mix it up

popular culture, mass media, and society

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W. W. Norton New York London

IKE GREAT WORKS OF ART OR SCIENTIFIC PROGRESS, EVEN THE MOST imaginative popular culture owes its reality to the hard-earned achievements of the past. On May 13, 2006, Barbados-born singer Rihanna scored her first No. 1 single on the Billboard U.S. pop chart with the catchy dance hit "SOS (Rescue Me)." Rihanna completed the song for Def Jam Recordings after being signed by its then-president and CEO, rapper Jay Z. The lead single off her sophomore effort *A Girl Like Me* (2006), "SOS" was produced by Jonathan "J. R." Rotem, and its lyrics and music were written by Rotem and Evan "Kidd" Bogart.

Actually, that is not entirely accurate, since one other songwriter is also credited with composing the music for the single, specifically its irresistible bass line and drum beat. That songwriter is Ed Cobb, who wrote "Tainted Love," a song released in the 1980s by the British new wave duo Soft Cell, from which Rotem and Bogart liberally sample as background rhythm for their recording of "SOS." A one-hit wonder, Soft Cell's "Tainted Love" slowly climbed the Billboard U.S. Hot 100 singles chart in 1981 to No. 8, and before the duo exited into oblivion, the song managed to spend what was at the time a record-breaking 43 weeks on the pop charts. Like other 1980s British invasion artists (Depeche Mode, the Human League, Joe Jackson, the Cure), Soft Cell incorporated depressing song lyrics of unrequited love with postpunk improvisation and synthesized sound effects. In their dance remix of "Tainted Love," Soft Cell accomplished all three by integrating the signature track with a second song, "Where Did Our Love Go?" with vocals accompanied only by a sparse synth-pop bass line and beat.

Rihanna pays homage to "Tainted Love" when she sings, "You got me tossin' and turnin' and I can't sleep at night," the one "SOS" lyric borrowed from the 1980s classic. But Soft Cell can't really take credit for the line, either, since the northern soul and rhythm-and-blues singer Gloria Jones actually performed the original version of Ed Cobb's "Tainted Love" in 1964 and later rerecorded it in the mid-1970s with her husband Marc Bolan of the English rock band T. Rex. In fact, "Where Did Our Love Go?" is also a cover, also recorded in 1964, by the all-female Motown group the Supremes. With its lead vocals sung by Diana Ross, "Where Did Our Love Go?" was the first of 12 No. 1 songs recorded by the Supremes; their other top-charting hits include "Baby Love," "You Can't Hurry Love," "Stop! In the Name of Love," and "You Keep Me Hanging On," the last of which Rihanna also pays homage to in "SOS": "I'm out with you / Ya got me head over heels / Boy you keep me hanging on / By the way you make me feel."

What does this discography tell us about popular culture? Perhaps the clearest lesson to be gleaned is that pop music, like Greek tragedy and Elizabethan drama, can transcend its historical moment to enjoy endless cycles of rediscovery and reinvention (Griswold 1986), just as "Tainted Love" began as a 1960s northern

1981

Tainted Love/ Where Did Our Love Go?
Performed by Soft Cell
Produced by Mike Thorne
Written by Ed Cobb

SOS (Rescue Me)
Performed by Rihanna
Produced by Jonathan "J. R." Rotem
Written by Rotem, Evan "Kidd" Bogart, and Ed Cobb

1976

Tainted Love
Performed by Gloria Jones and Marc Bolan
Produced by Marc Bolan
Written by Ed Cobb

1964

Tainted Love
Performed by Gloria Jones
Written by Ed Cobb

1964

Where Did Our Love Go?
Performed by the Supremes
Written by Lamont Dozier, Brian Holland, and Edward Holland Jr.

