

don't stop believing

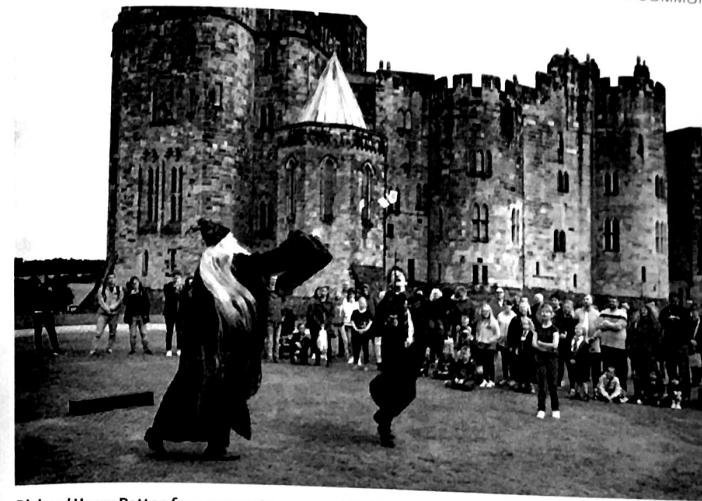
AUDIENCES AND THE QUEST
FOR MEANING IN POPULAR CULTURE

Pop culture pilgrims flock to Ong Jmel, in southern Tunisia, where several scenes from the first *Star Wars* film were originally shot.

ACCORDING TO *STAR WARS* LORE, A LONG TIME AGO JEDI KNIGHT Luke Skywalker hailed from a desert planet called Tatooine, its two suns burning bright in the galaxy's Outer Rim. Today, Tatooine attracts a small but devoted following of fans that make pilgrimage to its sandy landscape, or at least the North African outpost in Tunisia where George Lucas filmed numerous scenes that appear in the original 1977 movie. Writing in *Harper's*, Jon Mooallem (2009) chronicles the archaeological exploits of David West Reynolds, who used his *Star Wars* trading cards from his youth to locate the Saharan salt flats and craters that serve as the backdrop for the film's early scenes of Skywalker's homestead. According to Reynolds (as quoted in Mooallem 2009, p. 68), "I felt like I actually succeeded in stepping up from the seat in the movie theater when I'm an eight-year-old kid and stepping up into the screen. The action has wound down, and Luke and C-3PO have run off on the landspeeder, and the dust has settled. . . . But I'm still there—on Tatooine." Meanwhile, in Finland, tour guides lead visitors over the snowy glaciers that make up the scenic landscape of the ice planet Hoth in *The Empire Strikes Back*. Other adventurers excavate Buttercup Valley in the southwestern United States, the site of the Imperial Sand Dunes in *Return of the Jedi*, for left-behind scraps from the 1983 movie set.

What attracts tourists to these remote and otherwise nondescript locales in the wilderness, often to dig up decades-old garbage left behind by film crews of yesteryear? Like religious pilgrims, such crusaders are on a quest for meaning, only their sacred texts and myths are not biblical but the stuff of popular culture. As Mooallem (p. 63) argues, "Somewhere under the sand lay the actual relics of a fake, futuristic past—which were also the set pieces from the actual past that had helped bring that fiction into being. It was hard to keep it all straight. But I sensed that, as with any archeological endeavor, whatever physical objects we recovered would somehow tie us, in our time, more closely to the truths and mythologies of the era they survived."

Like *Star Wars* superfans, avid followers of the *Harry Potter* novels and movies trek to the real-life Alnwick Castle in Northumberland County in England, which appears in the first two *Harry Potter* films as the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. When touring London, *Harry Potter* enthusiasts also visit Platforms 4 and 5 at Kings Cross railway station, where some of the Hogwarts Express scenes were shot. (Tourists also take selfies in front of a sign there reading "Platform 9¾.") Other real-world sites that appear onscreen in the series include the Reptile House at the London Zoo (where a Burmese python speaks to the boy-wizard before its escape in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*) and the city's Leadenhall Market, which plays the "role" of Diagon Alley in numerous films.



Diehard *Harry Potter* fans re-create a game of Quidditch on the grounds of Alnwick Castle in Northumberland County, England. The castle served as the real-life stand-in for the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry in the first two *Harry Potter* films.

The last chapter followed the consumer habits of audiences in an attempt to understand the impact of social class on one's cultural tastes and patterns of consumption. In doing so, we discovered the complexities of American popular culture and the frequently shifting boundaries that define identity and status in our society. In this chapter, we look beyond consumer preferences and proclivities to assess how people invest popular culture with significance and meaning. Scholars from a variety of disciplines in the social sciences and the humanities agree that cultural meaning is a product of human engagement and interpretation. While a traditional model of culture might imagine that texts, dramatic plays, songs, film, and visual art are like walnuts, to be cracked open so that their hidden interiors can be revealed and consumed, most social scientists today recognize that cultural meanings are actively created by audiences themselves, albeit in socially patterned ways.

Audiences and Interpretive Communities

If audiences actively construct and attribute meaning and significance to popular culture, it follows that some of their experiences consuming culture will be uniquely singular and intimately personal. Some of those experiences are of a psychological or neurological character. For instance, in his book *Musicophilia*, the late neurologist and author Oliver Sacks (2007) reports on an epileptic patient whose seizures are provoked by a wildly diverse array of music from operatic Verdi arias to romantic Frank Sinatra tunes to rock music (he must wear earplugs when out of the house), while another patient with a

temporal lobe abnormality regularly experiences convulsions after listening to recordings of her favorite Neapolitan songs (pp. 26–27). Even mentally healthy music lovers may swoon over a personally captivating song (as when Elaine's boyfriend has a near-hypnotic reaction to the Eagles' hit "Desperado" during a 1996 episode of *Seinfeld*). Some married couples strongly identify with a featured slow dance number played at their wedding—according to Spotify, popular examples include "All of Me" by John Legend, "Thinking Out Loud" by Ed Sheeran, "Come Away with Me" by Norah Jones, "First Day of My Life" by Bright Eyes, and the classic hits "At Last" by Etta James and "Can't Help Falling in Love" by Elvis Presley—while others still wax nostalgic for the song featured as their high school prom's theme, whether "A Moment Like This" by Kelly Clarkson, "Don't Want to Miss a Thing" by Aerosmith, or "Don't Stop Believing" by Journey.

