

UNCHAINED MELODIES



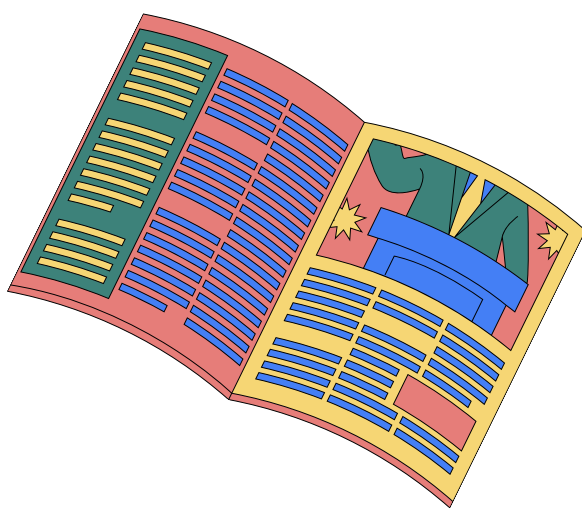
WHY EXAMINE POPULAR CULTURE?

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

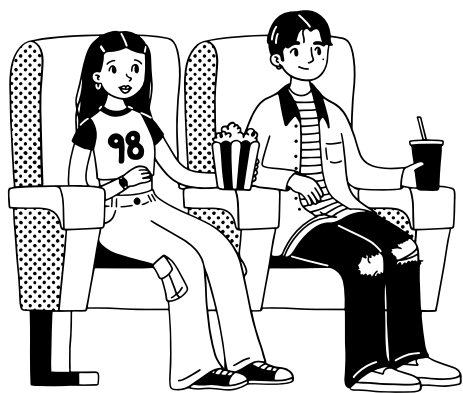
- First, we will define the term popular culture
- Next, we will explore why it's important to analyze popular culture and understand some of the counterarguments about why people might dismiss popular culture
- Finally, we will conclude with a reflection on popular culture and explore ways to begin examining it

WHAT IS POPULAR CULTURE?

Popular culture, also known as pop culture, includes the stories, images, music, and media that surround us every day. It is not separate from our everyday realities, and it helps shape how we understand ourselves and how we make sense of the world.



Jane Caputi, a professor of Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, reflects on the meaning of pop culture in an essay where she analyzes the film *Shrek*. In the essay, Caputi states, the term popular “comes from a Latin word meaning people.” Studying pop culture is therefore a way to understand people, and as Caputi notes, this is a very important indicator of “what people commonly know, value, fear, remember and believe.” This quote reminds us that pop culture reflects both our desires and our anxieties. Additionally, pop culture highlights the stories we share as a community, as well as the stories told back to us.

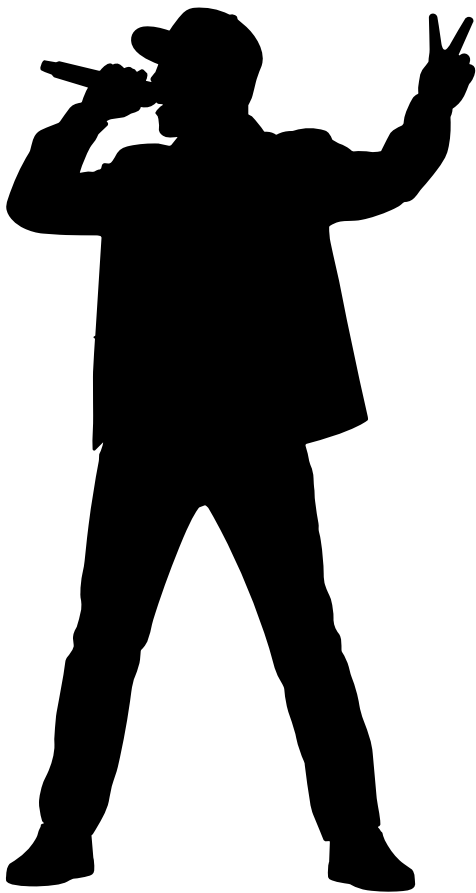


Cultural theorist Stuart Hall expands this idea by emphasizing that culture is never a finished thing. He states, “Culture is a process.” This quote invites us to see pop culture as something constantly created, argued over, reshaped, and reimagined as culture shifts; therefore, pop culture is not stationary, it's constantly transforming.



