X-RATED!

MARCEL DANESI

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THE POWER OF MYTHIC SYMBOLISM IN POPULAR CULTURE

Marcel Danesi

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PREFACE

In 1972 an event happened that initiated a debate across America—a debate that is still ongoing. The event was the premiere of the pornographic movie *Deep Throat*. The movie was rated *X*, a designation reserved for explicit erotic movies deemed to have no value other than to titillate people sexually. Remarkably and shockingly for many in mainstream America, *Deep Throat* became a hit with people from all walks of life, playing in mainstream theaters, rather than in dingy, gloomy adult movie houses. Apparently, even grandmothers took it in, finding it "interesting," as newspaper headlines of the era blurted out. In effect, the movie seemed to make "porn flicks" part of ordinary movie-watching fare, coming right after a commission of the Congress reported in 1970 that pornography did not contribute to crime or sexual deviation, recommending the repeal of all federal, state, and local laws that "interfered with the right of adults who wish to do so to read, obtain, or view explicit sexual materials."[1] In a culture founded on Puritan values, the popularity of *Deep Throat* and the findings of the commission caused considerable commotion. President Richard Nixon reacted swiftly, calling the commission "morally bankrupt" and warning that "so long as I am in the White House, there will be no relaxation of the national effort to control and eliminate smut from our national life."[2]

In hindsight, the main bone of contention was not the fact that the movie was sexually explicit or vulgar. Rather, it was more the fact that it became popular, and this had broad social implications. Conservatives like Nixon saw X-rated movies as clear signs that moral values were being eroded, pointing their collective finger at women's liberation, the youth counterculture movement, easy access to divorce, lax and permissive sexual attitudes, and the breakdown of the family as root causes of the erosion. Hollywood and the entertainment industries also came under their conservative microscope. New organizations stressing old-fashioned values sprung up everywhere, continuing to have a large following to this very day. Popular culture itself came under direct attack, since it was seen as the vehicle promoting sexually

permissive attitudes. In 1986, another staunch conservative president, Ronald Reagan, reopened the pornography debate, appointing yet another commission that, this time around, conveniently determined that a relationship did indeed exist between sexually violent or degrading materials and the amount of sexual violence in society.[3]

Deep Throat started a debate in the political arena, in academia, and in homes around the nation. It continues to rage on today under the general rubric of "America's culture wars." This book is about that debate. It is not intended for those who are skilled debaters (the politicians and the academics). It is directed instead at the same audience that found *Deep Throat* strangely appealing in 1972—people from all walks of life. This book has been percolating in me for a long time, ever since I started my teaching career at Rutgers University in the same year that *Deep Throat* became a hit, even though I have never seen the movie. The prompt for sitting down and writing it came from a student in my third-year pop culture class at the University of Toronto a few years ago. During a lecture on X-rated movies, she raised her hand and asked me, "If pop culture is so crass and vulgar, why hasn't it disappeared? Is it because we secretly love vulgarity, even if we do not admit it?"

I couldn't answer her question on the spot, because I really had no answer. I simply gave her the usual evasive comment of academics: "I will think about it." I never did get back to her. This book is my response. Hopefully, it will provide insights that I believe are useful for understanding why we love to hate and hate to love the "vulgarities" of pop culture. My approach will revolve around the meanings of common symbols, such as the *X* in X-rated movies. Symbols tell us more about the state of the world than do theories and sophisticated academic debates. In the aftermath of the *Deep Throat* phenomenon, *X* became a shibboleth for the radical turn that American society had started to take. Contemporary American pop culture is, in effect, an X-rated culture, where open sexual expression, the search for bodily pleasures, and a "stick-it-in-your-face" attitude toward authority reign supreme. The letter *X* has become synonymous with the "X-citing" things that make pop culture secretly appealing, conjuring up images that are just beyond the realm of decency and righteousness. *X* is a perfect logo for this archetypal American form of culture. Its particular design—a cross rotated 45 degrees—conveys the contradiction and opposition that has always beset American culture from the very outset.

Symbolism can be divided into two main categories—logical and mythic. The former is basically shorthand for concrete ideas and conventions—for example, π stands for a specific constant (3.14 . . .) derived by dividing the circumference of a circle by its diameter. The latter is shorthand for things that are much less tangible—things (such as zodiac signs and occult figures) that evoke unconscious cultural meanings. Such symbolism has always been part and parcel of American pop culture, from its use in the early carnivals and circus sideshows, to the clothing and tattoos worn by goth youths today. How did it come about? Why did it come about? I hope that my perceptive student and the reader alike will find my answers to these questions interesting, whether or not they agree with them. In that regard, I would like to quote Holden Caulfield, the protagonist of *The Catcher in the Rye* by J. D. Salinger (b. 1919): "What really knocks me out is a book that, when you're all done reading it, you wish the author that wrote it was a terrific friend of yours and you could call him up on the phone whenever you felt like it."[4] I hope to be read in precisely that spirit—as the reader's friend.

Like most others living today, I both love and hate pop culture. It is liberating to know that entertainment and faddish objects can be as much a part of everyday life as religious rituals and serious art. One does not preclude the other. In a sense this book is my defense of pop culture, answering its critics from Nixon on. I should warn the reader from the outset that many of my comments will have a scholarly ring to them. Presenting the subject matter of this book cannot really be done in any other way without diluting it so much as to make it simply a concoction of subjective opinions. I will use citations and references to the relevant literature only when it is strictly necessary to do so. I want to share my views with anyone who likes dancing, singing, jazz, horror flicks, women's open sexuality, rock and roll, Hula-Hoops, and anything else that is part of pop culture. Should I feel guilty about enjoying such things? I hope to provide sufficient reasons to support a "no" answer to that question.

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CHAPTER 1

X-POWER

AMERICAN POP CULTURE AS A THEATER OF THE PROFANE

> X is crossed swords, a battle: who will win we do not know, so the mystics made it the sign of destiny and the algebraists the sign of the unknown.
>
> —Victor Hugo (1802–85)

IMAGES IN ADVERTISING AND MEDIA BEARING MESSAGES THAT PROMISE pleasure and excitement permeate the modern social landscape, proclaiming and celebrating epicurean values. Some see these not as symptomatic signs of affluence, but rather as apocalyptic harbingers of wanton hedonism gone amok. However, there is nothing new under the sun, as the expression goes. Ancient societies throughout the world extolled epicurean lifestyles in very similar ways—with signs, graffiti, and inscriptions on public walls, in marketplaces, and even on temples. After all, it was an ancient Greek philosopher, Epicurus (c. 342–270 BCE), after whom the eponymous notion of epicureanism is derived. Epicurus believed that the human mind was disturbed by two main anxieties: fear of the deities and fear of death. The term *epicurean* suggests excessive bodily pleasures, but Epicurus actually taught that pleasure can best be gained by living prudently and moderately.

From time immemorial people have expressed the desire (perhaps the unconscious need) to pursue fleeting bodily pleasures, to have fun, and to enjoy life. The sacred (the sense of the spiritual) and the profane (the sense of the body and the instincts) constitute unconscious psychic impulses that have always sought expression in tandem, despite efforts to eradicate one or the other with political and social experiments ranging from totalitarianism to religious fundamentalism.

This psychic dualism is the likely source for culture, a communal system allowing for the routine expression of these two impulses. As history testifies, any attempt to thwart such dualistic expression seems destined to fail.

In American culture, with its Puritan basis, the sacred and the profane are often perceived to be at odds with each other, rather than in harmony. In early America, any lifestyle extolling bodily pleasures was viewed negatively and repressed. Around a century ago, a form of culture emerged to counteract such repression. Despite efforts to fight it with censorship and prohibition, it caught on across the country. Pop culture (as it is now called), crystallized in the early 1920s as an unconscious vehicle for the expression of previously repressed profane impulses. Society's elders and moral guardians especially condemned the faddish lifestyle of the flappers—young women who showed disdain for conventional dress and traditional feminine roles. Conservatives and liberals alike saw such lifestyle as a momentary aberration in the evolution of American femininity. It was not. It entered the cultural mainstream in 1923—the year in which a Broadway musical, *Runnin' Wild*, helped transform the Charleston, a sexually suggestive dance loved by the flappers, into a craze for the young (and the young at heart) throughout the nation. That event was evidence that the American psyche yearned for a new carefree and more sexually permissive lifestyle. In a word, such trends announced the birth of a new and profane culture in America—a fact captured cleverly by the 2002 movie *Chicago* (based on the 1975 Broadway musical).

Burlesque and vaudeville theaters, speakeasies (night clubs), and dance halls cropped up throughout America in the 1920s to satisfy the desire on the part of everyday Americans to shed the repressive bonds of their Puritan heritage. The era came appropriately to be called the "Roaring Twenties." By 1930, the flapper lifestyle was spreading to all corners of American society and to other parts of the world as well. Its emotional power could not be curtailed, despite the severity of the legislative measures taken, from Prohibition to various forms of censorship (direct or indirect). Its profane spirit was then, and is now, an unstoppable social force, challenging moral stodginess and aesthetic pretentiousness in tandem. Pop culture has been *the* driving force behind American social change since the Roaring Twenties, simultaneously triggering an unprecedented society-wide debate about art, sex, and "true culture" that is still ongoing.

What is behind its appeal? Is it sex? Is it its emphasis on fun and laughter? The answer is "yes" on all counts. Pop culture is a sexually

charged culture that emerged to challenge America's Puritan legacy. In so doing, it injected into American culture a large dose of profane symbolism. It is an empowering symbolism whose essence is encapsulated by the *X* in "X-rated." As such, it can be called its "X-Power." As the twentieth-century German philosopher Ernst Cassirer (1874–1945) often argued in his insightful writings, symbolism is the key to understanding the underlying structure of social systems.[1] In this chapter, I will take an initial cursory look at the X-Power behind American pop culture.

SYMBOLISM

Culture is a way of life, acquired or adopted by a group of people, that is based on a system of shared meanings. These are imprinted in the rituals, art forms, lifestyle patterns, symbols, language, clothing, music, dance, and all other expressive, intellectual, and communicative behavior that is associated with the group. In contemporary societies, culture is sometimes subdivided into such categories as "high" and "low," associated with differences in class, education, and other social categories. There is an implicit "culture hierarchy" that most people today would accept as valid (albeit in an intuitive rather than formal or critical way). People evaluate movies, novels, music, and so on instinctively in terms of this hierarchy. So, for example, in the area of television, the program *Frontline* would be assessed as having "higher" cultural value than would a program such as *American Idol* or *Jerry Springer*. The encompassing of levels, and the constant crisscrossing among the levels, are defining tendencies within what has come to be known as *pop culture*. For example, any episode of *The Simpsons* might contain references to the ideas of writers and philosophers locatable at the highest level of the hierarchy, as well as references to trendy music groups and blockbuster movies. This pastiche of styles and forms is the generic feature that sets pop culture apart from virtually all previous forms of culture. Pop culture makes little or no distinction between art and recreation, distraction and engagement. Although most of its products are designed to have a "short shelf life," some gain permanency, like the so-called great works of art of the past. Movies such as *Amadeus* or *Mystic River* are two candidates in this regard. Such is the paradox and power of pop culture.

The *pop* in *pop culture* (popular culture) alludes, essentially, to culture that makes little, if any, categorical distinctions. In a word, it is a culture that is *popular* across the social spectrum. Its rise in the 1920s

was due, in part, to a postwar affluence that gave masses of people, regardless of class or educational background, considerable buying power, thus propelling common people into the unprecedented position of shaping trends in fashion, music, and lifestyle through such power. By the end of the decade a full-blown pop culture, promoted and spread by an increasingly powerful media-advertising conglomerate, had materialized. The reason for this was rather straightforward—music trends like the Charleston, pulp fiction novels, horror movies, frivolous fashion, and the like had great market value. Since then, pop culture has played a pivotal role in the overall evolution of American society. This is why historians now tend to characterize socially significant periods since the 1920s with terms such as the "jazz era," the "swing era," the "hippie era," the "disco era," the "punk era," the "hip-hop era," and so on—all of which are references to major musical trends within pop culture.