When attributing meaning and significance to songs, movies, and other kinds of media and popular culture, audiences not only draw on their personal memories or individual psyches but their social circumstances as well. Consumers whose common social identities and cultural backgrounds (whether organized on the basis of nationality, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion, or age) inform their shared understandings of culture in patterned ways are called *interpretive communities* (Radway 1991; also see Fish 1980). As we discussed in Chapter 1, despite their historically negative depiction in film, Native American men tend to be ardent fans of Hollywood Westerns, an enthusiasm that derives in part from the value many place on the principles of hard work and self-reliant country living. Upon viewing the 1956 John Ford film *The Searchers*, starring John Wayne, American Indians surveyed by sociologist JoEllen Shively (1992) emphasized the free and independent cowboy lifestyle commonly celebrated in such films: "Westerns relate to the way I wish I could live"; "The cowboy is free"; "He's not tied down to an eight-to-five job, day after day"; "He's his own man"; "Indians today are the cowboys" (pp. 729–30). Similarly, LGBT audiences have historically dealt with the invisibility or otherwise negative depiction of homosexuality in film by resisting such readings of mainstream culture, finding gay-positive messages in classic films like *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), and *Ben-Hur* (1959) (Ross 2015, p. 125).

Interpretive communities often share a specific intellectual, religious, or political worldview within a larger institutional context (Fish 1980). For example, Christian organizations greatly differed in their interpretation of director Martin Scorsese's critically acclaimed yet controversial 1988 motion picture *The Last Temptation of Christ*, in which Jesus Christ (played by Willem Dafoe) is presented as a truly human figure tortured by inner demons and grave doubts; in keeping with the 1951 revisionist novel by Nikos Kazantzakis on which the film is based, during his crucifixion Jesus dreams of marrying and making love to Mary Magdalene, impregnating her and going on to lead the life of a normal man. A spokesperson for the National Council of Churches called the movie "an honest attempt to tell the story of Jesus from a different perspective," and the Reverend Michael Himes, a Notre Dame theologian, referred to the film as



What spurred interpretive communities to protest the release of Martin Scorsese's film *The Last Temptation of Christ*?

"fairly distinguished art" (Hunter 1991, pp. 233–34). Meanwhile, conservative Catholic and Evangelical groups were outraged by the film and its depiction of Christ. The right-wing fundamentalist group Focus on the Family attacked the Scorsese film for portraying Jesus "as a confused, lustful wimp who denies his divinity and struggles with his sinful nature," and an organization called Morality in Media proclaimed it "an intentional attack on Christianity" (p. 234). In 2004, religious and civil rights organizations similarly fought over the meaning and ideological implications of Mel Gibson's box-office blockbuster *The Passion of the Christ*. Focus on the Family's James Dobson called the film "the most heart-wrenching, powerful portrayal of Christ's suffering that I have ever seen," while other Evangelical leaders criticized *Passion* for its Roman Catholic themes. The Anti-Defamation League criticized the film's depiction of "bloodthirsty" Jewish mobs as historically inaccurate and anti-Semitic.

Interpretive communities materialize during public debates surrounding the value or potential harm of certain types of popular culture. In 1985, the U.S. Senate held hearings on the so-called dangers of heavy-metal rock music lyrics. Led by Tipper Gore (the wife of future vice president Al Gore), the Parents' Music Resource Center (PMRC) demanded that warning labels be placed on metal albums by artists such as Ozzy Osbourne, whose song "Suicide Solution" from the 1980 album *Blizzard of Ozz* had been dubiously blamed for the death of John McCollum, a depressed teenage boy who killed himself with a bullet to the head while listening to the record. At the Senate hearings, one

child psychiatrist representing the PMRC attacked the music of Black Sabbath (Osbourne's previous band) and AC/DC for encouraging violent behavior:

One of the most pathological forms of evil is in the form of the cult killer or deranged person who believes it is OK to hurt others or to kill. The Son of Sam who killed eight people in New York was allegedly into Black Sabbath's music. . . . Most recently, the individual identified in the newspapers as the Night Stalker has been said to be into hard drugs and the music of the heavy metal band AC/DC. . . . Every teenager who listens to heavy metal certainly does not become a killer. [But] young people who are seeking power over others through identification with the power of evil find a close identification. The lyrics become a philosophy of life. It becomes a religion. (quoted in Binder 1993, p. 758)

Meanwhile, an interpretive community made up of a strange mix of music industry executives, newspaper journalists, and musicians—from Twisted Sister lead singer Dee Snider to experimental rock guitarist Frank Zappa to acoustic folk and country star John Denver—defended the content of contemporary popular music, citing the small minority of songs containing explicit lyrics, the cartoonish and therefore harmless character of heavy metal, and the negligible role that rock lyrics play in the increasing proliferation of images of sex and violence in the media overall (Binder 1993, p. 759).

In later years, another public debate emerged among interpretive communities concerning the so-called dangers of popular music, specifically rap and hip-hop. In 1990, the Miami rap group 2 Live Crew's third album *As Nasty as They Wanna Be* was ruled obscene by a U.S. District Court judge in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, and the proprietor of a record store in Broward County was arrested for continuing to sell the album. (The album contains songs with titles such as "Me So Horny," "Put Her in the Buck," "Dick Almighty," "The Fuck Shop," and "Get the Fuck Out of My House." In addition to including more than 200 utterances of the word *fuck*, the album features more than 150 mentions of *bitch* and more than 80 descriptions of oral sex; see Hunter 1991, p. 232.) On the CBS news program *48 Hours*, an attorney accused 2 Live Crew's lead singer Luther Campbell of being "a psychological child molester" (p. 232), while conservative commentator George Will warned in *Newsweek* that the rap group not only threatened young listeners but all of society:

Fact: some members of a particular age and social cohort—the one making 2 Live Crew rich—stomped and raped [a] jogger to the razor edge of death, for the fun of it. Certainty: the coarsening of a community, the desensitizing of a society will have behavioral consequences. (quoted in Binder 1993, p. 762)

As in the previous controversy surrounding heavy metal, an interpretive community of perhaps uncommon bedfellows came to defend rap music (if not 2 Live Crew itself) from its critics, including African American university professor

and ordained Baptist minister Michael Eric Dyson, who writes in an essay on "Gangsta Rap and American Culture" (1996):

