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Introducing Popular Culture

Approaching Popular Culture

“Let’s go get a coffee.”

Every day, throughout much of the world, this phrase is uttered thousands of times, by different people—students, teachers, construction workers, lawyers, mothers, retail clerks, unemployed people, old people, young people—and in different social contexts, such as work, breaks from work, dating, interviews, therapy sessions, or hanging out. Going for a coffee is a major part of popular culture, not only in the sense that it is such a common practice, but also in that it means so much more than the literal act of tossing back a hot caffeinated beverage: in fact, “going for coffee” need not involve drinking coffee at all. So what does it mean? And what is it about coffee drinking that makes it part of popular culture while other equally common practices—like, say, yawning or mowing the lawn—are not? Or are they part of popular culture, too?

These are the kinds of questions this book sets out to answer—not by offering a comprehensive account of what fits in the category of popular culture and what does not, but by helping us to think about the question of *why* popular culture is such a critical part of contemporary life. For this reason, it might be misleading to call this book a “user’s guide” to popular culture. A standard user’s guide to, say, the smartphone that you may have just received for Christmas (which happens all the time in television commercials, less often in real life) tells you everything there is to know about the specific object that you have in your hands, what its functions are, and what it can and cannot do. Popular culture is not like that. For one thing, popular culture is a far more difficult “thing” to pin down than a smartphone or an IKEA desk; it is constantly changing shape, shifting locations, assuming new identities and new tasks and functions. The goal of a user’s guide to popular culture is to provide culture’s users—that is, all of us—with a way to think about popular culture that is flexible and supple enough to allow us also to think about its changes and redefinitions, and to figure out what is at stake in the definition of popular culture. How can we learn to read and participate in—to *use*—what is popular in a way that strengthens our understanding of ourselves and the world we live in? This book approaches these questions through the analysis of texts (objects that we can interpret, just like a book) and practices (things that we do): seeing movies, listening to songs, watching television shows, playing sports, going shopping—and drinking coffee.

The purpose of this introduction is to lay out a working definition of popular culture, to outline a few key concepts that will reappear in later discussion, and to give you a diagram of the way this book is put together—a “guide to the guide”—that should help make the task of piecing the bits of popular culture together a productive one. We also offer a rough guide to the field of cultural studies (see Close-Up 1.2) for readers who want to

delve further into the question of how popular culture has come to be seen as something significant and tricky enough to require a user's guide. Just be forewarned: by the end of the book, you will still be left with extra parts and you will likely end up with a concept of popular culture that looks different from that of your neighbors. But trust us: this is a good thing...

Defining Popular Culture

Like most things that form a big part of our daily lives, popular culture is familiar and obvious at first glance, but very complicated as soon as you start to think about it in any detail. Before we outline the concept of popular culture that informs this book, we suggest you take a couple of minutes to try to come up with your own working definition. When we've conducted this exercise in introductory university classes, a typical range of ideas tend to come up: popular culture consists of those things—products, texts, practices, and so on—that are enjoyed by lots and lots of people; popular culture is commercial culture (as opposed to, say, “high” culture, which people today still tend to associate with the things they imagine that rich people who own yachts like to do, like listen to opera or go to the symphony); popular culture consists of the traditional practices and beliefs or way of life of a specific group; and, finally, the most wide-ranging definition of all, popular culture is simply the practices of everyday life.

What is interesting about these definitions is not just their range but their differences—differences that are shaped to a large degree by the way we understand the terms “popular” and “culture.” It is worth taking the time to think about these different ideas, but not so we can dismiss some of them to identify a correct definition. Like most other important social concepts—concepts such as democracy, progress, justice, civilization, and so on that produce the shape of the societies we live in—it does not really make sense to hope for a correct definition that would likely solve the puzzle of all of these different meanings by establishing the essential one supposedly lurking in their midst. Rather, we want to suggest that popular culture is informed by *all* of these perspectives, not just in the sense that each is partially true, but also in the sense that the tension between them is fundamental to understanding the meaning of popular culture today. So before we erect a definition of popular culture that we can all feel comfortable inhabiting, we need to think about this tension. This may initially seem to be a frustratingly circuitous and unhelpful route to finding out the “facts.” However, such meanderings are a critical part of the study of culture, in which the question of meaning is never evident but always up for negotiation and disagreement.

What Is Culture?

When we ask our students to track the word “**culture**” as it is used in the media and other sources, two things tend to emerge: (i) culture (along with variations such as multiculturalism) gets mentioned *a lot*, implying that it is a significant concept in our society, and one that we likely can't do without; and (ii) it appears in many different, often contradictory, contexts, suggesting that exactly *how* it signifies is hard to pin down. When we talk about culture in the sense of building opera houses, the word obviously means something different than when we talk about Western culture or youth culture, national culture or business culture. Culture in the first sense—the one that fits with opera houses, ballet, and Shakespeare, which for convenience we'll call capital-C Culture—focuses on what we

usually think of as high-end creative production: artistic pursuits that are enjoyed by an elite minority as opposed to more accessible leisure activities, such as sports. These kinds of cultural productions are those that have over time (they are often associated with the past) assumed an especially privileged place in the collection of ideas and artifacts that comprise a cultural *tradition*.

A second definition encompasses a much broader understanding of culture as a whole way of life of a society or a distinct subsection of society: along with art, it encompasses everyday rituals such as meals, work, religious observances, sports, sex, family, and friendship. Implicitly opposed to “nature,” which we associate with biology (the things we share with the living nonhuman world), “culture” in this context refers to the practices that define us, collectively and in distinct groups, as human. This definition of culture, or something close to it, informs the disciplines of the social sciences—particularly anthropology, which until recently tended to focus on the cultures of preindustrial societies. When we go on vacation to experience other cultures, it is this sense of culture that we are making reference to: a glimpse into a different way of life organized according to its own principles and around its own unique practices.

The Mass Media

Interestingly, neither the familiar humanities definition of culture nor the one employed by traditional anthropologists adequately encompasses the experience of living in a post-modern capitalist society—the experience of most of us who teach and study those subjects—which is a way of life increasingly dominated by the mass media. Not only do the mass media tend to fall outside the definitions of culture centered around elite artistic production or the practices of ordinary everyday life; they also are frequently cited as the thing that threatens to destroy culture in both these senses: while one set of critics laments the dumbing-down of Shakespeare to satisfy the tastes of a mass audience in Hollywood productions such as *William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet, O* (based on *Othello*), or *10 Things I Hate About You* (based on *The Taming of the Shrew*), another warns of the corruption of “authentic” grassroots cultures by the global entertainment industry, which has made it more difficult to find cultures that are all that different from our own in our travels. While they come from different places, what these criticisms have in common is an element of nostalgia, a feeling that something has been lost, that a once pure realm of culture has become contaminated by commerce. It is the desire to understand this world-contaminated-by-commerce that motivates the relatively new discipline of *cultural studies*, into which this book fits (and whose development as an academic field is discussed in more detail later in this chapter).

Objects of Study

To avoid the limitations of earlier definitions of culture, **cultural studies** defines its object of study in very broad terms. One definition, offered in *Key Concepts in Communication and Cultural Studies*, describes culture as “the social production and reproduction of sense, meaning and consciousness. The sphere of meaning, which unifies the spheres of production (economics) and social relations (politics)” (O’Sullivan *et al.* 68). This is a useful definition insofar as it manages to encompass a wide variety of “meaning-producing” practices and technologies, including both traditional definitions of culture—fine art and everyday practices—and mass media. Of course, while the incorporation of these diverse meanings into one functional frame might give us a quick snapshot of what it is that cultural studies actually *studies*—the kinds of things that it looks at and why it is that it looks at them—it is difficult to ignore that the different conceptions

of culture that are named in this definition are historically not only different but also *contradictory*.

Rather than seeking to smooth over these contradictions, cultural studies is interested in actively teasing them out and laying them bare. It is committed to an understanding of culture that does not just expand on earlier definitions to include practices, objects, and people that tended, for different reasons, to get left out (such as television game shows, science fiction novels, or skateboarding), but also thinks about why and how such inclusions and exclusions occur in the first place. This means that cultural studies thinks deeply about the connections between culture and the spheres of politics and economics, and seeks to understand how that realm of activity concerned with “meanings, pleasures, and identities” shapes (and is shaped by) relations of power. Among the key questions that are raised by the contradictions between the different definitions of culture cited above are: How is culture produced (made by a society) and reproduced (passed on by a society into the future)? Who makes culture? For whom is it made? This brings us to the other half of the concept of popular culture (Fiske 1).

What/Who Defines the Popular?

