Third Edition

Popular Culture

A User's Guide

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Preface: A User's Guide to the *User's Guide*

The goal of *Popular Culture: A User's Guide* is to provide readers with an introduction to the critical study of popular culture. Our aim is to give readers the analytical tools to understand the everyday texts and practices that surround them, as well as their own roles as consumers of and participants in popular culture.

Why does anyone need a guidebook to popular culture? Don't we all already know not only what is meant by popular culture, but also how to consume and use it? Guidebooks are supposed to make mysterious lands with unusual customs more familiar or help us learn how to navigate complex tasks (like building a deck or planting a good-looking garden) with greater ease. Popular culture, on the other hand, is, well, *popular*. When it comes to watching films, listening to pop music, shopping, or sucking down cups of coffee, we believe that we know exactly what we are doing and why we are doing it. Like our native tongue, popular culture is something we know how to "speak" without resorting to lessons, audiotapes, courses, or guidebooks. So what can a user's guide tell us about popular culture that we don't already know?

In many respects, it is precisely the intimacy and familiarity with which we engage in contemporary popular culture that requires critical reflection, exploration, and analysis. After all, knowing how to speak a language because we are immersed in it does not mean that we are necessarily able to read or write it, or that we understand its syntax and structure. Reading and writing take an enormous amount of effort to get right. And once we have learned how to read, we are faced with other questions, such as how written language on a page can convey information about real and imagined worlds.

As with language, so, too, with popular culture. Because we are immersed in it, popular culture is both uniquely accessible and frustratingly opaque; it is hard to get a critical purchase on something we inhabit so completely and, most of the time, more or less unconsciously. To help us understand the "syntax" and "grammar" of popular culture—the unacknowledged but crucial structures that give popular culture its shape, meaning, and significance—this book attempts to help readers to see this familiar terrain more acutely and with greater insight. Our familiarity with popular culture tends to hide some of its most important features and its relationship to broader social, political, and economic currents. *Popular Culture: A User's Guide* will help readers to see parts of the contemporary cultural landscape that they may have been looking at all along without really perceiving.

This book aims to take readers beyond the "common sense" approach to popular culture, an approach that is defined by an odd mix of cynical knowingness and complacency.

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We are working from the premise that readers today possess an unprecedented level of media literacy. We are all aware, for example, that certain forms of media, such as advertising, operate according to particular agendas that may or may not reflect our own interests, and we also believe that we are smart enough to resist. This book seeks to create a level of awareness that goes beyond cynical complacency, not only to make readers aware of the underlying socioeconomic structures that determine the shape of media and, by extension, consciousness, but also to recognize the myriad ways that popular culture manages to manoeuvre around these structures. We want to give students the tools to understand their role not just as consumers but also as agents of popular culture.

We also want to showcase the full range of activities and practices that can be considered part of contemporary popular cultural experience. Unlike "high culture," which is generally understood to refer to a discrete body of books or artworks that are unified by their adherence to specific aesthetic and cultural codes, the field of popular culture is diverse and uneven, comprising texts and practices ranging from commercial media to subcultural styles to the activities of everyday life (eating, shopping, drinking coffee, recreational activities, etc.).

Many books about popular culture are actually surveys or overviews of academic or theoretical *approaches* to the study of popular culture. In other words, what such books offer is a roughly historical account of a specific academic discipline (what is now often called cultural studies) and the individuals and theories that have been important to the development of that discipline. While we certainly discuss and make use of many of the most important theories of popular culture, we have chosen to emphasize practical strategies for understanding and interpreting the popular. Working from case studies and examples, the aim of this book is to provide readers with a critical vocabulary and methods of analysis that will allow them to perform independent readings of cultural texts extending far beyond the sampling we offer here.

The specific analyses we provide in each chapter exemplify ways of using and adapting critical and theoretical materials to address the issues and problems at hand. The text is organized mainly around broad themes rather than specific genres or forms of popular culture (television, music, film, etc.), and is book-ended by chapters that focus on the prehistory of contemporary popular culture (Chapter 1) and on the complexities that the current historical context introduces for the study of popular culture (Chapters 9 and 10).

A number of other features make this book a distinctive contribution to the study of popular culture. There is, first, an emphasis throughout on the politics of popular culture—that is, on the way in which popular culture is always connected to practices and discourses related to the exercise and struggle over power and recognition in contemporary society. Second, there is an emphasis on Canadian examples and situations. Why? Even though our understanding of popular culture has been shaped and influenced by writers and thinkers from around the world, our approach to and understanding of popular culture is informed by our experiences of growing up and teaching in Canada. This does not mean, of course, that everything that we talk about or make reference to

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in this book has been made or created in Canada. This would be a false reflection of the experience of popular culture in Canada, which has historically always included radio and television programs from the United States and the United Kingdom(and elsewhere) and film and literature from around the world—alongside and in conjunction with homegrown programming and cultural production.

Sometimes at the expense of our own cultural producers, Canadians have been (for a variety of reasons) avid consumers of pop culture produced around the world. This book reflects this diversity of pop cultural sources, but just as importantly provides an interesting, uniquely Canadian perspective on Western pop culture that emerges out of Canada's specific structural relationship to the mythical pop cultural centre—"America." Because Canada is both outside of American pop culture and also uniquely and deeply engaged with it, we hope that this book sheds an interesting and useful light on phenomena that have thus far been examined from the perspective of too few geographic locations—for the most part, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia. In the study of popular culture, what you see and do not see often depends on where you are looking from.