At their best, rappers shape the torturous twists of urban fate into lyrical elegies. They represent lives swallowed by too little love or opportunity. They represent themselves and their peers with aggrandizing anthems that boast of their ingenuity and luck in surviving. . . . Before we discard the genre, we should understand that gangsta rap often reaches higher than its ugliest, lowest common denominator. Misogyny, violence, materialism, and sexual transgression are not its exclusive domain. At its best, this music draws attention to complex dimensions of ghetto life ignored by many Americans. Of all the genres of hip-hop—from socially conscious rap to black nationalist expressions, from pop to hardcore—gangsta rap has most aggressively narrated the pains and possibilities, the fantasies and fears, of poor black urban youth. (pp. 177, 184–85)

Likewise, during the 2 Live Crew controversy, pop music journalist Jon Pareles (1990) pointed out in the *New York Times* that "not all rap machismo should be taken entirely at face value. Like other black literary and oral traditions, rap lyrics also involve double-entendre, allegory and parody. Some rap machismo can be a metaphor for pride or political empowerment; it can be a shared joke, as it often is in 2 Live Crew's wildly hyperbolic rhymes." According to UCLA anthropologist Philippe Bourgois (whom Pareles interviewed for his *Times* piece):

I see rap as reflective, and what people should be scared about is the extent to which the songs reflect reality. That there is such unbelievable violence in these communities is a national tragedy, while the fact that people express themselves in terms of violence is a part of American culture, a way of thinking that goes back to the Wild West. I wouldn't worry about rap music leading to violence. On the contrary, rap music leads to a productive expression of alienation and oppression, and it's good that it gets channeled into creative outlets rather than drug addiction or physical violence. I see people, high-school dropouts, who carry around notebooks in their back pockets so they can compare their latest rhymes. (quoted in Pareles 1990)

The interpretive communities depicted in the preceding examples are engaged in what James Davison Hunter (1991) refers to as *culture wars*, cultural conflicts fought among ideological adversaries in the public arena. But while interpretive communities may disagree about the fundamental meanings of cultural texts, objects, or events, we need not think of such differences as necessarily combative or even oppositional.

For instance, during the 1980s the British rock band the Smiths and its morose lead singer Morrissey attracted a U.S. fan base of shy, pale-skinned white teenagers who identified with the band's melancholic view of life as expressed in morbidly titled songs such as "Heaven Knows I'm Miserable Now,"

"Unhappy Birthday," "Girlfriend in a Coma," "The Boy with the Thorn in His Side," "Still Ill," "Suffer Little Children," "I Want the One I Can't Have," "That Joke Isn't Funny Anymore," "Death of a Disco Dancer," "Barbarism Begins at Home," and "Meat Is Murder." Today, Morrissey and the Smiths continue to be popular in the United States—but among young Latino men, particularly those from Mexico and Southern California. As East Los Angeles native Javier Cabral (2014) reported in the *Washington Post*, "Mexican Americans can't get enough of him. The onetime lead singer of the Smiths is as central to the culture [of East L.A.] as bean-and-cheese burritos." Interpretive communities rely on common social experiences to frame their collective readings of popular culture, which is why some Latino fans explain their embrace of Morrissey and the Smiths in terms of their shared ethnic heritage and immigrant experience. Gloria Antuez, a 23-year-old junior high school teacher, explains, "Morrissey's family emigrated to England from Ireland, and they were kind of socially segregated from the rest of the country. . . . That is very similar to the Latino experience here in Los Angeles. We see things within his songs that we can particularly relate to. He sings about loneliness. He sings about solitude. Those are things any minority group can relate to." According to Martha Barreras, another Latina fan, "We're passionate people. He's passionate like us. . . . The music our parents played when we were growing up was always about love and emotion, and it's the same thing with Morrissey." As Cruz Rubio, a 20-year-old male fan, insists, "He speaks to us, man. As Latinos. He addresses us personally. . . . His music fits our lifestyle" (Klosterman 2006, pp. 49–52). Then again, other Latino fans associate Morrissey's pompadour and rockabilly sensibility with 1950s icon Ritchie Valens, the Mexican American rock 'n' roll pioneer whose hits included "Donna," "Come On, Let's Go," and, most famously, "La Bamba."

Meaning-Making and the Changing Significance of Popular Culture

While interpretive communities may attribute differing meanings and significance to popular culture, often it is the meanings themselves that shift among audiences over time. We have already seen examples of this in earlier chapters, as when contract-based craft production, like Italian Renaissance painting, gains prestige as an art form, or when mass cultural attractions, like Shakespearean drama, are recast as highbrow culture. We have also seen examples of cultural genres once contested among interpretive communities for their so-called threatening and dangerous character rehabilitated in the public imagination, such as the "demoralizing" and "unspeakable" African American jazz music of the 1920s (Appelrouth 2005).

Occasionally this reputational augmentation in the national consciousness reaches transformative heights, as in the case of the late American folk singer Pete Seeger. The progressive songwriter and beloved performer of songs like "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?" and "If I Had a Hammer," Seeger was demonized as a communist sympathizer during the McCarthyism of the 1950s.

He was called to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1955 and blacklisted for years from performing on prime-time network television. But as a result of the 1960s folk music revival and his subsequent fame as a cultural icon (as well as the eventual discrediting and dissipation of anti-communist hysteria among mainstream Americans), Seeger was selected as an Honoree of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in 1994, its publicity materials identifying him as "arguably the most influential folk artist in the United States" (Bromberg and Fine 2002, p. 1147). Just weeks later, President Bill Clinton awarded Seeger the coveted National Medal of Arts, the highest possible award given to an artist by the U.S. government.

Seeger's gradual transformation from national pariah to official recognition as an American treasure is a testament to the socially constructed character of the interpretive meanings and significance attributed to popular culture. But how common are these kinds of changes in meaning, particularly with regard not simply to individual artists but to entire forms of mass media themselves? In fact, these kinds of shifts occur more frequently than one might think. The reception of film in the United States provides an interesting case. Today we attach great artistic significance to movies, at least those easily recognized by socially conventional standards as worthy of critical praise—recent examples might include Academy Award winners and nominees such as *American Hustle*, *12 Years a Slave*, *Birdman* or (*The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance*), *The Revenant*, *Spotlight*, *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, *Selma*, and *Boyhood*. Yet historically this interpretation of cinema as art is a relatively recent development in American culture and dates back only as far as the 1960s. Earlier in its history, moviegoing was an inexpensive and therefore devalued form of urban entertainment. In New York City, nickelodeons—turn-of-the-century storefront theaters where film screenings could be enjoyed for a nickel—were typically concentrated in blue-collar tenement districts and attracted crowds of predominantly working-class patrons, particularly women and immigrants (Peiss 1986). According to sociologist Shyon Baumann (2007), from its beginnings through the 1930s wealthy and educated cultural snobs looked down on movies for their "lack of sophistication or aesthetic value," "tackiness," "tastelessness," and "corrupting and immoral" influence, while shunning the theaters themselves for attracting audiences of low social status, including ethnic minorities and the poor (pp. 24–25). Movies were considered entertainment for the lowest common denominator of audiences, inferior to more "legitimate" live theatrical performances.

