

(Pop) Culture:

Playground of the Spirit or Diabolical Device?

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by

Stanley J. Grenz

Pioneer McDonald Professor of Theology

Carey Theological College, Vancouver BC

My childhood was characterized by an ambiguous relationship to the kind of pop culture that was being dished out by the entertainment industry in the 1950s and 1960s. My parents, the deacons in the pietist Baptist churches that my father served as pastor, and my Sunday school teachers spoke with one voice in denouncing such pop cultural rituals as movie-going (as well as dancing, smoking, drinking and card playing) as among the sins that could derail the sincere Christian who was seeking to tread the pathway to holy living. This, coupled with the likelihood that the returning Lord would pass me by were he to find me in the show hall, worked to keep me on the “straight and narrow” and away from the movie theater. No wonder that I viewed my attendance at a showing of *The Shaggy Dog* with my cousins during a visit to a seemingly much more liberal-minded aunt and uncle as testing the limits of divine forbearance.

My parents and other adults in the church also warned me of the dangers of rock music. Yet the accessibility to the “hit parade” that the local Top 40 station provided to every transistor-radio-packing youth of the day made any parentally- or ecclesiastically-imposed ban on this form of entertainment more difficult to enforce. Then, when I was 16 years old, my parents unexpectedly lifted the ban on movie going. This decision was motivated in part by their realization that the rule made little sense when this year’s box office successes would be available for viewing on the family TV next year and by the appearance in the local theater of *The Sound of Music*, which even my mother would have gladly gone to see, if her role as pastor’s wife had permitted.

In contrast to my parents’ more “progressive” attitude, in the face of the onslaught of the entertainment industry many other Christians stiffened the rules. Some even extend the ban to the television set as well. Carl McClain captured the sentiments of a host of Christian leaders of the day regarding nearly every aspect of pop culture when he asserted, “I submit that a frequenter

of the theatre or movie house cannot at the same time be a spiritual force for good.”¹ Indeed, the reigning belief in the ecclesiastical circles in which I was raised was that pop culture in its various forms was a tool of Satan and that the entertainment industry was an ally in the devil’s efforts to neutralize one’s Christian witness and destroy one’s spiritual vitality.

Much has changed since the 1960s. There are Christians who continue to voice the fear that pop culture is a diabolical device and that the entertainment industry is part of a larger satanic-inspired conspiracy against godliness. Nevertheless, most North American church-goers in the twenty-first century take a more benign view.² Some even suggest that pop culture can serve as a vehicle for encountering the divine.

Several contemporary Christian film critics argue that movies function in this manner. Films, they declare, possess the ability “to awaken a sense of awe and wonder in the beholder,” to cite the words of Thomas Martin.³ The Jesuit priest Neil Hurley, for example, asserts that “film has become an outlet for transcendental concerns that are rooted in the human spirit: conscience, guilt, freedom and love.”⁴ In fact, on the basis of his sense that “both motion pictures and theology work with transcendence,”⁵ Hurley makes the startling claim that “[m]ovies are for the masses what theology is for an elite.”⁶ Sounding notes that are also found in Martin’s refrain, Hurley explains: “While seeking recreation, diversion, and understanding, moviewatchers are often exercising transcendental faculties of insight, criticism, and wonder that come remarkably close to what religion has traditionally termed faith, prophecy, and reverence.”⁷

Craig Detweiler and Barry Taylor concur. They admit that “the entertainment industry generates plenty of products worth criticizing,” and that “pop culture can transmit many allusions and delusions, leading unsuspecting audiences toward paths of destruction.” Nevertheless, Detweiler and Taylor are convinced that “God shines through even the most debased pop cultural

products.”⁸ Consequently, they “engage with popular culture out of genuine enjoyment, love, and respect,” anticipating that by examining “where God might be lurking in the songs, shows, and films kids continually return to for solace and meaning,”⁹ they just might be able “to discover the surprising messages God may already be broadcasting through the mass media.”¹⁰ Believing that its rise is one of “the most profound, provocative, exciting expressions of legitimate spiritual yearning in at least one hundred years,” Detweiler and Taylor turn to pop culture “to understand God and to recognize the twenty-first-century face of Jesus.” Confident that pop culture offers “a refreshing, alternative route to a Jesus who for many has been domesticated, declawed, and kept under wraps,”¹¹ they commend it as being possibly the Christian worker’s “new best friend.”¹²

So who is right? Is pop culture the playground of the Spirit, as enthusiasts such as Detweiler and Taylor seem to suggest? Or were the cautionary voices of an earlier day correct in warning that the entire entertainment industry comprises a diabolical device? Journeying toward an answer to this question requires that we first determine what we mean by pop culture, an inquiry that must itself be set within an understanding of the concept of culture.

The Cultural Phenomenon¹³

Martha Bayles notes that the word *culture* carries two distinct meanings and that this double-meaning introduces both confusion and ambiguity into the concept. Culture can refer to the purposeful activity—especially artistic and intellectual activity—“aimed at improving and perfecting its object.” But the term can also designate the way of life of a people, including “behavior patterns, customs, beliefs, rituals, and the whole material apparatus of life, from tools to textiles, totems to sacred texts,” to cite her almost poetic description.¹⁴ In Bayles’ estimation, the two meanings are not totally disparate, but are linked through what she denotes as “that peculiar amalgam known as *popular culture*.”¹⁵

From *Bildung* to Meaning: A “History” of Culture

The word *culture* sports an interesting history. Its derivation from the Latin *cultivare* (“to till the soil”) led to the original meaning: “the care and tending of crops or animals”¹⁶ especially with a view toward improving what is tended. The idea of a specifically *human* culture likely arose as a metaphorical extension of this “tending” process to the human person. According to the ancient philosophers, this process of “refining” the individual involved above all the mind and occurred through teaching.¹⁷

The breakdown of the feudal system in Europe and the rise of the middle class led to a renewed emphasis on the idea of the cultured person, especially in intellectual circles in France, Germany and Britain. The process was now understood in keeping with the idea captured in the German term *Bildung*. The cultured person (*der gebildete Mensch*) was one who had been educated to possess both intellectual capabilities and aesthetic sensibilities. In addition to its connection to the process of refining the human person, culture denoted the artistic and intellectual products (such as art and literature) deemed to be the means to becoming, or to be expressions of, the “refined” person.