In the history of human culture, pop culture stands out as atypical. It is mass culture "by the people for the people." In contrast to historical (traditional) culture, it has no patrons who hire artists and dictate what kinds of art works are to be produced by them. Pop culture's only sponsor is the marketplace and is, thus, subject to its laws. It has always been highly appealing for this very reason; bestowing on common people the assurance that culture is for everyone, not just for an elite class of artists hired by authority figures for their own edification. But this has its setbacks. Since the tastes of masses of people are bound to be fickle, pop culture is consequently changeable and often capricious. Trends within it come and go quickly. American composer Stephen Sondheim has encapsulated this reality eloquently as follows: "How many people feel strongly about Gilbert and Sullivan today compared to those who felt strongly in 1890?"[2] Paradoxically, it is its very ephemerality that allows pop culture to survive. Unlike the patronage system of the past, the marketplace requires that the congeners of cultural forms produce new ones constantly, so that they can survive economically. For this reason, the influential French semiotician Roland Barthes (1915–80) saw American pop culture as a "bastard form of mass culture" beset by "humiliated repetition" and thus by a constant outpouring of trendy new books, TV programs, films, gadgets, and celebrities, but always the same meanings.[3]

But, if it is so "humiliating" and "bastardizing," why is it so popular among people of all walks of life? Barthes himself provided a theory to explain the popularity of pop culture that, despite its intended

anti-Americanism, is nevertheless compelling. He claimed, in essence, that pop culture has mythic structure, recycling the ancient stories of good versus evil, love versus hate, and so on in contemporary entertainment guises. As I read Barthes, his central claim is that pop culture is popular because it taps into an instinctive need for myth among modern people. If that is so, it would explain why mythic symbolism is found everywhere in pop culture.

Mythic symbolism has always come in two forms—sacred and profane. This indicates that there are probably two unconscious impulses within us that have always sought expression in tandem. Ancient pictographs of spirits and sacred animals have been found along with those of phalluses and vessels (female sexual symbols) on the same walls and vases. Some had both sacred and profane functions. One example was the cross, which had sacred meanings in its upright orientation and profane ones in its diagonal orientation. The latter pictograph developed into the letter *X* around three millennia ago. Significantly, it is this very letter, representing opposition (the sacred versus the profane) that has surfaced as an overarching symbol of contemporary pop culture, used to stand for everything from movie heroes (Vin Diesel's xXx), TV programs (*X-Files*), sports events (*X-Treme Sports*), and videogames (Xbox), to new chic products (X-Tech shoes) and automobiles (Xterra). It has become a veritable "sign of the times."

As a symbol, *X* has, as mentioned, been around long before the advent of pop culture. Many of its previous meanings are still in use: it is the variable par excellence in algebra; it is the signature used by those who cannot write; it is a sign of danger when put on bottles of alcohol or boxes of dynamite; it is a symbol marking treasure on a pirate's map; and so on and so forth. The new uses of *X* today validate Barthes's notion that pop culture is a mythic culture, even though we live in a technologically sophisticated society. Indeed, we seem to desire myth as much as, if not more than, our ancestors did.

As mentioned in the Preface to this book, symbolism has two main functions. One is as a practical form of shorthand that can be used for recording and recalling information. Every branch of science has its own system of such logical symbols. A second function is to express something perceived as having value (cultural or spiritual). Symbols such as those used in horoscopes or to connect humans to their animal origins (as in totemic practices) are examples of mythic symbols. Mythic symbolism links people to their communities and to the past. The symbols used by nations on flags or as national emblems (for

example, Uncle Sam in the United States) are powerful, evoking emotional responses, rather than purely conceptual reactions (as do logical symbols). In the ancient world mythic symbols were associated with the sacred dimensions of communal life. Logical symbols were considered to be products of human reason and, thus, tied to the secular world. In today's pop culture, the situation is often reversed. Logical symbols are viewed as part of the sacred (the authoritative, logical, and rational dimensions of social life) while mythic ones are viewed as part of the profane (the secular, hedonistic, and epicurean dimensions of the same life). The emotional power of pop culture lies arguably in the fact that its artistic and material products tap into this inbuilt ambiguity. But this too is not historically unique. Indeed, in the ancient world, no distinction was made between alchemy and chemistry, astrology and astronomy, numeration and numerology. It was only after the Renaissance that alchemy, astrology, and numerology were relegated to the status of superstitious beliefs. Paradoxically, the Renaissance at first encouraged interest in the ancient mythic symbols and in their relation to rational-logical philosophical ones. Intellectuals such as Italian philosopher Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463–94) rediscovered and emphasized in his writings the occult roots of classical philosophy and science. By the time of the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century, however, science and philosophy had cut themselves permanently off from the mythic symbolism of their own past seeking only rational means to understand nature and reality.

But the separation was not complete. Indeed, modern sciences such as astronomy and chemistry use many of the astrological and alchemical symbols of the past, seemingly unaware of the linkage. To this day, the boundaries between mythic and logical symbolism are, in fact, rarely clear-cut. *X* reverberates with both types of symbolism, providing a critical clue to understanding the appeal of pop culture—a culture that is unusually resistant to all kinds of official censures and attacks from both those on the religious right (who see it as immoral) and those on the political left (who often see it as socially injurious). Reading the historical meanings of symbols provides a much more penetrating frame of analysis for unraveling how we make sense of, and take pleasure in, contemporary secular life than do the opinions and beliefs of those who attack it.

X IS EVERYWHERE

X is everywhere. It appears in the naming of products, places, and media genres. Companies use it commonly to identify themselves: X-Act is the name of an ad agency; X-Bankers is a loan company; Xcel is an electronic equipment business; and Xerox is a stationery and supply company. Product names with *X* abound: Xantax (a prescription drug), Xenadrine (an energy supplement), Xyience (a supplement), Cold Fx (a cold relief product), XXX Siglo Treinta (an alcohol brand), Xenergy (a fruit drink), Xtreme Cooler (a soft drink), XBox (electronic game), NeXT (computer software), X-Girl (female clothing brand), XOXO (shoes and clothing), Geox (shoes), Xcard (prepaid credit card from Master Card), and DirX (a baseball bat). In the realm of cars, examples of models that use *X* include X3 and X5 (BMW), X-Drive (Jaguar), Xterra (Nissan), XR (Toyota), X-Trail (Nissan), 330xi (BMW), G35x (Infiniti), GX430 (Lexus), FX (Infiniti), QX (Infiniti), and RX330 (Lexus). Media products and celebrities have names such as *Xena* (TV warrior princess), *The X Factor* (TV program), *X-Files* (TV program and movie series), *X-Men* (comics), XM (satellite radio), Xzibit (rap artist), DMX (rap artist), and *xXx* (fictional movie hero). The list of names with *X* in them would fill a book.

Some uses of *X* are nothing more than clever replacements of the prefix *ex* (X-Act, X-treme, etc.), since the letter is pronounced exactly like the prefix. But in so doing, the new "name look" assigns meaning properties to the product or event that are not conveyed by the simple prefix. Others evoke a sense of mystery and exploration (*X-Files*, *The X Factor*, etc.). Automakers seem to use it in particular to emphasize an active lifestyle or else a sense of mysterious power and sexual excitement. The BMW X3 and X5, the Nissan X-trail and Xterra, the Lexus GX430, RX330, and the Infiniti FX and QX are, in fact, all associated with such latent meanings in ads and commercials. Significantly, on the Web site used by Nissan originally to advertise its Xterra sports utility vehicle, the claim was made that the SUV was "equipped to push boundaries." In a phrase, the products, people, and events named with *X* appear to reverberate with all that pop culture is about (at least on the surface)—youth, danger, sexual excitement, mystery, and technological savvy all wrapped into one.

But, X-Power is hardly an invention of contemporary pop culture. In Joseph Conrad's *Secret Agent* (1907), for instance, a character who is portrayed as a suicidal anarchist is called, appropriately, Professor

X. In James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), a mysterious house is named, also suitably, X. And even further back in time, in *Don Quixote* (1605), Miguel de Cervantes noted that the letter *X* was a "harsh letter" and, thus, to be avoided. There have been so many meanings attached to this letter-symbol over the centuries that an entire book could be written about it. This is, in fact, what Marina Roy did in 2000, with *Sign after the X*, in which she argues that *X* taps into a complex and ancient system of meanings that reaches back to the mystical origins of language and culture.[4] Its emergence as a shibboleth for pop culture is probably due to novelist Douglas Coupland, whose 1991 novel, titled *Generation X*, portrayed the children of the baby boomers, who came of age in the early 1990s, as a disillusioned, cynical, and apathetic generation, facing the threat of AIDS, abuse, cancer, divorce, unemployment, and dissatisfaction with menial jobs.[5] Although a British punk band named Generation X was active and relatively popular in the 1970s, it was Coupland's novel that spread the term Generation X (GenX) throughout society. Extreme ("X-treme") sports came onto the scene shortly thereafter with TV sports channels transmitting scenes of young athletic GenXers mountain climbing, biking, kayaking, and otherwise pushing themselves to the X-treme (pun intended). X-treme sports spoke the language of GenXers perfectly. As Roy aptly puts it, "The X in Generation X means the forgotten; the identical; the percentage point in statistical surveys; the exchangeable; the money-hungry middle-class; the undifferentiated. Differences between people amount to second-hand experience and a life built on a string of references to pop culture and retro fashion. A fetishization of life's little details, for example, the turn of a particular phrase. Like totally. Random classifications and hierarchies. The bigger problems are impossible to get a handle on."[6]

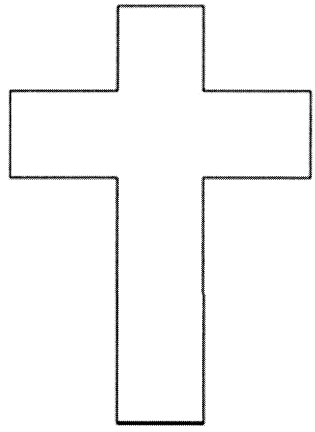
It is little wonder, as an aside, that one of the heroes of Generation X is filmmaker Quentin Tarantino, the slacker par excellence. Movies such as *Pulp Fiction* (1994) and *Kill Bill* (2005) are ultimately about the "fetishization of life" and the "turn of a particular phrase," as Roy puts it. This is why they refer mainly to other movies and other reference points in pop culture, constituting self-referential texts. TV sitcoms like *The Simpsons* are also products of the GenX mindset. Significantly, the sitcom uses cartoon characters, the perfect GenX forms for conveying parody and for caricaturizing real people in terms of "random classifications and hierarchies," as Roy phrases it.

But although Coupland's novel may associate *X* to a specific generation, its current popularity goes beyond Coupland's paradigm. And

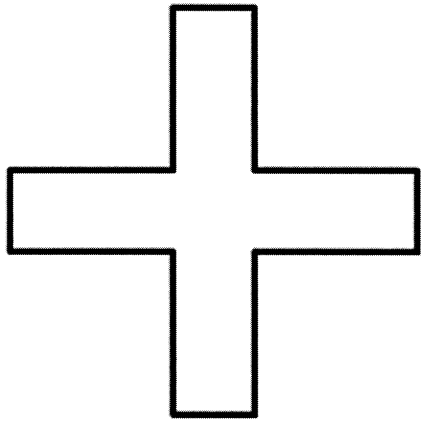
the probable reason for this is that *X* has always held a mythic appeal across the globe and across time. It has always constituted a language unto itself, conjuring up images of things that are just beyond the realm of security and decency. In Robert Priest's 1984 novel titled *The Man Who Broke Out of the Letter X*, the obsession with danger and excitement is palpable and deadly.[7] The same lethal mixture is found in the *X-Files* series and in movie characters such as agent xXx. As Roy puts it, "Most cultural and linguistic investments in the letter *X* carry the grain of something inherently fatal."[8]

Like the rest of our alphabet, *X* originates in the ancient Phoenician system around 1000 BCE as the letter pronounced *samekh*, meaning "fish," and used for the consonant sound *s*. Although relatively few words begin with *X* in English, the letter crops up over and over again. Craig Conley has identified seventy-six distinct uses of this letter, making it one of the most versatile symbols in the English language.[9] But *X* is not unique in this respect. All letters of the alphabet have at some point in time assumed symbolic values. Some of these will be discussed in subsequent chapters. But it is true that *X* seems to hold a special place among single-letter symbols.

As mentioned, historically *X* originated as a cross symbol rotated 45 degrees. The cross is the most common symbol for Christianity, representing in its form the crucifixion. Diverse groups of Christians have adopted different styles of crosses. Roman Catholics and Protestants use the Latin cross, made with a vertical straight line with a shorter horizontal crosspiece above the center (to resemble the cross on which Christ died).



Eastern Orthodox Churches use the Greek cross, instead, which has four arms of equal length.



Cross figures have also been found in Nordic cultures, dating before Christian times, in rock engravings from about 800 BCE. The swastika too—perhaps the most despised symbol of history when it was adopted in 1935 as the emblem of Nazi Germany—is really an ancient cross figure, meaning rebirth and prosperity in Buddhist and Sanskrit cultures. The mirror image of the sign, called *sauvastika* in Sanskrit, is associated with the opposite qualities of darkness and suffering.