In his book *Hollywood Highbrow*, Baumann (2007) argues that the work of prestige-granting institutions in concert with industry shifts and broader social changes can help explain the rising significance of film among American audiences. Believe it or not, the introduction and rapid popularity of television in American homes during the 1940s and 1950s was a crucial factor. As noted in Chapter 1, in 1953 two-thirds of family households in the United States owned at least one television, and by the mid-1960s that figure had grown to 94 percent (Cohen 2003, p. 302). Television's enormous mainstream appeal allowed film to emerge as a more distinctive and status-signaling cultural alternative, and by the 1960s,



The Criterion Theater in New York City's Times Square in 1931. Why did many cultural elites in the early twentieth century look down on movies?

motion pictures seemed especially smarter and more sophisticated than network television, particularly in light of the formulaic commercial TV programming popularized during the 1940s and 1950s, as represented by shows such as *Bozo the Clown*, *Howdy Doody*, *Candid Camera*, and *What's My Line?* Meanwhile, the growth of the middle class and the expansion of colleges and universities in the United States after World War II created newly educated audiences who were both hungry for rich cultural experiences and prepared to critically engage with cinema as something more than simply trivial entertainment.

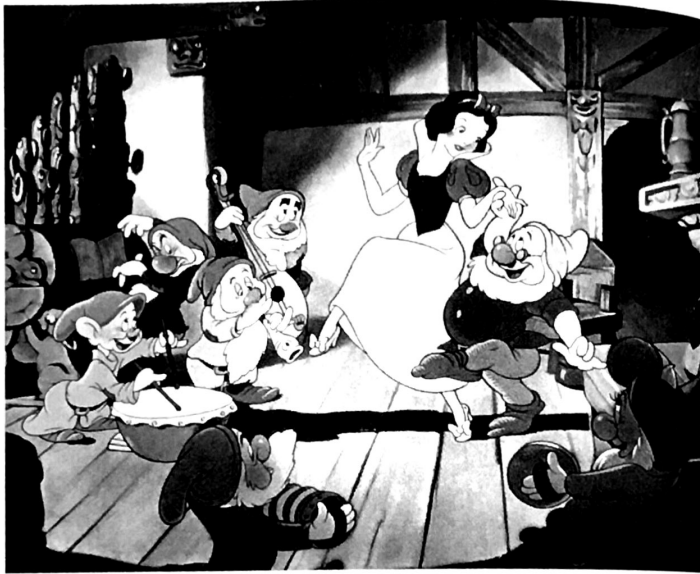
At the same time, a set of legitimizing institutions had succeeded in canonizing American films as worthy of intellectual and artistic cultural merit. In 1927, Louis B. Mayer of MGM and other studio heads created the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences as a means of bolstering the industry's image, and in 1929 the organization began nominating and bestowing its Academy Awards—today more popularly known as the Oscars—for achievement in film. By showcasing a small number of films every year, the Academy Awards helped contribute to the creation of a canon of American motion picture “masterpieces,” just as prizes such as the National Book Award and the Nobel Prize in Literature serve to establish a literary canon over time. The American Film Institute (AFI) was similarly created during the

1960s to recognize achievement in cinema, and in 1998 the AFI established a list of the 100 greatest American movies of all time. The AFI last updated its list in 2007, when the AFI 100 top five films were, in descending order, *Citizen Kane* (1941), *The Godfather* (1972), *Casablanca* (1942), *Raging Bull* (1980), and *Singin' in the Rain* (1952). More recent films on the updated list include *Toy Story* (1995), *Titanic* (1997), *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), *The Sixth Sense* (1999), and *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001).

The American film canon was also developed during the 1960s by growing numbers of academic departments offering advanced degree programs in film and cinema studies at major colleges and universities such as New York University, Columbia, UCLA, and the University of Southern California. Movies and their directors gained social prestige and scholarly significance as they were gradually incorporated into the university curriculum in courses on film history and theory. The early 1960s also saw the American importation of French auteur theory, which credits the director (rightly or wrongly) with providing the artistic vision for their movies, as if he or she were the sole author of their films. The theory of the auteur gained particular prominence as visionary directors such as Alfred Hitchcock and Stanley Kubrick gained more creative autonomy both behind the camera and in the editing room. Contemporary examples of the Hollywood director-as-auteur include Martin Scorsese, Woody Allen, Steven Spielberg, Sofia Coppola, Christopher Nolan, Spike Lee, Wes Anderson, Lisa Cholodenko, Alejandro González Iñárritu, and Quentin Tarantino. In addition, by the 1950s and 1960s cosmopolitan U.S. cities—Chicago, San Francisco, New York, Boston, Seattle—began hosting international film festivals showcasing new films as worthy of critical and intellectual consideration.

These changes helped reshape the heightened meaning and artistic significance that American audiences today attach to popular film. Baumann (2007) cleverly illustrates this interpretive shift by examining the differences between movie reviews published before and after the 1960s. Whereas earlier film reviews were short write-ups with little more than plot summaries and consumer recommendations, starting in the mid-1960s movie critics began employing an increasingly sophisticated language in lengthier discussions of films. Contemporary reviewers characterize film using an analytic voice featuring a critical terminology usually reserved for dissecting great works of literature and art—“composition,” “irony,” “metaphor,” “symbol,” “tone.” Critics today refer to the creative vision and authorial control of the director by using laudatory adjectives such as “art,” “brilliant,” “genius,” “inspired,” and “master,” and modifiers such as “Hitchcockian” or “Tarantinoesque” when comparing the cinematographic styles of different directors (pp. 119–20).

