Chapter 1

What Is Popular Culture and Why Study It?

Take a moment or two to jot down a favorite (1) movie, (2) TV program, (3) song, (4) cartoon, (5) comic strip, and (6) advertisement. Beside each selection, identify in a sentence or two why it is a favorite of yours. The reasons you offer actually demonstrate the influential role that each one plays in how you interpret the world around you.

Research has shown that these and other forms of entertainment can be highly influential in both reflecting and shaping how people believe and behave. If you are reading this book, I suspect this statement does not surprise you. What you may not know, however, is *how* these movies, TV programs, songs, cartoons, comic strips, and advertisements actually do so. The purpose of this book, then, is to equip you with tools to analyze the underlying messages offered in them about how we "ought to" and "ought not to" believe and behave. By the time you finish this book, you will be a more critical consumer of the messages being sent through popular culture. Ultimately, you will be able to make educated choices about whether to embrace such messages as being valid in your own life.

Developing your ability to make educated choices is particularly important when it comes to entertainment media (e.g., movies, TV programs, songs, cartoons, comic strips). Why? Because influential messages couched in entertainment media can be used ethically or unethically. Ethics refers to principles about what is right and wrong, moral and immoral, fair and unfair (Johannesen, 1990; Nilsen, 1974; Wallace, 1955). Unlike legal choices that are governed by rules to which we *must* abide, ethical choices

are guided by our values, conscience, and sense of fairness. As such, producers of entertainment media may operate by ethical standards that differ from yours or mine. Moreover, they might at times compromise ethical standards in the quest for higher profits. Developing your ability to discern those underlying ethics-based messages couched in entertainment media affords you the ability to choose whether to be influenced by them, rather than to be an unintentional victim of their persuasion.

This chapter lays the groundwork for studying popular culture as communication by, first, defining *popular culture* and *mediated popular culture texts* as they relate to other definitions of culture and texts. Second, the chapter provides a clear rationale for studying popular culture as communication. Third, the chapter presents a systematic approach for examining underlying messages embedded in popular culture texts using an extended example. By the time you finish the chapter, I hope you will be eager to expand your understanding and ability to examine the many kinds of popular culture texts that pervade daily life.

WHAT IS POPULAR CULTURE?

To fully understand what popular culture *is,* it is particularly helpful to begin by explaining what it is *not.* Let's begin with the concept of *culture* and then move on to the concept of *popular culture.*

Sometimes the word *culture* is defined within an *elitist* context. That is, one definition of the concept of *cultured* refers to the means by which to improve one's station in life. I must admit I encouraged my children to play in the school orchestra because I believed it was a means of self-improvement for them because musical ability has been positively correlated with intellectual capacity and leadership potential. *Culture* is also often defined within a *diversity* context (e.g., racial, ethnic, religious, and other demographic associations). For example, Muslim, Jewish, and Christian religions could denote different *cultures*. Although these demographic characteristics often play a role in determining target audiences of various movies, songs, advertisements, and such, they are insufficient in defining popular culture.

APPLYING WHAT YOU'VE LEARNED . . .

Have you ever gone to an event such as a symphony, a play, or a sophisticated dinner, reception, or social event as a means by which to become more cultured? If so, was it your idea or someone else's? What do you recall from the experience? Did it help? Why or why not?

Popular culture, in contrast, is not associated with the elitist definition of becoming cultured to improve oneself nor is it narrowly defined by demographic characteristics of a community or group. Rather, for purposes of this book, **popular culture** is comprised of the everyday objects, actions, and events that influence people to believe and behave in certain ways. (Essentially, everything we experience in our daily lives could be considered an element of popular culture.) They do so through subtle messages about what is "appropriate" and "inappropriate," "desirable" and "undesirable," "good" and "bad," and so on.

Because this definition of popular culture is so broad, we focus our discussions throughout the book on mediated popular culture. **Mediated popular culture** can be defined as what we experience through, for example, movies, TV, songs, comic strips, and advertisements that may influence us to believe and behave in certain ways.

