

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

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“Popular culture” as a label and as a distinct field of study has a revealing history and some significant permutations. Throughout the history of the field there have been some important failures to connect – missed opportunities to identify extensive areas of overlap between various existing or emerging disciplines. The marginalized position of some of these disciplines within the academy should have created alliances between the disciplines, but here again there has been too much disconnection, which has done a disservice not only to the academics who study popular culture in its numerous manifestations but also to students and to the creators and audiences of popular culture.

In the present book I aim to define “popular culture” inductively and thereby to alleviate some of the aforementioned disconnection. My conception of popular culture aligns closely with the structure and intellectual orientation of the Popular Culture Association (PCA), with which I have been affiliated since the late 1970s. Many of the authors of the chapters that follow are also longtime members of PCA. But while the book as a whole is very much in the tradition of works associated with PCA, it also includes some of what I think has been significantly missing from PCA. Thus the book represents traditional methods and concerns but also tackles political issues and examines the culture industries, the intellectual roots of popular culture study, and the place of popular culture studies in the academy.

The Popular Culture Association was founded in 1971 and the *Journal of Popular Culture* in 1967. Numerous people were involved in the establishment of these institutions, but the most important people turned out to be Ray Browne (1922–2009) and Pat Browne (1932–2013). They were most important because of their longevity, their organizational abilities and charisma, and the fact that they had a receptive

home base at Bowling Green State University. Because they were also two people with a mostly singular vision they were enormously productive.

Popular culture studies, as operationalized by the Brownes at Bowling Green, eventually grew to include a second national association and journal (the American Culture Association and the *Journal of American Culture*); a number of regional U.S. popular culture associations (currently seven), all with annual conferences and some with journals; a biannual international conference; and affiliated international popular culture associations (currently three). On top of this there were other affiliated journals, including *Popular Music and Society* (which I currently edit with Thomas Kitts), the *Journal of Popular Film & Television*, and *Clues* (a detective-fiction journal). Some of the journals were published by the Bowling Green State University Popular Press, which also published a book series. (Upon Pat Browne's retirement the Press became an imprint of the University of Wisconsin Press.) During the Brownes' tenure at Bowling Green the University established a Department of Popular Culture, degrees in popular culture and American culture studies, a Center for the Study of Popular Culture, and major library and archival collections of popular culture materials. Bowling Green has educated several generations of popular culture scholars (including a number of contributors to the current volume) who have spread the study of popular culture – and especially the Bowling Green approach to the subject – to universities across the United States.

What is the “Bowling Green approach” and what are its strengths and weaknesses? The approach is primarily a mixture of literary study, American studies, and folklore, reflecting Ray Browne's academic training and interests. In his more messianic moments, Browne sometimes proclaimed a popular culture “revolution” or “explosion” or “movement,” and this referred mainly to the subject matter being studied – vernacular culture, the everyday, the “mass,” the academically disreputable. If it was revolutionary to study these subjects at all, the ultimate heresy of the Bowling Green approach is to treat the subjects with the respect normally reserved for canonical texts in the fine arts. Thus two very important, if implicit, tenets of the Popular Culture Association: popular culture is good; and the study of popular culture is good. That is not to say that every popular culture text is a good work from an aesthetic or ethical standpoint. Nevertheless even a “bad” work is worth studying for what it may reveal about its context. It is important to understand why we think one popular culture text is good and another is bad. It is important to study how and why people create and use popular culture texts, regardless of the value judgments critics make about the texts.

To the Brownes these principles were self-evident and part of a deep-seated democratic ideology. Popular culture is the culture of the people. If all people are created equal, the culture of all people is equally worthy of respect and therefore study. Ray Browne's democratic vision extended to a general openness and accessibility in the Popular Culture Association. “The more the merrier,” he said of attendance at PCA conferences. Reacting to an Australian proposal for a conference dedicated to the “serious study of popular culture,” Browne objected to the word “serious.” I think he recoiled not from seriousness itself but from (1) the ostentatious and unnecessary

use of the label and (2) the probable meaning of seriousness as the excessive invocation and application of academic theory and methods.

