**Popular Culture**

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**Abstract**

Popular culture involves a gamut of objects, practices, meaning, and cultural contexts usually produced and consumed by mass audiences around the world. To speak of distinctly local or national popular cultures seems ever more challenging in a globally interconnected world. Popular culture is creatively diverse, geographically dispersed, commercially varied, and politically multifaceted in nature. It cannot be divorced from indices of social and economic difference. While the rigid distinction between high and popular culture seems less assured today than it might have once appeared to 19th and early to mid-20th Century commentators, shifts in popular culture and media outputs often provide telling insights into the state of power in contemporary societies. The study of and participation in popular culture provides opportunities for dominant ideas, motifs, and practices to be challenged and contested; as such, popular culture is never static.

**Keywords**: popular culture, power, identity, mass media, social media, film, East Asia, globalization, Americanization, and imperialism.

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**Introduction**

In her book, *Pop Culture: The Culture of Everyday Life*, Shirley Fedorak defines popular culture as “the culture of our everyday lives…popular culture is a mirror of societal dynamics and has the power to shape and reflect cultural ideals, generate resistance and activism, and represent changing social realities.” As an academic field, popular culture is a vibrant area of research with specialist journals such as *Journal of Popular Culture* (established in 1968) and professional networks including the Popular Culture Association (founded in 1971). Other academic journals cater to specific areas of popular cultural activities or products such as comic books, novels, film, television, shopping, fashion and music, including the *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, and the recently established *International Journal of James Bond Studies*. There are also a handful of universities offering standalone undergraduate and graduate degrees in popular culture, most notably Bowling Green State University (USA) and Brock University (Canada), while others combine and/or couch the study of popular culture with other fields like media (University of Huddersfield, UK), sociology (Texas State University, USA), and English (Dalhousie University, Canada). Overall, popular culture is an expanding field of study that is attracting an increasing number of interdisciplinary researchers and students.

In *Keywords,* British writer Raymond Williams reminded readers that the terms “popular” and “culture” are saturated with class connotations. Thus popular culture was considered to be distinguishable from “high culture”, which was the reserve of the elite and the aesthetically privileged. In his view, film, television, and advertising played a modest role in cultural life in comparison to a (more highbrow) social world in which works of “art” and “culture” are accorded extraordinary aesthetic, literary, historical, and philosophical value. This assessment is due, in part, to the association of “high culture” with limited circulation and refined tastes, rendering its consumption more exclusive (i.e. only the elite can appreciate) rather than inclusive (i.e. catering to masses). Writing in 1976, Williams described an analogue culture in which there was far less exposure to transnational artifacts and global media networks, let alone digital media. National broadcasters such as British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) and national newspapers such as *The Times* and *Toronto Globe and Mail* were culturally dominant in their respective countries.

More recent work is grappling with the popular culture in a digital and globalized era. John Street points out that as the nature of popular culture has become complicated in an increasingly globally interconnected world so too has our understanding of it. The rigid distinction today between high and popular culture is less assured than it might have once appeared to 19th and early- to mid-20th Century commentators. The development of the so-called “mass society” and the diffusion public entertainment blurred and undermined rigid cultural and artistic structures of production, consumption, and aesthetic authority. The profusion of social media allows more users to create their own popular culture in ways that are potentially more democratic and diverse (but not necessarily better as the activities of trolls and the practice of trolling reminds us). Instead of a ubiquitous “mass media,” ordinary people are more likely to contribute to and consume a “me media,” something infinitely more bespoke and personalized (but subject to variation depending on internet connectivity and social media usage). Popular culture in the digital age is never static.

Geography’s relationship to popular culture might not be immediately obvious given that key authors in the field tend to be anthropologists, historians, political scientists, and sociologists, as well as scholars working in cultural studies, communication, and film and media studies. American geographers such as Carl Sauer (1889-1975) explored the role of culture in shaping human-environment relations. There were few books that spoke, however, explicitly about the geography of everyday life or geographies of popular culture. Edward Relph wrote in 1976, *Place and Placelessness*, positing that mass media was incompatible with an authentic sense of place. In 1985, an edited collection *Geography, Media and Popular Culture*, made the case for an explicit geographical interrogation. The editors, Jacquelin Burgess and John Gold argued that geographers should consider “the material and symbolic expressions of the ‘everyday’ lives of ‘ordinary people’ and the places in which we live”. The chapters that followed interrogated films, novels, news media, popular nationalisms, and public attitudes towards immigration, racism, crime, and social disorder. The collection was informed by a Marxist approach to popular culture, with most authors eager to uncover ideological biases and class-based interests.