THE SACRED AND THE PROFANE

X has always symbolized an unconscious blend of the sacred and the profane—a blend that has been ritualized in various religious traditions throughout the world. Before Lent there is carnival; before the day of the dead, there is Halloween; and so on and so forth. *X* is a symbol of the psychic opposition we feel unconsciously between the human and the divine, between vice and virtue. Let me quote none other than the Marquis de Sade on the presence of these two internal voices within the human psyche—a personage who was much more insightful than history has made him out to be: "Nature, who for the perfect maintenance of the laws of her general equilibrium, has sometimes need of vices and sometimes of virtues, inspires now this impulse, now that one, in accordance with what she requires."[10] If the Marquis is right, it would seem that we perceive the world's most

basic relations as a balancing act between two opposing life forces—the sacred and the profane—acknowledging this with our symbolic and ritualistic practices.[11] Awareness of this unconscious dualism is also found in many philosophical systems. It is implicit in the yin and yang philosophy of the Chinese, in Cartesian dualism, and in distinctions such as the id and the superego of Freudian psychoanalysis.

The expression of the profane instinct in the form of the *carnival* is especially relevant to understanding the inbuilt opposition within the human psyche. Essentially, it can be defined as a spectacle through which the sacred is "profaned" for the fun of it. At the time of carnival, everything that is perceived as authoritative, rigid, or serious is derided and mocked. As the late Russian social critic Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975) effectively argued, carnival is a central part of folkloric traditions because it functions to maintain a psychological balance by allowing people to not take themselves and their world too seriously.[12] Bakhtin suggested that the rituals of carnival, from those performed by the phallophors (phallus-wearing clowns) of the Roman Saturnalia, whose role was to joke and cavort obscenely with phalluses in hand, to the rogue comedians at turn-of-the-century country fairs in America, have always been part and parcel of civil societies, not aberrations within them. Clowns and jongleurs have always satirized the lofty words of poets and scholars; carnival freaks—people with deformities or unusual physical features—mocked norms of beauty by their very appearance; and so on and so forth. Carnival is the ritualistic channel through which the pursuit of laughter and bodily pleasure is legitimized. Its residues are seen not only in modern-day carnivals and carnivalesque festivities (such as Mardi Gras and All Fools Day), but also in the characters who populate sitcoms and other pop culture spectacles. Some types of programs on TLC (The Learning Channel), for example, are nothing more than modern-day electronic platforms for showcasing carnival freaks—dwarfs, extremely obese people, exceptionally tall people. Like carnivals, such programs invariably contain a moralistic subtext, either implying that some freaks should not be derided since they are "people like us," or else that their appearance is a product of sinful living (gluttony).

The fool, the jester, and the clown who entertain with buffoonery and caustic wit have existed as carnivalesque figures since ancient times. The medieval fool or jester was attached to noble and royal courts. He was, typically, a dwarf or deformed in some way. But he was hardly mentally deficient. One of his tasks was to indulge in biting

satire and repartee. The fool's costume, which was hung with bells, usually consisted of a multicolored coat, tight breeches with legs of different colors, a bauble (a mock scepter), and a cap, which fitted close to the head or fell over the shoulders in the form of an ass's ears. The clown, on the other hand, is a comic character distinguished by garish makeup and costume whose antics are both clumsy and acrobatic. Clown figures appear in the farces and mimes of ancient Greece and Rome as foils to more serious characters.

Caricature and laughter are the intrinsic components of carnivalesque theater, in whatever form it takes. One of the most famous of history was the Italian Commedia dell'Arte in the late Middle Ages, with its stock comedic characters such as the acrobat Arlecchino (Harlequin), who wore a catlike mask and motley colored clothes, and who carried a bat or wooden sword, the forerunner of the vaudevillian slapstick. His crony, Brighella, was more roguish and sophisticated, a cowardly villain who would do anything for money. Pagliaccio (the clown) was the precursor of today's clownish stand-up comedian. Pulcinella (Punch), a dwarfish humpback with a crooked nose and a cruel bachelor who chased pretty girls, also has many descendants today in television and movie comedians. Pantalone (Pantaloon) was a caricature of the Venetian merchant, rich and retired, mean and miserly, with a young wife and an adventurous daughter. Il Dottore (the doctor), his only friend, was a caricature of the learned intellectual—pompous and fraudulent.

The role of ritual laughter in psychic life and culture cannot be underestimated. This was brought out cleverly by Umberto Eco in his brilliant 1983 novel *The Name of the Rose*. The plot takes place in a cloistered medieval monastery where monks are being murdered by a serial killer living among them. The hero who investigates the mystery is a learned Franciscan monk named William of Baskerville—a name clearly suggestive of the fictional detective story *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1902). The monk eventually solves the crime in the manner and style of Sherlock Holmes (the fictional detective in the 1902 story) with an uncanny ability to detect and interpret the signs left by the killer, the old custodian of the monastery's library, at each crime scene. What was it that motivated the custodian to kill his fellow monks? They were all interested in reading Aristotle's treatise on comedy. Aware that laughter cannot be tolerated in strict religious societies, where laughing at, and making jokes about, the deities would be considered the greatest of all blasphemies, the custodian decided

to put an end to his fellow monks' fascination with comedy in his own way.

One of the layers of meanings of the novel is that in order to tame the subversive effects of laughter, a communal channel for its ritualization is required. Pop culture is one such channel. As Arthur Asa Berger aptly observes, "People crave humor and laughter, which explains why there are so many situation comedies on television and why film comedies have such widespread appeal."[13] As Bakhtin also claimed, laughter liberates us by enabling us to find truths that are not reachable by other means (as Eco's custodian certainly feared). It is laughter, in fact, that undergirds Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque, emphasizing that laughter, along with mockery, is essential for maintaining a balance in psychic life. He writes, "Laughter created no dogmas and could not become authoritarian; it did not convey fear but a feeling of strength. It was linked with the procreating act, with birth, renewal, fertility, abundance. Laughter was also related to food and drink and the people's earthly immortality, and finally it was related to the future of things to come and was to clear the way for them."[14]

This might explain why carnivalesque sitcoms such as *South Park* have such broad appeal. The laughter that they generate is designed to mock the emptiness of society. As in traditional carnival spectacles, sitcom laughter ends up paradoxically validating and even celebrating that very emptiness. Similarly, contemporary mockers such as punk musicians, who scorn everything that is perceived as belonging to the mainstream culture through their dress, demeanor, language, and overall attitude, nevertheless accept payment from the members of that very same culture. As in the ancient satirical plays, the cruder and more vulgar the behavior and appearance of the punks, the more effective their performance. But, in the end, punk performers have hardly made a dint in the mainstream social order. As Bakhtin suggested, such carnivalesque transgression is instinctual and harmless. By being released in a theatrical way, it actually validates social norms. This would explain why pop culture does not pose (and never has posed) any serious subversive political challenge to the moral and ethical status quo of American society. It is not subversive; it just appears to be so. Flappers, punks, goths, gangsta rappers, Alice Cooper, Kiss, Eminem, Marilyn Manson, strippers, porn stars, and all the other "usual transgression suspects" are modern-day carnival mockers.

Their mockery institutes a vital dialogue within us between the sacred and the profane, pitting the two impulses in a ritual gridlock. It is through this dialogue that we discover who we really are.

X-POWER

To many phoneticians, *X* is just another letter of the alphabet, useful primarily for writing purposes. But, this phonic view of alphabet symbols ignores the fact that most of them started out as pictographs perceived to have some sacred (or profane) origin. The Cretans attributed the source of writing to Zeus, the Sumerians to Nabu, the Egyptians to Toth, the Greeks to Hermes. Similar divine attributions are found throughout ancient cultures. The Egyptians called their pictographic writing system *hieroglyphic*, which derives from *hieros* "holy" and *glyphein* "to carve." However, while pictography certainly had sacred functions, at the same time it was turned on its head by the satirists of the same ancient societies to critique those in authority. Thus, one finds carnivalesque graffiti alongside sacred carvings on the same walls in marketplaces of ancient cities. Mockery seems to have always gone hand and hand with sacredness.

Pictography, as its name implies, consisted of drawing pictures to represent objects and ideas. Although we are an alphabet-using culture, pictography has not disappeared from our lives. The figures designating *male* and *female* on washrooms and the *no smoking* signs found in public buildings, to mention but two common examples, are modern-day pictographs. More abstract pictographic forms, called *ideographs*, were used to represent ideas, rather than concrete objects, assuming a conventional knowledge of the relation between picture and idea on the part of the user. For example, drawing a "child with a book in a school setting" could be, hypothetically, an ideograph for "student." As ideographs became condensed and stylized they developed into *logographs* or *logos* for short. Logography has become one of the most widespread forms of symbolism today, mainly because of its uses in business, marketing, and advertising. Logos for Nike, Apple, Body Shop, Calvin Klein, Levi's, and a myriad other products, are recognized by virtually everyone living in a modern consumerist society. As Naomi Klein remarks in her controversial book, *No Logo*, for most manufacturers today the logo constitutes "the very fabric of their companies."[15] This topic will be examined more closely in Chapter 3. Suffice it to say here that logography is a widespread symbolic art today, because it taps into the sacred-versus-profane opposition within us. *X* is essentially a logo, reverberating with a psychic tension that oscillates back and forth between the sacred and the profane.

But the reader might legitimately ask, How can one read so much symbolism and meaning into a simple alphabet character? *X* is, when

it comes right down to it, the twenty-fourth letter of the English alphabet. But, then, one could counter with, What sound does it represent? As a phonic symbol, *X* is an anomaly. And, like the other alphabet forms, it does not originate as a sign standing for a sound. Our alphabet characters derive, in fact, from pictographs. The transition from pictorial to phonic representation came about around 1000 BCE to make writing rapid and efficient. Take the letter *a*, as a case in point, which originated as an Egyptian pictograph of an ox. Instead of drawing the full head of the animal, only its bare outline was at first drawn—probably in the marketplaces of the ancient world. This outline itself came to stand for the concept of ox, and eventually for the word for ox (*aleph* in Semitic). Shortly after, the Phoenicians rotated it 180 degrees (removing minor pictographic details from it), so as to make it stand just for the first sound in the word *aleph* (that is, the *a* in *aleph*). Archeological findings indicate that the Phoenician scribes, who wrote from right to left, drew the ox figure sideways (probably because it was quicker for them to do so). The Greeks, who adapted Phoenician letters, generally wrote from left to right, and so turned the A the other way. About 500 BCE, the Romans adopted the symbol, writing it in the upright position. The ox had finally settled on its horns, becoming the modern symbol for the vowel A.


❑ **The Ancient Egyptians**


❑ **The Semites**


❑ **The Phoenicians**


❑ **The Greeks**


❑ **The Romans**

A similar pictographic history can be written for the other characters of our alphabet. Today, we hardly think of *a* as an ox standing on its horns, but rather as a sign standing for the vowel sound in words such as *cat* and *art*. But in the case of *X*, it is not clear what sound it represents. In words such as *Xerox* or *xylophone*, we actually pronounce it like a *z*. In fact, throughout its history, the *X* has had absolutely

nothing to do with phonetics. As mentioned above, *X* has been used as the symbol for (among many other things) the following:

- Any mysterious factor, thing, or person
- The signature of any illiterate person
- A mistake
- Cancellation
- An unknown quantity in mathematics
- Multiplication
- The Roman numeral ten
- A mechanical defect
- Location on a map
- Choice on a ballot
- A previous motion picture rating indicating erotic content (rated X)
- Christ
- A kiss
- Chronos, the god of Time
- The planet Saturn in Greek and Roman mythology

The number of meanings and uses of *X* varies considerably. The lowest estimate that I was able to determine on my own is around seventy. Roy, on the other hand, lists the number well into the hundreds, although some of these seem to be repetitions.[16] Today, *X* is used to name products, media personalities, and events that make up the pop culture universe—a universe that is imbued consequently with X-Power, reverberating with all the mysterious meanings that the letter *X* carries with it from ancient history to today.

POP CULTURE

The foregoing discussion brings me to the implicit question that I am attempting to address in this book: What is pop culture? Why is it "the source of role models, pleasures and information, from holidays to car design, TV news to bars, rock music to fashion," as John Lough so aptly puts it?[17] Is it essentially a platform for the performance of kitsch and vulgar spectacles dished out on a daily basis for the simple reason of making a buck? If so, why is kitsch appealing? As writer Milan Kundera has perceptively remarked, pop culture is something that appeals to us instinctively because "no matter how much we scorn it, kitsch

is an integral part of the human condition."[18] To put Kundera's statement into other words, it can be said that pop culture is appealing because it taps into our need to ritualize our instinct for the profane.