The resulting preference for what we might call “high culture” formed a marked contrast to the practices, customs and even the language of the “uneducated” lower classes. Understood in this manner, culture was often used, especially by Enlightenment thinkers in France, somewhat interchangeably with the idea of *civilization*. The civilizing task involved overcoming the chaotic diversity characteristic of the life of the “common people,” which, the proponents of “civilization” concluded, marks a stage on the way toward the cultured society. As Kathryn Tanner explains, “civilization or culture was a self-conscious construction of human beings, a self-directed form of education, something made rather than found, the product of reason rather

than blind habit.”¹⁸

In intellectual circles in the United States in the 1920s, the use of the term to denote “high culture” or the goal of a process of education and refinement was replaced by the idea of culture as a given dimension of human social life—more specifically, the customs and rituals of a particular social group. For the genesis of this shift, some historians point to the work of Sir Edward Burnett Tylor, who understood culture not so much as the refinement of the human person but as the cultural achievements that are sustained through social institutions: “Culture or Civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.”¹⁹

Perhaps more significant in inaugurating the shift in meaning were thinkers such as Franz Boas,²⁰ who introduced into the English discussion the German idea of *Kultur*, understood as the highest achievements of a particular society. Under this rubric, the customs and social forms of a particular people came to be viewed as a self-contained whole comprising the culture of that group. As a result, *culture* could now be used in the plural.²¹ Because there are many human societies, there are a variety of human cultures.

The broad social understanding of the term that lay at the heart of the fledgling field of cultural anthropology is evident in the typical description offered in 1948 by Melvin Herskovitz: “culture is essentially a construct that describes the total body of belief, behaviors, knowledge, sanctions, values and goals that mark the way of life of a people....In the final analysis it comprises the things that people have, the things they do, and what they think.”²² Armed with this concept, modern cultural anthropologists explored the specific pattern of behaviors that distinguishes any given society from all others.²³

Beginning in the 1980s cultural anthropology itself came under attack. Since then, an understanding of culture has emerged that takes seriously the historical contingency of human personal and social life. At the heart of this postmodern perspective is a rejection of the “integrated” focus endemic to modernist definitions of culture. Postmodern anthropologists have discarded the older assumption that culture is a preexisting social-ordering force that is transmitted externally to members of a cultural group who in turn passively internalize it.²⁴ Further, the older focus on the integrative role of culture has become suspect; culture is now seen “as that which *aggregates* people and processes, rather than *integrates* them,” to cite Anthony Cohen’s succinct description.²⁵ In addition, postmodern thinkers view culture as the product of social interaction, with humans as active creators, rather than passive receivers, of culture.²⁶ What binds people together is not so much a general framework of social relations, a clearly understood body of beliefs and values, or a dominant ideology, as much as—in the words of Alain Touraine—“a set of resources and models that social actors seek to manage, to control, and which they appropriate or whose transformation into social organization they negotiate among themselves.”²⁷

Of greatest importance, however, is the movement away from the focus on common human behaviors as comprising the essence of culture in favor of a greater concern for the connection between culture and meaning. Postmodern cognitive anthropologists understand culture as denoting—in the words of Cohen—“the framework of meaning, of concepts and ideas, within which different aspects of a person’s life can be related to each other without imposing arbitrary categorical boundaries between them.”²⁸ Hence, culture consist of “shared knowledge,” a set of meaningful forms and symbols that from the point of view of any particular individual

are largely given,²⁹ but are only meaningful because human minds have the ability to interpret them.³⁰

The Meaning-Forming Function of Culture

Postmodern anthropologists view *culture* as a shorthand way of talking about the shared dimension of meaning-making. This understanding is closely connected to social-constructionist views of the world and of personal identity formation.

The contemporary idea of social construction builds in part from the thesis presented by Peter Berger in the mid-1960s that rather than inhabiting a prefabricated, given world, humans live in a social-cultural world of their own creation,³¹ a task to which society supplies the necessary cultural tools.³² Viewed from this perspective, people may be said to share a culture to the extent that they have similar experiences (i.e., experiences that follow the same general patterns as those of other members of the society)³³ mediated by shared humanly-created products and learned practices, which lead them to develop a set of similar meaning-creating cultural “schemas.” These schemas provide the tools for ongoing identity formation, in that they comprise the framework for reconstructing memories of past events, for imparting meaning to ongoing experience and for devising expectations for the future.³⁴

Taken together, the cultural schemas constitute the world a person inhabits. They form what Pierre Bourdieu calls the “*habitus*,” that is, the “*matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions*”³⁵—“the range of conscious and unconscious codes, protocols, principles and presuppositions”³⁶—that people enact as they fulfill their roles in their socially-constructed world. Building from Bourdieu’s concept, David Morgan offers this description of the “habitus”: “We might say that a world or habitus consists of all the roles, scripts, stages, and past performances that form the common fund of a society and are instantiated or remembered in the choices an

individual makes when interacting with others.”³⁷ This habitus informs, modifies and determines what a person does. It likewise generates the strategies that enable a person to cope with unforeseen and ever-changing situations.³⁸