As this chapter details, the place of geography in the study of popular culture has never been entirely absent. An interest in the everyday lives of citizens, however, was investigated via formal channels such as public education. Pioneering scholars such as Halford Mackinder and Vaughan Cornish were concerned with how geographical insights connected to geographical education and public awareness of Britain’s landscapes. Learned societies such as the Royal Geographical Society played their part in popularizing geographical knowledge through public lectures and scholarly and public publications. Mackinder and Cornish did not use the term ‘popular culture’ in their writings but they were certainly attentive to the need for British public education to be geographically informed and sensitized. Later scholars such as Derek Gregory in his 1994 monograph *Geographical Imaginations* drew attention to how colonial and imperial imaginaries underpinned and informed imperial spaces and identities. This is rather different to Marxist inspired scholarship, which focused more on the production of culture rather than consumption and identity formation. Geographical scholarship on popular culture has diversified – theoretically and empirically. Some of the most innovative work such as John Connell and Chris Gibson’s 2003 monograph *Sound Tracks: Popular Music, Identity and Place*, showed how it was possible to be attentive to the intersection of social action, local identities, media networks, trans-national exchange, and global commodification.

**Geographies of Popular Culture**

The geographies of popular culture are immensely varied because of the sheer diversity and scale of cultural artifacts and media. Hollywood cinema, for example, is designed to appeal to large/broad audiences to maximize financial profits, while participatory sub- or counter-culture(s) operate on a small(er)-scale and are often indifferent, resistant to, or non-reliant on commercial success. Teenage culture, black culture, dance culture, and hipster culture appeal to a specific social group/demographic rather than the general population. The size, commercial appeal, and political impact of specific forms of popular culture vary over time and space. Certain cities, regions, and countries inspire, promote, and sustain particular popular cultural articulations. The hipster movement, for instance, originated in 1940s America and jazz music, and the 1950s so-called Beat generation of writers and drifters added further to its popularity and prominence. Jack Kerouac’s 1957 novel *On the Road* became an emblematic text for a generation who were anti-consumerism and anti-materialism, and geographers such as Tim Cresswell, in his 2001 publication *The Tramp in America*, read the novel as an exemplar of popular cultural resistance to dominant societal norms in post-war America.

The most prominent academic interpretations of popular culture in the 20th Century have been undertaken by Marxist social theorists who took issue with earlier formulations of popular culture as something distinct from elite culture. Rather than position popular culture as the inevitable outcome of mass society and the dissolution of traditional binds such as religion and family, they argued that culture and capitalism were intimately linked. The collective work of Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Herbert Marcuse (from the Frankfurt School of social theory and critical philosophy) considers popular culture as cultural hegemony. Informed by Antonio Gramsci’s theorization of hegemony, these theorists examine popular culture as a site for ideological, cultural, economic, and political domination of working classes by bourgeoisie values and practices. In this reading of cultural hegemony, popular culture reflects dominant ideologies that are underpinned by a desire to produce conformity within society. In his 1964 treatise *One Dimensional Man*, Herbert Marcuse argued that consumer culture acts as a form of social control. In other words, post-war American society in particular was predicated on influencing and shaping citizen behaviour through extensive advertising and product promotion. Marcuse argues that at its very worst, mass consumerism promoted a deadening form of conformity and wastefulness in which popular culture hacked by corporate-capitalist interests.

Adorno and Horkheimer studied post-war Hollywood and Fascist Germany comparatively. Warning of the dangers of docile audiences and privileged mass media and cultural institutions, they argued that popular culture could become an arena for capitalist and political elite domination. In the 1950s, in the midst of paranoia about communism and the Soviet threat, the US House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) pursued a coterie of film directors, actors, and artists for their communist sympathies. A modern day witch-hunt followed, with profound consequences for those caught up in the crosshairs of the HUAC. Joanne Sharp’s 2000 work, *Condensing the Cold War*, revealed how the popular magazine *Readers’ Digest* proved influential in consolidating popular geopolitical sensibilities in the United States. In her analysis of the content of the magazine from the 1940s to 1980s, she dissected a persistent hostile tone and negative content directed towards the Soviet Union.

