Humanities 123: American Popular Culture / R. Miller
Glossary

Glossary caveat: Students should note that some of the following terms have multiple meanings or are debatable. Nonetheless, the definitions provided are useful descriptions of the ways these terms are commonly used. Additional terms will be provided and discussed in class. You will be responsible for understanding these terms, and they will be included in quizzes.

Aesthetic(s): related to the appreciation of beauty or good taste or a conception of what is artistically valid or beautiful.

Alternative culture: Created to have the intended effect of by-passing mass culture but not consumer culture. Alternative culture typically defies the conventions of whatever is considered “mainstream” at the time.

Anti-hero: a protagonist who lacks the characteristics that would make him or her a typical hero or heroine. An anti-hero should not be confused with a “villain”; in fact, anti-heroes function as a kind of unconventional type of hero in novels, films, etc.

Appropriation: The term appropriation is often used to describe an approach to making art and culture that has become quite common in recent decades. To appropriate something is to lift an image, sound, or subject matter from an original source and use it in a new cultural text. Pop art, for example, is known for appropriating images from consumer culture and popular culture. More recently rap music has become known for its appropriation (or “sampling”) of pre-recorded music. What is significant about the act of appropriation is that it does not merely copy an original; the meaning or effect of the appropriated material changes in its new context.

Archetype: an original model from which others are copied. Archetypes should not be confused with “stereotypes”. Unlike stereotypes, archetypes are considered idealized personae (heroes, for example) that we emulate.

Avant-garde: a description of an individual, group, or cultural practice that is active in the invention and application of new techniques or approaches in a given field, particularly the arts. Avant-garde art is generally regarded to be ‘ahead of its time’ and difficult to understand.

Binary: a binary is composed of two parts or components. In cultural terms, we can think of a binary as two concepts that are seen as opposites. The French theorist Jacques Derrida has been influential in the interrogation and critique of western binaries such as black/white, civilized/uncivilized, first world/third world, etc. We can think of high culture and low culture as a kind of binary.

Bourgeois: a member of the middle class or a person whose attitudes and behavior conform to that of the middle class. In Marxist theory, a bourgeois person is a member of the property-owning class; a capitalist. The bourgeoisie are the social group opposed to the proletariat in the class struggle. The term bourgeois is often used to describe a person with material values.

Canon: a group of books or works that are considered essential to a literary or cultural tradition. The plays of Shakespeare are part of the canon of English literature. The term is associated with works of high culture.

Class: in cultural studies this term refers to a group of people who are related by economic status and are said to be of the same social class: for example, working class, middle class, upper class. It is commonly thought that people of the same class tend to share the same social interests, cultural tastes, and political viewpoints.
**Code:** a system of signs or values that assigns meanings to the elements that belong to it. For example, a traffic code defines a red light as a “stop” signal, whereas a fashion code determines whether an article of clothing is stylish. To decode a system is to figure out its meanings, as when one discovers what an unlaced basketball sneaker means in the code of teenage fashion.

**Commodity:** an article of trade or commerce. A commodity is something that can be turned to a commercial or other advantage.

**Connote / connotation:** to connote is to suggest or imply in addition to literal meaning. A connotation is the meaning emotively suggested by a word, as opposed to its objective reference, or denotation. Thus, the word “flag” might connote (or suggest) feelings of patriotism, while it literally denotes (or refers to) a pennant-like object.

**Consumer culture:** refers to the commodities and the process by which popular culture texts are commodified by producing, distributing, and consuming them for the purpose of profit, often by drawing on consumers' fears and desires.

**Consumption:** the use of products and services, as opposed to their production. A consumer culture is one that consumes more than it produces. As a consumer culture, for example, the United States uses more consumer goods such as TV sets and stereos than it manufactures, which results in a trade deficit with such producer cultures as Japan.

**Context:** the environment in which a sign can be interpreted. In the context of a Pearl Jam concert, for example, plaid flannels and Doc Martens can mean that one is part of the group. Wearing the same outfit in the context of a job interview at IBM might be interpreted as meaning that you don't really want the job.