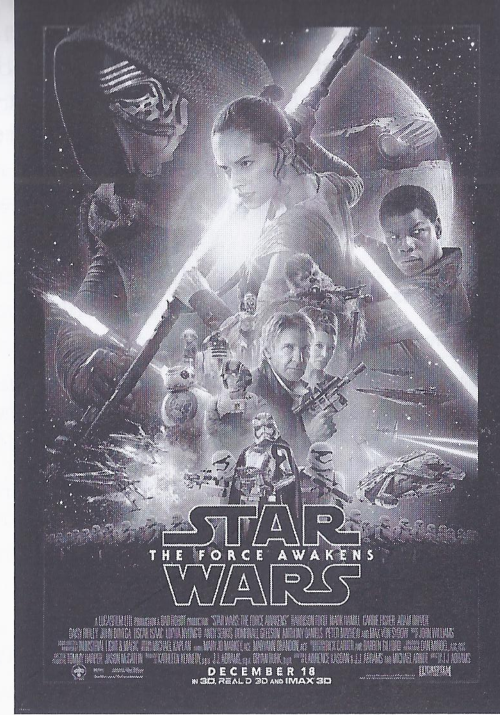
soul song and found new life as a 1980s synth-pop classic, which two decades later would be sampled for inclusion on a 2006 dance hit. The creators of popular culture rely on an endless repository of past work to inform their development of new and future projects, from pop singles to animated cartoons to feature films. In such cases, the first step to achieving success as a cultural *producer* is to be a savvy *consumer* of mass media and popular culture.

Moreover, the half-century history of "Tainted Love" spotlights a number of cultural producers whose combined efforts carried this song through its numerous incarnations (see fig. 1.1). Popular culture is never the product of a solitary artist but always emerges from the *collective activity* generated by interlocking networks of cultural creators. This is not to suggest that Rihanna would not have recorded "SOS" at all, if not for these many participants—only that without their cumulative input and influence, her song would have sounded different (Becker 1982).

All this highlights the major argument of this book: *Popular culture is produced, consumed, and experienced within a context of overlapping sets of social relationships*. Some of those relationships are forged out of a spirit of musicianship and camaraderie, as illustrated by the two members of Soft Cell. Many more are contractual relationships between artists and business firms built out of economic convenience, such as the relationship between Rihanna and Def Jam Recordings, or between Def Jam and its parent company Universal Music Group. Still others represent the close bonds between cultural creators and their audiences, or among the members of a social group who maintain a shared sense of identity, whether on the basis of class, race, nationality, religiosity, gender, or sexuality. This opens up a range of interesting questions: How are pop music genres such as rap, rhythm and blues, country, and heavy metal organized by industry personnel and audiences on the basis of social status? How are global pop cultural styles such as Afro-Cuban jazz, Turkish hip-hop, Bhangra dance music, and Bollywood film shaped by the local and regional settings in which they are transplanted? These questions all point to the centrality of social relationships in the creation, consumption, and experience of popular culture.

What Makes Pop Culture Popular?

In common parlance, *popular culture* refers to the aesthetic products created and sold by profit-seeking firms operating in the global entertainment market—horror movies, reality television, dance music, fashion magazines, graphic novels, literary fiction, remote-controlled toys, fast-food hamburgers, online video games. But understanding popular culture sociologically first requires that we define exactly what we mean by these two words of subtle complexity, *popular* and *culture*. Let us begin at the beginning: What does it mean for pop culture to be *popular*? It sounds simple, but in fact the word *popular* carries several distinct (and at times contradictory) connotations. First, and perhaps most obviously, (1) culture that is "popular" is *well liked*, and in a market economy that popularity is often best demonstrated through *commercial success* as measured by Nielsen ratings, iTunes downloads, ticket sales, or box-office revenue. In 2015, the top-grossing films included *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, *Jurassic World*, *Inside Out*, and *Avengers: Age of Ultron*. That last film took in more than $1.4 billion in global box-office receipts and starred the highest-paid film actor in the world, Robert Downey Jr., who earned $80 million in 2015. He has starred in recurring roles as Sherlock Holmes and Tony Stark/Iron Man in some of the biggest film franchises of all time, and his movies have grossed nearly $4 billion worldwide. Other popular A-list actors who today earn $20 million or more per film include Leonardo DiCaprio, Tom Cruise, Will Smith, Matt Damon, Johnny Depp, Sandra Bullock, and Denzel Washington.



According to one definition, popular culture is well liked and commercially successful, as exemplified by global blockbusters such as Star Wars: The Force Awakens.