Mediated popular culture pervades our daily lives. For example, I recall one morning when I watched some of the *Today Show,* I read our daily newspaper, and I talked with my spouse about what to wear to work given the kinds of meetings and classes each of us would be attending. In these 2 hours alone, I was influenced greatly by mediated popular culture. From the *Today Show,* for example, I was influenced that it is *desirable* and *good* to donate to the famine relief efforts in Africa as I watched young children and teens speak of what they are doing to help. I was also influenced to believe there are, in fact, *good* children and teens in this country. *Good* people, I surmised, are those who help others who are in need. In the daily paper, I was influenced to believe that I *ought to* help local homeless shelters as I learned about the rising numbers of people in our community who are losing their homes in the face of the current economic situation. Again, *good* people help those in need. Albeit more subtly, I was also influenced by mediated popular culture to suggest that my spouse wear a polo shirt and khaki dress pants to work today, rather than the jeans and sweatshirt he had selected. I believed the shirt and slacks would be more *appropriate* for the image of professionalism he *ought to* convey at the meetings he would be attending.

Mediated popular culture messages also shape my beliefs regarding how I *ought not to* behave. For instance, when perusing *Us Weekly,* my belief that women in our country shouldn't be starving themselves to be thin was reinforced when I read that *3rd Rock from the Sun*'s Kristen Johnston admits her anorexic body is too skinny. My opinion that extramarital affairs are *wrong* was confirmed when I read about Madonna and A-Rod caught in a scandal, as well as when Hulk Hogan's daughter talked about her mom's affair with a teenage boy. As I continued to page through the magazine, I saw that Will and Jada Pinkett Smith credit their 10 happy years together on remaining true to themselves and to each other. These kinds of images and stories influence us by confirming a belief we already hold or by convincing us to believe a certain way.

APPLYING WHAT YOU'VE LEARNED . . .

Identify messages that have been sent to you so far today via media, friends, or observations. What beliefs or behaviors did they reinforce for you about what is "appropriate" or "inappropriate," "desirable" or "undesirable," "good" or "bad," and why?

QUESTIONING YOUR ETHICS . . .

Do you think it is "appropriate" or "inappropriate" to consume alcohol during a business lunch meeting? Consider now the Samuel Adams beer commercials where several businessmen order water until one fellow orders a Samuel Adams beer. At that time, the others quickly change their orders to Samuel Adams beer as well. What is this commercial arguing about whether it is okay to consume alcohol during a business lunch meeting?

WHAT ARE POPULAR CULTURE TEXTS?

Popular culture *communicates* to us and for us through signs and artifacts. A **sign** is simply something that makes you think of something else. For example, when I look at the ring on the third finger of my left hand, I think of what that means in terms of the bond of marriage. I also reminisce about purchasing the ring with my spouse more than 25 years ago. I think of the summer when we replaced our first wedding rings with new rings we purchased in a favorite vacation spot (Medora, North Dakota). An **artifact** is a sign or series of signs that is socially grounded. That is, its meaning is widely shared by some identifiable community or cultural group. The ring I just described can be considered an artifact for the dominant American culture in terms of symbolizing the bond of marriage, but not in terms of the personal meanings I described. Those personal meanings are valid signs, but only for my spouse and me. When analyzing the communicative potential of popular culture, then, one looks for signs that function as artifacts.

Each of us is a member of (or identifies with) more than one popular culture group simultaneously. The various groups with which we identify often share characteristics, beliefs, or value systems. For example, I am a parent of teenagers, a college professor, a Christian, and a middle-class American, among other things. Each of these groups is distinct, yet I identify myself with each of them. Moreover, some beliefs are held by all of them and others are not.