While Marxist theorists of popular culture have been accused of being overly deterministic, more recent studies position producers and consumers of popular culture as active agents. Although popular culture may appear to be dominant and all-pervasive, many sub-cultures and counter-cultures resist, remake, and reject cultural artifacts and practices. In the 1970s and 1980s, British cultural theorists such as Stuart Hall and the Centre for Cultural Studies at Birmingham University positioned citizens as active coders and decoders, providing more complex and nuanced readings of personal and collective identity politics. Hall’s emphasis on agency, fluidity, and diffusion eliminated rigid distinctions between low and high culture, elite and popular culture, and marginal and mainstream culture.

The geographies of popular culture draw attention to how spaces and identities are made and remade through images, ideas, practices, performances, emotion, and affect. As far back as 1947 the president of the Association of American Geographers, J. K. Wright, called for geographers to study popular culture. He noted that any study of geographical knowledge needed to take seriously the role of travel books, magazines, newspapers, and paintings in creating what later cultural geographers would describe as geographical imaginaries. His call was not taken up until the 1970s, however, when humanist geographers began to investigate everyday maps of meaning and experiences of place and environment. New cultural geographical scholarship followed in the 1980s and 1990s, building on the pioneering work of scholars such as Yi-Fu Tuan, Edward Relph, and Douglas Pocock, moving geography away from its positivistic spatial science roots in order to embrace artistic and humanistic approaches to people, place, and environment. Popular cultural studies in human geography was split between Marxist inspired work and humanistic geography, which put human agency and creativity at the heart of explaining social and cultural relationships with place and environment. Much of this work was conditioned and shaped by the pre-internet era and the globalization of media and cultural networks.

**Globalization of Popular Culture**

Popular cultural studies in Anglophone geographygrew exponentially in the 1980s and 1990s with an embrace of the cultural turn, coinciding with an interest in exploring the intensification of social relations in the global production and circulation of popular culture. Peter Jackson’s 1989 monograph *Maps of Meaning* and later Mike Crang’s 1989 work *Cultural Geography* provided accessible and engaging evaluations of how popular culture was being infused by ideology, cultural hybridity, and trans-national media networks. Jackson defined popular culture as informed by “looking at socially marginal groups as well as the dominant, national culture of the elite. It is interested in popular culture as well as vernacular or folk style: in contemporary landscapes as well as relic features of the past”. Crang argued that geographers needed to be attentive to how popular culture is “political and contested – that is, they mean different things to different people in different places”.

By studying what came to be called globalization, geographers and social scientists began to grapple with the twin effects of the easing of Cold War geopolitical tensions and a neo-liberal capitalism underwritten by technological and communication revolutions that enabled knowledge, money, (some) people, and exponential amounts of goods and services to travel ever more easily around the world. Initially, debates about cultural globalization tended to focus on homogenization. Informed by literature on Americanization, Lane Crothers, in his 2007 book *Globalization and American Political Culture*, argued that the U.S. was a cultural superpower because it dominated global entertainment industries. As an exporter of cultural media such as film, satellite broadcasting, and music, as well as food and fashion, the U.S. leveraged its soft power at a time when state-sponsored communism appeared to be on the retreat. Shows like *Dallas* (1978-1991) globalized American music, clothing, and customs, offering a view of the U.S. and West as a repository of cultural values like self-expression, consumerism, and cultural homogenization.

Media and entertainment industries were thought of as exemplars of Americanization/globalization of popular culture. For much of the post-1945 era, the European film market was dominated by Hollywood films, leading to fears that the French film industry faced extinction without the adoption of protectionist measures. The Canadian film and media industry also struggled with the dominance of its nearest neighbour. From Michael Jackson music videos to hit television shows such as *Friends* (1994-2004), America’s greatest exports were arguably cultural in the 1990s and 2000s as McDonalds, Walt Disney, and CNN began to penetrate into new overseas markets in Asia, Africa, and former European communist nations. Paul Adams, in his 2009 monograph *Geographies of Media and Communication*, shows how it is possible to think about those media and popular cultural geographies in innovative ways from distinguishing between ‘places in media’ (e.g. how are places such as New York made meaningful through to the construction of social spaces via media practices such as watching).