Finally, to help our readers work through the *User's Guide,* we have incorporated a number of pedagogical features. Important terms and concepts are listed in a glossary at the end of the book and highlighted in **bold** in the text to allow readers to cross-reference with ease. Each chapter contains one or more suggested activities and questions that are intended to get readers to think further about particular subjects and to apply them to their own experiences. In course use, these Suggested Activities may form the basis of oral or written assignments. Close-Ups in each chapter clarify key concepts, theories, or movements, and may also form the basis for further study and investigation. Each chapter ends with a list of suggestions for further reading. These titles include other introductory texts that may deal with the same material in a different way or with a different emphasis, as well as original works by scholars and theorists referred to in the chapter. This text also has a website with more helpful resources and information, located at www.popularculture3e.nelson.com.

Like the writers of any guidebook, our hope is that readers use our maps and recommendations of places to visit and things to think about as a jumping-off point for the elaboration of their own maps of the landscape of popular culture. The authors would be the first to admit that not only are there plenty of things they have not seen, but there are places they do not yet know even exist.

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

In the late 1990s, when we began work on the first edition of *Popular Culture: A User's Guide*, we had a good sense that the task was going to be daunting. How to produce a reasonable survey of a subject whose hugeness was only exceeded by its stubborn refusal to stop moving? In the end, we felt the book did a pretty good job of covering its topic;

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what merited inclusion was vast but seemed mostly containable in representative samples and case studies. In the relatively short time between the publication of the first edition (2004) and this one, what counts as popular culture has grown exponentially, and with it, the range of potential examples and case studies has expanded beyond the capacities of two authors and a team of research assistants to contain. Our experience has been a little like watching the revolving thumbnail images of videos people are watching on YouTube: every few seconds, something new comes along that could potentially be interesting and illustrative of an issue or concept that would unlock the idea of popular culture for our readers, but as we pause to consider it, it's quickly replaced by something else. At certain points we've just had to stop, click the X in the upper-right-hand corner of our browser and word processor, and take our best educated guesses about what phenomena will offer the clearest insights into the state of popular culture, not just over the next few weeks. "Feist on Sesame Street"? "HYPE: The Obama Effect"? "Master Casters—Skeet Fishing"? Who is to say which of these commentaries on the state of things will imprint itself on our collective minds in a lasting way? (We hope you won't be too disappointed to know that none of these topics makes it into the book in any significant way.)

On a more pragmatic level, as we considered what to do with the second edition of this book, we had to rein in two impulses: the desire to do the whole thing over again from scratch, and the desire to add and add until there was nothing in the pop culture universe that we hadn't discussed or at least touched upon. Assuming we had world enough and time, either of these approaches would have probably ended up making a fatal mess of a book that we feel has done a good job of introducing students to the ins and outs of the study of popular culture.

In consultation with students and instructors, and based on our (admittedly subjective) sense of what's important at the moment, this book does look different from its predecessor in some significant ways. We have expanded some sections and condensed others; for example, material in the final chapter in the first edition, which touched briefly on the history and development of the academic field of cultural studies, has been incorporated into Chapter 1. In addition to more detailed discussions of digital culture throughout, this book contains one entirely new chapter on the spaces and places of popular culture. Finally, the new edition includes a more extensive and up-to-date range of case studies.

You might ask: Why didn't they spend time talking about *Guitar Hero*? Or the cost of cellphone service in Canada? Or about the crisis that happens at the dinner table when the kids have been spending too much time watching *Ramsay's Kitchen Nightmares*? How could they have talked about *x* without thinking about *y*? No single book on popular culture—especially an introductory book like this one—can claim to be definitive: the topics and case studies we use are meant to be supplemented by other ideas and examples. We hope we've given you fodder for spirited disagreement and recognition of all we've left out—but we hope, too, that the book offers you helpful tools, concepts, ideas, and examples that you will continue to work with long after your academic relationship to pop culture is over.

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PREFACE TO THE THIRD EDITION

The four years between the publication of the second and third edition of this *User's Guide* coincide with U.S. president Barack Obama's first term and the first four years of (what appears to be) the protracted fallout of the 2008 financial crash. Economies around the world continue to be shaky; job numbers almost everywhere are not what governments hoped them to be—in most countries, youth unemployment figures are particularly high, and in many they are staggering—and the level of indebtedness of countries, companies, and individuals threatens to upset the given order of things and to bring something new in its wake.

Despite this economic and political turmoil, popular culture continues its near exponential expansion—an expansion not only in numerical terms (think of the sheer number of apps now available for Apple or Android devices), but also in terms of new forms and modes of cultural expression and experimentation. While much in popular culture *hasn't* changed in the 10 years since the first edition of this book, a great deal—and a great deal that we think will be of particular interest to student readers of this book—has.

This edition of the *User's Guide* stays true to the strengths of its two earlier iterations while trying to capture the dynamic and ever-changing landscape of popular culture at the beginning of the 21st century. In addition to updating the book throughout, we've added more material on digital culture, especially on the role played by social media in political change. We've also done our best to explain the causes, consequences, and characteristics of the uncertain circumstances in which the college and university students who will be using this book find themselves—a world of struggle over cultural tastes, values, and mores; attacks on social movements such as labour and feminism, along with the development of new forms of activism; environmental deterioration and resource depletion; student debt; and information overload. The challenge of making sense of these changes—let alone confronting them in our lives—is formidable. We hope that, in reading this book, you experience some exhilaration along with inevitable difficulties, just as we have in writing it.

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