Having wrestled with the complicated problem of what constitutes culture, the meaning of “popular” seems much more straightforward, at least initially. Derived from the Latin word *popularis*, which means “of, or belonging to the people,” “popular” is often used in a contemporary context to describe something that is liked by a lot of people. For example, when an authoritative source cites *NCIS* as the most popular show on television, based on ratings in 20 nations (“TV Guide”), we can assume, reasonably, that a lot of us like slick crime dramas shot in glamorous settings. But when we start to look a little further into how the word “popular” is used today, it becomes obvious that it has to do with more than numbers—that the words “popular” and “the people” don’t refer to absolutely everyone, but to a particular group to whom a certain quality or value is attached.

A couple of examples will serve to illustrate this. First, a number of major art museums have recently come under fire for abandoning their mandate to promote serious art in favor of “popular” blockbuster shows guaranteed to fill up the galleries (and the museum shop). Recent examples of this phenomenon include the *Art of Star Wars* exhibition that toured galleries in Japan, Singapore, Scotland, and England between 2002 and 2004, and *Diana, A Celebration*, a tribute to the late Princess Diana that drew crowds at museums in Toronto, Fort Lauderdale, and Dayton, Ohio, from 2006 to 2014.

Art and museum critics are not all happy about the trend of blurring high and popular culture. As George Neubert, former director of the San Antonio Museum of Art and the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, puts it:

A lot of museums are now torn between two extreme opposite philosophies....One feels it has to compete with pop culture and mass culture to be relevant and for the big E, education, with lots of well-intentioned outreach and participatory programs. It does for a short moment bring up the numbers, but I wonder how meaningful those are in the long term. (Wolgamott)

A counterargument can be easily mounted in favor of the museums’ decision to show more “popular” work: as a public space, the museum should respond to the preference of people in general rather than to the tastes of an overly educated minority to whom museums have typically catered. Since these latter tastes are often seen to be disproportionately supported by state subsidy of the arts, this argument also often

concerns the appropriate allocation of tax dollars and the need for the arts sector to be more market driven. While a cultural institution can readily apply to governments for support of a show on Leonardo da Vinci's sketches, it is harder to justify showing off concept drawings of the dark Sith, Darth Maul, even if this is what the public might "really" want to see. In this case, the "popular" is evoked both as a democratic principle *and* as a judgment about who can make sense of "real" art. By including more "popular" shows, the museums invite more people inside them—but not, of course, to see the kinds of art objects they were initially designed to exhibit (see Figure 1.1).



Figure 1.1 Many museums now embrace elements of popular culture. *The Art of Video Games*, an exhibition at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, DC, included a physical installation as well as an online, interactive component. Source: *The Art of Video Games* exhibition at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, March 16, 2012–September 30, 2012

Another example of the slipperiness of the concept of the popular concerns the use of the related word “people” in the context of political protest. International political meetings, from the G20 to Rio + 20, frequently encounter opposition in the form of “people’s summits” organized by activist groups. In this example, the word “people” connotes something like democratic or grassroots or ordinary, in contrast to the powerful minority of state leaders and corporate CEOs. While government leaders denounce the organizers of such meetings as “special interest groups” (versus “democratically elected” leaders), activists counter these claims by highlighting governments’ subordination of social justice to corporate agendas and the resulting failure to represent the interests of the people. The term “people” here becomes the symbolic linchpin of a battle to gain the moral high ground over the substantive issues under debate. As with the art museum, the word “people” and its derivative “popular” are used here to convey something roughly opposite to “elite,” though the *value* of those terms means something entirely different in each context.

So we can add a couple of new elements to our understanding of the word “popular.” First, it tends to carry with it connotations of value that are implicitly contrasted with the value of what it is *not*, though those values are seen differently depending on who is talking and in what context. Second, as is particularly evident in the latter example of people’s summits, the question of who or what constitutes the popular is tangled up with questions of power.

With this in mind, let’s return to the apparently simple usage of “popular” with which we began this section and think about it in a little more detail. Who are the people who define the “popularity” of *NCIS*? Are they the unenlightened masses who lack the ability to discriminate between schlock and substance? Are they discerning viewers exercising their consumer choice? Or are they engaged in an act of political activism, employing the cultural resources of *NCIS* to construct an agenda for crime prevention or progressive social change? The slightly ludicrous quality of the last possibility raises a quite serious question about how we understand the popular: What kind of agency—that is, possibility for self-motivated activity or action—is involved on the part of “the people” in determining or defining something to be “popular”? This question has particular significance when we start to talk about popular culture.

What Is Popular Culture?

Common uses of the term “popular culture” reflect in interesting ways our understandings of the two separate words we discussed above. The most familiar use of the term “popular culture” identifies it with the entertainment produced through and by commercial media (television, film, the music industry, etc.) that have the economic and technological capacity to reach large, demographically diverse, and geographically dispersed audiences. Popularity is measured, in this case, by patterns of **consumption**: it refers to the things we buy (or watch, or listen to, etc.). A somewhat different use of “popular culture” defines it in terms not of consumption but production: popular culture is what “the people” make, or do, for themselves. This definition fits fairly closely with the anthropological definition of culture as “the practices of everyday life.”

Both of these definitions differ quite clearly from the elite capital-C Culture defended by cranky art patrons. Apart from this, however, their connotations are quite different and even oppositional: “do-it-yourself” popular culture is explicitly different from the culture that is produced by large corporate entities whose interest in the everyday practices of their consumers is shaped by their need to figure out how best to sell them things.

Indeed, the kind of culture produced by the commercial media is often seen as threatening the culture of everyday life by diverting people's desire for fulfillment—a desire that can ultimately be satisfied only by productive activity—into habits of passive consumption.

Folk Culture and Mass Culture

To distinguish clearly between these two different forms of cultural production, critics will sometimes use the terms “folk culture” and “mass culture.” **Folk culture** refers to those cultural products and practices that have developed over time within a particular community or socially identifiable group and that are communicated from generation to generation and among people who tend to be known to one another. It tends to be seen as the direct expression of the life experiences shared by its creators and their audience (Nachbar and Lause 15; Grossberg, Wartella, and Whitney 37). **Mass culture**, on the other hand, is produced for an unknown, disparate audience. While the transmission of folk culture is generally technologically simple (e.g., face-to-face, oral communication), mass culture depends on electronic (or mechanical) media to convey its message to the largest possible audience in order to secure maximum profit, which is its ultimate goal. These terms can serve to make useful distinctions between kinds of cultural production, highlighting the differences between, say, an Aboriginal dot painting and an MTV rap video. On even a superficial examination, however, the differences start to look a little fuzzy. Aboriginal paintings have been reproduced in forms ranging from mugs to T-shirts to high fashion. These uses are frequently condemned as appropriation or cultural theft—a justifiable charge in the many cases where Aboriginal artists are compensated poorly, or not at all, for the use of their work. But in the increasing instances where Aborigines direct and control the marketing of traditional art, complaints may have more to do with romantic, non-Aboriginal conceptions of primitive authenticity than they do with concerns about cultural ownership or legitimacy. Rap music, for its part, is now a multibillion-dollar industry, but one that emerged relatively recently from the African American street culture of the South Bronx. In each of these cases, it is difficult to identify the precise moment when folk culture metamorphosed into mass culture. The attempt to maintain a strict division is not just tricky in a practical sense, but also, arguably, somewhat suspect **ideologically**, an issue explored in more detail in Chapter 5.

The desire to preserve a folk culture safe from the corrupting influence of commerce is often inflected by a nostalgic desire to return to a (mythical) moment of history in which cultural and social identities were secure and cultural boundaries were clear. When this desire is extended to a socially and economically disadvantaged group, as in the two examples above, the situation becomes even more complicated. While it might be argued that the preservation of folk culture is a matter of community survival, the unhappiness of white collectors at the move toward mass-produced art may be motivated by concerns that have little to do with Indigenous peoples' autonomy and more with how the value of their own art pieces will be affected. A less crudely **materialist** motivation for consumer nostalgia in this case might be a well-intentioned, if racist, aesthetic investment in the image of the “noble savage.” This imaginary figure conjures up a purer, more natural world outside Western commercial culture while occupying a comfortable place within it.

However seemingly progressive the cause that is being (or has been) promoted in the name of “the people,” “folk culture” remains a term whose peculiarly heavy ideological baggage should set off alarm bells every time we hear or read it; the same alarm bells that should go off when we hear politicians invoke the mythical category of “ordinary working folks.” Just who are these “ordinary” people? This is not to say that we need to abandon completely the idea of folk culture and all its troublesome derivations. Like mass culture,

it retains some value as a descriptive term to designate particular kinds of cultural production, especially when referring to a time before our present capitalist moment—a moment when **authenticity** and commercial value are increasingly impossible to disentangle, when there is a sense in which, as one critic puts it, “*all* culture is mass culture” (Denning 258, emphasis added). We explore this idea a little further in Chapter 5.

Suggested Activity 1.1

Does commercialism destroy the authenticity of a cultural product or practice? Or does the authenticity of an object or practice increase its commercial value and potential? What does it mean if it is possible for us to answer both of these questions affirmatively? How does the divide between authenticity and commercial value work in the case of a practice like ecotourism and an object like the first release of an indie band on its own label?