The globalization of popular culture provoked fears that American media and cultural industries not only imperilled other national/domestic industries but also posed a grave threat to their expression of cultural identities and creation of public cultures. Don Mitchell in his 2000 book *Cultural Geography*, makes the important point that culture is ongoing, contested, and not a super-organic presence (as Carl Sauer claimed). In a celebrated incident, a French farmer Jose Bové attacked a local McDonalds franchise restaurant in 1999 in protest against U.S.-dominated economic globalization. The wide circulation of cultural exports such as music and film also involved a more complex array of U.S. and non-U.S. companies and stakeholders. While American cultural media, food, and fashion have found favour around over the world, fears of homogenization have in some respects been overstated. For one thing, as Mitchell claimed more generally that cultural imports often get renegotiated and repackaged for local audiences and markets. Fast food restaurant McDonalds developed food offerings, for example, that were tailored to specific dietary restrictions and cultural conventions. Moreover, Hollywood blockbusters have been adjusted in postproduction in recent years to meet the censorship requirements of mainland China in order to be cleared for screening in the lucrative Chinese film market. Other countries have sustained their own cultural products, and U.S. popular culture has itself been influenced and informed by music, fashion, food, and popular entertainment trends elsewhere. So there are distinct spaces that cultural products and practices operate within.

Since the heyday of these Americanization/globalization debates in the 1980s, it has become clear that global popular culture is not dominated by the United States. One notable example is in the growth of China as a producer and exporter of cultural media and products. Global diffusion of Hong Kong kung fu action films (during the “kung fu craze”) made an international star of American-born star Bruce Lee through such films like *Fist of Fury* (1972) and *Way of the Dragon* (1972). Later joined by a cast of Chinese-heritage action stars including Jackie Chan, Jet Li, and Michelle Yeoh, martial arts became enrolled in a suite of films in the 1980s and 1990s. Hong Kong films and actors attracted critical and popular claim in North America and Europe in addition to Asia, and Ang Lee’s critically acclaimed *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) marked a high point in foreign language film popularity. Geographical scholarship on film has drawn attention to the economic geographies of the creative and cultural industries alongside readings and audience consumption. Allen Scott’s 2005 monograph *On Hollywood: The Place, The Industry*, provides a compelling analysis of how and why Hollywood has endured despite the globalization of film-making and commercial markets.

The global film industry provides a powerful example of globalization as something more nuanced than either cultural imperialism (Americanization) or cultural exchange (hybridization) theories fully explain. Hollywood and Asian film industries illustrate how film production, circulation, and consumption is varied and always negotiated in local, regional, and international contexts. Recent Bond films, for example, have always been transnational affairs in terms of funding, filming, and marketing, but they have also become ever more attentive to the Chinese and wider Asian markets. While *Skyfall* (2012) was screened in China, it was censored in places where the Chinese authorities were unhappy with references to prostitution in Macau and the role of torture carried out by Chinese security forces while a rogue British agent was held in their custody after the 1997 handover. Three years later, *Spectre* (2015) performed impressively with Chinese audiences. Daniel Craig was sent to China to promote the movie and it was deliberately timed to coincide with the Single Days celebration, the biggest online shopping day in the country. The film was also heavily promoted in other key Asian markets including Singapore and Hong Kong. Funnell and Dodds in their 2017 monograph *Geographies, Genders and Geopolitics of James Bond* show how Bond/007 is a multi-sited and dynamic phenomenon bringing together an assemblage of finance, locations, creative agency, audiences and artefacts.