WHY ANALYZE POPULAR CULTURE?

Now that we understand the definition of popular culture, let's take a moment to explore why we should analyze popular culture. Why do you think it is important to understand pop culture?



Some people argue that pop culture is “just trash,” or that certain popular songs or media have no deeper meaning. For example, individuals might think of mainstream pop music as shallow or meaningless. But if we look closely at the lyrics, performances, and images of artists like Kendrick Lamar, J. Cole, Beyoncé, and the *Bending the Bars* tracks, we see stories about struggle, resilience, community, and social justice. These works reflect real-life experiences, highlight social inequalities, and challenge dominant narratives, showing us the importance of analyzing pop culture.

Instead of dismissing pop culture as merely entertainment, take a moment to reflect on some of your favorite songs and the meanings the artists have conveyed in their music. For instance, in the 2025 Super Bowl Halftime show, Kendrick Lamar included some very powerful statements in his performance. At one point in the show, Lamar stated, “40 acres and a mule / this is bigger than the music. They tried to rig the game / but you can't fake influence.” This quote by Lamar, about “40 acres and a mule,” is not just a reference to Spike Lee's film production³ company. Both artists are referencing the promise made to formerly enslaved Black Americans that was ultimately denied after the Civil War and the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. They make the claim that through art and creating culture, they can claim what is owed them by US society.



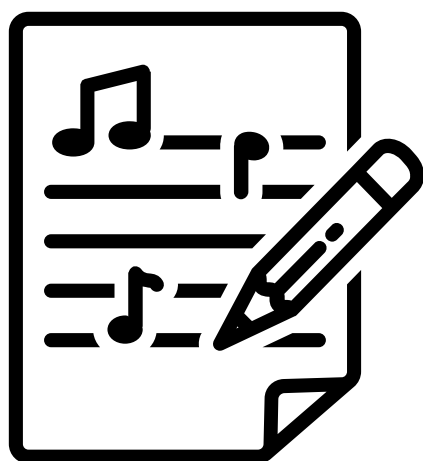
This example from Lamar illustrates the importance of analyzing popular culture to understand the powerful stories and messages that artists convey through their work. Lamar's quote at the Super Bowl show is an example of the power of storytelling and highlights the importance of understanding and unpacking popular culture.

CONCLUSION LET'S REFLECT

Since we've read about popular culture and ways that it reflects what is important to society, take a moment to reflect on some of your favorite artists. What are the ways that the artists you like convey important messages? Do they do this through the lyrics they use? The references they make? Or do they do this in another way? How might you explore issues important to you through your own art?



When we take a moment to explore popular culture, we can see the importance and dive a bit deeper into our favorite things. Some ways you can analyze popular culture are by examining lyrics, looking at themes that show up in your favorite story, or questioning how certain characters are represented in film and media. Taking time to look at popular culture critically is vital to understanding the important messages artists want to convey.



Together, Caputi, Hall, Lamar, and others have shown us that pop culture is not trivial. It is a shared language that helps us understand ourselves and our communities. When we study pop culture, we are studying meaning itself. We are studying imagination, belief, memory, and power as they appear in our everyday stories, from music to movies, pop culture shows us what is important to people.



WHERE WE FOUND THIS INFORMATION

1. Hall, Stuart. Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices. SAGE Publications Limited, 1997.
2. Caputi, Jane. "Green Consciousness: Earth-Based Myth and Meaning in Shrek." Ethics and the Environment, vol. 12, no. 2, 2007, pp. 23–44. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40339139>.
3. Avila, Daniela. "What Was Kendrick Lamar Referencing With '40 Acres and a Mule' at Super Bowl Halftime Show? Spike Lee Explains Shoutout." *People.com*, 12 Feb. 2025, people.com/kendrick-lamar-40-acres-and-mule-super-bowl-2025-reference-spike-lee-explains-11678962.

