

Popular Culture

Carla Freccero

**POPULAR
CULTURE**

AN INTRODUCTION



New York University Press

New York and London

NEW YORK UNIVERSITY PRESS
New York and London

Copyright © 1999 by New York University
All rights reserved

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Freccero, Carla, 1956–

Popular culture : an introduction / Carla Freccero.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-8147-2669-0 (cloth : acid-free paper)

ISBN 0-8147-2670-4 (paper : acid-free paper)

1. United States—Civilization—1945– 2. Popular culture—United States—History—20th century. 3. Mass media—Social aspects—United States—History—20th century. I. Title.

E169.12 .F717 1999

306'.0973—dc21

99-6112

CIP

New York University Press books are printed on acid-free paper,
and their binding materials are chosen for strength and durability.

Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To Generation X
and all my students

CONTENTS

| | |
|---|-----------|
| Acknowledgments | ix |
| 1 Popular Culture: An Introduction | 1 |
| 2 Cultural Studies, Popular Culture, and Pedagogy | 13 |
| A. Overview and Background | 13 |
| B. Serial Killers and the Question of Representation | 23 |
| 3 Sexual Subcultures | 33 |
| A. The Body and the State | 33 |
| B. Queer Subcultures | 40 |
| C. Madonna's Popular Bodies | 46 |
| D. <i>Truth or Dare</i> | 51 |
| 4 Identity Politics and Postcoloniality | 59 |
| A. Race and Identity Politics | 59 |
| B. Postcoloniality, Imperialism, Third World: Background and Context | 66 |
| C. Octavia Butler's <i>Xenogenesis</i> | 72 |
| 5 Multiculturalism's Migrations | 77 |
| A. Diasporic Identities and Sandra Cisneros | 77 |
| B. <i>Do the Right Thing</i> | 81 |
| C. Rap, Rock, Resistance | 88 |
| D. Sound and Story | 91 |

Contents

| | | |
|----------|--|-----------|
| 6 | Technocultures | 99 |
| | A. Technocultures and Postmodernism | 99 |
| | B. William Gibson's <i>Neuromancer</i> | 103 |
| | C. The Cultural Politics of the <i>Alien</i> Films | 111 |
| | Appendix: Sample Syllabus | 131 |
| | Notes | 135 |
| | Glossary | 149 |
| | Filmography | 173 |
| | Discography | 175 |
| | Bibliography | 177 |
| | Index | 193 |
| | About the Author | 202 |

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I could say right off the bat that it is impossible for me to thank here all the people who contributed, in one way or another, to the shape and completion of this book, but there are particular people I want to name for the crucial ways their persons, their thinking, their labor, and their love made the work possible. First, I thank my students at Dartmouth College and at the University of California, Santa Cruz, who took my Cultural Studies and Popular Culture course. Their skepticism, their vast knowledges of the domain of popular culture, and the energy they devoted to studying the popular inspired me and contributed vitally to my analyses.

I thank Nancy Vickers, who, at Dartmouth College in the years that we were colleagues together, taught me how much fun and how much work analyzing popular culture could be, and who first encouraged me to write about Madonna. Cirri Nottage and Melinda Weinstein acted as research assistants when I was writing about Madonna. Dana Blumrosen, who, as a student at UCSC, first took the course, then, as my research assistant, helped me organize the reading materials for another version of the course, also taught me a lot about popular culture, as did my teaching assistants, Tera Martin, Sergio de la Mora, Ana Rodriguez, and Michelle Habell. Robert Miotke helped me think through many of the cultural meanings in the films and videos I study and also acted as my research assistant in compiling materials on the *Alien* trilogy.

I thank Eric Zinner at New York University Press for his valuable suggestions and for the readers to whom he showed the book and who provided me with helpful critique and commentary. Also at New York University Press, Despina Papazoglou Gimbel and Daisy Hernández offered gracious and prompt assistance and suggestions. Grants from the Committee on Research of the Academic Senate of the University of California, Santa Cruz, enabled me to acquire the necessary research assistance

Acknowledgments

to continue and complete the project. The Document Publishing and Editing Center at UCSC also provided considerable editorial assistance with the manuscript. Gracious and intelligent assistance—at the eleventh hour—was provided by Catherine Newman.

The book could not have been started or completed without the admirable research skills, patient faith, enthusiastic energy, and brilliance of two graduate research assistants in particular: Robin Baldrige and Liddy Detar. I owe them an enormous debt of gratitude and a serious share of the credit for this book's existence.

