

# Social-Political Themes in Pop Culture

**All your assignments this semester will culminate in the final paper. This will focus on a socio-political issue and how it is illustrated through a pop culture context.**

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## Popular culture

**Popular culture** (also called **pop culture**) is generally recognized by members of a society as a set of the practices, beliefs and objects that are dominant and ubiquitous in a society at a given point in time. Popular culture also encompasses the activities and feelings produced as a result of interaction with dominant objects. Heavily influenced in lives]] of people in a given society. Therefore, popular culture has a way of influencing an individual's attitudes on certain topics.<sup>[1]</sup> However, there are various ways to define pop culture.<sup>[2]</sup> Because of this, popular culture is something that can be defined in a variety of conflicting ways by different people across different contexts.<sup>[3]</sup> It is generally viewed in contrast to other forms of culture such as folk culture, work culture, or high culture, and also through different theoretical perspectives such as psychoanalysis, structuralism, postmodernism, and more. The common pop-culture categories are: entertainment (such as movies, music, television and video games), sports, news (as in people/places in the news), fashion, technology, and slang.<sup>[4]</sup>

Popular culture is sometimes viewed by many people as being trivial and "dumbed down" in order to find consensual acceptance from (or to attract a share amongst) the mainstream. As a result, it comes under heavy criticism from various non-mainstream sources (most notably from religious groups and countercultural groups) which deem it superficial, consumerist, sensationalist, or corrupt.<sup>[5][6][7][8][9]</sup>

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## History and definitions

The term "popular culture" was coined in the 19th century or earlier.<sup>[10]</sup> Traditionally, popular culture was associated with poor education and lower social classes,<sup>[11]</sup> as opposed to the "official culture" and higher education of the upper classes.<sup>[12][13]</sup> Victorian era Britain experienced social changes that included increased literacy rates, and with the rise of capitalism and industrialisation, people began to spend more money on entertainment. Labelling penny fiction the Victorian equivalent of video games, *The Guardian* described penny fiction as "Britain's first taste of mass-produced popular culture for the growing consumer culture and an increased capacity for travel via the invention of railway (the first public railway, Stockton and Darlington Railway north-east England in 1825) created both a market for cheap popular literature, and the ability for it to be circulated on a large scale. The first penny papers were published in the 1830s to meet this demand.<sup>[15]</sup>

The stress in the distinction from "official culture" became more pronounced towards the end of the 19th century,<sup>[16]</sup> a usage that became established in the interbellum period.<sup>[17]</sup>

From the end of World War II, following major cultural and social changes brought by mass media innovations, the meaning of popular culture overlapped with those of mass culture, media culture, image culture, consumer culture, and culture for mass consumption.<sup>[18]</sup> Social and cultural c

Storey that arose of mass culture, media culture, image culture, consumer culture, and culture for mass consumption. Social and cultural studies in the United States were a pioneer in this with respect to other western countries.

The abbreviated form "pop" for popular, as in pop music, dates from the late 1950s.<sup>[19]</sup> Although terms "pop" and "popular" are in some cases interchangeable, and their meaning partially overlap, the term "pop" is narrower. Pop is specific of something containing qualities of mass culture; "popular" refers to what has gained popularity, regardless of its style.<sup>[20][21]</sup>

According to author John Storey, there are various definitions of popular culture.<sup>[22]</sup> The quantitative definition of culture has the problem that "culture" (e.g., television dramatizations of Jane Austen) is also "popular." "Pop culture" is also defined as the culture that is "left over" when we subtract what high culture is. However, many works straddle the boundaries, e.g., William Shakespeare and Charles Dickens.

A third definition equates pop culture with "mass culture" and ideas. This is seen as a commercial culture, mass-produced for mass consumption and media.<sup>[23]</sup> From a Western European perspective, this may be compared to American culture. Alternatively, "pop culture" can be defined as a culture of the people, but this can be problematic as there are many ways of defining the "people." Storey argued that there is a political dimension to popular culture; neo-Gramscian hegemony theory "... sees popular culture as a site of struggle between the 'resistance' of subordinate groups in society and 'incorporation' operating in the interests of dominant groups in society." A postmodernist approach to popular culture would "no longer make a distinction between high and popular culture."

Storey claims that popular culture emerged from the urbanization of the Industrial Revolution. Studies of Shakespeare (by Weimann, Barber, or others) locate much of the characteristic vitality of his drama in its participation in Renaissance popular culture, while contemporary practitioner Fo and John McGrath use popular culture in its Gramscian sense that includes ancient folk traditions (the commedia dell'arte for example).<sup>[24][25]</sup>

Popular culture is constantly evolving and occurs uniquely in place and time. It forms currents and eddies, and represents a complex of interdependent perspectives and values that influence society and its institutions in various ways. For example, certain currents of pop culture may merge with, (or diverge into) a subculture, representing perspectives with which the mainstream popular culture has only limited familiarity. Items of pop culture most typically appeal to a broad spectrum of the public. Important contemporary contributions for understanding what popular culture means have come from the German researcher Ronald Daus, who studies the impact of extra-European cultures in North America, Asia, and especially in Latin America.