Each community or cultural group is also identifiable because it embraces an ideology. An **ideology** is a cultural group's *perceptions* about the way things are and *assumptions* about the way they ought to be. It is crucial to understand that an ideology is not a factual description of objects and events, but rather a *perception* shared by a particular group about "the way things are." For example, as a parent of teenagers, I embrace a perception that raising teenagers is often difficult. This is not a factual statement, but rather a perception I share with others who identify with one popular culture group. A *factual* statement, in contrast, might be that raising some teenagers may be difficult, but that does not mean that all teenagers are difficult to raise.

So how are these groups and ideologies formed, reinforced, and sometimes re-formed? One answer is through popular culture texts. A **popular culture text** is something that is comprised of an interrelated set of signs and artifacts that all contribute to the same rhetorical argument. Recall that in this book, we focus on *mediated popular culture*. A *mediated popular culture text* might be, for example, a song, movie, TV program, or advertisement, or a series of songs, advertisements, or TV episodes. As you can see, a *text* in this context is not limited to written matter. **Rhetoric** is defined as the ways in which signs influence people. A **rhetorical argument**, then, is a message sent through a *text* that either reinforces or challenges a taken-for-granted belief or behavior about what is *appropriate* or *inappropriate, desirable* or *undesirable, good* or *bad*.

Texts argue rhetorically by confirming or disconfirming an ideology of a cultural group. For example, the United States is currently struggling with our ideology about marriage. Can marriage be conceived of in both heterosexual and homosexual relationships? Some groups within our population hold firm to the ideology that the rite of marriage is only *appropriate* for heterosexual partners, and other groups oppose

that ideology and believe that marriage can be appropriate for both heterosexual and homosexual relationships. Note also that an ideology is difficult to change because it is so embedded in the beliefs and structural systems of a culture. To illustrate further, an ideology held in the dominant American culture during the 1950s was that a family consisted of a husband who worked outside the home and a wife who stayed home and raised the 2.3 children. Today, the dominant American ideology of family has expanded to wives who work inside and/or outside the home and husbands who work inside and/or outside the home, as well as single-parent families, blended families, extended families, and so on.

Because the range of popular culture texts is so broad, this book focuses primarily on **mediated popular culture texts**. A mediated popular culture text is a subset of the broad range of popular culture texts limited to *mediated* popular culture forms such as movies, music, TV programs, advertisements, comic strips, and so forth. The examples focus primarily on mediated texts for a number of reasons. First, we can usually demarcate a beginning and an end to something like a film or a piece of music, at least for analytical purposes. Second, mediated texts—particularly those couched as mere entertainment (e.g., popular music, blockbuster movies, sitcoms)—are particularly influential because consumers often fail to realize their persuasive potential. Limiting my examples in this way does not in any way mean that these are the *only* examples of popular culture texts, but rather they provide a focus for this book.

WHY STUDY POPULAR CULTURE?

Because popular culture consists of everyday objects, actions, and events, people sometimes fail to see the rationale for studying it. Yet the fact that popular culture communicates and persuades in these subtle and covert, or hidden, ways actually points to the need for such study. As noted earlier, ultimately, popular culture persuades by empowering and disempowering certain people and groups by conveying messages about *desirable* and *undesirable, appropriate* and *inappropriate,* and *normal* and *abnormal* beliefs, attitudes, values, and behaviors.

Thus, popular culture is significant because it has the persuasive power to *shape beliefs and behaviors.* For example, according to the standards set by the American Dietetic Association, most female TV actresses are notably underweight. These images of what the "ideal" woman *ought to* look like have been shown to influence women's perceptions of their own bodies (Harrison, 2000; Murray, Touyz, & Beumont, 1996). To help clarify this point, a study was conducted a few years ago on the remote island of Fiji. Before the introduction of satellite TV, about 3% of the island's adolescent girls reported to have dieted. Two years later—after the introduction of satellite TV—that figure rose to 66%. Moreover, 15% of these girls admitted they had vomited to control their weight (Becker, Grinspoon, Klibanski, & Herzog, 1999).