I wish to thank the artist Jamie Hewlett for granting permission to use the image of Tank Girl from The Odyssey series on the cover of the paperback edition of this book. In this picture, Tank Girl—a riot grrrrl version of Madonna for the post-apocalypse—sits sprawled on the couch amidst the detritus of late-twentieth-century popular culture with Booga, her kangaroo lover from the Australian outback. This queer cross-species, interracial alliance of persecuted and marginalized outlaws epitomizes a certain youthful white female Imaginary of risk and empowerment as it is reflected back by television's mass-mediated storehouse of images. As such, it serves as an emblem for the matter of analysis in this book.

Friends and colleagues throughout the years have shared my enthusiasm for the critical analysis of popular culture, and I hope I have acknowledged the places where their ideas gave birth to or refined my own.

Popular Culture

An Introduction

This book evolved from a course I first taught for the comparative literature program at Dartmouth College in the summer of 1992 and subsequently taught twice more in the literature department at the University of California, Santa Cruz; a representative syllabus is included in the appendix. These two contexts differed vastly, as one might expect. Dartmouth College is an elite, conservative, small, rural liberal arts college, whereas UCSC is a larger public research university in the University of California system known for its progressive, if not radical, ethos. Dartmouth might be seen to be on the front lines of the war against **political correctness**, while UCSC might be seen to be PC's main stronghold (words in boldface are defined in the glossary). Both institutions value excellent undergraduate teaching and hold their faculty to high standards of performance in the area of pedagogy, yet each institution requires that a very different sort of pedagogy be developed.

When I taught the course at Dartmouth, I kept in mind a horizon of conservative response to the materials and ideas I presented and was careful to make my points concerning U.S. ideology through close readings of texts, videos, and films, in order to demonstrate the ways these materials "spoke" their meanings, rather than give the impression that I was a liberal preacher imposing leftist political significance or judgment onto a text. For Dartmouth students, popular culture was a domain of degraded culture: it was not the culture they were there to learn, even if it was their culture. They thus provided me with the ideal opportunity to argue the case for the importance of

treating popular culture and mass media as objects worthy of critical study.¹

At UCSC, students were too ready to denounce the ideology of U.S. mass media productions, too ready to condemn their representations of **race**, gender (see **sex/gender**), and **sexuality**. These students also claimed the popular as their domain, often educating me on trends and cultural formations about which I had very little first-hand knowledge (grunge, raves, and Dead culture, in particular). What they did not have—and were self-conscious about—was the high cultural capital that would enable them to see the dialectic between the popular and the highbrow. They were, much more so than Dartmouth students, GenXers, deeply knowledgeable about the vocabulary (visual, aural, and linguistic) of mass media, what it “says” when it appears as a reference, in a film for example, but despairing of its ability to represent or produce anything more significant than the flotsam and jetsam of culture that it appeared to be. So these students gave me the opportunity to argue for the potential progressive productivity of mass media representations, and, on the other hand, to show them how **hegemony** works, not by shutting down all opposition, but by recognizing and incorporating it. The challenge at UCSC was thus to demonstrate the contradictoriness of popular culture—and liberalism itself—and tease out some of the ways a “conservative” message can speak against itself. At the same time, it became important, as at Dartmouth, to argue that popular cultural representations were as potentially complex and worthy of interpretation as the “great” canonical texts of European literature that were always being used to demonstrate the poverty of popular culture and of youth culture in general.

Why study popular culture, and why teach popular culture to college students? I believe there are many reasons to do so, but a simple answer to the question might be that the culture as a whole, or what is sometimes called “public culture” in the United States, already “studies” popular culture, that is, enlists it to explicate, argue, demonstrate, condemn, or praise this or that event or social phenomenon. Witness the debates around gay sexuality that have emerged following the April 1997 “coming out” episode of ABC’s sitcom *Ellen* or, more recently, references to the film *Wag the Dog* (1997) to explain Bill Clin-

ton's strategic bombing of purported terrorist targets in the Middle East as a means of deflecting attention from the investigation of his affair with Monica Lewinsky. Popular culture itself, especially in its commodity form, even generates political and cultural debates, such as the media discussions of race and racism occasioned by Warren Beatty's filmic satire about race and party politics in America, *Bulworth* (1998). In other words, popular culture is already, in our culture, seen to be of consequence: it is thought to influence (young) people—to both determine and reflect the values and beliefs of a generation—and it is also perceived to be a political arena, a place where certain ideas are advocated and others are condemned. Therefore, an obvious reason for studying popular culture is to be politically literate, to understand what issues are at stake when political leaders and others condemn or praise its representations.