The Culture of Everyday Life

To signal this ambiguity, and to avoid producing a definition of popular culture that falls too clearly on the side of celebrating the folk or denigrating the masses, we might define popular culture as something like “the communicative practices of everyday life” (where “communicative practices” comprises all those activities concerned with the production of meaning: talking, writing, social rituals such as eating, shopping, dancing, music, visual culture, sports, fashion, etc.) that are shared among many members of a society, including and especially those who are not particularly socially, economically, or politically powerful (see Figure 1.2). This somewhat clumsy definition accomplishes three things: (i) it signals the inclusion of mass media alongside, and even within, the practices



Figure 1.2 “Culture” includes not only artistic and commercial creative practices and texts, but also aspects of everyday life, such as the rituals that surround food. Source: © Corbis/SuperStock

of everyday life, without determining in advance what relationship it has to those practices; (ii) it emphasizes the *meaningful* nature of popular culture—meaningful in the sense that it is important, as well as in the sense that it is concerned with the production of sense and social value; and (iii) it highlights the issue of power that always and overtly dogs the production of culture in general and popular culture in particular.

The Politics of Popular Culture

Why is power such a central issue for understanding popular culture? As we have already tried to suggest, culture is bound up closely with other aspects of human existence. As “the sphere of meaning which unifies the spheres of production (economics) and social relations (politics)” (O’Sullivan *et al.* 68), culture is concerned not just with individual tastes and desires, but also with the fundamental organization of society—with the distribution of material and symbolic power. Culture both reflects and influences social organization and the distribution of power. In the early twenty-first century, in most parts of the world, the dominant economic system is **capitalism** (for more on capitalism, see Close-Up 1.1). This means that the key characteristics of capitalism, including both its wealth-generating capacity and the patterns of inequitable distribution on which that capacity depends, help determine the shape of culture. This is particularly true for popular culture.

Close-Up 1.1 Capitalism

Capitalism is an economic system based on private ownership of the means of production and distribution, and geared toward the generation of profit. It is the dominant economic system in the world today. It is not the only economic system that has ever been in place, nor is it likely to be the last way in which human beings organize their economies, despite some claims to the contrary.

Loosely definable as a system of private enterprise whose primary aim is the production of profit, capitalism has been developing since at least the fifteenth century and underwrites many of the economic and cultural institutions that we take for granted today, such as private property, individual freedom, and the imperative of economic growth. Our tendency today to see these features of capitalism as not only positive but also *natural*—the products of human nature rather than consciously worked-out ideas—makes it harder to see its less desirable aspects, such as social fragmentation, the unequal distribution of wealth, and the conversion of everything (including life itself) into something that can be bought or sold.

These brutal elements of capitalism were particularly evident during the heyday of European **colonialism** from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. During this period, the exploitation of resources and enslavement of people from the non-European world helped make possible the massive accumulation of wealth enjoyed by a relatively small percentage of Europeans. This in turn fueled the Industrial Revolution, in which both the productive and the destructive elements of capitalism were further intensified.

In capitalist economies, the means of creating, distributing, and exchanging wealth lie mainly in the hands of individuals and corporations (which in North America have the legal rights of individuals—see Close-Up 5.2), rather than in public or state hands. The value of goods and labor is defined not by their social usefulness or significance, but by how much they can be exchanged for. The main goal of individuals in capitalism is to maximize the profit or the wages they receive. Proponents believe that, through the dance of supply and demand, goods and services are optimally and efficiently distributed throughout society.

Detractors point to the growing gap between the wealthy and the poor, whose life activity is often organized to generate even more wealth for those at the top.

Postmodern—also referred to as postindustrial or late—capitalism is distinguished by the fact that by comparison to earlier eras of capitalism, there is now a far greater emphasis on the exchange of information and services (e.g., software and banking) as opposed to hard goods (e.g., steel and cars) in an economy that has become globally integrated.

In fact, one could argue that capitalism does not just inform particular *versions* of popular culture, in the sense of sustaining some dominant narratives (e.g., the story of success through hard work) and disabling others (e.g., the triumph of the group over the individual) or by enabling certain kinds of technological innovation. *Capitalism enables the production of popular culture, period.* We will go on to trace the historical evolution of the relationship between capitalism and popular culture in Chapter 2. For now, it is sufficient to note that the economic and social struggle that is intrinsic to capitalism is fought, to some extent, on the terrain of popular culture.

File Sharing

A simple example will serve to illustrate the kind of struggle we're talking about. Through much of the twentieth century, the evolution of the global, but particularly North American, music industry was a story of skyrocketing profits. This story culminated in the introduction of the CD, which forced consumers to pay considerably more than what they had paid for vinyl LPs (with what many agreed was only a marginal improvement in sound quality), not to mention shelling out for expensive new sound systems. As promised price reductions never materialized, a quiet groundswell of annoyance with the recording industry began to grow. It seemed like a classic case of the customer getting cheated by corporations. Then, in the late-1990s, using the same digital technology that enabled the development of the CD, peer-to-peer file-sharing services such as Napster crept onto the scene, allowing people to swap music files on their computers without paying a cent. The recording industry fought back on two fronts, launching a series of lawsuits in a bid to recoup lost profits and creating programs that would enable users to download individual songs, albums, movies, television episodes, and series for (relatively) low fees. Meanwhile, determined file sharers—"pirates," in industry parlance—continue to find new ways to use the technology and the decentralized structure of the Internet to outmaneuver their relatively cumbersome, slow-moving corporate opponents.

The story of the changing dynamics of music and film distribution is a complicated one, with seemingly clear battle lines between "the people" and "corporations" blurred by such issues as the rights of musicians and filmmakers to get paid for their work, the accessibility of technology, and its implications for the construction of the community. Moreover, it isn't clear what effects the trend toward increasingly individualized, **privatized** music and film might have on our shared public culture (see Chapter 10 for further discussion of intellectual property and digital culture).

Suggested Activity 1.2

What are your feelings about file sharing? Does it constitute theft, as the film and music industries claim and the law increasingly confirms? Or is it a legitimate, even a virtuous form of genuinely popular culture? Do you see this shift in the way consumers access cultural products as empowering to producers, or does it threaten their livelihoods?

Popular culture in this example is not simply an arena in which the disempowered fight back, defining themselves out from under corporate power. Neither does it work simply to maintain those structures by reining in resistance, bringing it back under the umbrella of the dominant ideology of consumer capitalism. Rather, it is subject to a constant struggle over pleasure, profit, and, ultimately, the distribution of social and economic power in the world.

Power Relationships

This dimension of struggle means that it is impossible ever to fix the meaning of popular culture in terms of a collection of objects or practices, or in terms of a single group who can be said to possess them. We need to understand it, as cultural theorist Stuart Hall puts it, not as “a mere descriptive inventory—which may have the negative effect of freezing popular culture into some timeless descriptive mould—but [as] the relations of power which are constantly punctuating and dividing the domain of culture into its preferred and its residual categories” (“Notes” 234). What is true for the objects and practices of popular culture is also true for those who use and/or participate in them. If, as another critic, John Fiske, has claimed, “popular culture is the culture of the subordinated and disempowered” (4), this does not mean that it is possible to identify, by means of a simple checklist, who is “in” and who is “out.” Rather than existing in a stable form as the property of a single group, power moves between and among individuals and institutions; this movement is registered with particular intensity in the domain of popular culture. In the absence of the certainty of clear categories, we are left with the less comfortable but more expansive framework of a series of open-ended questions. In evaluating the significance of popular culture, we always need to ask: “Who says what, how, to whom, with what effect and for what purpose?” (Williams, qtd. in Burke 218).

Why Study Popular Culture? A Brief History of Cultural Studies

In one sense, cultural studies boils down to a bunch of theories and methodologies that help us find the answers to these straightforward questions. To understand why they’re *good* questions—and less straightforward than they might seem—a bit of perspective is necessary. The very brief history of cultural studies that follows offers such a perspective. In the process, it might also help begin to answer a question you might have asked yourself (with gentle prodding from family or friends, perhaps): What is the point of cultural studies? Why not do something more respectable/useful/career enhancing/*real*?

Every year, a couple of reports appear in the media about some new and outrageous course that has made it onto the curriculum of some university or college. In the 1980s, it was a sprinkling of courses on Madonna and feminism; now such a course is more likely to be on reality television, social media, or the cultural politics of fat. Less remarkable than the appearance of these courses is the fact that they still raise eyebrows. Only a few decades ago, the idea of a course on popular culture in general would have been unthinkable—the equivalent of bringing a case of beer into class and asking students to contemplate the meaning of drinking in their lives while getting happily buzzed. The fact that popular culture is more or less comfortably entrenched in the halls of higher learning while some aspects of it—certain celebrities, particular practices—are still excluded raises questions that are relevant for our discussion in this book: What counts as worthwhile knowledge in our culture? What is the relationship between popular culture and education? How has this relationship changed? Why has it changed?

