

Humanities 123: American Popular Culture

Defenses and criticisms of Popular Culture (Pros and Cons)

The following includes a partial list of pro and con arguments about popular culture, or, arguments in defense of popular culture and criticisms against popular culture. Can you think of other ways of understanding the dangers or the value of popular culture? Keep a running list and apply them to the examples of pop culture we analyze throughout the semester. These are relevant to class discussions, your quizzes and assignments.

Cons or Criticisms of / Arguments about Popular Culture:

- It promotes negative stereotypes of people and in this way encourages racism, sexism, homophobia, class biases and bigotry generally.
- It creates a *flattering* version of stereotypes – compensatory myths – which *seem* helpful but can have an equally negative impact on social groups. Compensatory myths tend to flatter various minority groups, people who have less economic, political or social power in society. Compensatory myths make otherwise disadvantaged people appear heroic or uniquely enviable when in actual society they continue to be devalued (discriminated against in varying ways). These heroicized portrayals in turn create a docile audience, one that is less likely to resist discrimination and attempt to positively change their standing in society.
- It distracts its audience from more significant and pressing events and issues and thus discourages social engagement, political involvement, etc.
- It can be a source of misinformation though it often masquerades as truthful information.
- Profit is its “bottom line.” In the pursuit of profit, it tramples over more experimental cultural forms and relies instead on repeated formulas (think of movie sequels, or story lines you have seen repeated endlessly).
- It eliminates regional or “folk” culture and thus creates a homogenized, mainstream “norm” and eliminates unique, regional cultural differences. It encourages us to all be the same, rather than celebrating difference.
- It contributes to a shortened attention span, inability to focus and think critically. It encourages a “passive” reception mode rather than critically engaged interaction.
- It can negatively influence its audience’s behavior or morals. For example, it has been argued that violence in popular culture creates violence in real life.
See other side ...

Pros or Positive interpretations of Popular culture:

- It “brings us all together” by providing shared cultural experiences. In this way, it has been argued to help eliminate social divisions (cultural, economic, etc.). It reminds us of our shared humanity and helps us empathize with people who we might otherwise objectify or judge unfairly.
- It has didactic qualities. In other words, it can teach us significant moral or historical lessons through its narratives. If we are to believe that popular culture can negatively influence us, then we must also agree that it can positively influence us.
- It can be politically or socially subversive. It can provide an outlet for perspectives that are critical of the so-called mainstream. In this way, it can be said to encourage critical thinking skills rather than a passive, unthinking reception mode.
- It provides us with pleasure that helps us endure hardships and helps us make meaning out of our lives. Though many consider the pleasurable appeal of popular culture to be dangerous, mindless, and vacuously “entertaining,” others have suggested that pleasure is a significant way in which we make meaning of our lives and it is an important survival tool.
- It can provide inspiring and productive models by which to live. It can positively influence our behavior and challenge our cultural assumptions and foster critical thinking skills.