This example demonstrates the negative consequences that popular culture texts can have on communities and groups. However, popular culture can also shape beliefs and behaviors in ways that promote positive consequences. Consider, for example, a film such as *As Good as It Gets.* In it, Jack Nicholson portrays a man with an obsessive-compulsive disorder. At the beginning of the film, viewers are led to see

■ **FIGURE 1.1**   Political Cartoon

Source: Used with permission.

him as anything but *normal* and certainly not *desirable.* By the end of the movie, however, viewers are rooting for him to win the affection of the female lead (played by Helen Hunt) because they now see him as a man, a human being with a heart, a human being who happens to struggle with a disorder, rather than as something less than human, something to be ignored or even feared. In this way, the film challenges an ideology about what is *desirable* and *appropriate.*

It is also important to study popular culture because of its persuasive power to *reinforce taken-for-granted beliefs and behaviors.* If we fail to study popular culture, we are left vulnerable to remaining fixed in our beliefs and behaviors, rather than examining them. Consider for a moment the concept of *family* we discussed earlier. Programs such as *Leave It to Beaver* in the 1950s reinforced a taken-for-granted belief of the dominant American culture that a *normal* family was one where the father worked outside the home and the mother did not. In the 1960s and 1970s, programs such as *I Love Lucy* and *The Brady Bunch,* while challenging other taken-for-granted beliefs, continued to reinforce this perception. Although the 1980s brought programs such as *The Cosby Show,* where the mother who worked outside the home was portrayed as *normal,* such shows continued to be the exception, not the rule. Even today, although there are more exceptions to this *rule* than in the past, many of the most popular TV shows that portray families with children, such as *Everybody Loves Raymond* and *According to Jim,* show mothers who do not work outside the home. Even shows such as *Two and a Half Men* and *Full House,* which depict men raising

children, often focus on their inability to do it well, which also reinforces the notion that the *normal* role for men is not raising children and caring for the home.

The previous examples point to another reason to study popular culture. Not only do popular culture texts shape and reinforce beliefs and behaviors, they do so *in covert ways* and *on multiple levels*. For example, among other things, *The Brady Bunch* argued that "normal" middle-class family homes are always neat and tidy. Contrast this with *Roseanne* or *Malcolm in the Middle* and you will see what I mean. In those programs, the home was rarely so neat and tidy. So, popular culture is important to study because it offers multiple messages simultaneously and covertly about how we *ought to* believe and behave.

Popular culture is also significant because it is so *pervasive*. Popular culture is everywhere. It is in our homes, our communities, our workplaces, and our social clubs. In fact, research conducted by the A. C. Neilsen Company reports that the average American home has more TV sets than people, and our TV sets are turned on an average of nearly 7 hours per day and we see about 20,000 TV commercials per year (Herr, 2007). Because it is impossible to avoid popular culture, we must become educated consumers of it.

A P P L Y I N G   W H A T   Y O U ' V E   L E A R N E D . . .

Identify as many popular culture signs, artifacts, and texts as you can that you have encountered in the past 24 hours. Now identify what belief or behavior each one played a role in reinforcing or shaping. Finally, describe at least two meanings being reinforced or shaped in each of them.

CONDUCTING A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF POPULAR CULTURE TEXTS

Examining a popular culture text to effectively reveal covert messages about taken-for-granted beliefs and behaviors is essentially a three-step process of (1) selecting a text and formulating a research question, (2) selecting a rhetorical perspective, and (3) examining the text via description, interpretation, and evaluation.

Step 1. Selecting a Text and Formulating a Research Question

The first step in the process of unpacking the underlying messages in popular culture texts is to select a text and formulate a research question. You can do so in one of two ways. You might start with a text. By that I mean you might watch a program or see an advertisement that piques your curiosity somehow. You may have a hunch that something more is going on than what the surface message is communicating. For example, maybe you enjoy watching a show like *Arrested Development*. On the surface, you like the program because it's funny. It makes you laugh. But maybe you wonder why it's funny. That is, what is it saying about what is *normal* and *abnormal* behavior?