Of course, one could (incorrectly, I think) argue that contemporary critics are more likely to describe films as artistic and intellectually significant simply because movies are actually more artistic and culturally significant today—except that Baumann also discovered these differences among earlier and later reviews of the same movies, including *Casablanca*, *Gone with the Wind*, and *The Wizard of Oz* (pp. 128–33). As an illustrative example, Baumann presents early and



While Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* drew criticism when it first premiered in 1937, it was later named the greatest animated movie of all time by the American Film Institute.

more recent reviews of the Disney animated classic *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. As the *New Yorker* told readers in 1938, shortly after the film's premiere:

He has perhaps overdone the wicked stepmother, and just for a moment or two has tinted the film with too lurid a touch. In one other element, too, I think Mr. Disney's judgment has erred. The language of the dwarfs is funny, but it must be called a little tough. It smacks too much of the language of the streets, and in a film like this it should be most literate, punctilious, and polite. No nice dwarf, Mr. Disney, ever says "ain't." (quoted in Baumann 2007, pp. 131–32)

Note the differences between this recap from the late 1930s and a more recent *Village Voice* review from 1973:

Disney is for children as much as Chaplin and Keaton are, by which I mean that children understand the broadest aspects of these artists—the lowest slapstick comedy and, in the case of Disney, the terror—but little else. "Bambi," for example, with its subtle mood studies, its deliberate lack of story-line and identification figures, left the largely children's audience I saw it with restless. . . . On a narrative level this sense of the past and emphasis on family relationships make the films, like fairy tales, fertile ground for Freudian

analysis. As in the Grimm original, "SNOW WHITE AND THE SEVEN DWARFS" centers around a sexual jealousy between an overweeningly vain queen and her innocent step-daughter. (quoted in Baumann 2007, p. 132)

In this latter review from the 1970s, the *Village Voice* compares Disney's work to that of Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton (both directors as well as comedic actors) and draws on terminology such as "Freudian" and "narrative." Since then, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* has been added to the U.S. National Film Registry (founded in the 1980s to honor and preserve "culturally, historically or aesthetically significant films"), named by the American Film Institute as the 34th greatest American film of all time and the *greatest* animated movie ever. (So much for Mr. Disney's "erred" judgment.)

In today's popular cultural environment, few American audiences would deny that filmmakers possess the potential to create transcendent works of artistic import and significance, and in hindsight the success of cinema's socially engineered shift from entertainment to art almost seems inevitable, a foregone conclusion. Moreover, in the contemporary era of high-quality programming and digital distribution, television has enjoyed a renaissance of similar proportions as plenty of entertaining shows have achieved the status of art in the popular consciousness. (A short list of such programs would include HBO's *Game of Thrones*, *The Sopranos*, and *The Wire*; AMC's *Mad Men* and *Breaking Bad*; Showtime's *Homeland* and *Masters of Sex*; Netflix's *House of Cards* and *Orange Is the New Black*; and Amazon's *Transparent*.)

However, a less prestigious brand of popular culture, such as rock music, may better emphasize the conflicts and contestation surrounding these kinds of transformations in cultural meaning-making. During its emergence in the 1950s, cultural authorities vilified rock 'n' roll, calling it juvenile, simplistic, and coarsely sexual, but in the last several decades rock critics and the remaining major record labels have worked tirelessly to increase its prestige as a respectable American art form, in part by relying on the same strategies as the Hollywood film industry and its institutional enablers. The National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences annually honors rock artists with its Grammy Awards. Founded in 1983, the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum canonizes rock artists in much the same way that the American Film Institute attributes significance to Hollywood movies. (Inductees have ranged from Chuck Berry and Elvis Presley to more contemporary acts such as U2 and Madonna.)

Rock magazines such as *Rolling Stone* also engage in canon formation by generating lists of classic albums and singles; for example, in May 2012 *Rolling Stone* released its definitive list of "The 500 Greatest Albums of All Time." Its top 10 included albums by the Beatles (whose *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* was honored with the coveted No. 1 spot on the list), the Beach Boys, Bob Dylan, Marvin Gaye, the Rolling Stones, and the Clash. College professors at Columbia and Northwestern University teach courses with titles such as "Issues in Rock Music and Rock Culture" and "Special Topics: The Music of Radiohead," while Liverpool Hope University now offers a master of arts degree in "The Beatles, Popular Music and

Society" (Kozinn 2009). Harvard classics professor Richard F. Thomas teaches a first-year seminar on the music of Bob Dylan, who surprised the world when he was awarded the 2016 Nobel Prize in Literature (Schuessler and Kraft 2016). Academics and journalists organize scholarly conferences around the intellectual study of rock music as well. At the 2016 annual Pop Conference of the Experience Music Project in Seattle, participants presented papers that included the following titles:

- "‘Reality Ruined My Life’: Lesbian One Direction Fandom and Disruptive Desires"
- "I Am Not a Hipster and Other White Lies: Seeing the Voice of Indie Rock"
- "A Blank Space Where You Write Your Name: Taylor Swift's Early Late Voice"
- "‘My Presence Is a Present’: Kanye West, Nicki Minaj, and the Laughter of the Rapper"
- "Of Whistles, Coos, and Doo-Wops: The Racial Kitsch of Mariah Carey's Vocal Theatrics"
- "Accidental Post-Racism in a Southern Voice: What Country Music Did and Didn't Say as the Obama Era Began"
- "Feeling the Human and the Politics of Vocal Pitch Correction: Notes from the Field"

Finally, today's music critics lionize canonical rock albums by relying on the same critical terminology and intellectualizing discourse employed by contemporary film reviewers, as illustrated in the above examples. In his book *It Ain't No Sin to Be Glad You're Alive: The Promise of Bruce Springsteen*, Eric Alterman (1999), a columnist for the *Nation* as well as a professor of journalism and English, writes:

Born to Run exploded in my home and my mind and changed my life, just as Elvis and the Beatles had done for Bruce a decade earlier. I never could have articulated it at the time, but *Born to Run* offered me an alternative context for my life, a narrative in which hopes and dreams that felt ridiculous were accorded dignity and, no less important, solidarity. . . . The poetry and power of *Born to Run* lie in its unwillingness to compromise, in the refusal of its protagonists to accept passively the hand dealt to them by circumstance. . . . The album's stories are internal monologues and dramatic renderings of Springsteen's own personal struggles with his parents, with authority, with women, and with the expectations of the world, universalized and ennobled through the language of the radio. . . . It is an album about the unsung heroism of everyday life, the quiet glory of unflinching personal integrity in a world where virtue is deemed to be its own reward. (pp. 73–76)

