlantic City, a teacher's essay in the *PCA Newsletter* begins: “Thought I'd write you a short account of some Popular Culture curricula reforms occur-

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ring on the high school level here in Tempe, Arizona." One almost expects the next sentence to begin: "Some of the guys down at Marge's deli dreamed up this terrific new course. . . ."

This informal devotion to the craft is more refreshing than it is naive, more tolerant than exclusive, and more widespread than parochial. Topics range from ancient folklore to modern myths. Some students invoke the highest standards of traditional scholarship, while others see popular culture as a means of liberating intellectual inquiry from hidebound convention. Social scientists, literary critics, dilettantes, and plain fans share the platform at scholarly meetings. In such an atmosphere, breadth matters more than definition.

No one can say what the future holds for popular culture. Limitless sources of TV, movie, and print production reaching for limitless audiences demand limitless repetitions of formulas, genres, and themes. But as long as purveyors of pop culture speak to the hopes and fears of their audiences, they will continue to produce popular art that can be studied as a mirror of social values—and enjoyed in its own right.

Despite the contempt of many critics, popular culture persists as a lively art and a compelling if unrefined field of inquiry. And if critics still see it as Yeats's rough beast slouching toward Bethlehem to be born, it must be remembered that nowadays to be born again is itself popular.



## PASSION ONCE REMOVED

*by Jeff Greenfield*

About 25 million Americans watch television between the daytime hours of 10 A.M. and 4 P.M. Most of these people are women; most of them are at home; and most of them are regular viewers. What they regularly see are soap operas and game shows—entertainments with far more in common than a mere preference for daylight.

These particular entertainments are the most enduring of broadcast forms, surviving and flourishing despite the fact that