A second reason, perhaps more pedagogical in motive, stems from the particular literacies of today's college students. When Allan Bloom, in *The Closing of the American Mind*, excoriated higher education in the country for the ignorance of college students, he held them to the literacy standards of his own day, as did E. D. Hirsch, in his less vitriolic and more well-meaning *Cultural Literacy*. What such a focus revealed were the noncompetencies of college-educated students: they did not share a canonical set of literary references from which to quote; they were not schooled in techniques of memorization and thus could not quote Shakespearean soliloquies (many of which themselves were once deemed "popular" culture); and they did not have the standard "social studies" or civics lessons of just a generation or so ago. Many of these developments can be explained historically: pedagogical methods have shifted away from memorization, for example. More important, perhaps, the historical shift away from a widely accepted notion that America is a homogeneous and singular culture (whether the image is of a melting pot or the mass production of uniform citizens from ethnic differences) has meant that students do not in fact share a single literary canon or a patriotic knowledge of government. Rather, they may be aware of several canons and the cultures of several nations. This is the phenomenon we have come to refer to as multiculturalism, and it is to a large extent taken for granted—although not always accepted—by students in high schools and colleges

today. It produces a different and far less uniform set of competencies and literacies.²

In addition to a different set of cultural competencies, students share a literacy different from that of many, if not most, of their teachers, one that could be called technological.³ In this electronic age, most students know more than their teachers about computers, video, CD-ROM, the Internet, the World Wide Web, television, and the entire domain of telecommunications, and often have greater access to such technologies at their educational institutions. Thus they develop literacies that are unfamiliar to those schooled primarily in print or oral (verbal) culture; most students I know “read” postmodern visual texts more competently and more quickly than most teachers I know. They are more at ease with fast-moving fragments of knowledge and information than those of us who were taught to compose coherent bodies and fields of knowledge from what we learned.

Thus an approach to learning through popular culture enables students to recognize and draw on their already existing literacies and the cultures they know in order to analyze and think critically, skills that may be expanded and applied to other, less familiar domains. What students have learned outside the classroom are the techniques of acquiring information from media, the technological processes that inform their production, and how to go about obtaining access to the technologies themselves—how to “consume” them. This is what advanced capitalist culture successfully teaches. What the cultural studies approach to popular culture in the classroom can provide, then, is an approach to technological cultures that seeks to understand the social meanings of the representations produced by these cultures: a way, in other words, to analyze these products. The result will be not only an “informed consumer” but someone who may be able to intervene to produce meanings in the language of the medium itself and intervene politically when those representations are used to support particular agendas.

As long as popular culture remains a degraded cultural form in the minds of liberal educators and students themselves, it will be available for use without analysis, much the way religion and morality are invoked in U.S. public culture as givens without meanings that are subject to contestation. Liberal arts education will will itself into anachro-

nism—as it is already being accused of doing—by focusing exclusively on forms of cultural production that are not widely shared in public culture. The domain of popular representation will pass as fact, unavailable for argument, debate, and analysis, or it will become an arena of technocratic competence where the focus will be on how to manipulate or manage it, but not analyze and interpret it.

My approach, which combines my extensive and traditional training in literary study with the newer field of cultural studies and its popular objects (**subcultures**, mass media, popular music, popular fictional genres, including science fiction and mystery novels), treats the objects of study as “texts” to be “read,” even when those objects are not necessarily written texts. I start from the premise that all representations tell a story, more than one in fact, and that representations can be read or interpreted the way one would interpret a written narrative. Representations are made up of **signs**, and together these signs combine to tell a story; the first—that texts consist of signs—I call the semiotic dimension of texts, and the second—that signs, in combination, tell a story—the allegorical. **Semiotics**, the study of signs, allows one to treat the elements of a representation—any representation—as a set of signs that signify something to someone, that point beyond themselves to a range of other meanings, which are in turn partially determined—and limited—by their social context. In the case of popular culture, that context is U.S. public culture (the culture of the late-twentieth-century United States), which includes aspects of everyday life, politics, economics, history, and the social, as well as the more limited notion of culture, the artistic and anthropological dimensions of a society. If we accept the premise that representations are also allegorical, that is, that they tell multiple stories and that those stories are not only the explicit story represented by the plot (of a given film, for example), then it is possible to argue that the stories that such representations tell are stories about the culture from which they emerge. They are, I argue, political, psychic, and social.

