Thinking Popular Culture
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Preface for Students

The purpose of this book is to introduce you to some of the tools and skills necessary to the critical analysis of popular culture. We focus on what scholars call “cultural theories”—theories that offer different ways of looking at the cultural landscape of our societies. Although popular culture is often considered to be “simply entertainment,” the theories you’ll learn explain the centrality of popular culture to everyday life, especially but not only in the post-industrial period. They also provide methods of analysis, including the “close reading” of particular popular culture artifacts and moments, wider studies of the socio-economic contexts that inform popular culture and how people interact with it, and ways of discussing how popular culture represents individuals and groups. The book pays attention to the Canadian context as well, through many of its examples and in some of the methodologies and theories examined. In this preface we discuss the basic structure of the text and some of the features that have been included to help you learn about the rich, diverse field of popular culture studies.

STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

The main text of this book is split into five parts. Part I is a general introduction to the academic study of popular culture, offering students basic definitions of some of the central terms in the field (including popular and culture themselves, which aren’t as simple as one might think!). Part II offers an overview of the foundational studies and theories of culture in general and popular culture specifically. These theories are updated in Part III, which looks to some of the more contemporary methods of studying popular culture (including the creation of the discipline known as cultural studies). Part IV builds on these foundations (and picks up on their discussions of social class) to explore in more detail the representation and construction of certain social or group identities (in particular, gender, sexuality, race, and national and postcolonial identities). Part V applies some of these theories to practice (we’ll return to this in a moment).

If you were to sit down and read the book from start to finish, you’d be given a general overview of the field of popular culture studies and its methods. But this book is designed to be used in a classroom setting. Theories and methods are meant to be applied, and a lot of that application will likely happen in class. And so you may even be reading the chapters in a different order than the one presented here. While the book can certainly be read chronologically, and while chapters do refer to each other, each chapter is also self-contained and designed to function in conjunction with the needs of specific courses in order to provide an idea of a particular way of analyzing popular culture. Instructors will likely include certain items of popular culture to analyze with each chapter or set of chapters being read.
LEARNING AIDS

Each chapter includes exercises and other material that will help students think in greater depth about the issues being discussed. These include sections in which the theories are applied to particular forms of popular culture as well as more interactive sections that ask students to apply what they've learned. These aids take the form of keywords, figures, issue boxes and case studies, discussion questions, and further reading. Readers will notice that certain words are placed in bold text throughout: these are considered to be keywords for the discussion at hand, and definitions for them can be found in the glossary at the back. Using the glossary often can help students more quickly integrate these concepts into their own work and knowledge set. The figures or diagrams help explain complicated ideas visually by breaking the theories down into their basic components. The issue boxes (throughout the chapters) and the case studies (at the end of all the chapters, starting with Chapter 3) apply the theories being analyzed to particular popular culture objects (and on occasion offer additional theoretical background). The discussion questions, also at the end of each chapter, can give students a starting point—both in and outside of class—for thinking about how to further explore the issues being discussed. Finally, the further reading lists that follow the questions allow students to explore the issues and ideas at hand in more detail.

Building on these learning tools, Part V provides extended applications of the theoretical material. Specifically, Part V discusses ways of writing about popular culture and how to incorporate theoretical work into that writing. It also offers examples of the types of student work many instructors assign in their courses, as well as samples of student work. These samples aren’t provided as “perfect” assignments, but rather as starting points for discussion and other work, or as guidelines that students can use as they learn to analyze popular culture and to incorporate theories into those analyses. Even if an instructor uses different forms of assignments, students can still use the assignments provided here to practise their writing and as practical study aids.

POPULAR THEORY!

As a final note: Students often find the theories discussed in this book to be difficult, and they sometimes think that approaching popular culture in these ways can take the “fun” out of it. But as you go through this book and your course, you'll likely come to a different perspective on these topics: yes, the theories are difficult, but applying their methods to analyze popular culture will take you beyond its surface—and as you learn to engage with it on more levels than you may have previously, these analyses can actually make the experience of popular culture richer and more exciting than before. This book aims to help students approach their cultural surroundings anew, and to challenge commonly held assumptions about our societies and their cultures.
Preface for Instructors

This book aims to offer the instructor of popular culture classes an overview of some of the more foundational and central statements of cultural theory, and to provide students and instructors with examples of the ways in which those theories relate to and can be employed for the study of popular culture. Importantly, Thinking Popular Culture draws on many Canadian examples and case studies to explain and employ the theoretical models discussed; some of these theories are also specific to the Canadian context (the textbook does not draw solely on Canadian examples, however, since doing so would, in fact, limit its usefulness for a Canadian classroom).

