

Introduction: Why Popular Culture Matters

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This is my first issue as the new editor for this journal, so please grant me some leeway to address the question of why popular culture matters being highlighted in these pages, including with our first attempt at a multimedia, interactive component. Please indulge my brief time on the soap box to explain my perspective to hopefully clarify my approach as the Editor of this journal.

I come to this—field? discipline? interest? passion?—from three separate perspectives: communication studies, fan studies, and psychology. I am fascinated with how people make sense of themselves, each other, and the world around them. Being a fan provides a particular slant to these sense-makings and can shape, and be shaped by, communication. I see all interactions with others as communicating because meaning is always exchanged. Sometimes that meaning is exchanged in a word; sometimes a picture; sometimes a cake; sometimes a slap. As a part of a person's identity, fandom informs, is created through, and impacts others through communication. The context or situation in which the communication occurs also shapes these interactions. Time of day. Place. Participants. So many factors impact what we communicate, how, and why.

Popular culture comes in through our fandoms and our situations. Popular culture is popular. It is for the public. The masses. For everyday working folk who perhaps could not afford the “finer” things of a society or culture but still find meaning and solidarity through so-called “low culture.” Popular culture helps people handle the drudgery of labor for the profit of others. Popular culture provides an education, a socialization to further people's interactions and, perhaps, people's status in life. Popular culture can reassure people that they are not alone, and it can challenge the status quo. Popular culture can unite, either in a narrow way around a specific text or activity or location or person, or in a more general way, through a network of thoughts, feelings, and/or behaviors that interrelate to constitute it.

We are not merely members or citizens of popular culture as we are other cultures or societies. To those we are born or naturalized. To popular culture we are converts or migrants. We move in and out of popular cultures as our lives change. We are fans of popular culture, primarily in the broadest sense, and then for all the

The Popular Culture Studies Journal, Vol. 7, No. 1
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specific forms that change during our lives. We willingly adhere to the tenets of popular culture, or else we leave it.

But to convert or adhere or leave, all these actions require communication as we interact with other fans, anti-fans, and non-fans. Writ large or narrowly focused, popular culture is the common language that weaves us together to help us find and make meaning, to discover ourselves and each other, to build community and solidarity, and to make sense of these things we call reality and life.

Admittedly, all of what I just wrote is celebratory, even pie-in-the-sky and rose-colored idealism. As a counterpoint, Scott M. Bruner provides an invited editorial in this issue to challenge our ideas about what popular culture is and why it matters. While we may disagree on the necessity for “popular” culture studies, we agree on the need for studying the cultures people live their lives in and through. In a world full of religious divisions and political partisanship, where people have a hard time communicating because of differences in beliefs and terminology, popular culture has become the means through which people can find connections and to have conversations on topics that—usually—do not lead to the same acrimony as religion or politics. Thanks to the online nature of popular culture, these connections and conversations can occur on a globalized transcultural or transnational level, creating empathic experiences and relationships heretofore unknown in human civilization. We can find our commonalities, and embrace our differences, through the popular culture we consume.

And in a world that perpetuates inequality in sociocultural, political, and economic power, popular culture can reify those inequalities, but it can also work to upend those traditional hierarchies and dynamics. Popular culture texts, practices, industries, communities and more can reflect the public’s values and beliefs at a particular time. Along with mirroring what the masses feel and think, understanding popular culture can illuminate these inner workings better than other aspects of life as it encompasses art and anthropology, ritual and exceptionality, the material and the metaphysical. Studying popular culture can reveal what is unknown in the known, what is unseen in the seen, and what could be empowerment among the disempowered.

These “coulds” and “cans” drive those who study popular culture, as gathered in these pages. Such as Carter Moulton, whose analysis of current television practices demonstrates a new approach to understanding how the technology undergirding our popular culture is changing, and perhaps changing us. Then Graeme John Wilson, whose work on *The Walking Dead* focuses on a problematic

representation of masculinity in contemporary American culture. And M. N. Roberts, whose examination of *Breaking Bad* suggests a challenging moral education coming through the series. With Stephanie Salerno, who explores fans' push and pull when dealing with the conflicting emotions of a Rufus Wainwright performance. And Mike Piero, whose work in this issue on the adaptation of *Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs* suggests an issue with capitalistic values being taught to children. And then with Jessica Seymour, whose consideration of the musical *Hamilton* challenges the intersection between gender and legacy in American culture. Finally, with Erin B. Waggoner, who explores the use of color in Robert Rodriguez's film adaptation of Frank Miller's *Sin City* graphic novels. All these articles help us to understand our world in new ways.

Of course, we may not always agree with what the analysis shows us, and we each may read the texts of popular culture in different ways. Such differences are fine—wonderful even—as long as we remain in open communication about them to learn with and from one another. Such communication, however, is becoming challenging, as popular culture causes the problems that align with the political partisanship of culture wars and fan wars. Thus, while we celebrate the various ways that popular culture allows us to emote, to create, to reflect, to illuminate, to reveal, to connect and to converse, we should also consider these more negative aspects. We should study popular culture to understand how it involves dividing, silencing, disempowering, stereotyping, exploiting, and more.

Popular culture is popular. It is of the people, by the people, for the people. And sometimes that means it does great things with and for the people. But because people are people, sometimes those things are horrible. Good or bad, popular culture remains important.

Popular culture matters not because it is something external to us to study, but because it is a part of us—all of us, whether we like to admit it or not. To borrow from the most important fandom in my life, popular culture is the force that surrounds us and penetrates us; it binds the world together. Sometimes in good ways, sometimes in bad ways.

But whatever the way, it is there for us to study, and because we are always in flux, so is it. Studying popular culture will never be done, and if that isn't a sign of its importance, then I don't know what is.