## Folklore

Adaptations based on traditional folklore provide a source of popular culture.<sup>[26]</sup> This early layer of cultural mainstream still persists today, in a form distinct from mass-produced popular culture, propagating by word of mouth rather than via mass media, e.g. in the form of jokes or urban legend. With the use of the Internet from the 1990s, the distinction between mass media and word-of-mouth has become blurred.

Although the folkloric element of popular culture engages heavily with the commercial element, the public has its own tastes and it may not always accept every cultural or subcultural item sold. Moreover, beliefs and opinions about the products of commercial culture spread by word-of-mouth, are often modified in the process and in the same manner that folklore evolves.

## Usage

Many people say that popular culture is a tool that higher ranking people in a society and elites (who often control mass media and popular culture) use to control the people below them in society. It's also said that popular culture dulls the minds of the "common man", making them more passive and easier to control, although popular culture can also be used as a means of rebellion against the ways and culture of dominant subcultures.<sup>[27]</sup>

## Sources

Sources of popular culture include:

- Films
- Television programs
- Popular music
- Sports
- Corporations
- Books *(no section)*
- Radio *(no section)*
- Video games *(no section)*
- The Internet *(no section)*<sup>[28]</sup>

## Films

Films started massive popular culture.<sup>[29]</sup>

## Television programs

A television program is a segment of audiovisual content intended for broadcast (other than a commercial, trailer, or other content not serving as viewership).

Television programs may be fictional (as in comedies and dramas), or non-fictional (as in documentary, news and reality television). They may be the case of a local newscast and some made-for-television movies), or historical (as in the case of many documentaries and fictional series). primarily instructional or educational, or entertaining as is the case in situation comedy and game shows.

## Music

**Popular music** is music with wide appeal<sup>[30][31]</sup> that is typically distributed to large audiences through the music industry. These forms and enjoyed and performed by people with little or no musical training.<sup>[30]</sup> It stands in contrast to both art music<sup>[32][33]</sup> and traditional or "folk" music. It was historically disseminated through the performances of written music, although since the beginning of the recording industry, it is also through recordings. Traditional music forms such as early blues songs or hymns were passed along orally, or to smaller, local audiences.<sup>[32]</sup>

## Sports

Sports include all forms of competitive physical activity or games which,<sup>[34]</sup> through casual or organised participation, aim to use, maintain or improve physical ability and skills while providing enjoyment to participants, and in some cases, entertainment for spectators.<sup>[35]</sup>

## Corporate branding

Corporate branding refers to the practice of promoting the brand name of a corporate entity, as opposed to specific products or services.<sup>[36]</sup>



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## SAMPLE POP CULTURE TOPICS:

Television show (ex: *The Twilight Zone*, *Black Mirror*)

Film (see list below)

Stand-up Comedy performance (ex: Dennis Miller, Judah Friedlander)

Music (song, album; discussion of music/lyrics can also include analysis of music video; protest songs, etc.)

Advertising (Dove Real Beauty ad campaign, print/commercial, etc.)

Video games (sexism and progressivism in video game culture/Gamergate)

Art (series/visual: painting, photography, etc.; Graffiti art like Banksy)

Performance Art (Yoko Ono, Poppy videos, etc.)

## SAMPLE FILM TOPICS:

*Edward Scissorhands*: Celebrity Culture

*Interstellar*: the Great Depression; over-farming/climate change

*Snowpiercer*: social class structure

*Minority Report*: criminal justice system; civil commitment

*Avatar*: imperialism/colonialism; reaping natural resources & destroying the environment; oil, blood diamonds, etc.

*Battleship*: Immigration

*X-Men*: eugenics; gay & lesbian analogy

## SAMPLE INTRO PARAGRAPH:

*Ex Machina* is a recently released sci-fi film that deals with an artificially intelligent being. It brings up such questions as whether it is ethical to create artificial life, what rights that artificial life should be given, and how does one define humanity. The film is relatable to current advances in technology in that these advances happen so quickly that society has little time to process the changes or adapt to them. One of the core questions then becomes, just because we can do something does not mean that we should do it. Relevant to present day, a recent article titled "As Japan's Population Ages, Robots Seen as Workforce Solution" by Will Ripley (CNN), discusses Japanese businesses using robots in stores and how one day these robots "could replace humans for certain jobs."

## FINAL PAPER GUIDELINES

TBD by instructor.

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