Popular culture studies originated in large part as an academic offshoot of American studies, the original humanistic interdisciplinary (see Mertz and Marsden). Popular culture studies is even more interdisciplinary. The range of subject matter is enormous. Contributors to popular culture conferences and journals come from virtually all humanities disciplines, most social sciences, and many professional fields. In order to talk to each other these people must eschew, as much as possible, the specialized jargon of their own disciplines (mostly theory and methods). This is another fulfillment of academic democracy. Studies of popular culture should be written to be understandable across disciplines and to the educated public. Writing to be widely understood means devoting more attention to writing. It does not mean abandoning scholarly rigor or seriousness or ambition. Nor does it mean elimination of theory or method, if that is even possible. Rather, and perhaps the crucial test, the proper study of popular culture involves the use of theory and method to illuminate texts. Doing things the other way around – using texts to illuminate theory or method – makes popular culture, the ostensible object of study, subservient to academic tools (and possibly careerist pretensions). This is anathema in the PCA view of things (see Ray Browne's article "The Theory-Methodology Complex").

In another of Browne's dicta, the study of popular culture is interdisciplinary, international, and timeless. (Because of space limitations the current book is by necessity USA-centric and somewhat presentist, although many chapters are historical and some touch on international topics.) The implications of interdisciplinarity, discussed above, include a bias toward the humanities. Browne, in fact, frequently referred to popular culture studies as "the new humanities." A more recent gloss by communication scholar Toby Miller says essentially the same thing, "blowing up" the humanities to a rough equivalence with popular culture studies. This interdisciplinarity includes the qualitative social-scientific study of popular culture – that is, an anthropological or ethnographic or folkloristic study focused mainly on people rather than on texts per se. Ray Browne was both a literary scholar and a folklorist. In my decades-long education in the ways of PCA I have come to appreciate the importance of its folkloristic component, which I overlooked at first. In British cultural studies, one of the fields that has remained largely disconnected from the PCA, ethnography of audiences, artists, and other cultural workers plays a larger role than does folklore in popular culture studies. Still, this ethnographic focus lends an empirical though qualitative element to the study of culture. British cultural studies has a more theoretical and often Marxist orientation that the PCA has usually not pursued. Quantitative social science, especially in its behaviorist, positivist, operationist extremes, has been mostly absent from both popular culture studies and British cultural studies, and in my view this is a welcome absence. One thing I do hope to achieve in this book, however, is a recognition of the importance of politics and industries in the creation of popular culture. Thus there are chapters on political economy, globalization, the media industries, technological determinism, mass culture, the "culture wars," and culture jamming, among other topics that

may be surprising to PCA stalwarts. They are here because I believe these subjects are vital to the study of popular culture, notwithstanding leftist debates about the relative importance of cultural studies vs. political economy (see Budd and Steinman; Fiske).

By including this material I hope to redress another major and multifaceted disconnection that I believe has plagued popular culture studies. It was not coincidental that the PCA and its journal began in the 1960s and early 1970s. That period was a heyday of student protest, the underground press, New Left politics, various liberation movements, and upheavals in the arts and media. As a college student at the time I studied theater but eventually got my degree in “radio-TV,” which was offered in a College of Communications. On the side I dabbled in rock music, creative writing, photography, and multimedia, largely as a practitioner. When I got my M.A. in 1976 it was in “speech communication” and included a course in the “rhetoric of protest.” As I gradually became a professional academic in the succeeding years I discovered that I fit in quite well with PCA but felt out of place in my “home discipline” of communication (which, during my professional life, has also been known as speech, communications, speech communication, and communication studies). Communication is itself an interdisciplinary field encompassing journalism, rhetoric, media studies, film, advertising, public relations, human relations, group dynamics, communication theory, performance studies, debate, and sometimes theater and speech sciences. Communication is a mixture of humanities, social science (both qualitative and quantitative), art, and professional study. The sprawl of this interdisciplinary is one of its attractions but causes serious problems for professors of communication (see Bochner and Eisenberg). One of my scholarly interests is music video, and I used to joke that I studied the least respected art form (music video) in the least respected subfield (television) of the least respected general area (media studies) of the least respected department (communication) in the most poorly treated part of the university (humanities). The situation has improved since the 1960s generation has risen through the ranks at universities, but communication as a discipline still does not know what to do about popular culture, even following the creation of some relevant new communication journals (*Critical Studies in Media Communication*, *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, *Popular Communication*). Bochner and Eisenberg’s excellent book chapter on some of the problems facing communication as a discipline says not a word about film, much less popular culture – as if these fields were not even a small part of the communication discipline as recently as 1985 when the chapter was published.