In the digital age, we can measure popularity according to noncommercial criteria as well. In 2016 the celebrity with the most Twitter followers worldwide was Katy Perry, with more than 95 million users; she bested Justin Bieber (91 million), Taylor Swift (83 million), and President Barack Obama (80 million). On Facebook, Portuguese soccer pro Cristiano Ronaldo has the most fans (117 million), followed closely behind by Colombian pop star Shakira. If you think that is a lot, bear in mind that the most viewed YouTube video of all time has been streamed more than 2.7 *billion* times—the music video for "Gangnam Style" by Korean one-hit-wonder Psy.

Unfortunately, audiences hardly look favorably upon all popular culture, and some of it isn't particularly well liked by anyone, especially annoyingly repetitive TV advertisements or well-known celebrities who seem to be famous for, well, simply *being famous* despite an obvious lack of talent or achievement. In this sense, (2) popular culture refers to icons or media products that are globally *ubiquitous* and easily *recognized* (if perhaps disliked or mocked) the world over (Gamson 1994; Gabler 2000). The most clarifying examples come from the diamond-encrusted world of high society, and in our contemporary culture, Exhibit A is reality television star Kim Kardashian West and her overexposed sisters. While Kim, Khloé, Kourtney, Kylie, and Kendall's fame may seem quite strange, their celebrity is actually modeled after similarly ostentatious wealthy men and women from earlier generations, including serial divorcée Zsa Zsa Gabor, whose nine husbands included Conrad Hilton Sr., the founder of Hilton Hotels. (He was also the great-grandfather of a far more recent celebrity socialite, Paris Hilton.) There are certainly more universally liked exemplars, as illustrated by the waves of loss felt worldwide after the widely reported deaths

of John F. Kennedy Jr., born just after his father won the American presidency in November 1960, and Princess Diana, the former wife of Prince Charles of Wales. Today, Diana's eldest son, Prince William, and his wife, Kate Middleton, similarly enjoy this kind of larger-than-life celebrity.

However, despite the differences between the Kardashians and members of the British royal family, many critics see these icons as two sides of the same coin of mainstream mass culture. According to their worldview, (3) popular culture refers to commercial media thought to be trivial, tacky, and pitched to the lowest common denominator as *mass culture* intended for general consumption, like canned soup or chewing gum (MacDonald 1957). In this context, popular culture—Justin Bieber, Big Macs, *Dancing with the Stars*—is unfavorably compared to the fine arts as represented by Italian opera, French nouvelle cuisine, and *cinéma vérité*. In these instances, the populations implicated by the use of *pop* culture as a pejorative label tend to be socially marginalized by class, race, and often age—hence the critical panning of melodramatic "pop" stars who target preadolescent and teenage audiences, such as boy bands like One Direction, contestants on NBC's *The Voice*, and former Disney starlets like Selena Gomez and Miley Cyrus.

1.1

itions of Popular Culture

tion	Examples
r culture is often *well liked*, as monstrated in a market economy h *commercial success*. (In the age, the extent to which pop is well liked can also be ed with alternative metrics webpage views, Twitter rs, or Facebook likes.)	Films such as *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* or *Jurassic World*; beloved celebrities such as pop star Katy Perry or soccer star Cristiano Ronaldo
r culture refers to icons, ties, or media products *well known* the world over.	Kate Middleton or Kim Kardashian West
r culture refers to commercial onsidered *mass culture*—trivial, nd pitched to the lowest common nator for general consumption.	Commercial pop stars who target teen audiences, such as One Direction, Justin Bieber, or Miley Cyrus
r culture refers to culture red to *belong to the people*, association with democratic m and authenticity.	Recording artists whose music speaks to the experiences of ordinary working-class people, such as Bob Marley or Bruce Springsteen
culture refers to media events neously experienced by mass es in real time.	The Super Bowl, Olympic Games, Academy Awards, U.S. presidential debates

Mass culture also has its many defenders, including those who argue for its intellectual complexity and depth, increasing innovativeness and social relevance, kitschy fun and contemporary cool, and similarities to past cultural touchstones now canonized as great art (Simon 1999; Johnson 2006). According to the American Film Institute, mass culture movies aimed at young people—*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Star Wars*, *Toy Story*, *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*—represent some of the greatest cinematic accomplishments in U.S. history.