Although the constructed world gives the semblance of being a given, universal and objective reality, it is actually—to use Morgan’s picture—“an unstable edifice that generations constantly labor to build, raze, rebuild, and redesign.”³⁹ The goal of the meaning-making task is the formation of personal identity within the context of the social group, i.e., the socially-constructed self. This task, like that of the construction of culture itself, is a never-completed, and hence an ongoing process.⁴⁰

At the heart of this ongoing, dynamic process are what sociologists call “symbols” that transmit the shared meanings by means of which a people understand themselves, pinpoint their deepest aspirations and longings, and construct the world they inhabit. Through the symbols they share, members of a group express and communicate to each other their understandings of the central aspects of life, even as they struggle together to determine the meaning of the very symbols they use in this process.

Symbols come in various shapes and sizes. Yet the most widely-used symbol systems are linguistic. Language ranks as the central cultural form involved in the world-constructing and meaning-creating task,⁴¹ for it provides the central conceptual tools through which we construct the world we inhabit. As Paul Hiebert asserts, “We cannot perceive nature or think or communicate about it without language, but language, to a great extent, also molds what we see and how we see it.”⁴² In addition, linguistic concepts serve as the vehicles through which we communicate and thereby share meaning with others. In the words of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, “Language objectivates the shared experiences and makes them available to all

within the linguistic community, thus becoming both the basis and the instrument of the collective stock of knowledge.”⁴³ Meaning is conveyed by other carriers as well—things, images, rituals—many of which have taken on increased importance in our contemporary consumer society.

In summary, we might say—borrowing a phrase from Shakespeare—that all the world’s a stage, albeit a stage of our own construction. By participating in the task of making meaning, we contribute to the creation of the context in which we act out our socially-designed roles and gain our sense of identity. Rather than being fixed and stable, this socially-constructed stage is in constant flux—sometimes imperceptible to us, sometimes obvious to all, but changing nonetheless. Over the course of our life-span, our sense of personal identity (and hence the parts we play) shifts along with the changes in our constructed world.

Culture Goes “Pop”

After introducing the term *pop culture* into the discussion in the quotation I cited earlier in this essay, Martha Bayles hastens to add an important clarification: “I do not use the word *popular* as the opposite of *high*, *serious*, or *good*. This usage is both illogical and a-historical: in every time and place, there have been works of art that possessed both popularity and artistic merit. And conversely, works that are low, unserious, and bad are not necessarily popular.”⁴⁴ Bayles’s comment underscores the tendency since the late eighteenth century to differentiate between “high,” “serious,”⁴⁵ “elite” or “private”⁴⁶ culture on the one hand and “popular” or “mass” culture or the “public arts”⁴⁷ on the other, while acknowledging the blurred character of the line that separates them.

Popular vs. High Culture

Rather than the intrinsic value of the cultural artifact, perhaps the most often-articulated characteristic that distinguishes pop culture from high culture is that of mass appeal vs. adherence to the standards of an elite. So widespread had this perspective become by the last third of the twentieth century that in 1970 Russel B. Nye could assert,

Most, though not all, of those in the field of popular culture today would probably agree that ‘popular culture’ describes those productions, both artistic and commercial, designed for mass consumption, which appeal to and express the tastes and understanding of the majority of the public, free of control by minority standards. They reflect the values, convictions, and patterns of thought and feeling generally dispersed through and approved by American society⁴⁸

Or to cite Ray Browne’s terse description, “Popular culture is the culture of the people, of *all* the people, as distinguished from a select, small elite group.”⁴⁹

When did popular culture arise? Writing in 1974, Marshall Fishwick used the label to denote what he saw as the emergence of a new international style in the late twentieth century.⁵⁰ If he is correct, then we might say that pop culture is the invention of—or for—the post-World War II, 1950s teenagers and their successors, the so-called “baby-boomer” generation. Because they shared the crucial characteristics of being “treasured” by their parents, flush with disposable cash, and intent on finding a sense of self-definition through product identification, these youth provided the ideal constituency for a profit-driven entertainment industry.⁵¹ In any case, it was no accident that the “veritable golden age of popular culture” (to cite Paul Buhle’s characterization) emerged simultaneously with the prosperity that began during the years immediately following the Second World War.⁵²

Despite the relatively recent origin of pop culture's "veritable golden age," the roots of the phenomenon lie much earlier. In a sense, pop culture was an outgrowth of folk culture. It emerged out of the work of artisans and artists who contributed to the community life of "primitive" human societies. Moreover, its precursors included such diverse expressions as the theatrical and sporting events of ancient Greece and Rome, the trappings that surrounded the festivals and celebrations of the medieval era, and the ballads and folk songs that reflected the life of the common people in the Renaissance and Enlightenment eras.⁵³

Yet if popular culture is best understood as "mass" culture, rather than merely being the heir of folk culture, then we should look for its more immediate origin in the industrial and democratic revolutions of the late eighteenth century.⁵⁴ The stage was set for the advent of popular culture by the population explosion and urbanization that began in western Europe and North America the 1800s but intensified in the United States after the Civil War.⁵⁵ These far-reaching developments produced rising literate, democratic-spirited blue-collar and middle classes, together with technological advances (such as moveable-type printing presses) that facilitated wide and rapid dissemination of cultural materials. As this process unfolded, folk communities were assimilated into a larger whole, leading to the creation of a vast new audience that could be exploited through the mass media. As a result, artists were no longer dependent on a relatively small upper class, but could derive their livelihood by creating the kind of cultural materials that appealed to this growing "mass" audience. In 1953, Dwight Macdonald offered a succinct summary of the reigning historiography:

Political democracy and popular education broke down the old upper-class monopoly of culture. Business enterprise found a profitable market in the cultural demands of the newly awakened masses, and the advance of technology made possible the cheap

production of books, periodicals, pictures, music, and furniture, in sufficient quantities to satisfy this market. Modern technology also created new media such as the movies and television which are specially well adapted to mass manufacture and distribution.⁵⁶

Pop Culture and the Psyche of the Masses

“In the simplest terms,” explain Christopher Geist and Jack Nachbar, “popular culture is best thought of as mainstream culture—the arts, artifacts, entertainments, fads, beliefs and values shared by large segments of the society.”⁵⁷ Their analysis of the four dimensions that they see as comprising it suggests that pop culture involves (1) the beliefs, values, superstitions and movements of thought shared by a large percentage of the population, which come to expression (2) in artifacts and images of people, (3) in the arts, and (4) in the rituals or events that garner a wide following.⁵⁸ By describing pop culture this manner, Geist and Nachbar reflect the often-articulated idea that this phenomenon is closely connected to the psyche of the masses. What makes pop culture popular, according to this view, is its ability to articulate the outlooks, attitudes, aspirations, fears and values of the masses of people to whom these cultural products are marketed and upon whose willingness to purchase their wares the purveyors of pop culture (i.e., its artists and producers) are financially dependent.

This assumed connection to the psyche of the masses has opened popular culture to harsh criticism almost since its advent. Writing in 1950, the American sociologist Leo Lowenthal pointed out that nineteenth century popular culture had been the target not only of Christian (especially Catholic) social philosophy but also of secular polemicists, such as Friedrich Nietzsche and Karl Kraus. The latter of these two figures, according to Lowenthal’s characterization, linked pop culture with “the disintegration, and even the disappearance, of the concept and existence of the autonomous individual, of the personality in its classical sense.”⁵⁹

Until the late twentieth century criticism of popular culture tended to highlight its supposed tendency to cater to the most vulgar or debased tastes adrift among the masses. Dwight Macdonald stated the critique pointedly, when he wrote in 1953, “a mass society, like a crowd, is so undifferentiated and loosely structured that its atoms, in so far as human values go, tend to cohere only along the line of the least common denominator; its morality sinks to that of its most brutal and primitive members, its taste to that of the least sensitive and most ignorant.”⁶⁰ Macdonald then portrayed pop culture as a secret ploy perpetrated upon the masses by the tycoons of capitalism whose sole intent is that of making a profit. In his estimation, “Mass Culture is imposed from above. It is fabricated by technicians hired by businessmen; its audiences are passive consumers, their participation limited to the choice between buying and not buying.”⁶¹

What appeared in the 1950s to have become a consensus among elitist critics has since then given way to a diversity of opinion regarding the exact nature of the connection between pop culture and the psyche of the masses. Some social commentators continue to draw from the ideologically-oriented thesis articulated by mid-century critics: that pop culture is imposed upon the wider society by a small but powerful elite. Yet the arguments proposed in recent years tend to run counter to the critique Macdonald voiced at the midpoint of the twentieth century. Hence, rather than claiming that pop culture is debased because it panders to the masses, in his widely-acclaimed jeremiad *Hollywood vs. America: Popular Culture and the War on Traditional Values*, Jewish film critic Michael Medved decries pop culture because it “assaults” the “most cherished values” of “tens of millions of Americans.”⁶² Medved asserts that the goal of the elites who control the output of pop culture has less to do with amassing wealth than with shaping social attitudes and values. In making this claim, Medved draws in part from the work of Linda

and Robert Lichter and Stanley Rothman, who concluded from their survey of television programming, “Far from always following in the wake of popular tastes, the fictional world of prime time can be sharply at odds with public sentiment. More often, it tries to guide middle-American tastes in the direction of intellectual trends emanating from New York and Los Angeles.”⁶³

Other sociologists take issue with the idea that pop culture is imposed upon a passive society. Geist and Nachbar articulate what at first glance appears obvious: “the very popularity of a work suggests that it has struck a chord in the public at large, that thousands or even millions have found something in the work that is enormously appealing, satisfying or stimulating.” They acknowledge that pop culture is a shaping influence on the sensibilities of its consumers. Yet of greater importance is the manner in which pop culture reflects the psyche of the masses. Geist and Nachbar are convinced that “the popular arts provide a gauge by which we can learn what Americans are thinking, their fears, fantasies, dreams and dominant mythologies.”⁶⁴ Ray Brown sounds a similar chord. In fact, in his estimation, the close connection to the psyche of the masses is precisely what gives pop culture its usefulness as a window into the soul of a people, a connection that actually serves to place it above, in this respect, high culture. He writes: “Because it is less artful. Less altered by the alchemy of the artist, popular culture is often a more truthful picture of what the people were thinking and doing at any given time than artistic creations are.”⁶⁵

Drawing these seemingly divergent theories together suggests that a reciprocal relationship exists between pop culture and the lives of people. Pop culture both *reflects* and *affects* the values and outlooks that people construct for themselves. This observation, in turn, points in the direction of the most significant aspect of the importance of pop culture in

contemporary society. Pop cultural commodities may well be produced and distributed by industries that are motivated to a large degree by their own economic interests. Nevertheless, the products of these industries become the tools by means of which a vast number of people engage in the cultural task of determining meaning for their lives. As a consequence of this development, pop culture has become a genuine cultural phenomenon. John Fiske states the point well: “Popular culture is not consumption, it is culture—the active process of generating and circulating meanings and pleasures within a social system.” He then adds, “Popular culture is made by the people, not produced by the culture industry. All the culture industries can do is produce a repertoire of texts or cultural resources for the various formations of the people to use or reject in the ongoing process of producing their popular culture.”⁶⁶