**Co-opt:** to neutralize or win over through assimilation into an established group or culture.

**Culture:** The entire way of life of a defined group of people, which includes the interrelated spheres of the physical world, material social conditions, ideology, spirituality, affect. Culture includes the overall system of values and traditions shared by a group of people. The term culture is not exactly synonymous with “society” as a society can include numerous cultures within its boundaries.

**Denote / denotation:** to signify directly or refer to something specifically. Denote can describe the relation between a word and the thing it names and connote describes the relation between the word and the images it evokes. For example, a beret denotes a hat and connotes France and / or artists. A denotation is a particular object or group of objects to which a word refers.

**Discourse:** The means by which language, broadly understood, through the production, distribution, and reception of texts, conveys meaning (especially ideology) on a conscious and unconscious level. In contemporary cultural studies, the term “discourse” most frequently refers to the ways in which individual disciplines delimit what is considered true or real. The notion of discourse is vital to understanding how individuals are formed within culture.

**Dominant culture:** the group within a society whose traditions, values, and beliefs are held to be normative. A European or “Western” culture is dominant in the United States.

**Explicit:** fully and clearly defined, expressed, or formulated. This term often refers to something that is graphically detailed or forthright and readily observable, not subtle.

**Folk culture:** refers to popular culture texts created by a group of people, usually growing out of (in response to, celebrating) a way of life, which is not intended to be/nor has the effect of being part of mass culture.
Popular culture, in a traditional sense, refers to folk culture. However, today it is often conflated with the term “mass culture”.

**Gender:** one’s sexual identity and the roles that follow from it, as determined by the norms of one’s culture rather than biology or genetics. Our cultural associations with gender should not be confused with the biological distinctions between the sexes. A gender “norm” is a kind of cultural assumption about the gender. The assumption that women should be foremost in the nurturing of children is a longstanding gender “norm”; the fact that only women can give birth, on the other hand, is a biological phenomenon.

**Hegemony:** hegemony is Antonio Gramsci’s term for the force by which people are convinced of the naturalness or rightness of their position, perspective, or rulers.

**Hero(ine):** traditionally refers to a man or woman who is endowed with admirable qualities – courage, sacrifice and / or strength. A hero or heroine can also more broadly refer to the main character in a work of literature, theatrical production or film.

**High culture / art:** also referred to as the fine arts, high culture or high art refers to art or cultural forms that are generally considered to be less accessible and require some form of education to be understood. High art is generally understood in contrast to popular or mass culture or low culture. In our own time, opera, classical music, and certain traditions in painting, the theater, and literature are considered to be high art. For the first half of the twentieth century, the divide that separated high and low art was cavernous. Modern art considered itself to be revolutionary and critical of the bourgeois or middle-class culture. It stood apart from commercially successful culture. Popular or mass culture, on the other hand, was defined by its commercial success or failure. With the advent of Pop Art in the 1960s, the division between popular culture and high culture was aggressively blurred (some historians would argue this occurred even earlier with artists such as Marcel Duchamp). Art was no longer insulated from the consumer-oriented imagery that had become such a distinctive feature of mid-twentieth century life. In much postmodern art, hostility toward popular culture has been replaced by direct engagement with it.

**Icon:** that which stands in for an absent referent in an image. More broadly, an icon can refer to someone (often a celebrity) who has a commanding or representative place in popular culture. Michael Jackson and Madonna are both music video icons.

**Ideology:** The discursive process whereby meaning is produced that affects relations of power. A set of beliefs, interests, and values that determines one’s interpretations or judgments. The term ideology is often used in discussions about power and cultural relations. Ideology has been described as that which naturalizes something that isn’t necessarily natural (rather it is cultural). Ideology is similar to myth in that it is often taken for granted as natural or inherently true.

**Implicit:** implied or indirectly expressed, not readily apparent but suggested. See explicit.

**Index:** points to other referents and meanings outside of the sign itself ( a footprint in the sand is an index of a person who was walking there; a mark of paint is an index of an artist who made the mark, etc.) It can be more general as well, e.g., the social and political contexts evoked by such marks.

**Institutions:** The organized structural entities that serve as sites of power.

**Irony:** the use of words or other expression to express something different from and often opposite to their literal meaning.