**Popular Culture 2.0**

Even before the advent of the Internet and later the social media revolution, media and cultural analysis began approaching popular culture as something far more actively consumed than earlier research assumed. Informed by an ethnographic turn in social research in the 1980s, media, communication, and cultural studies scholars engaged in new audience research to consider how people actually watched television, enjoyed film, and read novels. Using such techniques as interviews, participant observation, and survey research, they began to better understand and appreciate the role of audiences in place-making. For instance, as highlighted in her 1985 book *Watching Dallas*, Ien Ang explored the television viewing habits of Dutch women using the immensely popular and globally distributed American television series *Dallas* (1978-91). Ang relied strongly on audience testimony, opening up space to not only challenge simplistic assumptions about cultural imperialism but to also reveal the critical role that popular media plays in shaping sensibilities and subjectivities. Moreover, Ang’s writing on the role of women and their viewing pleasures sparked new approaches to thinking of audiences as gendered, nationalized, and racialized, as well as differentiated through age, sexuality, and occupation.

Later research on audiences emphasized the importance of doing and feeling (i.e. actively engaging with) rather than simply receiving or watching (i.e. passively consuming) popular culture. New literature in cultural, television, and more recently, new media studies, strongly emphasizes that audiences can and do argue over the meaning and significance of television shows, public art, film, advertising, music, and clothing. Active audiences can and do read against the grain and develop what Stuart Hall once described as an encoding/decoding relationship with popular culture. Hall’s argument was that audiences might adopt one of three viewing positions (adoption, negotiation, and rejection), and that making sense of popular culture entails taking seriously the everyday encounters of people with media and cultural artifacts. Film geographers Ann Fletchall, Chris Lukinbeal, and Kevin McHugh explore the role that place specifically plays in informing audience perceptions and subjectivities. In their 2012 book *Place, Television, and the Real Orange County*, they explore how various reality television series set in Orange County, California, use place and especially landscape images to create a sense of ‘emotional realism’ to encourage audiences to believe the claim of these reality television shows that the events unfolding on screen are real and not scripted.

The advent of the internet and the social media revolution in the 1990s and 2000s have added to the thinking about popular culture as immersive, with blurred distinction between producer, circulator, and consumer of cultural artifacts. Social media platforms provide unprecedented opportunities for those with reliable internet access to produce their own videos, circulate commentary, and consume an array of cultural media. The focus is on, what Jason Dittmer and Dan Bos note in their 2010 book *Popular Culture, Geopolitics and Identity,* the ‘doings’ – the interaction between people, artefacts and wider popular cultural circuits. Recent audience research on popular shows such as *Keeping up with the Kardashians* (2007-present) and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) have illustrated the role that fans play in commenting on, creatively responding to, and engaging with, the producers. Television fantasy and reality shows have been hugely popular because they invite viewers to immerse themselves into the everyday lives of celebrities and they enable viewers to participate in online fan cultures. The diffusion of social media platforms enables viewers to actively advocate for storylines, promote fan clubs and fan fiction, and write and record their own appreciations of cultural media. Popular culture provides capabilities and resources for individuals, communities and institutions to invoke and mobilize.

The blurring of popular cultural producers and consumers, however, must be considered with some caution. Media fandom, for example, is riven with tension and conflict about who is allowed to speak and engage in public discussion, with women and racial minorities who raise their voices in public spaces facing violence and silencing. As #Gamergate amply showed, online abuse is often particularly virulent towards women and girls. Although the internet appeared, in its earliest iterations, to promise unprecedented opportunities for creativity and fresh perspectives, both audiences and producers are varied and variegated by others. One’s level of participation in online social media spheres is encouraged or discouraged by society and social media encounters. When the internet first emerged, some believed that political and cultural authoritarianism was going to be held accountable by a new global community of online users. Two decades later, conversations about global popular culture have shifted to focus more on the covert role and impact of media intrusions, commercial and state-sponsored surveillance, and data mining, as Daniel Trottier points out in their 2012 monograph *Social Media as Surveillance: Rethinking Visibility in a Converging World.*

David Beer in his 2013 book *Popular Culture and New Media: The Politics of Circulation*, highlights how this ‘participatory turn’ in popular culture is double-edged. To speak of American popular culture, for example, is to enter into a highly contested terrain of analysis, where so-called “culture wars” have gripped the country over issues such as abortion, #BlackLivesMatter, sexual assault and harassment in the workplace (e.g. #MeToo), gun control, and struggles for equality for LGBTIQ communities. Popular culture, in both online and offline spaces, is a vibrant and at times violent sphere for contending visions of the ways in which nationalism and patriotism should be expressed. A gamut of ideas, practices, discourses, representations and affective atmospheres of hate, fear, solidarity and so on circulate in popular culture and its media. As Beer notes, “Millions of people on a global scale are engaging with culture via these new media forms as they enchant, distract, entertain, reveal and occupy…we should be thinking [about] their use and incorporation into everyday practice”.