As Susie O'Brien and Imre Szeman aptly put it, pop culture is popular because it consists of "what the people make, or do, for themselves."[19] This includes material forms (magazines, videos, bestselling novels, fads, etc.), art and representational forms (music, movies, TV programs), and practices such as shopping for fun, going to sports events, etc. The term itself crystallized around the middle part of the twentieth century, and was probably fashioned after the *pop art* ("popular art") movement—a movement that saw artists appropriate images and commodities from consumerist culture as their subject matter. The movement began, actually, as a reaction against the obscure expressionist abstract art style of the 1940s and 1950s. Pop artists sought to depict everyday life, using brand-name commercial products, fast-food items, comic-strip frames, celebrities, and the like as their materials and their subjects. They put on *happenings*, improvised spectacles or performances for anyone, not just art-gallery patrons. The most famous representative of that movement was the late American artist Andy Warhol (1928–87), who created highly publicized paintings and silk-screen prints of commonplace objects (such as soup cans) and pictures of celebrities (such as Marilyn Monroe).

For the sake of historical accuracy, I should mention that the roots of modern-day popular culture probably go back to the middle part of the nineteenth century, when the Industrial Revolution gave common people the financial means to seek pleasure in the arts and to engage creatively in them. From the outset, this democratization of art was viewed by many critics as encouraging the rise and spread of a vulgar and degrading form of culture. The British social critic and writer Matthew Arnold (1822–88), for example, saw it as a "dumbed down" version of what he called "serious" culture.[20] Arnold believed that the mass society that coalesced in the Industrial Age through urbanization had become far too homogenized, preferring "low" forms in their cultural choices. Known today as the "mass society thesis," Arnold's main contention was that a mass popular form of culture based on materialism and affluence had a deleterious effect on human growth and potential.

Arnold's basic idea is still used today to differentiate between levels of culture. As mentioned earlier, high culture implies a level considered to have a superior value, socially and aesthetically, than other levels, which

are said to have a lower worth. Traditionally, these two levels have been associated with class distinctions—high culture with the Church and the aristocracy; low culture with common folk. As John Storey has cogently argued, pop culture has obliterated this distinction.[21]

The motivators behind the spread of pop culture at the turn of the twentieth century in America were young people. Setting themselves apart from the Puritanical adult culture of the era, the youth of the Roaring Twenties sought to express sexual freedom through music, dance, fashion, and a generally carefree lifestyle. Although the older generation initially rejected the new trends as immoral and vulgar, they eventually caught on for a simple reason—they had mass appeal (even for older people). As the prohibitionist-minded adults of the era found out to their chagrin, pop culture engages the masses emotionally and interactively. Everything from comic books to fashion shows have wide-ranging appeal because they emanate from a "pleasure dynamic," as it can be called, that is established between their congeners and their consumers. In such a situation, anything goes, as long as it sells, as the British literary critic Frank R. Leavis (1895–1978) emphasized in his acerbic writings. Leavis condemned American pop culture because he saw it as having defiled the models of aesthetics established by the "classics." The "blame-it-on-America" focus of critics such as Arnold and Leavis remains a strong one to this day, even within America itself, where many equate pop culture to rudeness, tastelessness, and crude sexuality. But, as I will argue throughout this book, such critics have ignored the lessons of history—pop culture today is really nothing more than a mass communal form of profane theater—a contemporary form of ancient and medieval carnivals that cannot be easily repressed or suppressed. Moreover, defining the boundary line between high and low culture is a highly variable and subjective act. Sometimes, what starts out as profane art, ends up being redefined as classical art. Comic opera (known as *opera buffa*) is now considered to be part of high culture. But, in the seventeenth century, it was seen as a form of entertaining comedy performed in front of the curtain between the acts of an *opera seria* (a serious opera). The characters in opera buffa were common people who, unlike the professional singers in opera seria, represented the professions and the social classes of the times, including doctors, farmers, merchants, servants, and soldiers. The typical comic skit of opera buffa dealt with a common situation from everyday life. Many characters sang in dialect rather than in the proper language of opera seria. Both forms

of opera were extremely popular—bringing out how the sacred and the profane have always tended to merge in expressive practices. Most opera buffa compositions were performed for one season and then quickly forgotten. The ones that are still performed today (such as those by Mozart and Rossini) are hardly viewed anymore as part of profane entertainment.

The spread of modern-day pop culture is due in large part to developments in cheap technology. The rise of music as a mass art, for instance, was made possible by the advent of recording and radio broadcasting technologies at the start of the twentieth century. Records and radio made music available to large audiences, cheaply, converting it from an art for the few to a commodity for one and all. The spread and allure of American pop culture today is also due to new technologies that make it possible to spread it instantly across the globe. Needless to say, this has had social and political consequences. Satellite television, for example, is often cited as bringing about the disintegration of the former soviet system, as people became attracted to images of consumerist delights by simply tuning into American TV programs. The late Canadian communications theorist Marshall McLuhan (1911–80) claimed, long before the advent of such technologies, that the diffusion of pop culture images through electronic media would bring about a veritable "global village."[22] No wonder, then, that American pop culture is sometimes seen as a threat (both from within and without).

Condemning pop culture early in the twentieth century were members of the so-called Frankfurt School, established in 1923 at the University of Frankfurt as an independent research center (formally, the Frankfurt Institute of Social Research). The School flourished in the 1930s. Most of its members used Marxist ideology to explain pop culture away as a passing fad. One of its most influential theorists was Theodor Adorno (1903-69), who saw mass communications technology as contributing not to the betterment of humankind but to the massification of barbaric elements—a critique that is still bandied about today in academic circles. Max Horkheimer (1895–1973), another prominent member of the School, went even further, condemning the capitalist forces behind pop culture bluntly, seeing the power brokers in a capitalist system as controlling a "culture industry" that is designed to obey only the logic of marketplace capitalism, not any pre-existing canons of art and aesthetics. Adopting Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci's (1891–1937) concept of hegemony, some Frankfurt

scholars went even so far as to claim that the whole pop culture enterprise was nothing more than a hidden instrument of social domination and control, used by the group in power to gain the passive consent of common people by keeping them constantly entertained and thus unreflective. The concept of hegemony is attractive to many academic theorists of pop culture even today. It is used to explain why pop culture is so appealing, claiming that its spectacles and its products offer the promise or fulfillment of pleasure.[23] As Berger aptly explains, "like a gas that we cannot smell but which can affect us in profound ways," hegemony "permeates the atmosphere and takes on the guise of the natural."[24] But, then, how is it that capitalist cultures change all the time, if people are so mindless and easily duped by the power brokers behind the culture industries? The answer to this, according to some of the more clever Marxists, is that most people are improperly educated and thus unable to recognize the controlling agencies behind the scenes. The theorists have apparently taken it upon themselves to educate the masses and help them escape from their miserable state.

One of the last of the theorists associated with the Frankfurt School, Herbert Marcuse (1898-1979), broke somewhat away from this rigid Marxist stance, seeing in American hippie culture, for example, a renaissance of Romantic idealism. So too did Walter Benjamin (1892–1940), who put forward a "catharsis hypothesis," by which he claimed that the vulgar aspects of pop culture allowed people to release pent-up energies. Benjamin rejected both the notion of hegemony, arguing instead that the profane nature of pop culture was hardly a product of capitalism, but rather, a means through which common people can seek catharsis. Pop culture was, for Benjamin, a safety valve that allowed profane energies to escape harmlessly.

Benjamin's ideas are crucial to understanding why pop culture persists and why it continues to be so highly appealing. Simply put, it is cathartic. Whether it is yelling at a rock concert, dancing the Charleston energetically in front of admiring eyes, or grooving to hip-hop, pop culture provides contexts that allow people to release energy and thus to gain control of their emotions. Many of the ancient mythic dramas were similarly cathartic, as Barthes claimed, and this is why they are recycled in the form of entertainment spectacles, from wrestling matches to rock concerts.[25] As a consequence, Barthes argued, pop culture has had a profound impact on modern-day ethics, because myth is virtually indistinguishable from ideology (the set of beliefs and values that shape worldview).

Along with other Marxist-leaning theorists—such as E. P. Thompson (1924–93), Richard Hoggart (b. 1918), and Raymond Williams (1921–88)—Barthes has had an enormous impact on contemporary pop culture theory.[26] Of these, Williams was highly influential in shaping such theory in the 1960s and 1970s.[27] His main contention was that to read pop culture insightfully one had to understand its underlying "sign-system." He put it in the following way:

> For if we have learned to see the relation of any cultural work to what we have learned to call a "sign-system" (and this has been the important contribution of cultural semiotics), we can also come to see that a sign-system is itself a specific structure of social relationships "internally," in that the signs depend on, were formed in, relationships "externally," in that the system depends on, is formed in, the institutions which activate it (and which are then at once cultural and social economic institutions); integrally, in that a "sign-system," properly understood, is at once a specific cultural technology and a specific form of practical consciousness; those apparently diverse elements which are in fact unified in the material social process.[28]

As a semiotician myself, I tend to favor a sign-based approach to pop culture. But I disagree with Williams's point that signs are formed within institutions. There is a dynamic between signs and institutions—one entails the other. Signs in pop culture, such as the *X* sign discussed in this chapter, both characterize pop culture and guide its course. The two go hand in hand. Moreover, Williams' Marxist emphasis on "social economic institutions" and a "material social process" seems to hide a socio-political agenda, rather than espouse a semiotic theory of culture. As the Austrian-American Joseph A. Schumpeter (1883–1950) aptly put it in 1942, such views are really akin to a religion: "Marxism is a religion. To the believer it presents, first, a system of ultimate ends that embody the meaning of life and are absolute standards by which to judge events and actions; and, secondly, a guide to those ends which implies a plan of salvation and the indication of the evil from which mankind, or a chosen section of mankind, is to be saved."[29]

I will return to theories of pop culture in the final chapter.[30] Suffice it to say here that there is more to pop culture than meets the Marxist eye. Some of the modern world's most significant artistic products have come out of the pop culture arena, not the Marxist one. The comic-book art of Charles Schultz (1922–2000) is a case in point. His

comic strip *Peanuts*, which was originally titled *Li'l Folks*, debuted in 1950 when Schultz was still in his twenties. The strip dealt with some of the most profound religious and philosophical themes of human history in a simple way that appealed to masses of people. Examples such as this abound. *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* and *The White Album*, by the Beatles, reverberate with engaging melodies and classical harmonies and yet remain essentially simple in texture, much like the music of some of the great musicians. *Sgt. Pepper* was released on June 1, 1967, and I remember myself stopping to listen to it at a friend's house and not believing my ears. I was so fascinated by it that I ran to get a copy instantly at a record store. It was, I thought, a rock version of a classical opera. And it is not coincidental, in hindsight, that the album cover featured a carnivalesque gathering of people—a veritable pastiche of images from pop culture.

Pop culture perpetuates itself (and has always perpetuated itself) because it appeals to large masses of people. And this has, in turn, brought about social change. The social fabric of America in the 1960s, for instance, was shaped by hippie culture, which garnered media attention through protest and music. Before the advent of pop culture, the only form of culture that survived was, primarily, the one that received support from authority figures or traditional institutions, from the church to the nobility. With the advent of cheap print materials, gramophones, radios, and the like, the conditions for delivering all forms of culture, independently of sponsoring institutions, became a reality, ushering in the age of pop culture—an age that is as vibrant today as it was a century ago.

As John Leland has cogently argued, pop culture may be older than many think. He characterizes it as "hip"—a word that surfaces for the first time in 1619 when the first blacks arrived in America off the coast of Virginia.[31] Without black culture, Leland correctly maintains, there would be no pop culture and hip lifestyles today. He derives the word from two West African Wolof verbs *hepi*, meaning "to see" and *hipi*, "to open one's eyes," defining it as a smooth and ambiguous attitude. It is something that one feels, rather than understands, and that is why it has always been associated with musicians. In 1973, the funk group Tower of Power defined hip appropriately as follows: "Hipness is—What it is! And sometimes hipness is, what it ain't." The blues were hip. The Charleston was hip. Jazz was hip. Elvis was hip. Rap is hip. Hip is about a flight from mainstream conformity, a way to put oneself in contrast

to it, to stand out, to look and be different. Leland observes that many characters and personages that make up pop culture history can easily be seen to have possessed hipness. The loveable cartoon character Bugs Bunny, for example, exemplified hip perfectly, with his sassy attitude that always got the better of Elmer Fudd, the ultimate "square." His sardonic "What's up, Doc?" is pure hip talk. Bugs was so hip that sometimes he stopped in the middle of a cartoon and argued with his human creators.