Written texts, however, are privative; they deprive the reader of the sights, sounds, smells, gestures—in short, all the paralinguistic details that round out the meaning of anything we seek to understand. Their underdetermination means that certain conventional figures or **tropes** will have to do the work that, in live communication, is provided by

the context. This is called the rhetorical dimension of literary language. Whereas other media may benefit from the paralinguistic, contextual details that allow one to determine meaning in a fuller way, they, like literature, each follow a set of conventional guidelines for signifying that make up for the specific constraints of the medium, whether these constraints are technological (as in film, where three-dimensionality must still be represented by two-dimensional means) or sensory (music, for example, when it does not have words to enrich its signifying codes). Thus it is also important, when “reading” media, to understand the rhetorical conventions or devices that govern their signifying practices. We are all familiar with the convention in horror movies, for example, of using a certain kind of music to signal to the audience the presence of danger or the imminence of an attack.

Perhaps because written text is so obviously deprived, or because, simply, my training is literary, I find that the rhetorical devices and the techniques for their interpretation developed in the field of literary study are the most complete available for analyzing any medium that relies on a specific set of restricted means of communication. These techniques of close reading and interpretation that are attentive to social and historical context enable many kinds of analysis, such as those that attempt to chart the workings of the psyche (**psychoanalysis**), or those that assess the political investments of representation (ideology critique or historicism).

The literary is not the only domain from which such an analysis can emerge: cultural studies is a field that combines a wide range of disciplines in an interdisciplinary manner. These include, among others, anthropology, sociology, communication studies, film studies, and political theory. Cultural studies may also take as its object a wider range of phenomena than I choose to examine here, and thus may require other techniques than the primarily literary ones I use. For example, population surveys, audience studies, news and television analyses all require specialized skills that the study of cultural representations does not necessarily include.⁴ My focus here, then, is on the kinds of representations amenable to those skills I have developed, skills that fall within the general category of a liberal arts education: reading, writing, critical thinking, and qualitative analysis.

Popular Culture

This book may be said to take as one of its organizing principles a certain phenomenon within popular culture that David Glover and Cora Kaplan have named “the fate of the sixties-within-the-eighties.” In “Guns in the House of Culture” they write,

Today the fate of the sixties-within-the-eighties is a notoriously important issue in the struggle for cultural and political meaning, an instance of the way the conflicting forces in every conjuncture attempt to write uncontested histories for themselves. The hegemony of the New Right has involved a sustained critical attempt to monopolize the complex terrain of the popular, and in particular to drastically overhaul the social significance of the sixties. (222)

I understand the “sixties” here to refer to a wide range of political and social struggles in the United States and elsewhere. Some of the significant social movements for subsequent decades and for the popular cultural productions I look at in this book are the civil rights movement, Black Power, Black nationalism, and the **identity politics** that took their inspiration from them (including Chicano nationalism, the American Indian Movement, second-wave feminist movements, women of color movements, lesbian and gay rights movements). National liberation struggles and the decolonization movements of the sixties in the Third World also influenced and shaped many of these domestic social struggles. The baby boom generation and the student upheavals of the sixties, which can be said to have given rise to the term “counterculture” in the United States, figure importantly in the popular cultural imagination of the eighties and nineties, as do the Vietnam War and the assassinations of the Kennedys, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X. Needless to say, this list is not exhaustive, but a quick survey of MTV videos from the eighties would demonstrate that these moments (in the form of newsreel footage and photographic images from the sixties and seventies) in sometimes confused and always fragmentary form, contribute to the cultural imagination of current youth and public culture today.⁵ The “sixties-in-the-eighties,” and, I would add, in the nineties, thus inform both the issues guiding this study and the content of the materials included in the book.