Over two decades ago, Geist and Nachbar declared insightfully, “popular culture taken as a whole is the most common part of our cultural heritage and our present living environment.”⁶⁷ Indeed, in recent years, pop culture has emerged as not only one cultural phenomenon among others, but as the central medium for the creative cultural task of a vast number of people, especially younger people. The pop cultural realm created by the teenagers of the 1950s and 1960s has become a given for their successors, a central dimension of life, a cultural world in which they have been steeped from the cradle. Writing as a “twenty-something” in the late 1990s, Tom Beaudoin observes,

The extent to which popular culture has meaning for our generation gets at the heart of what makes it a distinct group. In addition to a unique set of social and economic conditions that prevailed for those of us born in the 1960s and 1970s, our generation...readily “respond” to (find meaning in) a shared set of cultural referents. These pop culture “events” significantly influenced and continue to shape the meaning

systems and values of this generation, both actively and potentially, explicitly and implicitly.⁶⁸

In short, speaking both about and on behalf of his contemporaries, Beaudoin declares, “we are nurtured by the amniotic fluid of popular culture with the media as a primary source of meaning....We express our religious interests, dreams, fears, hopes, and desires through popular culture.”⁶⁹

(Pop) Culture’s “God” or the God of Culture?

Beaudoin’s confession that a vast number of people in his generation express their *religious* interests through popular culture leads us back to the question with which we began: Is pop culture the Spirit’s playground or the devil’s device?

The “Standard” Approach to the Question

It should be noted here that critics whose answer is the latter generally argue their case on the basis of the questionable value or even the outright immoral character of the content presented in pop cultural products. Michael Medved provides a terse all-encompassing articulation of this argument: “Hollywood ignores the concerns of the overwhelming majority of the American people who worry over the destructive messages so frequently featured in today’s movies, television, and popular music.”⁷⁰

Christians who find value in pop culture also routinely look to the messages that can be found in pop cultural artifacts for the basis of their appraisal. But what they find differs greatly from what critics like Medved see. Detweiler and Taylor, for example, hail pop culture as “the collected wisdom of our era.” They point out that pop culture “includes explorations of injustice, songs of sorrow, tributes to women.” Although they stop short of ascribing to pop culture “a

salvific purpose,” they assert that “it still offers us essential perspective, comfort, wisdom. Its artistry often stands alone as smaller, isolated truths that endure the test of time.”⁷¹

Robert K. Johnston, in turn, expands the list of valuable messages that can be found in pop culture, especially movies. He sympathetically summarizes what he finds to be the thinking of a variety of Christian observers who conclude that movies “help us empathetically understand both others and ourselves. In an increasingly visual culture...film images are an important source of knowledge....Because the viewer cannot control the images, they catch us off guard and tell us things about ourselves and others.” Moreover, Johnston notes that according to many theorists, “It is from movies that we get our ‘collective’ images of ourselves, our values, and our social world. Movies both identify our anxieties and reveal our society’s values; they ‘tell’ us something about the age we live in.”⁷²

Four decades before the appearance of the work of either Johnston or Detweiler and Taylor, theologian Robert McAfee Brown responded to the parallel question, “What can Christians learn from non-Christian works of fiction?” His answer was simple: “the Salingers and the Steinbecks...do not merely tell us ‘interesting’ things, they tell us true things; and they do so with greater sensitivity and accuracy than many so-called ‘Christian writers.’” In short, in his estimation, “non-Christians can operate as God’s pseudonyms.”⁷³

Echoing the sympathies of proponents like Robert McAfee Brown and Robert Johnston that the purveyors of pop culture can be God’s pseudonyms, Detweiler and Taylor admonish Christians to “look closer” so as “to discover the surprising messages God may already be broadcasting through the mass media.” For the theological basis for their brash thesis that truth can be found in pop culture, Detweiler and Taylor, like the two Robert’s,⁷⁴ appeal to the theological theme of “common grace”:

The theological term behind learning to look closer is ‘common grace.’ It begins with an appreciation of the creative side of God, the goodness initiated in Genesis that continues through the Spirit’s ongoing work of conscience. It finds biblical roots wherever God used questionable sources, such as Cyrus, the king of Persia (Isaiah 45), to restore his people, the Hebrews. Exhibiting a sense of humor and playful surprise, the God of the Old Testament speaks through such unlikely means as a burning bush, a donkey, and a dream.⁷⁵

The two pop culture enthusiasts then conclude, “Common grace explains why the most spiritual movies are often made by people outside the formal borders of the church.”⁷⁶

Debating the relative merits or demerits of the messages that pop cultural products carry, although not irrelevant, is ultimately superficial. The task of determining whether pop culture is the Spirit’s playground or the devil’s device requires that such a discussion be augmented by an attempt to delve deeper into the dynamics of cultural expression in general and pop culture as a vehicle of expression in particular. For this reason, our journey toward an answer to the question posed by this essay leads to one additional feature of the meaning-making task associated with culture: its religious character.