Close-Up 1.2 Cultural Studies

Looser in its parameters than conventional disciplines such as psychology or history, “cultural studies” is, as one practitioner puts it, “a term of convenience for a fairly dispersed array of theoretical and political positions which, however widely divergent they might be in other respects, share a commitment to examining cultural practices from the point of view of their intrication with, and within, relations of power” (Bennett 33). It embraces a definition of culture that includes—in addition to conventional “texts” such as books—television shows, music, advertising, and ways of life (in the sense of concrete practices such as shopping, eating, drinking, fashion, etc.), as well as more abstract structures such as language, beliefs, “the contradictory forms of ‘common sense’ which have taken root in and helped to shape popular life,” and the institutions that surround them (S. Hall “Gramsci” 26).

This broad definition of culture obviously contains a complex mix of elements—social, linguistic, political, economic; indeed, the study of popular culture might be described in one sense as the study of the interrelationships among what were once seen as discrete fields of existence. As such, cultural studies embraces a number of different disciplines, including literary studies, film studies, political science, anthropology, sociology, and communications studies, and employs a variety of methodologies: close reading, ethnography, content analysis, population surveys, and historical research.

Popular Culture Invades the Classroom

In Chapter 2, “The History of Popular Culture,” we talk about the development in the mid to late nineteenth century of a distinction between high, or capital-C, Culture and popular culture. Among the engineers of this divide were “rational recreationists”—religious and charitable groups bent on “improving” the lower classes—and education experts such as Matthew Arnold, who saw in “culture” a way to knit society together and soften the edges of the materialism infecting, in different ways, the middle and lower classes. Strangely, it was from this clearly hostile move against popular culture that the impulse to understand it—an impulse that informs this book—was born.

Sneaking in through the Back Door

Matthew Arnold and his followers saw mass media (understood in the form of such things as popular novels) as leading to social disintegration through the replacement of spiritual with commercial values. They were particularly concerned with what they saw as the crass materialism of the new middle class and the degeneration of working-class morals. Behind this critique lay a powerful resistance to **industrialization** and nostalgia for an organic agrarian society in which people knew one another (and, not incidentally, knew their own place; **class mobility** was not a feature of this society). As people moved away from the supporting structures of church and community into the alienating and anonymous environment of the city, it was argued, they became vulnerable to all sorts of corrupting influences. Implicit in this position is a view of the masses as childlike in their ability to be easily led. The problem, as cultural conservatives saw it, was that they were being led by the wrong forces. The beneficial influences of the classic works of Culture, which discouraged the pursuits of materialism by offering more spiritual forms of sustenance, were being replaced by **commodities** that, in their form (cheap paperback novels,

pop songs played on the gramophone) as in their content, seemed to celebrate values of easy pleasure and instant gratification.

These critiques grew throughout the early decades of the twentieth century as new cultural technologies and modes of production facilitated easier distribution of forms of popular culture such as fiction, movies, music, and eventually television. Recognizing that it was impossible to shield impressionable minds from this trash, early twentieth-century educators such as F.R. and Q.D. Leavis suggested that schools should focus on training students' tastes to help them discriminate between true culture and its "multitudinous counter-influences—films, newspapers, advertising—indeed the whole world outside the class-room" (Leavis and Thompson 1). Such discrimination, they argued, was essential to the development of a sensitive moral character.

The course of study they proposed featured such inspiring study questions as "Modern publicity debases the currency of spiritual and emotional life generally": Discuss and illustrate" (121). The target of these "discussion" questions (which don't leave a whole lot of room for discussion!) is both the products of popular media culture and the ignorant masses who consume them. Education in taste, then, is, as Pierre Bourdieu was later to point out (see Chapter 5), an education in class discrimination. That many of the students themselves came from the class they were now being taught to despise was something not taken up by the Leavises or other educators of the time.

In the Leavises' educational program, popular culture made it onto the curriculum as an example of a social problem—like alcohol, say, or bad hygiene—that could, with the proper techniques of discipline and avoidance, be successfully banished. In a way, though, these efforts were defeated by their own intentions: bringing popular culture into the classroom both acknowledged and promoted its legitimacy as a powerful social force.

The Democratization of Culture

The Leavises' approach to culture was unashamedly elitist. F.R. Leavis's 1930 work, *Mass Civilization and Minority Culture*, painted a picture of a society clearly divided, in which the cultured minority on the inside, the world of "us," fought valiantly to preserve itself from the degenerate populace on the outside, the world of "them." These certainties began to break down after the Second World War, when an increasingly diverse university student body started to challenge the boundary between "us" and "them." Particularly significant was the arrival of a large number of (mostly male) working-class students. Many of these were adults who, because of the war or for economic reasons, had deferred their education. They brought along with them a whole raft of knowledge and experiences that did not conform to elite conceptions of Culture.

Williams, Hoggart, and Thompson

From this group, three figures emerged as particularly influential in the development of the more inclusive vision of "culture" that would come to define cultural studies. Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart, scholars of English literature, and E.P. Thompson, a historian, all began their university careers as scholarship students from working-class backgrounds. Williams's and Hoggart's later experiences working as adult-education tutors confirmed their sense that the dominant scholarly understanding of culture was far too narrow and exclusive to encompass the rich and complex fabric of their students' lives.

While the work of these three theorists is characterized by important differences of disciplinary perspective, approach, and argument, some of the central general implications of their work can be summarized here. First, all three established the legitimacy of

working-class life as a subject of academic study, expanding the boundaries not just of culture but also of history to include experiences traditionally dismissed as insignificant. In the process, they also refined the definition of culture, moving away from a “literary-moral” to a more anthropological understanding of it as “the ‘whole process’ by means of which meanings and definitions are socially constructed and historically transformed.” In this new definition, “literature and art count as only one, specially privileged, kind of social communication” (Williams, qtd. in S. Hall “Cultural Studies and the Centre” 19).

For Hoggart and Williams in particular, literature and art retained their significance as embodiments of important human values. Part of their projects recalled the efforts of F.R. Leavis in their determination to expose students to classic works of literature in order to enhance their literacy and, by extension, their understanding of the broader cultural contexts that shaped their lives. They all shared, to a certain extent, Leavis’s elitist disdain for the products of the **culture industry**, enhanced by nostalgia for an earlier, more innocent (and partly imaginary) time when culture had yet to be totally corrupted by commerce. Hoggart and Williams broadened Leavis’s focus, however, in their extension of the principles of literary criticism, especially the techniques of close reading, to a wide range of popular texts—songs, magazines, newspapers—and in their emphasis on the connections between these texts and other aspects of everyday life: leisure activities, family relationships, gender roles, and so on. They also differed from Leavis in the crucial respect that, while Leavis wanted to preserve the terrain of minority culture against the threat of “mass” civilization, they sought to enhance democracy by developing the cultural literacy of ordinary people, helping them to understand the substance of their own lives.

One important area of conflict between, and even within, the works of these theorists concerns the relationship between the individual and broader institutional and social structures. While histories “from below” such as Thompson’s tried to foreground working-class experience, and also to highlight the **agency** of working-class people in shaping their own lives, his work was also characterized by a recognition of the way in which agency is shaped and constrained by broader economic relations. Williams and Hoggart, though equally interested in the conditions that would allow working people to become the subjects of their own history, rejected what they saw as the economic determinism of traditional **Marxism**, insisting on the substance and autonomy of culture as a shaping force. Debates about the relative power of individuals and the structures that constrain them, the role of ideology in determining hierarchies of cultural value, and the shaping effects of economics on culture (and vice versa) became increasingly urgent in the context of a rapidly expanding culture industry. The establishment of the new Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham (headed by Richard Hoggart) in 1964 engaged these questions with a specific focus on the study of media and youth subcultures—a diversity of subjects that marked the ambiguity of popular culture as defined simultaneously from above and below.

The Americanization of Popular Culture

The changes that were occurring in Britain in the years following the Second World War were part of broader, global upheavals. One significant change resulted from Britain’s shift from a dominant to a subordinate political and economic power in relation to the United States as the new leader of the “free” (i.e., noncommunist) world. Combined with the position of media dominance that the United States had occupied since the early

twentieth century, the new configuration of global power meant that, from the 1950s onward, global popular culture increasingly had an American face.

British cultural critics had a mixed reaction to these changes. In the 1950s, art critics working at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) established a working group to study contemporary trends in architecture, visual culture, and other forms of popular art. They were particularly interested in—and, generally, excited by—the growing influence of American popular culture on British culture. Their approach was different from most of the other critical responses to the culture industry, which were just that: critical.

In the United States itself, serious interest in popular culture was motivated by an unlikely source: the **Cold War**. The contest between communism and capitalism spurred a push in American universities to study, and thereby promote, the **liberal** democratic values that represented the American way of life. American studies programs sprang up that were at first mostly committed to the teaching of American “high” culture—literature and art, along with the triumphant narrative of American history.