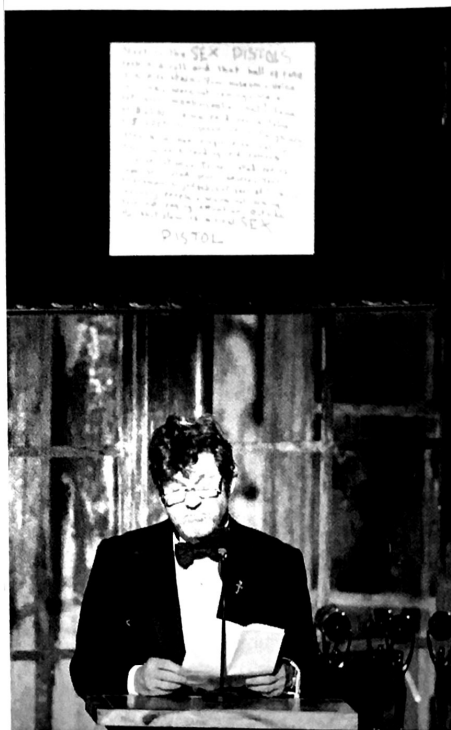
Note the language Alterman employs to characterize *Born to Run*, Springsteen's celebrated 1975 album: He emphasizes its "narrative," "poetry and power," and "internal monologues and dramatic renderings," all "universalized and ennobled," just as if he were dissecting Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*

or William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*. This artistic and literary characterization of rock among music journalists and critics, along with the formation of a classic rock canon, university courses and scholarly conferences, an endowed museum, and award-granting institutions, all shape the heightened meaning and artistic significance that American audiences today attach to rock 'n' roll music.

However, unlike cinema, rock has had more than its fair share of dissenters and party-poopers, and not just among the psychiatrists and politicians' wives associated with the Parents Music Resource Center of the 1980s culture wars. In *The Closing of the American Mind*, the renowned University of Chicago philosophy and classics professor Allan Bloom (1987) writes:

Though students do not have books, they most emphatically do have music. . . . This is the significance of rock music. I do not suggest that it has any high intellectual sources. But it has risen to its current heights in the education of the young on the ashes of classical music. . . . Ministering to and according with the arousing and cathartic music, the lyrics celebrate puppy love as well as polymorphous attractions, and fortify them against traditional ridicule and shame. . . . Picture a thirteen-year-old boy sitting in the living room of his family home doing his math assignment while wearing his Walkman headphones or watching MTV. He enjoys the liberties hard won over centuries by the alliance of philosophic genius and political heroism, consecrated by the blood of martyrs; he is provided with comfort and leisure by the most productive economy ever known to mankind; science has penetrated the secrets of nature in order to provide him with the marvelous, lifelike electronic sound and image reproduction he is enjoying. And in what does progress culminate? A pubescent child whose body throbs with orgasmic rhythms; whose feelings are made articulate in hymns to the joys of onanism or the killing of parents; whose ambition is to win fame and wealth in imitating the drag-queen who makes the music. In short, life is made into a nonstop, commercially prepackaged masturbational fantasy. . . . People of future civilizations will wonder at this and find it as incomprehensible as we do the caste system, witch-burning, harems, cannibalism and gladiatorial combats. (pp. 68–75)

Bloom's vitriol betrays a wide generational gap as well as his inability to code-switch between classical and pop music worlds. But while he launches his attack on the significance of rock from outside its cultural universe, plenty of rock musicians *themselves* fight against the emergent production of prestige surrounding popular music, arguing that attempts to fabricate its critical and canonical "legitimacy" deprive rock of its rebelliousness and subcultural cool. British rock vocalist and guitarist Elvis Costello has been quoted as asserting that "writing about music is like dancing about architecture—it's a really stupid thing to want to do." And in February 2006, the surviving members of the 1970s punk band the Sex Pistols reacted to their upcoming induction into the Rock and Roll Hall



Jann Wenner, founder of Rolling Stone magazine and chairman of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Foundation, reads the note from the Sex Pistols declining to attend the ceremony inducting them into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

of Fame by posting the following announcement (replete with grammatical and spelling errors) on their website explaining their refusal to attend the induction ceremony at New York's Waldorf-Astoria Hotel:

Next to the SEX PISTOLS rock and roll and that hall of fame is a piss stain. Your museum. Urine in wine. Were not coming. Were not your monkey and So what? Fame at \$25,000 if we paid for a table, or \$15000 to squeak up in the gallery, goes to a non-profit organisation selling us a load of old famous. Congradulations. If you voted for us, hope you noted your reasons. Your anonymous as judges, but your still music industry people. Were not coming. Your not paying attention. Outside the shit-stem is a real SEX PISTOL.

By refusing to donate thousands of dollars for a table at the black-tie event, the Sex Pistols railed at what many consumers recognize as the worst excesses of the rock music industry: the prohibitive cost of stadium and arena concerts, the endless celebration of *passé* or otherwise forgotten musicians, the commodification of beloved rock songs, and, most of all, the lack of rabble-raising authenticity among millionaire rock stars.

Popular Culture and the Search for Authenticity

Perhaps no other desire motivates consumers of contemporary popular culture more than the search for authenticity. In recent years, reality television has proliferated not only because it is very inexpensive to produce (as we discussed in Chapter 6) but also for its brazen attempts to capture “ordinary” people in unscripted moments of everyday life, warts and all (Grindstaff 2002). African American hip-hop music artists sell millions of albums based on their ability to “keep it real” by remaining “true” to “the street,” even when they hail from middle-class suburbs (McLeod 1999). Television news anchors and on-air media personalities go so far as to downgrade their résumés for fear of seeming inauthentic and insufficiently populist. On Fox News, cable TV host Bill O'Reilly has asserted that “I understand working-class Americans. I'm as lower-middle-class as they come,” even though he hails from the decidedly well-off neighborhood of

Westbury, Long Island, and earned advanced degrees from Harvard and Boston University without financial aid (Murphy 2002).