Culture as a Religious Act

It has become common place since the advent of cultural anthropology in the 1920s to view religious artifacts and rituals as a dimension of the broader cultural phenomenon. Bernard Meland articulates this perspective when he declares, “religious expression is, itself, a cultural occurrence, not only in the sense of partaking of a cultural coloring but in the deeper sense of giving voice to human hungers, anxieties, and appreciations which, in turn, exemplify and articulate the cultural psyche.”⁷⁷ At the same time, a somewhat opposite thesis has also gained a

positive hearing. Cultural artifacts are often understood as giving expression to the underlying religious ethos of a society. Hence, T. S. Eliot writes, “We may ... ask whether what we call the culture, and what we call the religion, of a people are not different aspects of the same thing: the culture being, essentially, the incarnation (so to speak) of the religion of a people.”⁷⁸ Similarly, Paul Tillich asserts, “Religion as ultimate concern is the meaning-giving substance of culture, and culture is the totality of forms in which the basic concern of religion expresses itself. In abbreviation: religion is the substance of culture, culture is the form of religion.”⁷⁹

Taken together, these two perspective points toward an even more profound manner in which the cultural task is fundamentally religious in character. As I mentioned earlier, Peter Berger theorizes that a people construct their world as they draw from a culturally-mediated interpretive framework, a shared “common order of interpretation,” so as to impose a meaningful order upon the multiplicity of experiences that they encounter.⁸⁰ Moreover, Berger notes that throughout human history religion has played a decisive role in the building of the socially-constructed worlds that humans inhabit.⁸¹ Religion legitimates the world of a society by locating it and its institutions within a sacred, cosmic frame of reference, by bestowing on its members a sense of being connected to ultimate reality, and by giving cosmic status to its interpretative framework.⁸² In short, religion is “the human enterprise by which a sacred cosmos is established.”⁸³ What Berger finds to be the case regarding the construction of social identity can be extended to the realm of personal identity formation. Religion is instrumental in the task of legitimating the identity of the self within a socially-constructed world. Bringing the personal and the societal together, David Morgan asserts, “It is the function of religious images in visual piety to secure the world or sense of reality in which the self finds its existence.”⁸⁴

The Religion of Pop Culture

The “veritable golden age” of pop culture has brought about what we might refer to as the “respiritualization” of cultural expression. In a manner unprecedented in the late modern era, contemporary North Americans appear to be open to the spiritual,⁸⁵ even though acknowledged adherence to traditional religious institutions has declined drastically, especially among younger people.⁸⁶ Many members of Tom Beaudoin’s generation transfer what can be seen as a fundamentally religious quest from institutionalized ecclesiastical forms to pop cultural expressions. Their “lived theology” is not expressed in the sacred practices of traditional religions, especially Christianity, but in and through popular culture.⁸⁷ But how exactly does pop culture function culturally?: In what sense does it come to stand as the center of the task of meaning-making that brings cohesion to the lives of its consumers?

In his study of classical hero myths, Joseph Campbell declares that such myths, regardless of where they are found, narrate a plot that flows through three typical stages: “A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder; fabulous forces are there encountered, and a decisive victory is won; the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.”⁸⁸ In his intriguing study, *Life the Movie*, Neal Gabler draws a connection between the hero myth as a cultural narrative and religious belief, and then applies this connection to the phenomenon of the “celebrity” that has become such an important part of contemporary pop culture:

What Campbell codified was the basis not only for cultural myths but for systems of religious belief as well....In imposing the same mythic matrix on celebrity, the entertainment culture was also providing a system of belief. The spirituality, the alternative reality, the easy transcendence, the celebrity homilies, the gospels inspired by

celebrities' deaths, the icons on their way to apotheosis—all these edged entertainment, as incarnated by celebrities, ever closer to theology.⁸⁹

Yet the effects of pop culture are not limited to providing a series of *ersatz* personalities through whom people can vicariously live their lives. Its role moves deeper. Pop culture has increasingly mediated to its consumers the narrative that provides the basis for the formation of their sense of personal identity.

Contemporary narrative thinkers have rediscovered the importance of narrative in the process of personal identity formation.⁹⁰ Narrative, they argue, is constitutive of the way humans actually experience their world and themselves.⁹¹ Alasdair MacIntyre, for example, points out that humans are story-tellers⁹² and that identity develops through the telling of a personal narrative, in accordance with which one's life "make sense."⁹³ Similarly, George Stroup describes identity as the pattern that memory retrieves from one's personal history and projects into the future. According to Stroup's description, identity emerges in that through the exercise of memory a person selects certain events from one's past and uses them as a basis for interpreting the significance of the whole of one's life.⁹⁴ This identity, Stroup explains, is not created merely from the "factual data," or "chronicle," of one's life, but requires an "interpretive scheme" that provides the "plot" through which this chronicle makes sense.⁹⁵ The result is a sense of personal identity that arises by means of a perceived connection to a particular narrative that gives shape to one's identity. Moreover, the interpretive framework or plot in accordance with which a person make sense out of one's life arises ultimately from one's social context. Hence, personal identity always has a communal element; it is shaped by the community of which the person is a participant, which mediates to the person the communal, transcendent narrative necessary for personal identity formation.⁹⁶

Until the “veritable golden age” of pop culture, religious communities—especially the church—provided a sacred metanarrative by means of which a large percentage of people in North America explained their world, made sense out of their lives and constructed their personal identities. But beginning in the last half of the twentieth century, this task increasingly fell to pop cultural artifacts, especially movies, which offered “a model of narrative coherence in a world of seeming anarchy,” and which thereby assumed “the burden of drawing the curtain of fantasy,” to cite Gabler’s helpful descriptions.⁹⁷ In the process, pop culture changed the manner in which its consumers understood life itself. As Gabler points out, “where we had once measured the movies by life, we now measured life by how well it satisfied the narrative expectations created by the movies.”⁹⁸ In short, faced with the seeming pointlessness of their own chaotic lives while living in a world that appears to be characterized by anarchy, contemporary people increasingly turn to pop culture for an overarching narrative, and by means of which they construct their personal identities and in accordance with which they measure their lives.