Soon these programs began to acknowledge the importance of the media in communicating democratic values through popular culture. The tendency to view the new media culture in a celebratory mode, as the embodiment of America’s democratic spirit (as opposed to the culture of censorship and repression that was seen to exist in Russia), competed with concerns about the capacity of the commercial media to lure audiences into habits of unthinking **consumerism**. Concerns about subliminal advertising (see Chapter 5) played a large part in the move to incorporate media studies into university curricula.

While worries about the capacity of the media to weaken society’s moral fiber by bombarding it with images promoting sex and shopping preoccupied many American educators, the explicit *Americanness* of the media also concerned many critics outside the United States. This vaguely defined quality was seen to shape not just the content of a popular culture that promoted values of liberalism, **individualism**, and consumerism, but also the way in which it was produced and distributed. Improvements in communications technology, in conjunction with American economic and cultural expansionism, granted the products of the American culture industry unprecedented access to the rest of the world. This development spawned fears about **cultural imperialism** (see Chapter 9), as well as the growth of critical media studies in Britain and elsewhere.

The Decolonization of Culture

Challenges to the comfortable dominance of the model of British Culture advanced by Matthew Arnold and the Leavises came not just from a shift in power away from Britain toward the United States, but also from more widely dispersed challenges to the world order associated with decolonization (see Chapter 7). The challenge was not only from the renaissance of other traditions, such as the African and South Asian cultures that had been submerged during the colonial period, but also the necessity—highlighted by anti-colonial activists such as Mohandas Gandhi and Frantz Fanon—for European culture to confront the contradictions that lay at the heart of its cherished ideals of freedom and **progress**. Around the same time, women’s and labor groups, along with the civil rights movement in the United States, had begun to highlight the fault lines of **race** and gender that defined the supposedly universal norms and values of liberal democracy.

What Is an Education For?

In addition to their broad consequences for society as a whole, these social justice movements, which came to a head in the massive protests launched in the United States, France, and Mexico in 1968, had an enormous impact on higher education. Along with anticolonial and labor rights activists, students were among the strongest participants in the protests. Their chief demand—for a greater role in determining the shape of their education—was in part an expression of anger about the detachment of the world inside the university from what was going on outside it: lectures celebrating the values of freedom, civilization, and human dignity did not fit with the realities of violent conflict such as the Vietnam War, human rights abuses, and environmental destruction. If academic institutions were to serve any useful role in advancing human understanding, they needed to acknowledge the bankruptcy of many of their foundational principles.

The crisis of higher education sparked by the social movements of the 1960s had an intellectual as well as an institutional dimension; indeed, it highlighted the connection between those dimensions by revealing the ways in which privileged forms of knowledge were bound up with structures of power. This is one of the key insights of the cultural moment known as postmodernism, which brought about what one theorist described as a “crisis of legitimation” (Lyotard 26): once the most fundamental beliefs of Western culture are shown to be the product not of timeless truth but of particular social arrangements, they and the structures of authority that uphold them crumble, taking with them the possibility of *any* universal, objective truth.

Culture Wars

The somewhat grandiose term **culture wars** refers to fights that took place in humanities departments of American universities in the 1980s—fights that spilled over into the arenas of media and public policy—between a traditional idea of Culture and the forces of **postcolonialism**, feminism, and postmodernism that sought to undermine it. While the move was sometimes characterized as a campaign simply to replace the Western canon—the preserve of Dead White Males—with a new and eclectic selection of texts, from works by women of color to Hollywood films, what was actually at issue was not so much the works themselves, but the structures of authority that sanctioned some forms of culture while dismissing others.

One important challenge to those structures was a shift in emphasis from Culture to cultures—a rhetorical shift that expressed more substantial changes in focus. First, and most generally, this marked a move away from the humanities/literary critical definition of culture toward a more anthropological one. This entailed both an extension of the term from its traditional focus on works of art to embrace the practices of everyday life, and a recognition of the existence of multiple cultures, existing within and between societies. The idea of culture was thus transformed from something timeless and universal to a historically determined, and thus constantly changing, phenomenon with local and global dimensions. The myth of a unified *English* culture, which frequently lurked behind the “universal” label, began to waver in the face of the recognition of the many **sub cultures**—youth culture, for example, or gay culture—on whose exclusion it was based. At the same time, the invisible lines of race (white) and gender (male) that marked traditional definitions of culture—including the more inclusivist, working-class definitions proposed by Williams and Hoggart—began to emerge through the pointed critiques of women and **minorities**, who had been stuck somewhere on its margins.

The opening out of the idea of culture in response to the claims of its excluded others occurred in conjunction with the arrival in Britain and North America of successive waves of immigrants from the former colonies, including many who ended up working and studying in universities. Some, like the Jamaican-born Stuart Hall, who succeeded Richard Hoggart as director of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, helped to define new directions in cultural studies by, among other things, insisting on its global dimensions and on the necessary connectedness between intellectual work and politics.

Who won the culture wars, then? The persistence of undergraduate programs that still require English majors to take a course in Shakespeare suggests that the ideological magic of “Culture” has not entirely been exorcised. However, the enormous growth in cultural studies programs would seem to suggest that history is on the side of the culture critics. This might look like a victory for feminism and postcolonialism against conservatism—but, as should be clear by now, the relationship between culture and power is never that simple.

Culture and Economics—The Postindustrial Revolution

As in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the social and political upheavals that marked the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries were accompanied by economic and technological changes, which have made culture a very different thing than it was 100 or even 30 years ago (for a broad discussion of these changes, see Chapter 10). As with the Industrial Revolution, the weakening of old regulations, in conjunction with the decline in traditional structures of authority, created new freedoms. However, these also eroded structures that had served to nurture and not just to suppress the development of diverse forms of popular culture.

The extension and intensification of market forces granted greater powers to private interests, but weakened the imaginary and actual power of public institutions. The university, one of the key sites for the distribution of what Pierre Bourdieu calls *cultural capital*, is affected particularly strongly by these shifts, in terms of the way its resources are allocated, as well as the role it is seen to play in society. While that role was traditionally conceived as one of nurturing future citizens—a goal facilitated by ensuring students had a solid grounding in the humanities, English (or American) literature in particular—the idea of university is now more likely to conform to the much less romantic vision of a factory for the production of workers in the global knowledge economy. Students, according to this model, are seen not as junior members of an academic community to which they are bound by an **idealized** commitment to learning or becoming “cultured,” but as consumers—and, ultimately, products—to be bought up by the corporations that play an increasing role in funding, and thereby shaping, the universities’ basic operations.

According to the essentially commercial logic of this model of education, resources cannot be wasted on those departments or faculties that are concerned with abstract values such as citizenship or critical thought. These departments—English, for example, or philosophy—are forced to rationalize their budgets and to modify their course offerings to favor those that can be taught by a few faculty members to a large number of students from a variety of different disciplines. Here, then, is one institutional explanation for why courses in popular culture are quietly popping up alongside (and sometimes in place of) more traditional courses in subjects such as, say, medieval history: they are popular in the same commercial sense that *NCIS* is popular, which is to say they are profitable.

This poses a challenge for cultural studies scholars, whose aim, as we have suggested throughout this book, is not simply to affirm the value of commercial culture, nor—equally simply—to denounce it, but to map its place within a constellation of signifying practices that correspond to underlying relations of power. That constellation is constantly shifting, which means that we need to remain constantly alert to the social and political significance of *all* of our cultural roles, including the role of students and teachers of popular culture. Why—personally, institutionally—are we doing what we are doing? What other subjects *might* we be studying if we were not studying popular culture? What are the educational implications of the growing popularity of popular culture courses?

Why This? Why Now? Why Me? A Couple of Final Arguments for the Importance of Studying Popular Culture

To sum up the last few sections, there are lots of reasons why you are reading a textbook on popular culture instead of (or maybe in addition to) Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, or Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. First and foremost are the political and social changes that, over the course of the twentieth century, demanded a radical rethinking of the intellectual foundations of “culture” and its connection to other areas of life. These changes have shaped society in general and education in particular. On a more pragmatic level, schools, colleges, and universities have changed their curricula in response to economic pressures, so that what is considered valuable in educational terms is increasingly determined by what is profitable. Those are large, impersonal, and, in the latter case, cynical reasons for why popular culture is suddenly a popular thing to study.

We would also encourage you to think about this in more personal terms. One compelling reason to study popular culture is that it is everywhere. To borrow an expression from T.S. Eliot, if most academic study is about helping to make the strange familiar, studying popular culture is a process of making the familiar strange. This can be a pretty uncomfortable experience, since it involves taking what feels most natural and pleasurable and subjecting it to detached inquiry. Actually *studying* popular culture helps us to move beyond a range of typical reactions to it: (i) unconscious consumption (which is only a theoretical position, since most consumers have achieved some level of critical consciousness); (ii) contemptuous dismissal—“popular culture is trash, so I avoid it” (an equally mythical position, since it is virtually impossible to live entirely outside commercial culture); and (iii) cynical consumption (“I *know* this is garbage, but I like it anyway”—or, stranger, “I like this *because* I know it is garbage”). Most of us probably respond to culture in a way that is something like the third position. A variation on this position is the belief that, while other people are vulnerable to the messages of popular culture, *we* are smart enough to see through its manipulations.