**Kitsch:** kitsch generally refers to the low-art artifacts of everyday life. It encompasses lamps in the shape of the Eiffel Tower, paintings of Elvis Presley on velvet, and lurid illustrations on romance novels. The term
comes from the German verb verkitschen (to make cheap). Kitsch is a by-product of the industrial age’s astonishing capacity for mass production and its creation of disposable income.

The art critic Clement Greenberg characterized “kitsch” as ‘rear-guard’ as opposed to ‘avant-garde’ in art. He defined kitsch broadly to include jazz, advertising, Hollywood movies, commercial illustrations – all of which are now considered popular culture rather than kitsch. Today the term kitsch is more commonly used to denigrate objects considered to be in bad taste.

Low, middle, high culture: These terms refer to cultural texts that are considered to be different in content and audience appeal. These are highly contested terms and reflect assumptions and biases about cultural materials.

Low culture is sometimes referred to as popular culture or mass culture. It is assumed to be more accessible to a greater quantity of people and is sometimes critiqued for its simplicity or lack of intellectual content.

Mainstream: the prevailing current of thought, influence, or activity. Some aspect of culture that represents the prevailing or dominant attitudes and values of a society or group.

Marginal culture: refers to a subculture or some less powerful component of a larger culture. Marginal aspects of culture can be seen as distinct from the mainstream and are sometimes seen as “outside” a broader cultural norm.

Mass culture: Popular culture texts that are produced, distributed, and/or consumed with the intention and/or effect of reaching a broad, usually mainstream audience. A distinction between popular culture and mass culture can be made: mass culture employs mass media – television, film, newspapers, comics, paperback novels, the internet, etc.—for its distribution.

Mise-en-scene: a term to describe and analyze film referring to all of the elements placed in front of the camera to be photographed: the setting, the props, lighting, costumes and make-up, and figure behavior.

Motif: an element in a film or some other work or art or popular culture that is repeated in a significant way.

Myth: the overall framework of values and beliefs incorporated in a given cultural system or worldview. Any given belief in such a structure – such as the now widely debunked myth that a “woman’s place is in the home” – is called a myth. This example is a dated myth, but contemporary myths do not appear to be myths. Rather, they seem to be reality itself and thus we do not tend to question them. Cultural critic Roland Barthes has described myth’s purpose as “to give an historical intention a natural justification, and make contingency appear eternal.”

Oppositional culture: Created to have the intended effect of challenging mainstream ideology in form and/or content, or its production/distribution/reception.

Politics: essentially, the practice of promoting one’s interests in a competitive social environment. This term does not simply refer to electioneering; there are office politics, classroom politics, academic politics, and sexual politics.

Pop Art: the term Pop Art first appeared in print in the late 1950s. It has since come to be associated with a mostly American and British art movement that gained prominence in the 1960s and had roots in the 1950s. Precedents for Pop Art include the European DADA movement with its interest in consumer objects and urban debris, and the American artist Stuart Davis, a Modernist who used Lucky Strike cigarette packaging in his painting sin the 1920s. Popular culture – including advertising and the mass media generally – provided subject matter for Pop artists such as Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein. The look and techniques of mass
media also provided inspiration for these artists. Andy Warhol appropriated celebrity photographs and reproduced them as silk-screen prints and Roy Lichtenstein borrowed the imagery and style of comic strips for his paintings. Though the high art world had flirted with the low cultural forms prior to Pop Art, Pop Art foregrounded the subject matter and techniques of popular / mass culture and blurred the boundaries between the categories of high and low culture.

**Popular Culture:** This entire course will question the meaning of this term, and thus your understanding of the term should grow and shift. Popular culture is not a specific thing with concrete boundaries—it's a series of possibilities requiring different methods, questions, tools; it's flexible, contingent, contextual, and therefore dynamic. But the quest for precise definition within different contexts is crucial. We must know what we are talking about, what we are leaving out, what we are emphasizing, what we are uncovering that before we had ignored or assumed to be true or false. This is the first step of critical inquiry. Popular culture is not a thing but a process. There are popular culture texts, but popular culture itself, like all culture, is lived, experienced.