Yet for another set of artists and audiences, (4) popular culture is associated with songs, dances, and other artistic expressions *belonging to the people*, given its association with democratic populism and authenticity. This characterization of popular culture refers to songwriters and recording artists who create roots-oriented music (such as blues, folk, reggae, and certain strains of American rock, R&B, country, and rap) said to channel the traditional hopes and dreams of ordinary working-class people. They include legends such as Muddy Waters, Woody Guthrie, Johnny Cash, Bob Dylan, Nina Simone, Bob Marley, and Bruce Springsteen. In more recent years, contemporary hip-hop and R&B artists such as John Legend, Common, Alicia Keys, Lauryn Hill, D'Angelo, and J. Cole have continued in this fashion by writing and recording protest songs that resonate with the Black Lives Matter civil rights campaign (Tillet 2015).

Finally, (5) popular culture can refer to media events that national and even global mass audiences experience simultaneously, in real time, whether on television or online. These events include professional sports events such as the Super Bowl and the World Series, international competitions like the Olympic Games, and staged political events such as U.S. presidential debates and State of the Union addresses to Congress. They also include the ever-proliferating number of televised awards shows populating the airwaves: the Academy Awards, Grammy Awards, Emmy Awards, Tony Awards, Golden Globe Awards, People's Choice Awards; the list goes on (English 2005).

Defining Culture

As if the multiple and contradictory connotations of the word *popular* were not confusing enough, defining *culture* can be equally frustrating, particularly since this complex term has finely differentiated meanings in a variety of dispersed intellectual traditions and academic disciplines. For example, in the humanities, culture represents what Raymond Williams (1983, p. 90) identifies as "the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity," particularly those that lead toward "a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development." The first part of this definition suggests the rarefied forms that culture manifests in the humanities: great novels and concertos, classical architecture and painting, Wagnerian opera and contemporary experimental poetry. In the fields of literature, music, philosophy, and art history, culture represents the most revered expressions of the human condition—Shakespeare's *King Lear* and *Hamlet*, Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and Melville's *Moby-Dick*, Beethoven's Fifth Symphony and Bach's Toccata and Fugue in D Minor. As for culture's purpose, it is not merely one of entertainment but "intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development," nothing less than the cultivation of the mind toward greater enlightenment and epicurean pleasure. It is only through the fine arts that an individual—and by extension, an entire human society—can truly come to be thought of as civilized or, as they say, "cultured."

This humanist vision of culture suggests a high-minded and perhaps inaccessible world of challenging ideas communicated through complicated texts and compositions. In contrast, in the social sciences, culture refers to "a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period, a group, or humanity in general" (Williams 1983, p. 90). To the sociologist (or anthropologist, psychologist, economist, political scientist, or communications scholar, for that matter), culture refers to a mode of living in the world as a social being, as represented by the shared

practices, rituals, behaviors, activities, and artifacts that make up the experience of everyday life. For example, culture can refer to the styles of cooking and eating enjoyed by a people—their cuisines, recipes, ingredients, spices, kitchen tools, and table manners. We can appreciate this fact even though it is hard to imagine our *own* modern culinary folkways—say, slurping down Froot Loops cereal for breakfast—as particularly cultural. After all, it would not be unusual to find the serving vessels and utensils of an ancient society (such as their clay pitchers, metal spoons, or drinking goblets) exhibited in an art museum or in an archaeology textbook. The improvised games children play—Double Dutch, kickball, hopscotch, freeze tag, dodgeball—are also cultural, as are our dirty jokes, obscene gestures, and other locker-room antics.

To this end, sociologists of culture are interested in a wide spectrum of everyday rituals and social activities associated with public life, including sports participation and spectatorship, dating and courtship, retail shopping, beauty and cosmetic enhancement, dining and coffee drinking. However, for some this anthropological conception of culture may seem to suggest an impossibly broad inventory of possible topics for analysis, as vast as human civilization itself. A helpful way to cut culture down to a manageable size is to focus on three properties common to both the humanist and social scientific understandings of culture. Culture is richly *symbolic*, invested with meaning and significance. The meanings attributed to culture are never simply given but are the product of human invention and *collectively shared* by a demonstrably large number of people. (It is in this sense that sociologists argue that culture and meaning are "socially constructed.") Finally, for culture to be sensibly understood, it must be *embodied* in some kind of recognizable form.