ORGANIZATION

The organizing principle of the book combines two of the common textbook approaches to the field: chronological-theoretical and thematic. The chronological-theoretical approach focuses on the developments in cultural theory over time by following the development of certain schools or theoretical groups (from the Frankfurt School to the Birmingham School; from structuralist to poststructuralist; from modern to postmodern; and so on), while the thematic organization focuses on concepts surrounding identity (nationalism and postcoloniality, race, feminism, gender, and sexuality). This book joins these two approaches, first discussing the origins and developments of cultural theory and the study of popular culture in the first three parts, and then analyzing theories of identity in the fourth. The chapters often refer to each other in order to allow students to develop a sense of the various relations between the theories and schools, but each chapter also functions as a self-contained narrative on a particular subject, along with relevant case studies showing the potential applications of the theories being discussed. Primarily, the text summarizes and analyzes, in relatively conversational language, what students often find to be dense theoretical texts. As much support as possible—by way of selective quotation and direct application—is provided so that instructors may choose to use the book on its own, or pair it with specific theoretical readings and examples of popular culture, either those mentioned directly here or additional works.

Thinking Popular Culture thus offers instructors a variety of choices as to how to incorporate the textbook into their classes: the textbook can be read from cover to cover, certainly, but it can also be “broken up,” with instructors assigning chapters—or sections of chapters—in any order, as best befits their classes. In general, the textbook is designed to help instructors with the task of introducing difficult theories so that more classroom time can be spent on the discussion and application of those theoretical models. More information on possible classroom uses is provided below.
Pedagogical Features

In addition to the central theoretical discussions, several pedagogical features have been included for use in the classroom, in tutorials, and/or for assignments. Throughout each chapter, instructors and students will find six central learning aids, in addition to the main text:

- Keywords
- Figures
- Issues Boxes
- Case Studies
- Discussion Questions
- Further Reading

**Keywords:** Each chapter contains several keywords that are placed in bold, which the student can then find in the glossary at the end of the book. These definitions can prove especially useful for the introductory classroom, as students are exposed to an extensive new set of terminology: having the glossary handy can help them learn the usefulness of—and engage with—that terminology quickly and effectively (it can also serve as a useful study tool).

**Figures:** The figures are primarily designed to help students understand different stages of some of the more complex theories. While not all theories lend themselves to such diagramming, these are included where they have proven especially useful.

**Issue Boxes:** These boxes appear several times in each chapter; taken as a whole, they fulfill two purposes: they apply individual theories to particular elements of popular culture, and do so at the moment in the text when those theories are being discussed (e.g., an issue box on a “Pregnant Barbie” is provided when discussing heteronormativity and performative theories of gender identity); and they offer some practical background to the theories when necessary (e.g., the brief discussion of the history of Marxism and Communism at the beginning of the section dealing with Marxist theories).

**Case Studies:** Longer case studies have been included at the end of each of the main chapters, starting at the end of Chapter 3, to demonstrate some of the ways in which the main theories discussed in each chapter can be used to analyze specific examples of popular culture. Unlike the issue boxes, these case studies show how a particular element of popular culture can be analyzed from a variety of theoretical perspectives. The case studies show students that they have choice in how to approach and apply the theories discussed in any given chapter, and also serve as a quick overview of some of the main points of the chapter. Moreover, these are intended to be “open-ended” analyses, to which students and instructors can add with discussion and with further examples brought to class. More information on the examples chosen for the issue boxes and case studies is provided below.