Broadly speaking, popular culture refers to the segment of a culture devoted to phenomena with broad appeal, such as entertainment and consumer goods. A wide variety of cultural materials can be defined as “popular” depending on their context and use. Popular culture is often used interchangeably with the term mass culture, but mass culture refers more specifically to those cultural texts that are mass mediated (through print, cinema, television, internet, etc.) Popular culture, unlike mass culture, can refer to regionally specific, traditional cultures (see also folk culture). It is important to note the ways the terms differ, but it is now common to use the terms interchangeably. Both popular culture and mass culture can be used to refer to a multitude of cultural forms including newspapers, magazines, popular music, comics, pulp fiction novels, television and film.

**Popular culture as process:** The process by which people and institutions produce, distribute, and receive cultural texts that shape a collective entity, thereby making meaning and interacting with the ideological nexus.

**Popular culture texts:** Those texts that convey meaning to a collective consciousness; that are part of the overall system of meaning of a culture or subculture.

**Protagonist:** the leading character in a work of fiction (film or literature).

**Pulp fiction:** this term was first applied to popular magazines that emerged in the early 20th century, but eventually the term was applied to certain paperback novels. Both magazines and books were considered “low-brow” in their sensational content and were made on inexpensive “pulp” paper. The term implies that the quality of writing was less because the quality of the material it was printed on was less. However, many top writers were published only in paperback. Originally, the terms "pulp," "pulp magazine," and "pulp fiction" were writers' and publishers' trade terms. To the magazine writer and his/her potential advertisers, the quality of paper was a vital concern; so-called slick paper afforded a highly desirable look, but was expensive and was only economically feasible for large-circulation magazines. Pulp paper, on the other hand, was much cheaper and its use made possible for publishers to reach a mass reading market at a low price. Many different kinds of magazines with low advertising content utilized pulp paper: comic books; political and cultural journals; newspaper book review and entertainment supplements; scholastic, library, and book trade publications, etc. However, only the popular fiction or all-fiction magazine acquired the name "pulp." These publications included detective stories, adventure stories, and fantasies, like "Dime Detective," "Argosy," "Blue Book," and "Weird Tales."

**Semiotics:** the study of signs and meaning. The study of how systems of meaning are structured.
**Sign:** anything that bears meaning. Words, objects, images, and forms of behavior are all signs whose meanings are determined by the particular codes, or systems, in which they appear.

**Stereotype:** a conventional, formulaic, and oversimplified conception or image of a person, group or thing. Stereotypes are frequently criticized in contemporary discourse because of their negative connotation. Stereotypes often convey preconceived assumptions about groups of people -- groups categorized by racial, ethnic, class, gender, age, etc. -- that are considered prejudicial.

**Subculture:** A subset of the main cultural group.

**Subvert:** to undermine or overthrow. The potential of cultural practices to be subversive is an important issue in popular culture and contemporary art. Certain cultural practices have been discussed in terms of their ability to subvert an existing power structure.

**Symbol:** level of meaning that is based on socially agreed upon conventions. A flag is a symbol of the nation it represents. The letters “c-a-t” are symbols that form the word cat. A symbolic sign’s significance is arbitrary and is entirely determined by cultural familiarity. The shape of a valentine is a symbol of love, for example, in certain Western cultures. One generation’s symbols may be illegible to later generations. In Italian Renaissance painting, for example, a rose was a symbol for the Virgin Mary.

**Text:** Any entity or phenomena that conveys meaning. Frequently we refer to works of art or popular culture (books, film, television shows) as cultural texts.

**Theme:** a theme is an implicit topic or idea that typically repeats itself within a work of literature or film. The theme is related to the work’s subject matter, but expresses more of the work’s meaning. For example, one could say that the subject matter of *Gone with the Wind* is the Civil War’s impact on a group of southern characters and one of the themes is that of self-discovery. See your text, *Ways In.*

**Universal:** of or relating to the entire world and all within the world. A universal trait or pattern of behavior or set of values that is thought to be shared by all human beings.

**Western culture:** the West refers to Europe and what is considered the western hemisphere. Western cultures include Europe and those cultures that are seen as deriving from European influence such as the United States.