As Glover and Kaplan note, the eighties ushered in a national conservatism and a right-wing backlash against what was viewed as the excessive liberalism of the previous decades; the “backlash” also includes, importantly, a polemic against the sixties. George Will, writing for *Newsweek* in 1991, illustrates the extent to which the political and social significance of the sixties—and popular culture that is seen as “nostalgic” for that decade—becomes a political target for neoconservative polemic:

[Jim] Morrison was not [Arthur] Schlesinger set to music, but both were symptoms of a Sixties disorder. Schlesinger’s words “expression” and “release” were part of the mantra of the decade that made Morrison a shooting star, and soon a cinder. The cult of self-validating expression contributed to the debasement of education, which came to be considered a process of letting something out of students rather than of putting something into them. The craving for “release” from reason and other intolerable restraints, led to the confusion of narcissism with freedom.⁶

Here, as elsewhere, popular culture becomes the currency of political polemic and debate. Meanwhile, popular cultural forms themselves contradictorily register both the adoption of and the backlash against values perceived as belonging to the sixties; for example, they may adopt “multiculturalism” as a value, even as they express resentment against the class aspirations of ethnic and racial groups that are not “white,” or they may understand the claims of feminism even as they revel in the epithet “bitch.” This is especially true of the mass media forms I analyze here: Hollywood films such as *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), *Basic Instinct* (1992), *The Bodyguard* (1992), *Waiting to Exhale* (1995), *Dead Man Walking* (1995), and the *Alien* trilogy (1979, 1986, 1992). One lesson to learn from mass media representations is, then, that they are politically contradictory. What I seek to encourage in readers of these texts is the ability to **articulate** the ideological work they perform and to identify gaps of logic and contradictions where the cultural critic might intervene to tease out progressive elements from within the **dominant culture**, and to understand how hegemony recognizes and incorporates counterhegemonic energies.

Ultimately I am interested in practicing cultural politics, strategically developing what Andrew Ross calls the **protopolitical** in popular culture, particularly in those media that have been derogatorily designated as “mass culture” or the “culture industry” by left- and right-wing intellectuals alike. It is my general feeling that the Left cannot retreat into anachronistic puritanism with regard to what it calls the new opiate of (young) people—“mass” culture—or else it cedes a strategic terrain of cultural politics all too clearly recognized as such by the New Right. These texts may suggest strategies for the empowerment of the subordinated, marginal, and decentered in advanced capitalist culture, strategies that are not anachronistic but born of the medium of advanced capital and the gaps that are produced within it. I am interested in the way such strategies, and such technology, may be used to produce significant counterhegemonic forces within a culture whose ruling classes seem to have perfected the art of containment.⁷ The degree to which this is possible in any given text varies widely, and I do not underestimate the extent to which such a project is limited by both the institutionalization of cultural studies in U.S. universities and the increasing marginalization of humanistic studies in universities in our culture. Popular culture is a currency, however, that circulates between the academy and public culture, and as such it can at least constitute a common terrain of contestation.

This book also studies popular culture that more closely resembles the definition of the popular as that which belongs to the people. Texts such as Jewelle Gomez’s *Gilda Stories*, Octavia Butler’s *Xenogenesis* trilogy, Sandra Cisneros’s *Woman Hollering Creek*, and William Gibson’s *Neuromancer*, and films and videos such as Marlon Riggs’s *Tongues Untied* or Jennie Livingston’s *Paris Is Burning* can be said to constitute, to a certain degree, oppositional cultural productions that also rework the social insights of the sixties toward more politically progressive ends, in an effort to fashion radical social visions for the present and the future. Many of the cultural critics that I rely on to theorize these texts, such as bell hooks, can also be said to forge oppositional cultural energies.⁸ These texts thus demonstrate that the popular is also explicitly engaged in counterhegemonic cultural practices in the name of participatory democracy, and that it can challenge neo-conservative public culture’s representations of the people.

I have therefore organized the chapters of my book according to the social formations and issues—feminism and sexuality, multiculturalism, and **technoculture**—that, in eighties and nineties terms, interpret the social legacies of the sixties within the framework of cultural studies, the academic field that has focused most prominently on these issues from a leftist point of view. In teaching the course on Cultural Studies and Popular Culture, I chose to organize these topics in such a way as not to separate the interstructured and co-articulated components of what I take to be some of the most vital categories of contestation in public culture: race, gender, class, sexuality, and, in a different but equally contestatory manner, technology. Each chapter takes as its specific focus one or another of these, but endeavors not to exclude or elide the others from its analysis and, further, selects cultural representations that explicitly interweave them. While I have not devoted a chapter to the topic of feminism, the entire study is fundamentally informed by the political, social, and critical insights and practices of this political and theoretical movement, as it is also critically shaped by the legacy of Marxist politics and theory.