While it might seem to make this position appear even more valid, studying popular culture usually leads to a different conclusion, revealing the culture industry to be both less and more powerful than we initially imagined. Cultural studies unmasks and to a certain extent disables the power of commercial culture by helping us recognize the narratives, genres, myths, and **discourses** that convey its values—values that tap into fundamental beliefs about ourselves, our relationships with others, and society at large.

Yet, as cultural studies also emphasizes, culture is not just about texts, about how the products of the commercial media are put together, and how certain meanings are produced, but also about how we consume those products, what we actually *do* with them. The title of this book, *Popular Culture: A User's Guide*, reflects our belief that not only is

it possible for all of us to learn to *use* popular culture more effectively, in the sense of actually shaping it in productive ways, but also that it is vital that we do so. As Stuart Hall puts it, “There is something *at stake* in Cultural Studies, in a way that I think, and hope, is not exactly true of many other very important intellectual and critical practices” (S. Hall “Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies” 278).

Many cultural studies practitioners go further, stressing a key connection between doing cultural studies and engaging in political activism—as distinct from other kinds of study, which stress mere “technocratic competence” (Freccero 5). The study of popular culture is necessarily political, in the sense of being concerned with the distribution of social and economic power in society. It is important to recognize, however—in spite of the prescriptivist tone of what we’ve just said about why you *should* want to do cultural studies—that each of us approaches the study of culture in different ways, and that students and teachers of popular culture are often situated quite differently in relation to the subject, based on factors such as age, class, experience, and temperament. For students, what often proves most illuminating (or, for some, simply irritating) about taking a course in cultural studies is its revelation of the connection between popular culture and power. For teachers, one of the insights that proves most strangely elusive—one that they often need to be reminded of by students—is that popular culture is about pleasure. Figuring out what happens at the intersection of those forces of power and pleasure is perhaps the principal value of studying popular culture.

As this is a particularly busy intersection, we find it helpful to access it through a few relatively straightforward paths or angles of approach. On the broadest level, these angles might be identified as *representation*, the process of making meaning from sign systems that encompass anything from words and images to physical structures (cars, buildings, cities) to fashion accessories; *production*, which encompasses the individual and corporate entities involved in the creation and distribution of cultural products, including the technologies through which they are produced and reproduced; and *consumption*, which involves the economic, technological, and physical processes by which different audiences derive meaning from cultural products.

Of course, these categories—the subjects of Chapters 3, 4, and 5, respectively—can’t help but bleed into one another. The texts and practices of culture are inseparable from the means of technological production or from what individual audiences do with them—nor can they be separated from what are conventionally regarded as noncultural realms of existence such as economics and politics. Lest popular culture begin to sound like everything (or nothing), let’s try to pin it down more firmly by returning to our original example of drinking coffee. An examination of this practice through the lenses of representation, production, and consumption can help us understand how popular culture operates, drawing us in as producers and consumers and working, literally, to reshape the world.

Coffee as Popular Culture

Coffee is a part of culture to the extent that we can ask “What does coffee *mean*?” Coffee is not, in other words, just “a liquid brown drug” (L. H. Cohen 10), but part of a complex set of social rituals. The significance of coffee is hugely determined by context: its meaning shifts depending on whether we are drinking it at home or in a café, from a mug or a Styrofoam cup. Its significance also varies depending on whether we are alone or with friends and in what other activities we are engaged: a social meeting, for example, or a late-night cram session—in which case it might really be coffee’s status as a “liquid brown drug” that we are seeking (see Figure 1.3).



Figure 1.3 What is in a cup of coffee? More than a “liquid brown drug,” coffee derives its meaning within interconnected networks of representation, consumption and production. Source: © Alexcrab/iStockphoto

But even then, when the physical properties of coffee are arguably more important than its symbolic properties, it is *still* more than just a drug. After all, if it were just a stimulant we were after, there are obviously other, more powerful options out there. The fact that most of us are probably inclined to reach for coffee rather than, say, amphetamines speaks to more than the question of availability or a fear of being arrested for possession. In fact, these questions (why is caffeine legal while amphetamines are controlled and pot is illegal?) are themselves tied up in the culture of coffee—what it means in a broader social context. To answer them, along with the broader question of how coffee comes to be part of culture, we need to look at coffee in the context of representation, production, and consumption.

The Representation of Coffee

To say that coffee “signifies”—that it refers to something other than its literal, physical substance—is not to say that it has some kind of intrinsic or inherent meaning. Rather, coffee acquires different, specific meanings as it is incorporated within different economic and social practices. It therefore makes sense to ask not just *what* does coffee mean, but also *how* does it acquire meaning, and under what circumstances?

To talk about the meaning of coffee is to talk about how it operates in systems of **representation**, which translate a world of objects into one of sense, significance, and values. So what kind of significance or value is attached to coffee?

Suggested Activity 1.3

Take a few minutes and write down some of the meanings attached to coffee in your life. What kinds of associations does it have and how are they marked by their differences from and similarities to those of other things you ingest (water, milk, beer, etc.)? How do these associations change depending on the context—where, when, with whom, in what circumstances you’re drinking coffee? (Or *not* drinking it; strangely, this exercise may be easier if you’re *not* a coffee drinker: it’s easier to critically analyze a cultural practice if you’re detached from it.)

The Mythology of Drugs

We discuss the significance of **mythology** in more detail in Chapter 3. A key aspect to think about for now is the ways in which cultural mythologies tap into the underlying social structures of a culture, including its relations of power. To understand how this works, we can think for a moment about the cultural or *mythological* difference between coffee and some of the other drugs we cited above. Coffee, alcohol, and marijuana are all drugs (i.e., they all have mind- or body-altering properties), but they *signify* differently. The most obvious significance concerns their legality: as legal substances, coffee and alcohol fall fairly comfortably within the realm of things our culture accepts and condones as part of social life. Marijuana, which remains illegal in many jurisdictions, currently does not. As cannabis activists along with many health professionals point out, this different status is not justifiable on the basis of each drug's physical properties: marijuana is not, in other words, inherently more harmful than beer; rather, its status is determined within broader political and social structures (see Figure 1.4).

Of course, part of the mythology associated with different drugs *is* influenced by their physiological properties: the fact that caffeine is a stimulant—conductive, at least in theory, to productivity—while alcohol and marijuana are more conducive to relaxation explains in part why coffee is tolerated in most workplaces while booze and pot (even the names connote sin!) are not. While the different physiological states induced by these different drugs, and even their social effects, might be indisputable, what is less easily explained is why our society places a higher value on productivity and stimulation than on relaxation. Thinking about this question puts us in the realm not of nutrition or health, but of culture and representation.

The Production of Coffee

Clearly, the mythologies surrounding coffee, alcohol, and marijuana—mythologies that influence, as they are influenced by, their legal status—do not exist in a vacuum. Rather, they are generated out of real, material processes: social, political, and economic. This becomes clear when we think about the differences in how coffee operates symbolically (i.e., what it represents) in the cultures of the North, where coffee is consumed in such large volumes, in comparison to the cultures of the South, where it is produced.

In the Global North, along with Australia, New Zealand, and a growing number of other countries, coffee is entangled in the lifestyle of postindustrial society: it is fuel, pleasure, instant gratification, relaxation. In many parts of the Global South, coffee is an



Figure 1.4 When researchers in the United States experimented with giving drugs to spiders, they found that caffeine had a more severe effect than marijuana, resulting in much more sparse, haphazard webs. Source: Noever, R., J. Cronise, and R. A. Relwani. "Using spider-web patterns to determine toxicity." *NASA Tech Briefs* 19.4 (1995): 82. Published in *New Scientist* magazine, April 29, 1995

equally integral part of life, associated not (or not only) with pleasure, but more substantially with labor and the basic conditions of life. Those social rituals surrounding coffee that *do* exist in the South are shaped by an awareness of its economic as well as its cultural significance. For example, among some coffee-growing cultures in Tanzania, coffee has an almost religious significance associated with the *amagdala*, or “life force,” of the coffee grower, such that the death of a coffee tree was traditionally taken as an omen of its owner’s death (Hyden, qtd. in Weiss 96).

The History of Coffee in Western Culture

In the Global North, by contrast, coffee’s role in the global economy is something that most of us, unless we’re involved in the stock market or even more directly in coffee sales, are only dimly aware of. Yet its popular cultural significance is profoundly shaped by the history of its production, in conjunction with European colonialism in the seventeenth century as well as with more contemporary processes of **globalization** (see Chapter 9). A brief discussion of this history helps to illuminate some of the ways in which coffee signifies today.