To best emphasize these three properties of culture, Wendy Griswold (1986, p. 5; 2004, p. 13), a sociologist at Northwestern University, characterizes the sociology of culture as the study of *cultural objects*, or "shared significance embodied in form." Cultural objects are social expressions of meaning that have been rendered into something tangible, like a Greek epic poem or a bronze sculpture. By the same token, cultural objects can be found in the world of popular culture as well as the fine arts—Homer's *Iliad* and Homer Simpson, Alexander Pope and *Scandal*'s Olivia Pope, Jonathan Swift and Taylor Swift, Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables* and Netflix's *House of Cards*. While sociologists of culture investigate and analyze "the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity," these creative compositions not only include classical music and nineteenth-century Russian literature but also mass media enjoyed in the contemporary world as a regular feature of everyday life: rock, rap, country music, celebrity-gossip tabloids, animated cartoons, billboard advertising, cable newscasts, comic books, reality television, food blogs, and *Minecraft*. As the British synth-pop band Depeche Mode sang back in 1983 on its *Construction Time Again* album, everything counts in large amounts.

In fact, a popular cultural object need not even be a traditional form of visual or aural media: It could be a meaningful nonverbal gesture, like a wide smile, a conspiratorial wink, an enthusiastic thumbs-up, or an aggressively pointed middle finger (Geertz 1973, pp. 6–7; Katz 1999, pp. 18–86). It could be an icon, like Abraham Lincoln (Schwartz 1996, 1998; Schwartz and Schuman 2005), or Albert Einstein, or the Statue of Liberty, or the Volkswagen or Apple logo. In this sense popular cultural objects operate at the level of language, with their articulated if complex shared meanings ready to be decoded among participants who inhabit a common social environment or context. Like language, the meanings attached to cultural objects both *endure over time* and yet are also capable of *innovation* and *change*, just as the definitions of certain words maintain stability over time even as they take on new and altered meanings. (Examples in the digital age include terms such as *tweet, text, drive, bit, hack, chip*, and *mouse*.)

Popular Culture as Collective Activity

Now that we have discussed a variety of meanings and exemplars associated with popular culture in the interests of developing as inclusive a definition as possible, the next step is to examine how popular culture can be best understood as an inherently social phenomenon. In his work on the social organization of culture and the arts, the sociologist Howard S. Becker (1982) observes that its production is first and foremost a *collective activity*. Whether a Jane Austen film adaptation or a dragon-themed video game, popular cultural objects are produced by collaborative webs of interconnected individuals working together toward a common goal and eventually consumed and experienced by audiences who attach shared meanings to them.

According to Becker (1982), media and popular culture are produced in the context of *art worlds*, or networks of participants whose combined efforts create movies, musical compositions, websites, graphic novels, advertising, and so forth. For some types of pop culture, the collective nature of creative production is readily apparent, as anyone who has scanned the thousands of names listed in the closing credits at the end of a feature film surely knows (Becker 1982, pp. 7–9). Perhaps a less obvious example of the secondary creative workers or *support personnel* who labor in relative anonymity in the culture industries are those people necessary for recording music, since even songs credited to a single artist like Beyoncé, Nicki Minaj, Taylor Swift, or Carrie Underwood rely on teams of songwriters, producers, session musicians, studio engineers, and sound mixers. In the music industry, support personnel may also include the software developers responsible for the digital technology that enables the easy transfer of performed music into binary code and back into realized sound, and the record producer who matches the appropriate set of effects pedals to each guitarist, or edits preprogrammed electronic beats and sampled bass sounds into a pulsating rhythm track (Seabrook 2015). Even the digital artwork that accompanies the delivery of online music requires the cooperative efforts of product managers, art directors, photographers, archivists, liner note writers, copy editors, and other support staff (Becker 1982).

Given the collective nature of producing popular culture, it only makes sense that in a complex society like our own, networks of creative personnel are organized according to a highly segmented *division of labor*, as the aforementioned