Pop culture is hip culture. For this reason, I beg to disagree with some theorists who see contemporary forms of pop culture as "postmodern," a mode of representation in movie, television programs, etc., that brings out the absurdity of life and even of pop culture itself. Postmodernism is not applicable to any description of pop culture in my view, because pop culture is hip, not postmodern. Postmodernism theory is really a descendant of two larger twentieth-century intellectual trends known as absurdism and existentialism. The former held that human beings exist in a meaningless, irrational universe and that any search for meaning by them will bring them into direct conflict with this universe; the latter emphasized the isolation of the individual's experience in a hostile or indifferent universe, viewing human existence as unexplainable. In the words of Czech playwright Václav Havel, all such movements point to "an absence of meaning" in the universe.[32]

The term postmodernism was coined, actually, by architects in the 1970s to characterize a new style that had emerged to counteract modernism in building design, which by mid-twentieth century had degenerated into sterile and monotonous formulas (for example, boxlike skyscrapers). Architects called for greater individuality, complexity, and eccentricity in design, while also demanding the use of architectural symbolism that made reference to history. Shortly after its adoption in architecture, the term *postmodernism* started to catch on more broadly, becoming a catchphrase for certain social, political, philosophical, and cultural trends. Frederic Jameson, one of the most celebrated postmodernist critics, has even suggested that the end of modern liberal society came with the demise of true social protest in the 1960s and the advent of ironic frames of mind in art and representation shortly thereafter.[33] Since then, Jameson argues, a new social order has arisen that turns out to be nothing more than a late stage in the evolution of capitalism—a stage that has generated postmodern culture, a culture based on a pastiche of styles and expressive techniques. He characterizes this pastiche as follows:

> The enumeration of what follows, then, at once becomes empirical, chaotic, and heterogeneous: Andy Warhol and pop art, but also photorealism, and beyond it, the "new expressionism"; the moment, in music, of John Cage, but also a synthesis of classical and "popular" styles found in composers like Phil Glass and Terry Riley, and also punk and new wave rock (the Beatles and the Stones now standing as the high-modernist movement of that more recent and rapidly evolving tradition); in film, Godard, post-Godard, and experimental cinema and video, but also a whole new type of commercial film. Burroughs, Pynchon, or Ishmael Reed, on the other hand, and the French *nouveau roman* and its succession, on the other, along with alarming new kinds of literary criticism based on some new aesthetic of textuality.[34]

Jameson is correct in pointing out that pop culture makes little or no distinction between forms of art and expression. And he correctly suggests that music is (and always has been) the force behind pop culture's evolution, in any of its versions or at any of its stages. But I would hardly classify the works of a John Cage or a Jean-Luc Godard as part of pop culture. How many people listen to, or have ever listened to, John Cage? Moreover, pop culture is not chaotic, as Jameson claims. Postmodernism is. It is a clever condemnation of pop culture, not an evolutionary trend within it. Pop culture is all about carnivalesque forms of entertainment, not about self-criticism. It is hip culture, not philosophical culture. It is a culture that thrives in a capitalist system, because its products must succeed in the marketplace. Actually, because of this, there is little doubt that pop culture is (and always has been) a major component in the constitution of modern economies. The constant turnover of trends within it (from music to clothing fashion) makes it particularly suited to such economies, which depend for their survival on a constant and rapid turnover of goods and services.

Take cars as an example. The automobile industry is a vital component of the economic stability of many modern nations. The enormous growth of the automobile industry is due, in large part, to mass advertising campaigns that have transformed cars into symbols of hipness. Ford's Mustang model, which was introduced on the market in 1964 as a quasi-sports car, is a perfect example of this. Marketed for the young (or young at heart) as a low-price, high-style car, it appealed instantly to the young people of the era. It became a symbol of youth hipness. Its design included elegant, narrow bumpers instead of the large ones popular at the time, air scoops on its sides to cool the rear

brakes, and delicate grillwork, which would jut out at the top and slant back at the bottom to give the car a forward-thrusting look. Its logo of a galloping horse adorned the grille, becoming an icon of youthful cool and lifestyle. To this day, when the name Mustang comes up, a whole series of cultural images accompany it, from songs extolling cars of this type, such as *Little Deuce Coup* by the Beach Boys, to images of fun and sexual freedom in movies and advertisements. Cars are, in a word, symbols of trends in pop culture, representing the role and appeal of technology in that culture. The series of James Bond movies, for example, would be much less popular without the use of supra-technological cars that allow the master spy to go after the "bad guys."

So, what is pop culture? There is no easy answer to this question. In my view, it is a mythic culture and, as such, has great emotional (rather than logical) appeal. Pop culture is "X-rated." It is a culture that is perfectly symbolized by the letter *X*—a symbol that brings out the crisscrossing of psychic levels in its very form. As mentioned in the preface to this book, the term X-rated emerged in the early 1970s to rate pornographic movies. The perceived danger that such movies posed to many at the time was not so much their blatant sexuality, but rather the threat that their explicit sexual style could spread to other areas, ultimately eradicating the Puritan values on which America was founded. And indeed the style has spread. It is evident in everything from rap videos and pop music performances like those of the Pussycat Dolls to high-class fashion shows. X-rated movies were perceived with a sense of "moral panic" by the Nixon and Reagan administrations. Today, that sense seems to have dissipated, as such movies have become nothing more than examples of just another movie genre. As social critic Stan Cohen has observed, this type of mutation in perception characterizes the evolution of pop culture generally. Whether it is a panicked reaction to Elvis's swinging hip movements, a sense that X-rated movies are bringing about the end of civilization, or a belief that the gross antics performed on stage by punk rockers are transforming society into a state of chaos, people typically react negatively to transgressive mockery only at first.[35] As the mockery loses its initial impact, the moral panic associated with it evanesces. Elvis Presley was proclaimed, at first, to be the devil's emissary on earth; over the years he became, ironically, part of evangelical culture and, in his death, was seen by the very groups that once condemned him as a "martyr."

Moral panic theory can be enlisted to grasp why certain events have taken place in pop culture. In 1952, the *I Love Lucy* program was forbidden to script the word "pregnant" when Lucille Ball (the main character of the sitcom) was truly pregnant; moreover, Lucy and Ricky Ricardo were shown as sleeping in separate beds. Such restrictions were common in early television. On his *Ed Sullivan Show* performance in 1956, Elvis Presley was shot from the waist up, to spare viewers from seeing his gyrating pelvis. But television soon after caught up to transgressive style, co-opting it more and more. In 1964, the married couple Darrin and Samantha Stevens were seen sharing a double bed on *Bewitched*. In 1968, Rowan and Martin's *Laugh-In* challenged puritanical mores with its racy skits and double entendres. In the early 1970s, *All in the Family* addressed taboo subjects such as race, menopause, homosexuality, and premarital sex for the first time on prime time television. In 1976, the female leads in *Charlie's Angels* went braless for the first time in television history, and one year later the *Roots* miniseries showed bare-breasted women portraying African life in the eighteenth century. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, *Seinfeld* and *NYPD Blue* often made references to previously taboo sexual topics (such as masturbation). In 2000, the winner on CBS's first *Survivor* series walked around naked (although CBS pixilated sensitive areas).

All these events caused moral panic initially. However, as Cohen had predicted, the panic was short-lived. Today some of the things that once were considered to be truly alarming are now incorporated by the very people who condemned them the most. Evangelical groups in the United States, who are vociferous leaders in America's "culture wars," use rock and rap bands to sing the praises of the Lord in mammoth theaters. They also use media products (DVDs and CDs) to promote a "hip religious lifestyle." In contemporary American society, religion and hipness seem to go hand in hand. Moreover, as James Twitchell has recently argued, many of the latter-day evangelical religions that seem to sprout up regularly are nothing more than pop religions.[36] Americans now seem to change their faith to suit their fancy. They shop for it, rather than remain in the one they were born into. Religion is, Twitchell claims, more and more a fashion accessory, to be displayed like a designer logo.

As a theater of the profane, pop culture is fundamentally a form of carnival mockery in which sexual displays are part of the act. At the 2003 MTV Video Music Awards, Madonna open-mouth kissed Britney Spears; a year later, Janet Jackson exposed her breast during

the *Super Bowl* halftime show. Both were hardly just sexual acts; they were acts of mockery in front of mass audiences. They got the same reaction that similar or comparable acts have always gotten—outrage. The same applies to the most vulgar of all forms of pop culture—the porn movie, which, as mentioned, is seen today as just another genre, especially after the rise of cable television and videos in the 1980s making porn movies widely available and thus demystifying their impact. This occurrence is, in my view, central to understanding pop culture. When *Deep Throat* premiered in the early 1970s, it was perceived not only as obscene smut, but also (and primarily) as a serious threat to the moral, political, and social order of mainstream America, as filmmaker Brian Grazer has persuasively shown in his insightful 2005 movie *Inside Deep Throat*. But people enjoyed it just the same, secretly or openly. Like an ancient bawdy comedy, *Deep Throat* allowed pent-up sexual fantasies to be released in public, where they could do less (or no) harm.

Porn movies have been problematic, not just for religious authorities and right-wing politicians, but also for some early feminist critics, who saw them as objectifying women in subservience to the desires of the male sexual gaze. They are indeed crude and vulgar. There really is nothing more to them than pure sexual voyeurism. And that is their point. They subvert sexual mores blatantly and forcefully. The early feminists, however, were not bothered by this aspect of pornography, as were those of the religious right. They argued, instead, that porn movies were degrading to women, and a source of influence in promoting violence against women. They leveled a similar attack against pop culture generally. Some of their critiques were well founded, given the effusion of images of women as either "sexual cheerleaders" or "motherly homemakers" in many domains of early pop culture. However, already in the 1950s, alongside such skewed views of womanhood imprinted in sitcoms such as *Father Knows Best*, there were sitcoms such as *The Honeymooners*, which portrayed women as individualists. The main character in *I Love Lucy* was a strong-willed, independent female, completely in charge of her life. Moreover, by seeing the display of women's bodies in spectacles and movies only as a form objectification catering to male voyeurism, the early feminists seem to have ignored the fact that this very mode of display played a critical role in liberating women from seeing themselves as constricted to the roles of passive obedient housewives, consequently allowing them to assume a sexual persona openly that, paradoxically,

has become more controlling of the male gaze than controlled by it. As Camille Paglia has pointed out, such displays reveal a "sexual power that feminism cannot explain and has tried to destroy."[37] This sexual power is something that feminism has tried to dismiss "as a misogynist libel, a hoary cliché," but which nonetheless "expresses women's ancient and eternal control of the sexual realm," and "stalks all men's relations with women."[38]

With the entrance of Madonna onto the pop culture scene in the mid-1980s, the tide in feminist theory started to change radically, leading to what is now called postfeminism. A true individualist, the original "material girl" projected female sexuality front and center on the pop culture stage. The subtext in her performances has always been transparent—no man can ever dictate to Madonna how to pose on that stage. She will do it on her own terms. Men can only watch passively and behave. Her concerts are indeed "spectacular," blending "peep show" style with postures that simulate prayerlike reverence. Using the power of her sexual persona she invites *spectare* (looking) from both male and female audiences. Influenced by Madonna, feminist critics today tend to see the public display of female sexuality not as exploitation, but rather as a form of a carnivalesque performance—a form that actually started in the midways and sideshows that were part of state fairs in the 1870s and 1880s. As Stencell has observed, "Sex and horror along with the unusual have always been staples of midway shows," making them the first truly public carnivals in America to bring out the power of female sexuality in evoking helpless *spectare*, long before Madonna and her contemporary clones.[39]

A sure sign that the tide has turned in the perception of pornography as a "male voyeuristic plot," as some early feminists put it, is the fact that, as Francesca Twinn reports, today porn is viewed widely by women.[40] A 2007 study of 19,000 British men and women, *Sex & the Psyche*, found that porn is viewed by 90 percent of men but by an astounding 60 percent of women. As Debbie Nathan points out, it can in fact be argued that the history of pornography overlaps considerably with the history of pop culture.[41] Walter Kendrick suggests that pornography is a modern-day concept invented in the second half of the nineteenth century.[42] In the ancient world, the term referred to "writing about prostitutes," not to visual depictions of sexual activities. Ironically, it was during the sexually repressive Victorian era that, as Ken Gelder puts it, pornography "became an

underground cottage industry with its own traditions and its specialized audiences, able to retain at least some of its political edge and libelous force."[43]

X-Power is however not just about sex. The *X* symbolizes the power of the profane in human life and the need to express it in some ritualized way. It is also the cross figure and thus simultaneously suggests sacredness. Indeed, the X-Power of pop culture lies in its ability to fuse and oppose sacredness and profanity at the same time. Unlike what some academic and political critics have claimed, pop culture is a magical kingdom—a kind of extended Disneyesque Fantasyland. It is Xanadu, the mythic region represented by the initial *X* of its name (no coincidence here) by the great English poet Samuel Coleridge (1772–1834) in his poem *Kubla Khan*. As Coleridge writes, "And in this tumult Kubla heard from far, ancestral voices prophesying war!" Pop culture too is a place of tumult, where two kinds of "ancestral voices" can also be heard prophesying an internal psychic war—one voice is that of the sacred and the other is that of the profane.