The story of coffee’s arrival in the West from the Middle East in the seventeenth century is part of the history of European colonialism. The importation of coffee was part of the much bigger process by which European nations sought to fuel their economies by finding new resources to develop, satisfying and promoting the desires of European consumers and creating new markets for European manufactured goods. Coffee entered European popular culture via the eighteenth-century institution of the coffeehouse, a new meeting place described by one historian as “*the* site for the public life of the eighteenth-century middle class, a place where the bourgeoisie developed new forms of commerce and culture” (Schivelbusch 59). Patronized mostly by commercial agents such as merchants and insurance brokers, coffeehouses were places for both socialization and the transaction of business. Both functions came together in the establishment of a connection between coffeehouses and newspapers. Coffeehouses such as the famous Lloyd’s of London (now more familiar as the financial institution it eventually became), established at the end of the seventeenth century, often became centers of journalism, thus linking cornerstones of eighteenth-century public life—industry and print capitalism.

Coffeehouses became sites for the development of capitalist society in more direct ways, as Brad Weiss points out, through the drinking of coffee itself. As both a consumer good and a drink that promoted sobriety, coffee could be enlisted in the encouragement of good middle-class values—values such as “clear-headed rationality, alertness and restraint”—that were not associated with the “rude” pleasures of ale. In short, coffee, “through the short, sudden burst of energy and concentration it supplies is the original therapy for the micro-management of bourgeois personality” (Weiss 101). Coffee was thus enlisted in the reconstruction of the working day associated with the Industrial Revolution (see Chapter 2), as “coffee breaks” became a means of both marking and *making* time that is now routine in labor practices. Coffee fulfills nicely the goal of defining a break from work that is taken in order to make work more effective—a direct conversion of leisure into productivity.

Coffee and Colonialism

If it is no exaggeration to say that coffee contributed to the growth of European and North American economies over the past 200 years, it can also be connected to the *underdevelopment* of many Southern nations. While colonialism has now formally ended

(in most places, in the middle of the twentieth century), trade regulations preferential to the economies of dominant nations force developing countries to adopt agricultural practices that consign them to continued poverty. Coffee is a good example of a cash crop whose growth is encouraged in places like Central America to satisfy North American consumers. Coffee has replaced the traditional crops that once allowed the region to feed its own people, forcing them instead to import food produced and/or processed elsewhere and, in many cases, causing severe environmental degradation. While growing coffee once offered a relatively decent living to many farmers, its falling price on the world market due to overproduction means that farmers in places like Haiti are struggling to survive.

The effects of fluctuating coffee prices, so critical for producers, are barely felt at the retail end. A 2004 report states:

For every pound of coffee that sells in the U.S. for between US\$2.69–8.49 (depending on quality) a Guatemalan farmer receives less than 35 cents and the coffee picker less than 14 cents. Put another way, an entire crop of Guatemalan coffee earned one producer US\$8,500 which sold (notionally) for three quarters of a million dollars retail in the U.S. (Simons 85–86)

The principal reason for the growing discrepancy between the wealth of primary producers and retailers is the growing concentration of power in the coffee industry, which is now dominated by just four companies—Nestlé, Kraft (owned by tobacco company Philip Morris, which has been rechristened Altria Group), Sara Lee, and Procter & Gamble—which are able to exercise disproportionate control over the wages received by growers and the prices paid by consumers.

These economic circumstances, which have a big impact on the day-to-day existence of coffee farmers, have until recently been remote from the experience, or at least the consciousness, of the average North American coffee drinker. While we might feel a momentary twinge as we fork over the price of a sandwich or a beer for a Styrofoam cup full of burnt beans and water, our unease is quickly forgotten as we sink into the comfy chairs of our favorite coffee bar, dimly but pleasantly aware of the hum of activity around us as we enjoy moments—or hours—of leisure away from the demands of work, home, or school. That enjoyment might be diminished by a too acute awareness of the economic context in which we are drinking our coffee: part of the magic of the experience of consumption—a magic that is invoked, with variations, whether we are trying on a new dress, drinking a steaming latte, or driving a new car—is its ability to bury the crude facts of the economic transaction we have engaged in beneath the mythology surrounding the item we have just bought. The increasing availability of fair-trade and shade-grown coffees might be seen as a hopeful counter to a trend of unconscious consumption; by inviting us to equate “good” coffee drinking with political activism, these labels could also be seen to be working a different variety of magic.

The Consumption of Coffee

We use the word “magic” deliberately to describe the experience of consumption. Karl Marx (1818–83) employed the term **commodity fetishism** to describe what happens under a capitalist system in which material objects are bought and sold: commodities come to stand in for relationships between people as symbols of meaning and value, while people and social relationships themselves become objectified (they are turned

symbolically into objects). In premodern culture, a “fetish” is an object that is believed to have magical powers or that excites erotic feeling. Commodity fetishism, then, is literally the attribution of a magical or sexual power to a commodity, assigning it a value that has no logical connection either to the human labor that produced it or to the usefulness of the object itself, but is derived from the abstract system of exchange that determines that such-and-such an object is worth so many dollars. Commodities don’t acquire these “magical” properties by accident, of course; rather, the properties are generated by sophisticated marketing campaigns that tap into prevailing social mythologies. In fact, in a commerce-driven society, the language of marketing increasingly works to *shape* mythologies, thereby defining and creating new values and desires as much as it tries to appeal to already existing ones.

We can get a sense of how this process works by looking very briefly at the mythologies evoked by two different coffee chains that inspire different coffee cultures—the proudly cosmopolitan Starbucks and staunchly Canadian Tim Hortons—and then comparing them with the “third-wave” coffee culture that predominates in Australia and New Zealand. Each works through systems of *representation* that conceal relations of economic *production* in order to enhance the consumer experience. The significant differences between the “magic” of Starbucks and that of Tim Hortons reflect a contemporary consumer culture that differs from earlier forms of mass culture in the way it draws on, and indeed seeks to promote, individualized **identities** (see Chapters 6 and 7) defined largely by lifestyle. The concept of lifestyle, discussed in more detail in Chapter 4, is most easily associated with Starbucks, which indeed deserves some credit for promoting it. The secret of lifestyle marketing lies in the way the product falls into the background of a mythology, one centered on the consumer’s attitudes and practices and the identities they imply. While the attitudes or practices may have ethical or **aesthetic** overtones—for example, concern about the environment, a love of art—the overriding premise is one of individualism, expressed through consumer choice.

Starbucks

For a company like Starbucks, the mythological value of individualism is paramount, and it is represented not just through the diversity of blends available, but also through the careful structuring of the whole consumer experience. While it is difficult to generalize across outlets, some of the signal features of Starbucks outlets are dim, natural-looking (as opposed to fluorescent) lighting; movable furniture, often mismatched but clearly designed with an eye not just to comfort or utility but also to style; serve-yourself cream, milk, sugar, and so on; and an aura of creativity, whether signaled by the presence of large murals featuring art or poetry or by individual paintings available for sale. The presence of other sale or display items—designer mugs, dishes, even books or CDs—emphasizes that the Starbucks experience is not about just having a cup of coffee but is an act of self-expression, entry into a privileged and sophisticated world.

Launched in Seattle in 1971, Starbucks is now a truly global corporation—global in terms of its expansion throughout Western Europe and Asia Pacific, but also in terms of the image it projects of the urbane, cosmopolitan consumer. Located mostly in large cities, in areas patronized mainly by middle- and upper-class, educated consumers (e.g., Starbucks outlets are often near, if not affiliated with, university campuses), it aligns itself with the values of style, mobility, and progressive thinking. These values emerge all the more strikingly when we compare Starbucks with Tim Hortons, a chain started in Hamilton, Ontario, in 1964 and named after the late hockey player who founded it.

Tim Hortons

If the “magic” of Starbucks is associated with globalization and progress, Canada’s ubiquitous coffee chain, Tim Hortons, is strongly nationalist in flavor even though it was bought by the US chain Wendy’s in 1995 and spun off to shareholders in 2006. This mythology is intensified by a long association between Tim Hortons and the Canadian Armed Forces (see Figure 1.5), an association emphasized in marketing campaigns such as the 1999 television ad featuring Canadian soldiers on a ship somewhere in the Persian Gulf, gratefully receiving a massive shipment of Tim Hortons coffee. In contrast to the foreign, slightly scary location of the Middle East (signaled in the ad by jerky camera footage of a chaotic market scene, accompanied by vaguely Arabian-sounding music), Tim Hortons is a piece of home, something that presumably, like the Canadian military, “you can always count on.” The soldiers in the ad are almost all men, and the servers who appear briefly to pay tribute to “our boys” overseas are all women, dressed in the familiar brown of the Tim Hortons uniform.