Popular culture, for its part, has been much more eclectic and welcoming, but still the prevailing force in the interdisciplinary has been English professors. Popular literature has been a dominant focus, with an attendant emphasis on popular genres and authors. The PCA has of course been open to the study of film and media, but generally as narrative, literary, adapted, and genre texts rather than as production texts or industrial products. Critique of the cultural industries has been in short supply. While I stand by my assertion that popular culture is good, many individual popular cultural texts deserve harsh evaluation. Organizations that create those texts also

deserve scrutiny and criticism. Popular culture studies should not be a knee-jerk reaction to 1950s-style elitist blanket condemnations of “mass culture.” Popular culture studies should recognize excellence in popular texts and especially should respect the cultural choices and practices of the people. However, respect for people and their culture also entails a willingness to identify inferior works; to accuse popular artists of aesthetic or ethical lapses; and to critique elitist and antidemocratic entities, structures, and practices in the cultural industries. Some model critical studies in this regard include Mark Crispin Miller’s scathing critiques of TV commercials (“Getting”) and game shows (“Family”); David Marc’s appreciation of the pioneering television scholarship of Erik Barnouw, Marshall McLuhan, and Gilbert Seldes; Ian MacDonald’s respectful but clear-eyed analysis of the Beatles’ oeuvre; George Lipsitz’s evocative history of ethnic sitcoms in early U.S. television; Barbara Bradby’s brilliant analysis of Madonna’s “Material Girl” (song, record, and video); Marsha Kinder’s perceptive explication of “phallic film,” the “boob tube,” and music video; and such ethnographic works as Matt Roth’s devastating journey through Amway, Todd Gitlin’s comprehensive account of the 1970s and 1980s U.S. television industry, and Ray Murray’s recent investigation of paparazzi.

Part of my project in this book, then, is to mark the study of popular culture as a fulfillment of the 1960s. What I mean when I refer to the 1960s is not only an opening of the college (and high school) curriculum and of scholarly discourse. I also celebrate the radicalization of Western popular culture itself in the 1960s. Further, I hope to create a larger space, especially in the last section of the book (“Politics of Culture”) for industrial and political analyses of popular culture in the tradition of Dallas Smythe, Harry Skornia, Nicholas Johnson, Ben Bagdikian, Michael Shamberg, and Chapple and Garofalo, all of whom I think I am justified in claiming as “1960s people.”

I also want to cite popular culture studies as one of the intellectual enterprises on the correct side of the 1990s “culture wars.” This is practically the same thing as saying that popular culture studies is the fulfillment of the 1960s, but I want to make a separate point about the 1990s, when conservatives launched an attack on universities and on popular culture studies in particular. Part of the attack, although mean-spirited, had some justification in that it exposed the same excesses of academic theory that Ray Browne resisted. In this sense I agree with Russell Jacoby’s lament about the disappearance of leftist public intellectuals. Conservatives took advantage of the follies of the so-called tenured radicals (see Kimball) to promote a reactionary canon in the humanities and to attack media studies (especially) along with popular culture studies more broadly (see Burns, “Popular”; Burns, “Television”; Burns et al.). The chapters in this book are fairly “traditional” in their writing style, their treatment of subject matter, and their rigor and seriousness as humanities scholarship. That is as it should be, but I hope readers will appreciate that popular culture studies as a field, the PCA as an organization, and many chapters’ authors as individuals have battled against hostile forces, from the 1960s to the 1990s and beyond, to gain a position in academe secure enough to make the present volume possible.

In closing I would like to take this opportunity to thank the book’s contributors for their patience. I thank my colleagues at Wiley-Blackwell for their splendid

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