CHAPTER 2

V-POWER

THE FEMININE FORM AND POP CULTURE

V is the vase.

—Victor Hugo (1802–85)

A FEW YEARS AGO SHELL OIL INTRODUCED A NEW FUEL, which it called *V-Power*. The name resonated instantly with consumers as sales of the gasoline went up. The brand name seems to have tapped perfectly into the *Zeitgeist* of our times—an era that is symbolized perfectly by the letter *V*. There is, in fact, more to the letter *V* than meets the eye, as the saying goes. The use of *V* in product naming is, as I will claim in this chapter, one of the many signs today of the emergence of women on the social scene as trend-setters—an emergence that can be called, like the fuel, V-Power, The *V* is, in fact, an ancient symbol for the "sacred feminine," or the view that females are wise and all-knowing, yet at the same time powerful. This symbolism is imprinted unconsciously in the names given to some female goddesses, such as Virgo (virgin) and Venus, and in the words used to denote sexually suggestive objects such as the *vase* and *vessel*, which are universal symbols for femininity.[1] The meanings packed into the *V* symbol, are undoubtedly due to the fact that its *V* form suggests female sexuality, as Catherine Blackledge has cogently argued in her book, *The Story of V*.[2]

All this may come as some surprise to the reader, as it did to me a few years back while I was conducting a simple exercise in symbolic interpretation with a first-year class at the University of Toronto. I asked the class to tell me what the sign formed by raising the index and middle fingers of my hand in the shape of a *V* meant to them.

At first, I received the kinds of answers that I had always obtained with this exercise, namely that it stands for victory, peace, the number two, or a salutation gesture. In my role as professor, I quickly intervened to explain these meanings. For example, I explained that the link of the *V* sign to victory was established in the modern era at the end of World War II by British politician Winston Churchill (1874–1965) after he utilized it publicly to acknowledge the victorious outcome for the allied forces. I pointed out, however, that the same sign was used by ancient armies to indicate victory. I went on to explain that, starting in the mid-1960s, the hippies used the *V* sign as a symbol against war and human conflict, turning Churchill's meaning on its head, and indirectly warning society of the inanity of war and human conflict. A version of the sign was used on the early *Star Trek* TV series by the Vulcans (a name that, significantly, also starts with *V*) and meant "Live long and prosper." The Vulcan sign was formed with the third and fourth fingers instead of the second and third.

At that point a female member of the class blurted out, "That's old stuff, professor. Did you know that *V* now stands for *girl power*?" Her comment took me aback, momentarily. The student went on to say that she got this meaning from the pop culture domain, having seen the sign used by the female British rock group called the Spice Girls, popular in the mid-1990s, in one of their videos. I did not, fortunately, dismiss that student's comment, sensing something much more profound in its "girl power" meaning than would seem at first thought. So, I decided to research the symbolism of *V*, right after the class, finding in due course that, in fact, it is one of the oldest and most common symbols for womanhood throughout history. Why? Perhaps,

as mentioned, the shape of the sign itself suggests feminine sexuality, in an analogous way that phallic symbols suggest masculine sexuality—through resemblance. This hypothesis finds corroborating evidence among the symbolic and representational traditions in cultures across the world that use the *V* sign with a feminine meaning. It is not coincidental that the names of mythic female figures, such as Venus and Virgo, as well as common female names (Vanessa, Virginia, etc.), and words describing female social and physical meanings (virginity) begin with the letter *V* in many languages of the world. The *V* is, in a phrase, a symbolic mythic icon for the feminine form. Like the *X*, it is imbued with oppositional meanings. On the one side, it bespeaks of the world-disordering sexual power of womanhood, noticeable in such mythic stories as those about Lilith, Delilah, Salome, and Helen of Troy. On the other, it bespeaks of the world-harmonizing emotional power of the same womanhood, noticeable in the stories about Gaia, Eve, and the Madonna. No wonder then that *V* is being used by companies such as Shell to name products that, either intentionally or latently, have tapped into the spread of V-Power, or "girl power," as my student called it.

V-Power has always been the fuel (no pun intended) behind the rise, spread, and appeal pop culture. The feminine form is (and always has been) front and center in popular spectacles. Its sexual power is unmistakable. This is why many trends, performances and personages in pop culture, from the flappers and stripteases to fashion shows, highlight V-Power blatantly. And the public display of this power has always constituted a source of moral panic for many politicians and self-annointed moral guardians of society. The current uses of the letter *V* in advertising and in various naming practices play on the emotional power and cultural ambiguity built into the feminine form.

DUAL SYMBOLISM

Throughout time and across cultures, women have been viewed as having two natures packed into one body—the "mother" and the temptress or "femme-fatale." The Bible represents this dualism in the person of Eve (the mother) and Lilith (the femme fatale). Lilith comes across as (sexually) dangerous, disruptive, and rebellious (toward patriarchy). In the single biblical reference to her (Isaiah 34:14), she is depicted as a desert demon. According to another legend, God created Lilith out of earth in the same way that he created the first man. The pair immediately began to quarrel, because Lilith refused to submit to

Adam. She fled. God sent three angels to bring her back, who warned her that if she refused to return, one of her children would die each day. Lilith refused defiantly and vowed to seek revenge by harming all newborn infants.

It is not the purpose here to go into the theological and philosophical debates surrounding Eve and Lilith. I simply want to point out the presence of a "dual symbolism" with regards to womanhood that goes right back to the dawn of recorded history. This suggests that both the mother-image and the femme-fatale-image are deeply rooted in the human psyche. The latter appears in myths and legends throughout the world, with different names and under different guises, but with the same basic concept of femininity that we have labeled V-Power here. In Western literature, Lilith appears, for example, in the *Walpurgis Night* section of Goethe's *Faust* and in Bernard Shaw's *Back to Methuselah*. The mother-image is also a universal staple of myths and legends. Eve is the most widely known personification of this image, but she is not alone. The ancient Greek goddess of the earth, Gaia, is another well-known mythologization of the mother-image. The Eve story, however, seems to have an inbuilt twist to it. Eating the forbidden fruit was, in fact, the first independent act by a human being—a remarkably courageous act if one really thinks about it. Eve was a risk taker, not a gullible victim, as many have portrayed her throughout history.

Like the Lilith story, the legends of Jezebel and Delilah are also symbolic of V-Power. A Tyrian princess, daughter of Ethbaal, king of Tyre (now Sur, Lebanon) and Sidon (now Saida, Lebanon), and wife of Ahab, king of Israel, Jezebel introduced the worship of Baal into Israel, thereby inciting an enduring enmity with the prophets of Jehovah. She was a bitter opponent of the prophet Elijah, portrayed as a strong-willed, politically astute, and utterly defiant woman who dared to disregard the religious system of her era by adopting paganism as a way of life. Jezebel has been admired by writers such as Shakespeare, Shelley, and Joyce. She also surfaces as a recurring figure or theme in pop culture, from Frankie Laine's hit single *Jezebel* and a song by Boys II Men, to the 1938 movie *Jezebel*, for which Betty Davis (in the title role) won an Academy Award. The story of Jezebel constitutes a kind of protofeminist discourse. She is a perfect emblem of V-Power—a power that men can hardly manage, let alone vanquish. In the movie *Basic Instinct 2* (2006), for example, a male psychiatrist is no match

for the wits and sexual power of Sharon Stone's *V* character. He ends up powerless, as she drives him, ironically, to insanity.

Similarly, the story of Delilah seems to have been all about V-Power. She was the Philistine mistress of Samson. The Philistines, who were enemies of the Israelites, bribed her to find out the secret of Samson's power so that they could take him prisoner. Delilah performed a seductive dance before Samson—a dance that was beyond Samson to resist. She was then able to learn that Samson's hair was the source of his strength, betraying him by cutting his hair while he slept (Judges 16:4–20).

Many "first-woman" myths incorporate the dual symbolism of the female as indicative of something that is psychically overpowering, something to be both venerated and feared. A classic example is the myth of Prometheus and Pandora. Prometheus gave humanity the gift of fire, the symbol of intelligence, which he stole from Mount Olympus in a fennel stalk, against the wishes of Zeus, who did not want humans to become intelligent. To punish humanity for Prometheus's crime, Zeus ordered the gods to make a creature to both delight and torment them—Pandora. She was given a sealed jar container that she had instructions not to open. And like Eve, curiosity got the better of her. She opened the container, and out poured all the illnesses and sufferings of the world. Only hope remained inside. Many have noted the resemblance between Pandora and Eve. In 1508, the Dutch author Desiderius Erasmus first used the term "Pandora's box," which has since come to symbolize any object or situation that has a great potential for evil.

Similar first-woman stories exist across cultures. Isis, for example, was the most powerful goddess in ancient Egyptian mythology. The wife and sister of Osiris, king of the underworld, the Egyptians worshiped Isis as the protector of the dead and also as the divine mother. The earliest references to Isis are inscriptions found in pyramids built about 2350 BCE. Artists portrayed Isis in human form, often with the hieroglyph for a throne over her head. She gradually merged with the cow goddess Hathor. After about 1500 BCE, Isis, like Hathor, was shown with horns and a solar disk above her head. Isis, like Pandora and other first women, was clearly portrayed as a conundrum.

Some societies have attempted to inhibit female sexual allure with opposite kinds of myths and by adopting various proscriptions, such as the implementation of clothing practices designed to hide the female body.[3] According to the great Swiss psychologist Carl Jung (1875–

1961), such stories are expressions of unconscious thought patterns, called archetypes, which enable people to react to situations in similar ways. The Eve and Lilith stories are archetypes of womanhood.

Because women themselves are part of cultural traditions, and because archetypes cannot be suppressed, it is little wonder that censorship and prohibition have rarely stifled the veneration of feminine beauty and sexuality. Often, proscription has had the countereffect of stimulating even more interest in it. The classic example of this was the Victorian Age in England, when prudery, exaggerated delicacy, and sexual piety were heralded as the only true virtues for women to uphold. Yet, in the very same era, prostitution flourished, as did the Romantic Movement in art and literature, which praised sexual freedom in people's everyday lives. The movement appealed to a new mass audience, leading arguably to the rise of modern-day pop culture shortly thereafter, challenging the repressive sexual taboos of the Victorian era. It was also the era, as we saw in the previous chapter, that probably gave birth to modern pornography.

V-Power is everywhere in contemporary pop culture. It is the central theme in the runaway 2003 bestseller *The Da Vinci Code* by novelist Dan Brown. The hero, a Harvard scholar named Robert Langdon, attempts to solve an intriguing historical mystery connecting Jesus and Mary Magdalene by using his knowledge of symbology. A part of the allure of that novel is due, needless to say, to its intricate mystery plot. But a larger part is due to the ways in which Brown portrays Mary Magdalene as a symbol of the victimization endured by women living in patriarchal cultures. Brown's subtext is that Mary Magdalene was the wife of Jesus and carried his baby (the Holy Grail), surviving evil forces within the Church that have attempted throughout the ages to suppress this fact. Throughout the novel, Brown uses the *V* symbol cleverly, such as in his interpretation of Da Vinci's *Last Supper* painting where a *V* figure appears to separate Jesus from an apostle who looks like a woman (presumably Mary Magdalene). Langdon's partner in his quest for unraveling the truth is, not surprisingly, a *V*-empowered woman named Sophie (a name that, not uncoincidentally, stands for wisdom and knowledge). The novel's enormous success was, in my view, a result of Brown's cleverness in tapping into V-Power in its "sacred feminine" version. This is the view that women play a harmonizing role in the world, by balancing masculine traits. This is why Isis and Osiris, Aphrodite and Adonis, and other such male-female pairs are found in ancient mythologies. This psychic partnership was

eliminated by Christianity, so claims Brown. It is probably a growing desire in the contemporary world to recover it that has transformed Brown's fictional novel into a theological treatise. But Brown ignores history conveniently. Womanhood has always been considered to be an integral part of Christianity, as can be seen in the pivotal role that the Madonna has always played in it. Worshipped by Christians since apostolic times in the first century, shrines and places of pilgrimage devoted to Mary are found throughout the world. The early Christians venerated her by calling her Mother of God, a title affirmed in 431 CE at the Council of Ephesus. Brown's novel became an overnight success, not because it assessed history accurately, but because he articulated in modern narrative form what many ancient societies have always assumed implicitly—that V-Power (or goddess culture) is a crucial component of human psychic life.