We are now, finally, in a position to respond to the question that motivates this essay: Is pop culture the playground of the Spirit or a diabolical device? In a word, the answer is: “Both.”

For a large and growing segment of the population, pop culture serves as the chief referent for the cultural task. It provides the central tools by means of which they engage in the age-old task of meaning-making as persons within society. It mediates to them the paradigmatic narrative by means of which and in accordance with which they make sense of their otherwise seemingly senseless lives and thereby construct a sense of personal identity. To the extent that it fulfills this purpose well, pop culture becomes the playground of the Spirit. It serves an instrument by means of which the divine Spirit nurtures the human spirit. It facilitates persons, who find themselves drifting in a sea of apparent meaninglessness, in the task of fashioning a

personal identity that is genuine. To the degree that this occurs, pop culture functions rightly, fulfilling its cultural task under the lordship of the God of culture.

At the same time, the meaning that people construct by means of the narrative that pop culture provides all-too-often falls short of what is in fact the truth about their lives. Pop culture routinely fails to bring people in touch with the narrative of the God of the Bible, who is bringing creation to its divinely intended goal, namely, that of becoming the new creation fashioned around Jesus Christ, the Logos, the one in whom all things find their interconnectedness and hence their true meaning. To the extent that the paradigmatic narrative mediated through pop culture moves its consumers away from the truthful narrative of God, pop culture becomes its own god. It becomes the god of pop culture. When this occurs, pop culture, which is intended by God to be the playground of God's Spirit degenerates into a device that is diabolical, and this to the detriment of all.

Notes

1. Carl McClain, *Morals and the Movies* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 1970), 25. CHECK
2. For a helpful taxonomy of attitudes toward films, see Robert K. Johnston, *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000), 41-58.
3. Thomas Martin, *Images and the Imageless: A Study in Religious Consciousness and Film* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1981), 52. CHECK
4. Neil P. Hurley, *Theology Through Film* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), x.
5. Hurley, *Theology Through Film*, x.
6. Hurley, *Theology Through Film*, ix.
7. Hurley, *Theology Through Film*, x.
8. Craig Detweiler and Barry Taylor, *A Matrix of Meaning: Finding God in Pop Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003), 8.
9. Detweiler and Taylor, *Matrix of Meaning*, 9.
10. Detweiler and Taylor, *Matrix of Meaning*, 16.
11. Detweiler and Taylor, *Matrix of Meaning*, 9.
12. Detweiler and Taylor, *Matrix of Meaning*, 17.
13. For an expanded treatment of this topic as well as the subsequent discussion of culture and religion, see Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 131-50.
14. Martha Bayles, "Immunity Not Surgery: Why It Is Better to Exert Cultural Authority than to Impose Censorship," in *Toward the Renewal of Civilization: Political Order and Culture*, ed. T. William Boxx and Gary M. Quinlivan (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 152.
15. Bayles, "Immunity Not Surgery," 153.
16. For this background, see Michael Warren, *Seeing Through the Media: A Religious View of Communications and Cultural Analysis* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1997), 41.
17. See, for example, Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, 2.5.13 in *Cicero in Twenty-eight Volumes*, trans. J. E. King, revised edition (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 18:159.
18. Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997), 7.
19. Edward Burnett Tylor, *Primitive Culture* (London: J. Murray, 1871), 1

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20. For this assessment, see Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 19.
21. See George Stocking, *Race, Culture and Evolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 203. Writing as a historian of anthropology, Stocking describes here the shift in usage from “culture” to “cultures,” a shift that he suggests was begun by Frank Boas.
22. Melvin Herskovitz, *Man and His Works* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948), 625.
23. See, for example, John W. Bennett and Melvin M. Tumin, *Social Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948), 208-9.
24. Roy G. D’Andrade, *The Development of Cognitive Anthropology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 250.
25. Anthony P. Cohen, *Self Consciousness: An Alternative Anthropology of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1994), 118-19.
26. Cohen, *Self Consciousness*, 118-19.
27. Alain Touraine, *Return of the Actor*, trans. Myrna Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 8, 26-27, 54-55.
28. Cohen, *Self Consciousness*, 96.
29. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 45.
30. Ulf Hannerz, *Cultural Complexity: Studies in the Social Organization of Meaning* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 3-4.
31. Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*, Anchor Books edition (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969), 3-13.
32. See also, Paul G. Hiebert, *Cultural Anthropology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1983), 28-29.
33. Claudia Strauss and Naomi Quinn, *A Cognitive Theory of Cultural Meaning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 48.
34. Strauss and Quinn, *A Cognitive Theory of Cultural Meaning*, 49.
35. Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 82-83.
36. David Morgan, *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Images* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), 7.
37. Morgan, *Visual Piety*, 205.
38. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 82-83, 72.
39. Morgan, *Visual Piety*, 9.