Since the onslaught of the Industrial Revolution in the nineteenth century, the search for authenticity has been a middle-class reaction to the soullessness of monopoly capitalism and the ravaging of the countryside, whether as expressed by Karl Marx's critique of alienated labor or Walt Whitman's and Henry David Thoreau's pastoral odes to the natural landscape. Today, as contemporary media and popular culture grow ever more processed and manufactured, many consumers place increasing value on that which appears less prone to manipulation and thus more authentic. For instance, in our postmodern age of high-tech frivolity—as exemplified by the proliferation of Botox and filtered Instagram photos, Hollywood artifice and Auto-Tuned pop music, virtual reality and vampire chic—some consumers nostalgically seek out the authenticity suggested by symbols of agrarian simplicity (organic beets, raw honey) and old-fashioned folkways (handlebar mustaches, homemade taxidermy).

Authenticity can refer to a variety of desirable traits: credibility, originality, sincerity, naturalness, genuineness, innateness, purity, or realness. Like a badge of honor, authenticity connotes legitimacy and social value, but like honor itself it is also a social construct with moral overtones rather than an objective and value-free appraisal. Given its socially constructed and thus elusive nature, authenticity *itself* can never be authentic but must always be performed, staged, fabricated, crafted, or otherwise imagined (MacCannell 1976; Peterson 1997; Fine 2003; Grazian 2003). The performance of authenticity always requires a close conformity to the expectations set by the cultural context in which it is situated. For instance, in American politics authenticity is marked by straight talk, plain speech, and working-class cultural sensibilities, whereas foodies evaluate the authenticity of ethnic cuisine according to its closeness to national, local, or regional sources of tradition (Lu and Fine 1995; Johnston and Baumann 2007).

Consumers attribute authenticity to cultural objects and symbols as a means of creating distinction, status, prestige, or value; it is therefore ironic that authenticity is so often associated with hardship and disadvantage. Collectors assign legitimacy to the childlike artwork of uneducated, self-taught artists on the basis of its unmediated purity, its expression of the wild but innocent creativity of an unrefined mind (Fine 2003). Music fans and ethnomusicologists romanticize the Mississippi Delta blues melodies of poor sharecroppers as rural expressions of African American primitivism and Anglo-Saxon folk ballads for their association with working-class country living (Roy 2002). For similar reasons, international tourists and consumers delight in their purchases of indigenous crafts handmade in developing countries such as Thailand and Costa Rica (Wherry 2008).

While these examples illustrate how the search for authenticity can serve as an exercise in snobbery or condescension, other cases reveal how consumers and cultural authorities can establish distinction through a more democratizing discourse of authenticity attribution. Gourmet food writers, cooks, and diners alike validate ingredients, recipes, and dishes as authentic by associating them with a particular geographic region, whether in the case of Tuscan wild boar

stew, Vietnamese beef wraps, Maryland crab cakes, or Nashville hot chicken. (The specificity of place also serves as a marker of authenticity among consumers of globally popular music from Punjabi bhangra to Jamaican reggae.) Other culinary audiences legitimize food as authentic by emphasizing the rustic quality of homegrown or organic produce—heirloom tomatoes, baby kale, handpicked cilantro, shaved truffles—or else the modesty of handmade dishes such as black beans and rice or mint cucumber salad (Johnston and Baumann 2007).

Considering their invented quality, attributions of authenticity must often be passionately defended if they are to masquerade as actual facts, occasionally to ridiculous ends. Many locals insist that a truly authentic Philadelphia cheesesteak must be prepared with one of three kinds of cheese—American, provolone, or Cheez Whiz, even though the latter is perhaps the most artificial and synthetic of all foodstuffs, invented in a laboratory in 1952 (two decades after the introduction of the “original” Philly cheesesteak), and in Canada, no less. (When in 2003 U.S. presidential hopeful John Kerry accidentally ordered a cheesesteak in South Philadelphia with Swiss cheese, local reporters suggested that it may have marked the “unraveling” of his campaign.) Pabst Blue Ribbon beer is commonly hailed as a symbol of working-class authenticity by counter-culturally minded consumers presumably oblivious to the fact that the former Milwaukee brewer is now based in Los Angeles and owned by TSG Consumer Partners, a private-equity firm. Food companies liberally draw on ideologies surrounding authenticity to euphemize the use of flavor additives and extracts as “natural flavors” (Schlosser 2002). Meanwhile, national supermarket chains such as Whole Foods Market promote their most highly processed foods from frozen burritos and pizzas to TV dinners as “organic” as if such dishes were grown on small family farms rather than manufactured in industrial laboratories and packing plants (Pollan 2006).

Given that the authentic experiences American consumers value are inevitably rooted in stereotypical and fanciful images of reality rather than the messiness (and sometimes unpleasantness) of everyday life as it is actually lived, the search for authenticity can prove to be a risky balancing act. After all, few contemporary home buyers on the market for a “historically preserved” nineteenth-century Victorian carriage house are likely to desire one lacking indoor toilets. American diners at ethnic restaurants may crave exotic dishes from faraway lands, but not those foods so far removed from their customary palates that they deem them inedible, such as Swiss horsemeat, or Malaysian webbed duck feet, or *bosintang*, a Korean soup prepared with dog meat. In fact, the representation of cultural authenticity in dining and other entertainment settings almost always relies on a somewhat imaginary and aesthetically pleasing simulation of reality. In mainstream Chinese restaurants in the United States, dishes like Mongolian beef are prepared with lots of sugar to appeal to American tastes; soup is served as an appetizer course rather than at the end of the meal (as it would be in China); and traditional Chinese dishes such as beef tripe, ox’s tail, and pig’s tongue are excluded from most menus (Lu and Fine 1995). Feigning authenticity, Mexican restaurants in the United States serve tortilla chips before the meal and burritos

as a main course—not because traditional Mexican folkways demand it (they do not), but because Anglo customers do (Gaytan 2008, pp. 325–26).