V-Power is everywhere today. It can be seen in television programs and movies that feature devastatingly attractive and physically invincible female actors, with minds of steel and bodies to match. Like never before in pop culture lore, female heroes now outmatch their male opponents easily. Movies such as *Lara Croft* and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* showcase V-Power actors who can easily wipe out an army of male thugs without even a sweat, at the same time that they can overwhelm any of them emotionally through their sexual prowess.

THE FEMALE BODY

The main plot of the 2002 movie *Chicago* is about fame-hungry Roxie Hart, who dreams of a successful life on the vaudeville stage, in the bright lights of Chicago, hoping to flee from her boring life with her husband Amos. Her heroine is club singer Velma Kelly (who is in jail for killing her husband and sister, after discovering their affair). Roxie meets Fred Cassely, a man who convinces her that he can "make her showbiz career take off." But after Fred uses her for his own sexual gratification (which was his real intention from the outset), Roxie realizes that she was duped, and that he has no more connections in show business than she herself does. In a rage she shoots and kills Fred. Her doting husband is, at first, prepared to take the blame for her. But after discovering her infidelity, he refuses to do so and Roxie is sentenced to hang. In jail she finally meets her hero Velma Kelly, who has become infamous throughout society for the double murder she

committed. She also meets other females similarly awaiting trial for the murders of their own partners.

The subtext of the movie (based on a 1976 musical play) is a transparent one—the vaudevillian-burlesque stage has empowered females to metaphorically kill their controlling men by allowing them to break away from their roles as submissive spouses. Roxie hires slick Chicago lawyer Billy Flynn, who convinces her to get the media to think of her as an innocent victim. The tabloids take quickly to the new girl on the cellblock, and Roxie finally (and ironically) realizes her dream of becoming famous. Her body is her best asset in this quest; the camera shows it in sexually suggestive poses as Roxie sings and dances on stage. The importance of the stage for bringing out the allure of V-Power is not an innovative theme of the movie. It is, actually, a basic motif in many other texts. For example, it is the central theme in the opera *Pagliacci* (1892) by Ruggero Leoncavallo (1858–1919). The opera is about a Commedia dell'Arte troupe, in which the actor who plays the clown becomes aware of his wife's infidelity. In a famous scene (*Vesti la giubba*, "Put on your costume"), he looks into the mirror as he puts on his clown's makeup. He blasts himself for being a true clown, as he disintegrates emotionally over the infidelity. Ironically, his skit on stage is all about that very infidelity, and the actors in it are his real wife and her lover, who playact what they are actually doing in real life.

The role of V-Power on the entertainment stage has been a historically crucial one, no matter how society views it or has traditionally viewed it. The movie *Chicago* emphasizes this very fact. Without the eroticized female body, pop culture would simply not have come about in the first place. As Linda Scott has perceptively observed, this became saliently obvious in the Roaring Twenties, when flappers (young females who openly defied the dominant moral strictures of the era) dressed provocatively, smoked cigarettes (and cigars), drank booze, drove automobiles, and danced frenetically in public. Lilith had made her entrance into modern American society. The flapper lifestyle was openly sexual, based on jazz and its inbuilt sexual energy. The flappers "scared the heck," colloquially speaking, out of society's puritanical and prejudicial moral guardians, who put the blame on African-American culture: "The flapper's dress was particularly well suited to her nightlife. Going without a corset left the girl free to move—and all the fringe, beads, and spangles shimmied with her. Just as has happened with every other musical sensation coming out of the African American community in the twentieth century—ragtime,

swing, rock, blues, rap—the conservatives charged that jazz would corrupt the morals of white youth."[4]

The female body on stage is powerful, not only because of its sexuality, but because of its dualism—its intoxicating blend of Eve and Lilith. It puts into psychic tension the perception of females as nurturing mothers with the perception of them as sexual demons. As such, it is particularly menacing to the stability of patriarchal systems. And this is why the threat of "loose women" has always caused great consternation and reprobation in such systems, as *Chicago* brings out. In a sense, therefore, one could say that pop culture is a feminine-based culture. Without women, not only would the show not go on, it wouldn't make sense at all. In a fascinating book, Maria Elena Buszek shows how the apparently exploitive images of women in erotic movies, pinups, and the like are, actually, empowering of women. Starting with burlesque and later with such publications as *Playboy*, Buszek argues that the story of erotic, sexually explicit pop culture is a story of true feminism.[5] In a similar vein, Linda Scott has argued that the type of feminism that sees the role of women in erotic spectacles as nothing more than sexual victimization or objectification is, when deconstructed, an attempt by Puritan-minded, middle-class, white, American women intellectuals to control all women, not free them. The power of pop culture to liberate women from any form of oppressive ideology, including (and ironically) the feminist one, is what gives it its V-Power. As Scott writes, the sexual women involved in early erotic pop culture were "social activists, who argued passionately for the rights of women to have beauty and pleasure, especially in sexual expression."[6] Similarly, Lynn Peril points out that the sexual freedom that pop culture has allowed women to enjoy has been met with hypocrisy or suspicion by those speaking from both the pulpit and the university lectern.[7]

Despite condemnation by the pundits, pop culture in its most blatant sexual forms has been good for women's independence movement. It takes ancient feminine mythic themes and symbols and recycles them—one of these themes is that of virginity. Needless to say, Hollywood's objective has not always been to provide a conceptual framework for an understanding of the role of virginity in social life but to put it on its own media stage, where it can be both praised and satirized, in true carnivalesque style, as this brief selection of movie titles shows:

1918: *The Married Virgin*
1921: *A Virgin Paradise*
1924: *The Wise Virgin*
1959: *Virgin Sacrifice*
1970: *The Virgin and the Gypsy*
1982: *The Last American Virgin*
1997: *Mary Jane's Not a Virgin Anymore*
1999: *The Virgin Suicides*
2005: *The Virgin Queen*
2007: *Virgin School*

As Hanne Blank has recently suggested, pop culture's fascination with female themes, such as virginity, reveals its basis in V-Power (as it has been called here).[8] As Twinn has also observed, ancient ideas, such as that of the sacred Vestal virgins of Rome, who were sworn to celibacy, seem to crop up constantly in contemporary forms of representation.[9] It was seen as a heinous crime to interfere with the virgins who were the guardians of the sacred flame of Rome's patron goddess, Vesta, housekeeper of the pantheon.

The foregoing discussion was not intended to imply that women have not been victimized by sexism in pop culture. The line between sexism and sexuality has always been a thin one in that culture. Perhaps no one knows this more than New York playwright Eve Ensler, creator of *The Vagina Monologues*, the one-woman stage monologue that has been performed throughout the world. The first show took place in the basement of a Soho café in 1996. This led to the establishment of V-Day in 1998, becoming so popular shortly thereafter that in 2008, there were four thousand productions in fifteen hundred locations across the globe. The monologue revolves around stories and statements from women about their "V-word" (vagina and vulva), allowing them to feel proud of their sexual body.

Ensler's main objective is to stop violence against women, physical and psychological. V-Day is, in fact, part of a global movement to stop such violence. *The Vagina Monologues* is the result of interviews with more than two hundred women, and, with humor and grace, Ensler uses them in her stage act to celebrate women's sexuality and emotional strength. The subtext of the *The Vagina Monologues*, as I read it, is that violence can be stopped if women's sexuality is understood, openly and frankly, and not shrouded in myth and prejudice. Women can become true power brokers of society only if they can finally discuss

their sexual nature candidly. Clarissa Smith has argued this very point in a truly insightful study showing that women should hardly consider themselves to be enslaved by the sexuality of the images coming out of popular media, but rather to appropriate them, thus transcending any potentially harmful effects that such images may cause.[10]

The opening up of sexual mores occurred, as mentioned, at the turn of the twentieth century, with the advent of jazz. It is little wonder that such music was rebuffed as corrupt and immoral by the mainstream society of the era. Most early jazz was played by small marching bands or by solo pianists. In 1917 a group of New Orleans musicians called the Original Dixieland Jazz Band recorded a phonograph record of a jazz composition that created a sensation in America and abroad. The doors to a new world were opened. By the mid-1920s, it was obvious that jazz had arisen to become the musical voice of a new open-minded culture. It was liberating for many young people; it was worrisome for many adults. It may have been the first case of true moral panic in pop culture's history. As mentioned in the previous chapter, moral panic theory asserts that any new trend that is perceived as subversive is interpreted as an apocalyptic sign that the world is deteriorating. In hindsight, it is almost ludicrous to note that jazz, today, is classified as serious music, taught in universities and conservatories alongside classical music. It has become part of the sacred in American culture, even though it originated in the profane.

With its seductive syncopations and suggestive rhythms, jazz became a staple of early burlesque. The reason for this is obvious. Without jazz or jazz-like rhythms to accompany it, stripping on stage seems to lose much of its erotic impact. In a fascinating recent book, titled *Striptease: The Untold History of the Girlie Show*, author Rachel Shteir has argued that the "girlie show," as it was once called, was pivotal in liberating women from their mother-image and in enshrining V-Power in America. Among the first to take notice of the power of the striptease was Hollywood.[11] In a scene in the 1946 movie *Gilda*, Rita Hayworth takes off her glove with a languorous technique that clearly alluded to the way a stripper would remove her glove on a stage. Analogously, Sharon Stone's sexual antics in *Basic Instinct* (the first movie and its sequel) are simulative of those used by strippers. Her leg spread in those movies in particular seems to tap into a basic male instinct (hence the title of the movies). Stone's portrayals, and stripteasing generally, enact an unconscious mystique surrounding female genitalia. Michael Sims has observed that these modern-day

enactments and representations are not much different from ancient ones, such as can be seen in the famous "Venus Impudique." As he puts it, "Typical early representations of this part of the body include the Venus Impudique, the Shameless Venus discovered in France in 1864. It is a three-inch piece of mammoth ivory, a female figure that apparently was carved, sometime around 14,000 BCE, in its current state: headless, armless, footless, without any specifically modeled features except the vertical slit of the vagina."[12]

The art of stripteasing also brings out the fact that V-Power would hardly have come about without sexy clothing and cosmetics. High heel shoes, for instance, emphasize the feminine form. They force the body to tilt, making the buttocks and breasts jut out prominently. As the social historian William Rossi explains, sexy shoes have always been intrinsic to V-Power, as evidenced by such classic tales as *Cinderella* and *The Golden Slipper*.[13] Shoes, stockings, and frilly clothes generally provide the fine details in representations and enactments of V-Power. Makeup, too, has undeniable V-Power, having a long and unbroken connection to ancient courtship rituals and practices. Many condemn the use of cosmetics as part of a narcissistic disease spread by the beauty industry and the media working in tandem. But the use of cosmetics has been transformative for women in many ways, as Kathy Peiss argued a few years ago.[14] Cosmetics have always allowed women to emphasize sexual attractiveness openly. The founders and early leaders of the "cosmetic movement" were simple women—Elizabeth Arden (1884–1966), a Canadian, was the daughter of poor tenant farmers; Helena Rubinstein (1870–1965) was born of poor Jewish parents in Poland; and Madam C. J. Walker (1867–1919) was born to former slaves in Louisiana. While it is true that our media culture preys on social fears associated with "bad complexions," "aging," etc., it has at the same time allowed women to assert their right to emphasize their sexuality, not conceal it. That is the paradox, ambiguity, and unconscious allure of modern-day pop culture.

Incidentally, it is relevant to note that stripteasing probably originated in circus sideshows, jumping over to vaudeville a little later. Vaudeville started in the 1880s in America, reaching its height of popularity in the early 1920s. The range of its material and the diversity of its performers appealed to audiences of all kinds. A typical vaudeville show had jugglers, animal acts, skits, recitations, celebrities of the day, singers, comics, magicians, and female strippers. The term *vaudeville* comes from a French word for a "light play" with music that was popular

in the 1800s. The American form grew out of attempts by saloon owners to attract more customers by offering free salacious versions of vaudeville. These came to be known as *variety shows*. At first, they were condemned as vulgar spectacles by mainstream society. But by the 1890s, variety shows were transformed into family entertainment by the shrewd showman Tony Pastor, who achieved this by prohibiting drinks and upgrading the quality of the acts, and, of course, by eliminating stripteasing.