Each chapter deals with a set of issues relevant to the study of popular culture and performs readings of selected popular cultural texts. Chapter 2 discusses the field of cultural studies, provides some background, and raises some common concerns related to the question of representation: what does it mean to talk about “good” and “bad” representations? What is at stake in analysis versus judgment of such representations? I then go on to introduce the category of cultural politics through a reading of serial killer narratives and what they might have to say about popular ideological fantasies in our culture.

Chapter 3 first raises questions about recent efforts on the part of the state to legislate the conduct of bodies and their representations in public culture; here I discuss the relationship between censorship and representations deemed obscene or indecent. Since the completion of this book, new questions concerning the relationship between the state, sexuality, and the promulgation of “obscenity” suggest themselves as a result of the publication (in the press and on the Internet) of the Starr report (graphically) detailing President Clinton and Monica Lewinsky’s sexual encounters.

I then go on to discuss the phenomenon of subcultures, using Dick Hebdige's well-known book, *Subculture*, as a point of departure. I focus on a particularly prominent subcultural formation in the United States today that I pluralize under the heading "sexual subcultures," or what also might be called "**queer** culture." The readings in this section focus on sexual subcultures in Jewelle Gomez's *Gilda Stories* and the most famous recent representer of sexuality, Madonna. Toward the end of the chapter I argue for the interstructuredness of representations of gender, sexuality, and race.

Chapter 4 concerns itself centrally with the cultural and political movements most associated with the question of "race" today: identity politics and postcoloniality. I use Jennie Livingston's film *Paris Is Burning* and the cultural critic bell hooks's response to the film to explore the question of race as it is related to sexuality and gender. This chapter is largely historical and theoretical; it concludes with a reading of Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis* trilogy as an example of a fiction that combines the domestic issues of race as it is understood in the United States with the thematics of **colonialism**.

Chapter 5 further explores identity politics, this time focusing on some theories of **hybridity** promoted by Chicana feminists and others, while also analyzing popular cultural representations of gender, race, and racialization: Sandra Cisneros's *Woman Hollering Creek* and Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing*, rock, as well as rap, and pop. This chapter thus also deals with notions of resistant or oppositional culture as they are expressed in music; it presents a case study for the analysis of political and cultural ambiguity by analyzing the relationship between several popular films (*The Bodyguard*, *Waiting to Exhale*, and *Dead Man Walking*) and their soundtrack albums. These too have something to say about race, gender, and sexuality in our culture.

Finally, chapter 6 discusses another important dimension of our "**postmodern** condition": technoculture. This chapter introduces readers to understandings of postmodernism and explores the question of technoculture through feminist analyses of technology and through the science fiction genre of **cyberpunk**, here represented by one of its "founders," William Gibson. It asks questions about the constitution of virtual communities of the future, given the youthful **homosocial** fantasies that much of virtual reality seems to represent. It

concludes with an extended reading of the ideological fantasies embodied in the first three *Alien* films, demonstrating what a cultural politics approach to representation might yield in the way of understanding cultural anxieties and fantasies about race, gender, reproduction, sexuality, and technology.⁹

Readers of *Popular Culture* will find my choice of works to examine and issues to analyze idiosyncratic; indeed, the domain of the popular is so vast that no one could hope to cover its range of cultural productions and the numerous political and social debates it mobilizes. My choices have been guided, in part, by debates arising in public culture during the years that I was teaching this course and writing the book, and I would hope that any study of current mass media and popular culture—particularly in the classroom context—would do the same, for these are the debates and the cultural productions that capture the energies of students. Nevertheless, I hope that the approaches employed, the issues discussed, and the readings presented will serve as a useful and effective springboard from which other kinds of courses on, and studies of, popular culture may emerge.

There is one reason for analyzing and teaching popular culture that I have not mentioned thus far—seeking, as I was, to persuade the reader of the seriousness and importance of such a study—and that is pleasure. Pleasure is frequently, if not always, the disavowed motivation for even the most serious and scholarly of studies, studies that denounce the assertive and playful pleasures of popular culture as frivolous.¹⁰ Emma Goldman declared that she did not want to belong to a revolutionary movement where she could not dance, and her statement points to the ways pleasure—and its sources in fantasy—are powerful mobilizers of the political. Since popular culture has the audacity to make pleasure (or “enjoyment,” as Slavoj Žižek calls it) its purpose, cultural studies and the study of popular culture can inspire students and intellectuals to affirm the pleasures of critical analysis, to confront not only the cultural politics of pleasures, but also the pleasures of cultural politics.¹¹