Within the media and culture industries, the production of popular music relies on similarly strategic methods of representing authenticity. In the early era of country-western music, record companies portrayed their actual artists as authentic old-timers, hillbillies, and cowboys (Peterson 1997). Contemporary recording labels rely on racially charged stock characters to market their male rap and hip-hop acts as gang-bangers, street thugs, pimps, convicted felons, ex-cons, and drug users. (Meanwhile, female rap and pop stars from Nicki Minaj to Iggy Azalea to Lana Del Ray are regularly accused of being inauthentic—of not writing their own raps, of not being able to sing, of pretending to be “street,” of not keeping true to their roots.) Pop bands take their fashion cues from once-underground punk and skateboarding scenes to camouflage themselves in the symbolic authenticity of alienated youth and independent rock. Blues club owners in Chicago almost exclusively hire African American bandleaders for profitable weekend gigs in response to audience demand for the authenticity that affluent white consumers usually attribute to black blues performers (Grazian 2003). According to one local guitarist:

It’s because white audiences and owners are ignorant. The owners know that tourists will ask at the door, “Well, is the band playing tonight a *black*



Tenry Johns Blues Band with Claudette playing at Blue Chicago, one of the city’s most popular downtown blues venues. Why do blues clubs in Chicago almost exclusively hire African American bandleaders?

band, or is it a *white* band?" Because the tourists only want to hear black bands, because they want to see an authentic Chicago blues band, and they think a black band is more *real*, more *authentic*. When they come to Chicago, it's like they want to go to the "Disneyland of the Blues." You know, it's like this: people want German cars, French chefs, and well, they want their bluesmen black. It's a designer label. (quoted in Grazian 2003, p. 36)

Adventures in the Quest for Meaning in Popular Culture

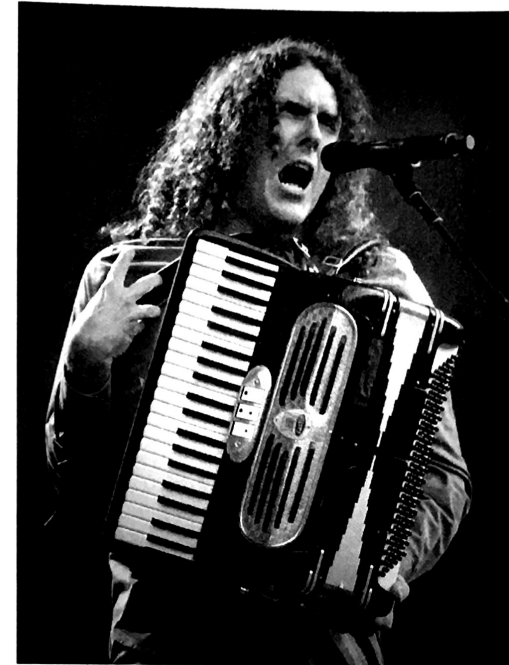
While the search for authenticity among consumers has perhaps never been stronger, others embrace an alternative set of pop cultural pursuits that devalue, deconstruct, or otherwise challenge such explorations as tradition-bound, humorless, or else pretentious. For example, in the quest for meaning in popular culture, many postmodern consumers seek out exemplars of *hybridity* in which otherwise disparate cultures are melded together in a self-conscious manner to generate new possibilities for creative expression. In many ways, the entire history of American popular music in the twentieth century was marked by attempts at synthesis and fusion. Blues and jazz developed as a *mélange* of African and European musical traditions, while early rock 'n' roll pioneers developed the genre by blending urban blues with country music. Such experiments in hybridity are also evident in the aforementioned Bob Dylan's mid-1960s development of electric folk-rock (which signaled his supposed *lack* of authenticity among more traditional folk music adherents, including the aforementioned Pete Seeger); Miles Davis's forays into free jazz, funk, and psychedelic rock on albums like *Bitches Brew* and *On the Corner*; the appropriation of classical music techniques in 1970s and 1980s progressive rock and heavy metal; and the emergence of rap rock, an amalgam of punk, hard rock, and hip-hop music exemplified by 1980s and 1990s acts such as the Beastie Boys, the Red Hot Chili Peppers, and Rage Against the Machine.

Like the pursuit of authenticity, adventures in cultural hybridity are popular among foodies, as evidenced by the pervasiveness of global fusion cooking in fine-dining establishments worldwide. In New York, San Francisco, Chicago, and other cosmopolitan cities, three- and four-star restaurants prepare fashionable exemplars of hybrid cuisine that combine French cooking with a mixture of ingredients from Japan, Italy, Cuba, Mexico, and Morocco, among other locales. In downtown Philadelphia restaurants, fusion dishes include seared Kobe beef carpaccio, truffle-scented edamame ravioli, and chocolate mousse with fresh grated wasabi (Grazian 2003, p. 233). By playfully combining culinary traditions common to regional cuisines, chefs and dining patrons alike reject the social construction of authenticity in favor of global fusion.

If the pursuit of hybridity represents a challenge to cultural traditions, so do adventures in *irony*. We experience irony when we invert aesthetic and taste conventions to humorous effect, particularly when cultural creators and consumers playfully mock what they regard as the self-importance of authenticity displays. The self-consciously campy performances of gay drag queens call attention to the stylized artifice and theatricality of celebrity culture, as do

pop music divas from Madonna to Lady Gaga and Katy Perry. The same can be said about the dead-on song parodies and music videos of Weird Al Yankovic, who has sold more than 12 million albums (more than any other comedy act ever) by sending up superstars such as Michael Jackson, Taylor Swift, Miley Cyrus, Pharrell Williams, and, yes, Madonna, Lady Gaga, and Katy Perry.

We also experience ironic detachment (and not a little nostalgia) when consuming outdated pop cultural fads and fashions as cheesy kitsch, whether 1970s disco music from the Bee Gees or the Village People or 1980s hair-metal rock bands such as Mötley Crüe or Guns N' Roses. Cult movies with demonstrable camp appeal among winking audiences include Ed Wood's 1959 film *Plan 9 from Outer Space*, widely considered the worst movie ever made (which ironically makes it one of the most important movies ever made), and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), a low-budget musical parody that today boasts the longest theatrical run in motion picture history. Since the 1970s, Troma Entertainment has produced and distributed gross-out science-fiction horror films that harken back to the alien and monster B-movies of the 1950s, including *The Toxic Avenger* (1985) and *Class of Nuke 'Em High* (1986). More recent cult films include *Showgirls* (1995), an exploitive Las Vegas-based morality tale and box-office bomb that went on to earn \$100 million in the home video rental market, and *Wet Hot American Summer* (2001), a sweaty summer-camp movie that later gained a following among pop culture fans when a number of its relatively unknown cast members became famous, including Elizabeth Banks, Bradley Cooper, Amy Poehler, and Paul Rudd. (In 2015, Netflix released a short TV series as a "prequel" to the film, starring much of the original cast.) Even certifiably awful films and other pop cultural duds can entertain audiences, and in doing so can be made meaningful, and even significant.



In his performances, Weird Al Yankovic, who specializes in parodies of songs by the biggest names in pop culture, emphasizes the artificiality of celebrity culture.