The world represented in the Tim Hortons ad is strikingly different from the ambience of Starbucks, evoking traditional values of the nation defended by a strong military, traditional gender roles, and clear boundaries between the familiar and comfortable and the foreign. This atmosphere is replicated in Tim Hortons restaurants, in which the comfortably padded but immovable benches, functional (and easy to clean) Formica tables, and fluorescent lighting convey an atmosphere of order and uniformity. The institutional flavor of the décor is softened somewhat by the service dynamic, in which the largely female staff deliver your coffee just the way you want it—within fairly limited parameters.



Figure 1.5 The image of Tim Hortons as an emblem of Canada persists in media coverage of the coffee’s arrival on a military base in Kandahar, Afghanistan, in July 2006, in response to intense lobbying by the troops. Source: © All rights reserved. AR2007-A050-0016 reproduced with the permission of DND/CAF 2016

Though the chain has expanded its selection of both food and beverages in recent years, the emphasis here is not on choice, and certainly not on style, so much as on comfort, embodied in the familiar combination of coffee and doughnuts. In fact, the mythology of Tim Hortons is arguably defined in obvious, even self-conscious opposition to the snazzy ambience of Starbucks, and revels in its preservation of old-fashioned, working-class family values against the tide of globalization, speed, and the blurring of traditional identities.

Of course, *both* of these mythologies are constructions—imaginary replications of the world rather than accurate reflections of it. Nevertheless, they *work*, through the dynamics of consumption—a dynamic increasingly central to the formation of popular culture—not just to sell coffee or doughnuts, but also to create compelling pictures of everyday life and of human relationships that are increasingly indistinguishable from “the real thing.” What is interesting about our comparison of Tim Hortons and Starbucks is not so much their differences as the similarities that are concealed beneath those differences: both are large **multinational** corporations that capitalize on cheap labor and resource costs in the South to generate significant profits in the North; both derive the bulk of their profits by selling coffee and sugary baked goods—products that might not do a lot for anyone’s health, but are staples in a traditional North American diet; and both are major parts of the popular cultural landscape.

Yet for all its symbolic identification with globalization (see Chapter 9 for further discussion), the global reaction to Starbucks in particular has been mixed. In 2008, the company closed 61 of the 84 outlets it had recently opened across Australia, officially citing the global economic slowdown as the reason. But other commentators suggested that Starbucks just didn’t mesh with Australia’s own coffee culture, which rejected “gimmicky” drinks like caramel lattes in favor of good strong coffee (Raslan, qtd. in Edwards and Sainsbury). Though chains like Bean Bar and Gloria Jeans are successful in Australia, the mythology of coffee there is less tied to a specific company than it is to a style of drink—the flat white—which, originating in Australia and New Zealand, has begun to circulate globally, and to acquire symbolic significance as a marker of a sophisticated appreciation for pure coffee, uncorrupted by branding or the aggressive addition of syrup and whipped cream (Symons).

The flat white is one hallmark of an approach to coffee that has come to be identified as the “third-wave” (Skeie; Cho), a style of production, preparation, and consumption defined very explicitly against a post–Second World War “first-wave” of instant, freeze-dried coffee, and a “second-wave,” exemplified by Starbucks and the rise of the espresso machine. In the second-wave, according to this narrative, the focus is consistency, achieved by the mastery of a now standard technique of coffee making enabled by state-of-the-art machines. Defenders of the third-wave, many of them baristas, challenge what they see as the second-wave emphasis on automation, calling instead for a much closer attention to the place of origin and vintage of the bean—much like wine! The belief at the heart of the third-wave is that while in the old days “coffee was ‘consumed’ rather than ‘enjoyed,’” the chief achievement of the third-wave is “letting the coffee speak for itself.” In line with contemporary food trends emphasizing raw food and artisanal preparation techniques, this philosophy *appears* to dispense with mythology in favor of an absolutely authentic experience. Rather than seeking a uniform cup of coffee, its proponents suggest, consumers should be educated to appreciate the unique flavor produced by different beans, crafted by a dedicated barista. That respect for difference extends, in the third-wave, to a suspicion of any claims of an authorized method or system, and a strong respect for individual opinion—except maybe a preference for Starbucks or (perish the thought!) instant coffee.

Here is where things get tricky, though. Mythology operates most successfully when its mythological qualities—historically produced values and beliefs—are least visible. It is relatively easy to unpack the mythologies that circulate in ads, especially when, as in the example of Tim Hortons, the values being promoted are highly conventional (e.g., traditional gender roles). It is much harder to challenge the aura of naturalness that surrounds a form of consumption that grounds itself in an opposition to corporate culture and appeals to a standard of taste defined by purity and simplicity. We discuss the politics of taste in further detail in Chapter 6. For now, it is enough to note that all of our practices of production and consumption inevitably negotiate, in some combination of complacency and awareness, acceptance and resistance, the uneven terms of capitalist society. A key ingredient in third-wave coffee culture seems to be the kind of elitist disdain for standardization that characterized earlier waves of mass culture critique. Thinking in more structural terms, participation in the third-wave not only requires money (artisanal roasts cost quite a bit more than coffee purchased from a thermos at the gas station—often even more than Starbucks!), the excellent taste it signifies also demands an aesthetic training that is not universally accessible.

And It All Boils Down To...What Is in a Cup of Coffee?

Based on this quick (drive-through?) analysis of coffee, we might come up with a fairly depressing reading of popular culture. Dominated by practices of consumption, much of our experience of popular culture is tangled up in relations of economic exploitation—relations that are concealed by the mythologies and ideologies of capitalism, to which we are helpless, caffeine-addicted victims. Of course, this is a partial picture, and one that is contradicted by the practice of coffee drinking itself.

While there is no escaping the consumerist aspect of coffee drinking, this practice—more, perhaps, than many other aspects of commercial culture—highlights the possibilities for different kinds of consumption. For example, at a time when people are increasingly diverted by home entertainment, cafés can, at least in theory, serve as public spaces for the promotion of community, much as they did in the eighteenth century. It is easy to exaggerate this function: with its comfy chairs, free newspapers, and generally artsy aura, the image of the contemporary coffeehouse is as much a product of slick marketing as genuine community. However, it is possible to recall some of the positive aspects of public culture in private space, not by “seeing through” the lifestyle concept of places like Starbucks, but by taking it at its word. In other words, it is possible to sit in a Starbucks reading for hours with an empty cup in front of you, and the culture of the café (a culture Starbucks itself has actively nurtured) is such that no one’s likely to ask you to leave. “Going for a coffee” need not mean actually going for a coffee—a concept that places like Starbucks have successfully promoted, sometimes at the cost of their own profits.

Coffee’s evolution into a highly charged commodity brings it within the realm of popular discourse, thus creating new channels of meaning and knowledge and new forms of “anticonsumerist” consumerism. The success in recent years of the Fair Trade Federation and other cooperative ventures that seek to preserve the natural environment while ensuring that coffee producers receive a fair price for their products has been motivated by activists in conjunction with consumers themselves. The overwhelming commercial power of corporations such as Starbucks, while contributing to some extent to the growing gaps in wealth that characterize the coffee industry, has also shed a strong and sometimes harsh light on the industry, forcing it to change in productive ways. Coffee’s third-wave reflects some of these significant critiques.

Mythology, then, works not just to contain, but also to spark and activate new forms of resistance, not all of which are constrained by the harness of corporate culture. Popular culture isn't just coffee purists sipping their flat whites, poets and students staring at their laptops while their lattes grow cold; it's also the bricks through the window at Starbucks and Niketown, the creators of ads raising consumer awareness about the "real" price of coffee, and the customers who happily imbibe the "lifestyle" of the café, sitting around in animated conversation for hours without actually buying anything. The relationship between these different faces of popular culture is part of what this book will examine.

Our study of popular culture occurs at a historical moment in which there is no human activity that is free from capitalism, commodification, and the profit motive. No space in people's everyday life remains outside these economic processes. This is most apparent in the case of culture and communication, which have become totally commercialized. By the same token, culture and communication have come to dominate the economy, with the result that, as Fredric Jameson observes, "No society has ever been saturated with signs and messages like this one" (Grossberg *et al.* 53).

Many contemporary cultural critics see this shift as a wholly depressing situation, representing the end of collective culture and its replacement with a society of atomized individuals who are consumed by the drive toward self-gratification at the same time as they are entirely colonized by consumerist ideology. These critics despair over what they see as the erosion of people's ability to think critically, to produce and create things for themselves in a context where everything is supplied for them, subject to their ability to pay for it. A less bleak view, and one that we share, is that while commercial culture's grand promise to provide fulfillment and liberate individual and social potential is essentially an empty one, there are, within its intricate networks of power, all kinds of opportunities for creativity and even resistance. Through a series of concrete examples, the remainder of this book develops an idea of popular culture as a process defined by the often contradictory but sometimes collaborative interests of private and public interest, of commerce and creativity, of capitalism and community. Its ultimate goal is to provide tools that will help you to think about your own place in this compelling and sometimes invisible matrix of possibilities.

Suggestions for Further Reading

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