Social media will continue to be a site, network, technology, and affective arena for political scandal and contention. Frank Pasquale’s 2016 book *The Black Box Society: The Secret Algorithms that Control Money and Information* provides a useful overview of the regulatory and technological parameters at work. During the 2016 presidential campaign, millions of messages were sent by Russia to voters in the United States though social media platforms such as Facebook. The new challenge for social media users and scholars alike is to make sense of a media ecology in which bots, fake news, and the dark web have become compelling and arguably corrupting influences in the public sphere. Algorithms end up playing an important role in shaping and directing users’ access to news, popular entertainment, shopping, and, as the 2016 presidential campaign demonstrated, political commercials and advertising. Further, as both governments and commercial giants such as Facebook increasingly commercialize, survey, and evaluate online engagements, harvesting and recording this information has become big business. Individual online search histories, commercial habits, and social engagements never truly disappear—leading to very real and legitimate concerns about how governments and corporations can covertly influence decision-making that benefits those in power. Future geographical work will, almost certainly, explore further the role of data mining in the construction of publics and the supervision and regulation of social media.

**Conclusion**

The contribution of geographers to the study of popular culture has grown considerably since the late 1980s. Peter Jackson’s *Maps of Meaning*, published some 30 years ago, remains instructive. Jackson encouraged geographers to embrace the ‘opportunity’ to do popular cultural work. Taking up that challenge, geographers have moved away from ‘reading’ cultural landscapes and analysing in isolation specific media such as novels, films and television. Scholarly attention is more attentive towards the diversity of popular culture (for example studying video games and night clubs), and its ‘ordinariness’. It is more attentive to the immersive qualities of popular culture, taking into account the role and scope of digital culture, 3D movie making and new devices such as drones which offer everyday opportunities for place immersion and private data generation.

This is reflected in methodological and theoretical approaches, which are neither beholden to the aesthetic preoccupations of academic researchers nor focused on expert interpretation and normative judgement, a point reinforced in notable publications such as Tim Edensor’s 2002 monograph *National Identity, Popular Culture and Everyday Life*. Popular cultural scholarship in geography is ever more multi-media and multi-sensorial, with links to spatial experience and knowledge. The touch, feel and scope of digital and social media such as smart phones and tablets offers impetus to think further about the ‘doing’ of popular culture. Citizens can produce, circulate, and consume more media than ever before, and the ‘objects’ of and for popular culture more diverse. James Ash and his colleagues offer a good example of this diversity in their book, *Digital Geographies*.

Given relatively new insights about the influence of social media in other spheres of political and social life, studying popular culture has never been as important as it is today. The majority of the world’s populations are living in the most media saturated environment in history. The production, distribution, and consumption of media and cultural artefacts is of profound importance in such a world. Whether it be video games, film, food, and/or social media, the way in which a population or community produces and consumes popular culture informs and influences the way it views itself, other populations or communities, and the world at large. Each retweet, like, repeat, endorsement, share, and distribution contributes to popular culture—both directly through digital engagements between people and indirectly by influencing the algorithms that organize, structure, and prioritize what and how content gets posted. For many, understanding and engagement with the world is enabled or constrained through popular culture and the myriad of networks and relations of power that make it possible. The uneven distribution of networks and power, however, mean that some individuals, populations, and communities have more opportunities than others to participate in popular cultures than others. Some lack access to reliable internet or cannot afford a smart phone. Some experience hate, shaming, and misogyny. Some have been silenced physical, politically, and/or socially. And some find means and ways to profiteer from what some authors are terming ‘smart capitalism’, where personal data is harvested, re-packaged and commodified.

Geographers are well placed to continue to participate and research into and engage with popular culture.

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