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40. Morgan, *Visual Piety*, 204-5.
41. Quinn and Holland, "Culture and Cognition," 9.
42. Hiebert, *Cultural Anthropology*, 119.
43. Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, Anchor Books edition (New York: Anchor Books, 1967), 68.
44. Bayles, "Immunity Not Surgery," 153.
45. Martin W. Laforse and James A. Drake, *Popular Culture and American Life: Selected Topics in the Study of American Popular Culture* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1981), vii.
46. Marshall Fishwick, *Parameters of Popular Culture* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1974), 2.
47. Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White, "Perspectives of Mass Culture," in *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America*, ed. Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1957), 24.
48. Russel B. Nye, "Notes on a Rationale for Popular Culture" (Bowling Green, OH: Popular Culture Association, 1970), as reprinted in *The Popular Culture Reader*, ed. Christopher Geist and Jack Nachbar, 3rd ed. (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1983), 23-24.
49. Ray B. Browne, "Popular Culture—New Notes toward a Definition," in *The Popular Culture Reader*, ed. Christopher Geist and Jack Nachbar, 3rd ed. (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1983), 13.
50. Fishwick, *Parameters of Popular Culture*, 1.
51. For a similar characterization, see Paul Buhle, "Introduction: The 1960s Meet the 1980s," in *Popular Culture in America*, ed. Paul Buhle (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), xvii.
52. Buhle, "Introduction," xv.
53. For a depiction of some of these artistic expressions, see *The History of Popular Culture to 1815*, ed. Norman f. Cantor and Michael S. Werthman (New York: Macmillan, 1968).
54. For a helpful, succinct summary of this development, see Nye, "Notes on a Rationale for Popular Culture," 21-24.
55. See, for example, Laforse and Drake, *Popular Culture and American Life*, viii.
56. Dwight Macdonald, "A Theory of Mass Culture," *Diogenes* 3 (Summer 1953), as reprinted in *Mass Culture*, 59.
57. Christopher Geist and Jack Nachbar, "Introduction," in *The Popular Culture Reader*, ed. Christopher Geist and Jack Nachbar, 3rd ed. (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1983), 4.
58. Geist and Nachbar, "Introduction," 5-9.

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59. Leo Lowenthal, "Historical Perspectives of Popular Culture," *American Journal of Sociology* 55 (1950), as reprinted in *Mass Culture*, 52.
60. Macdonald, "A Theory of Mass Culture," 70.
61. Macdonald, "A Theory of Mass Culture," 60.
62. Michael Medved, *Hollywood vs. America: Popular Culture and the War on Traditional Values* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 3.
63. Linda S. Lichter, S. Robert Lichter and Stanley Rothman, *Watching America: What Television Tells Us about Our Lives* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1991), 4. CHECK [Medved, 295]
64. Geist and Nachbar, "Introduction," 3.
65. Browne, "Popular Culture," 17.
66. John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 23-24.
67. Geist and Nachbar, "Introduction," 3.
68. Tom Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 22.
69. Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith*, xiv.
70. Medved, *Hollywood vs. America*, 3.
71. Detweiler and Taylor, *Matrix of Meaning*, 11.
72. Johnston, *Reel Spirituality*, 64.
73. Robert McAfee Brown, "Assyrians in Modern Dress," *Presbyterian Life* (May 1, 1962), as reprinted in Robert McAfee Brown, *The Pseudonyms of God* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), 96. This essay was revised, expanded and recast as chapter 2 of Robert McAfee Brown, *Persuade Us to Rejoice: the Liberating Power of fiction* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992).
74. Robert Johnston offers a succinct summary of this theme: "God is in all of human culture, both in the way of life of a people and in the expression of that identity through human creativity." Johnston, *Reel Spirituality*, 67.
75. Detweiler and Taylor, *Matrix of Meaning*, 16.
76. Detweiler and Taylor, *Matrix of Meaning*, 17.
77. Bernard Eugene Meland, *Faith and Culture* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1953), 82.
78. T. S. Eliot, *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (London: Faber & Faber, 1948), 28.
79. Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, ed. Robert C. Kimball (New York: Oxford, 1959), 42-43.
80. Berger, *Sacred Canopy*, 20.

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81. Berger and Luckmann, "Sociology of Religion and Sociology of Knowledge," 422.
82. Berger, *Sacred Canopy*, 32-36.
83. Berger, *Sacred Canopy*, 25.
84. Morgan, *Visual Piety*, 205.
85. For a discussion of the presence of this trend in the late twentieth century, see John Naisbitt and Patricia Aburdene, *Megatrends 2000: Ten New Directions for the 1990s* (New York: Avon Books, 1990), 295-96.
86. According to a poll conducted in the mid-1990s, eight out of ten adult Canadians say they believe in God, eighty-two percent consider themselves to be "somewhat" or "very spiritual," and about half report that their lives have become more spiritual in the last several years (Sharon Doyle Driedger, "On a Higher Plane," *Maclean's* 108/52 [Dec. 25, 1995-Jan. 1, 1996]: 23). Nevertheless, less than 25% attend church regularly. Similarly, although 80% of the students in David Batstone's religion classes at the University of San Francisco claim that they are "not religious," the same percentage think of themselves as "spiritual" (Martin Wroe, "American Pie in the Sky," *Third Way* 18/7 [September 1995]:13).
87. Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith*, 18.
88. Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 30. [gabler 170]
89. Neal Gabler, *Life the Movie: How Entertainment Conquered Reality* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 173-74.
90. See, for example, John A. Teske, "The Social Construction of the Human Spirit," in *Issues in Science and Theology*, 202-3. Narrative theory has spawned a new movement in psychology called "narrative therapy." See, for example, Michael White and David Epston, *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends* (New York: Norton, 1990).
91. Mark Johnson, *Moral Imagination: Implications of Cognitive Science for Ethics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 11. See also, Donald E. Polkinghorne, *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences* (Albany, NY: University of New York Press, 1988), 36.
92. Alastair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 216.
93. On this point, see also, Robert N. Bellah, et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, Perennial Library ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1986), 81.
94. George W. Stroup, *The Promise of Narrative Theology* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), 101-11.
95. Stroup, *Promise of Narrative Theology*, 112-15.
96. Stroup, *Promise of Narrative Theology*, 109-10. Here Stroup is in substantial agreement with social constructionist sociologists, such as Peter Berger. See, for example, Berger, *Sacred Canopy*, 20.
97. Gabler, *Life the Movie*, 238.
98. Gabler, *Life the Movie*, 233.