**Discussion Questions:** Following the case studies, the discussion questions are framed in a number of ways: often they build on the possibility of having either the instructor or students bring in other examples, thus allowing even more direct analysis and application to happen in the classroom. Other questions serve as springboards for a wider exploration of the theories, often by focusing on those areas that experience has
shown students to have problems with. Depending on the structure of the class, these questions can be incorporated into the lecture or class discussion or used in break-away tutorials for larger classes. Students can also be asked to prepare formal or informal replies to them, either to bring to class or to post on the course’s electronic systems, if any.

Further Reading: This section, finally, is provided for the instructor who may want to assign other texts in related areas as readings, and for students interested in furthering their awareness of the larger field. These examples can be supplemented with an instructor’s own list, of course.

On the Use of Examples in the Text and in the Classroom

The text was written with an eye to the interdisciplinary and multi-disciplinary nature of the field, and so examples and objects for analyses in the main text, issue boxes, and case studies are drawn from a variety of materials, including television, film, music, advertisements, political action, common situations, university campuses, and many others. These examples are provided in order to give students some concrete analyses to help them as they read material ahead of class. The examples are also chosen from a range of periods: while many examples are contemporary, more historical ones are chosen when especially appropriate. Likewise, material was chosen with an eye to providing material with which many students will be familiar as well as more specific or “obscure” examples that can expand the range and depth of discussion. To take two film examples, most students will know the international blockbuster The Matrix even though it’s fifteen years old at the time of this writing. Their knowledge of the film can help start conversation easily. Fewer will know the much more recent Canadian film Pontypool, but most will be familiar with the resurgence in the popularity of zombies. Offering an analysis of this film not only allows the injection of a particularly inventive Canadian example of popular culture, but can also allow students to see how somewhat obscure theories can be intimately connected to a particular popular cultural phenomenon.

It is also expected, however, that instructors can and will both build on these examples in lecture and discussion and add to them examples of their own that are especially relevant to particular classes or student and instructor interest—such supplemental work is actually quite important given the rapidly changing nature of the pop culture landscape. No popular culture textbook can stay up to date in its analytical examples. By offering summaries of the theories alongside separate examples throughout, this textbook provides students with the necessary theoretical tools that will allow them to branch out into their own applications, with their instructor’s help.

Writing Section

Importantly, the textbook also includes an innovative concluding section that discusses approaches to writing about popular culture. This section is not intended to be a replacement for, nor is it as comprehensive or wide-ranging as, a writing handbook. Instead, it offers
students some basic approaches to writing both short and longer assignments about popular culture using the theories discussed in the text. “Combining” theory and critical analysis often proves challenging to students, and so by suggesting a few different approaches, this book aims to give students and instructors useful entry points into that work. As part of this discussion a selection of sample writing assignments is provided, including assignment sheets and model student responses. These assignments were chosen after surveying a variety of popular culture course outlines: common writing assignment types were synthesized into three forms: the theory response, the object analysis, and the research essay. These assignments are described at greater length in the relevant section of the book, but important to note here is that they’re described in ways that can easily be incorporated into a number of other specific assignment types (including, but not limited to, writing journals, Wiki-style assignments, presentations and group work, and so on). Using the samples provided here in conjunction with the requirements of a specific course can allow the instructor to incorporate writing and analysis instruction directly into the other material being discussed in class.

Significantly, these sample assignments are intended to be used as interactive tools rather than as static models of the “perfect” assignment. While they should provide strong examples, there are still areas of the application or writing than can be analyzed and critiqued with the students: instructors can identify particular areas of the sample assignments and ask students how they could be improved, or how their structures would need to be modified to meet the needs of the specific course assignments used in their particular course. Getting students to engage actively in such activities could allow for a more engaged relationship with their own writing.

Overall, this book is designed to complement an instructor’s own pedagogical choices: a chronological reading of the book would work for many courses, but the various portions can also be arranged onto a course schedule in a variety of ways, with some sections joined together or others lingered over and emphasized, following the needs of the particular course. Likewise, the analytical examples provided in the textbook can be supplemented with ones of the instructors’ and students’ own choosing.

The textbook is designed to be incorporated into your class rather than the other way around. Teaching the critical analysis of popular culture in conjunction with cultural theory can be a challenge, but it can also be one of the more rewarding classroom experiences one can have, and this book hopes to help instructors and students reach that goal.

SUPPLEMENTS
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