Stripteasing, as its name suggests, is all about the tease. It is, in a phrase, a temptation dance that re-enacts various mythic V-Power traditions. The biblical tale of Salome's dance is a case in point. The action takes place in King Herod's palace around 30 CE. Saint John the Baptist proclaims the coming of the Messiah from his prison cell. Herod orders him to be brought forth. Salome, who was Herod's stepdaughter, is sexually attracted to Saint John (according to one version of the story). After he rejects her advances, she performs a "Dance of the Seven Veils" and then asks Herod for Saint John's head on a silver dish. Though horrified, Herod is overcome by the dance and orders John to be beheaded. Modern stripteasing reverberates with the same kind of undertones as Salome's dance. Removing each item of clothing suggestively, like Salome's removal of each veil, stimulates curiosity by highlighting the V-Power built into the feminine form. The curiosity, by the way, is not limited to male curiosity. Until the 1920s stripteasing was part of vaudeville, as mentioned, attracting audiences of both men and women. By the 1930s, striptease acts were introduced into burlesque shows, which were also appealing to both sexes. It was only in the 1950s that such stripteasing became gender-specific—for "gentlemen only." It had morphed into an act of its own, independent of burlesque, remaining so to this day.

But like X-Power, V-Power is not only about the theater of the profane (as pop culture was defined in the previous chapter). There is, and has always been, a more romantic side to it, as exemplified in recent times by the popularity of Harlequin romance novels and the so-called chick flick. But these are hardly "chick-only" fantasy genres, as some critics have claimed. In my view, they constitute new representational vehicles in the struggle for women to assert themselves socially and psychologically. They represent a challenge to representations of women as passive receivers of male attention. The modern chick genres trace their roots to great writers like Virginia Woolf and

Daphne Du Maurier, and to classic movies such as the *Thornbirds* and *Gone with the Wind*, all of which were far ahead of their eras.

The filmmaker who tapped directly early on into both ancient symbolic dimensions of V-Power—the "sacred feminine" and the "overpowering woman"—was none other than American animator Walt Disney (1901–96), whose representations of womanhood have been both controversial and extraordinarily popular among women themselves. Nowhere is this more evident than in his first great full-length animated feature of 1937, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. The movie has become one of the most popular films in cinematic history, based on, but differing in many ways from, the original 1810 story by the Brothers Grimm. Early feminist theorists saw the movie as chauvinistic, since, they claimed, it portrayed women as passive creatures awaiting their Prince Charming to come along. But, as post-feminist criticism and other models of interpretation have counter-proposed, it is just the opposite, especially when one probes beneath the textual surface of the Disney narrative. First, the only truly powerful characters in the story are two women—Snow White and the evil queen. The men are either dwarfs serving Snow White faithfully, or else they are there to serve a perfunctory role (such as providing a kiss anonymously at the end). Snow White is a ruler of nature. All respond to her command, from the animals to the dwarfs and even the prince, who is beckoned to her side by an implicit sense of V-Power. Disney further explored V-Power in *Cinderella* (1950) and *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), both of which revolved around powerful female personages who ruled the mythical worlds they inhabited by force of their femininity

This V-Power subtext was not abandoned by the Walt Disney Company after the death of their founder. Starting with a 1989 animated feature called *The Little Mermaid*, modeled after the mischievous Shakespearean character Ariel, the studio simply updated the mythology in Snow White to more contemporary V-Power standards. Ariel's departure to the world above her father's sea kingdom symbolizes this rather transparently. She is daddy's girl, but she ultimately ends up breaking the bonds tying her to daddy, implying an independence from patriarchy. In *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), there is a clever reversal of roles, whereby it is the prince who has to wait for his rescuer princess to come by and save him. Belle became a model for a post-Snow White generation of women to come to grips with their new form of V-Power. Two movies from Disney followed in the

1990s, *Pocahontas* (1995) and *Mulan* (1998), in which the heroines are portrayed as being physically and intellectually superior to any of the males in them.

Some (perhaps many) will disagree with the foregoing discussion. For example, Mark Pinsky, in his book *The Gospel according to Disney*, claims that Disney classics such as *Snow White* are nothing more than "archetypal female rescue fantasies with essentially passive fantasies."[15] But I read a different symbolic story in them. Snow White, Cinderella, and Sleeping Beauty (not to mention Ariel, Belle, Pocahontas, and Mulan) are hardly passive archetypal females (whatever that means). They are wise and kind but not submissive. Indeed, they motivate all those around them, who are ultimately at their beck and call. They are, in a phrase, modern-day characters exemplifying the mythic power of the sacred feminine. As Sangeet Duchane has cogently written, however, there are many sides to the Disneyesque portrayal of V-Power:

> The question of whether Walt Disney classics like *Snow White* are really about the lost sacred feminine is one symbologists and others could debate for a very long time. Many of the Walt Disney classics were based on European folklore and continue those cultural myths. It is probably too limiting to restrict the meaning of this folklore to the story of the lost sacred feminine alone. A painting of the penitent Magdalene does appear in the movie *The Little Mermaid*. The painting is part of the swag that Ariel has gathered from shipwrecks. Walt Disney studios may have found significance in the painting, but they could have chosen it for a more mundane reason: Ariel refers to fire, and touches a lit candle in the painting as she sings.[16]

Although I would disagree with such assessments overall, I would agree with the implicit suggestion in some of them (such as Pinsky's) that idealized forms of female beauty are (and have often been) exploited for crass motivations. This can be seen, perhaps, in the popularity of "next top model" TV programs and in beauty pageants (such as the Miss America contest). But then even spectacles of this type would not be appealing without a deeper V-Power subtext built into them. Maybe, as Gerald Early suggests, they are nothing more than refined versions of V-Power textuality catering to our need for profane theater: "The Miss America contest is the most perfectly rendered theater in our culture, for it so perfectly captures what we yearn for: a low-class ritual, a polished restatement of vulgarity, that wants to

open the door to high-class respectability by way of plain middle-class anxiety and ambition."[17]

Some critics would also claim that this kind of exploitation is spreading across the pop culture spectrum. For example, Gloria Watkins, who uses the pen name "bell hooks" (spelled with lowercase letters), sees the sexual representation of black women in rap videos as harmful, portraying them as mere sexual providers: them as mere pleasure seekers and providers: "Just as black female prostitutes in the 1940s and 1950s actively sought clients in the streets to make money to survive, contemporary black female sexuality is fictively constructed in popular rap and R&B songs solely as a commodity—sexual service for money and power, pleasure is secondary."[18] Hooks also correctly points out that black V-Power is often contrasted with white V-Power in a symbolic way through a blonde-versus-non-blonde contrast—a contrast that, she suggests, Madonna brings out in her stage persona:

> For masses of black women, the political reality that underlies Madonna's own recognition that in a society where "blondes" not only "have more fun" but where they are more likely to succeed in any endeavor is white supremacy and racism. We cannot see Madonna's change in her hair color as being merely a question of aesthetic choice. I agree with Julie Burchell in her critical work *Girls on Film*, when she reminds us: "What does it say about racial purity when the best blondes have all been brunettes (Harlow, Monroe, Bardot)? I think it says that we are not as white as we think. I think it says that Pure is a Bore." I also know that it is the expressed desire of the non-blonde Other for those characteristics that are seen as the quintessential markers of racial aesthetic superiority that perpetuate and uphold white supremacy. In this sense Madonna has much in common with the masses of black women who suffer from internalized racism and are forever terrorized by a standard of beauty they feel they can never truly embody.[19]

Madonna's performances are empowering of women because, as Berger points out, they are designed to "resist traditional male stereotypes."[20] Madonna's performances mock the view of women as passive, and especially the view of the female as a "bimbo," a term that has a long history within pop culture, going back to the 1920s when females started to play a major role in the world of entertainment. Basically, a bimbo is a "looker without brains," a woman who (as bell hooks reminds us) has symbolically blonde hair. In addition, she wears flashy makeup, tight clothing, high heels, and is supposedly

promiscuous, brainless, and helpless in resisting the male gaze. There have been many celebrities who, intentionally or unintentionally, have been shaped by the media to fit the bimbo model. One of these was Marilyn Monroe, originally Norma Jean Baker (1926–62), who ended up transforming the image of the bimbo into a tragic figure.

But the image of the bimbo is not the only stereotypical modeling of sexual femininity. Many have been constructed by pop culture itself. One of the most persistent of these is "daddy's girl," which originated in the 1930s with Cole Porter's song *My Heart Belongs to Daddy*. But, like anything else in pop culture, nothing is as straightforward as some critics would have us believe. In Porter's song there is an implicit double entendre with respect to the word *daddy*. One cannot, in fact, figure out whether the "daddy" is a real father, a lover, or a pimp and, thus, whether the girl is a daughter, a lover, or a prostitute. Perhaps she is all three. As mentioned throughout this chapter, it is this inbuilt ambiguity in pop culture's portrayal of V-Power that gives it its power. Among other stereotypes of women found in movies, novels, and other popular cultural texts are the "tomboy," "the girl next door," "the vamp," "the bitch or ball breaker," "the wicked mother-in-law," "the old maid," "the dominatrix," "the bombshell," "the pinup girl," "the butch," and "the doll." The fact that we recognize most of these stereotypes and can easily conjure up attendant images of them is evidence that the symbolism associated with V-Power is a widespread and dominant one.[21]

The view of women as "dolls" merits further commentary. The commercialization of dolls as both fashion "models" and playthings for children can be traced to Germany in the early fifteenth century. Fashion dolls were made on purpose to model clothing for aristocratic German women. Shortly thereafter, manufacturers in England, France, Holland, and Italy also began to manufacture dolls dressed in fashions typical of their respective locales. The more ornate ones were often used by rulers and courtiers as gifts. By the seventeenth century, however, simpler dolls, made of cloth or leather, were being used primarily as playthings by children.

During the eighteenth century, doll manufacturing became more sophisticated. The fashion dolls started to look so lifelike that they were often used to illustrate clothing style trends and were sent from one country to another to display the latest fashion trends. After the Industrial Revolution, such dolls became commonplace toys of little girls. By the 1920s, the play dolls became more and more lifelike, with sleeping eyes, lashes, dimples, open mouths, teeth, and fingers

with nails. The first latex-rubber dolls that could drink water and wet themselves were also manufactured. Take, for instance, the "Barbie" dolls. Since their launch in 1959, there is little doubt that they have often become part of the experience of growing up for many little girls in North America. No wonder, then, that Barbie has been designed to reflect changes in American womanhood over the years. Barbie has been an astronaut, an athlete, a ballerina, a businesswoman, a dancer, a dentist, a doctor, a firefighter, a paleontologist, a police officer, a lead singer of a rock band (Barbie and the Rockets), and even a UNICEF volunteer. Each of her personae reflects a different perception of V-Power at different stages of its pop culture evolution. Barbie continues to be somewhat popular because she keeps in step with the times.

But Barbie now has stiff competition, especially with the debut of the Bratz dolls and their contemporary clones. The Bratz dolls reflect the "girl power" dynamic of contemporary pop culture perfectly. They have a brassy look, with bare midriffs, sequins, fur, eye shadow, and other cosmetic and dress accouterments that fit the girl-power model. The sexual suggestiveness of the dolls is transparent, emphasized especially by halter tops, faux-fur armlets, ankle-laced stiletto sandals, eye shadow, and dark lip liner. Bratz dolls became fads the instant they were launched a few years back because they were perfect for the times. They tapped into a sassy "Lolita-style" V-Power. School boards across America initially prohibited them. But even this reaction was predictable, in line with moral panic theory. Needless to say, the opposition soon subsided, as the Bratz dolls and their imitators quickly passed into pop culture lore, joining Barbie and all other previous doll models of V-Power.

The Feminine Form

Critiques of how women are portrayed in rap videos, on shows such as the next top model programs, and in Bratz dolls really beg a generic question: What type of representation is appropriate and, more importantly, who should control it (if anyone)? This is hardly a modern-day question. Visual artists have always had a fascination with the nude female figure. Its soft, eye-pleasing features can be seen carved into the famous ancient Greek statue known as the Venus de Milo, which represents Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love and beauty (Venus in Roman mythology). Its seductive qualities, on the other hand, can be seen in the sculptures of Diana of Roman mythology. Diana was the moon goddess representing various aspects of women's life, including

childbirth. She was also the protector of young living things, particularly young animals, and the goddess of hunting. A virgin, Diana symbolized chastity and modesty. When Actaeon saw her bathing, Diana was revolted, taking her revenge by changing him into a stag. Actaeon was immediately attacked and killed by hounds. Aphrodite and Diana may appear to be different—as different as Barbie and Bratz dolls—but their overall body form is identical. It is an ancient idealized form that has always defined V-Power. On the one hand, it is sensual, voluptuous, sultry; at the same time it is smooth, pleasant, reassuring. It is a blend of Eve and Lilith, the sacred and the profane.

The unconscious psychic power of the feminine form has fascinated artists and writers from time immemorial. Two modern-day examples are French filmmaker Jean Luc Godard's 1961 movie *Une femme est une femme* (A Woman is a Woman) and Bryan Forbes's 1975 *The Stepford Wives*. The two movies are essentially cinematic essays in the feminine form and its V-Power. Both ask an implicit question: Is our fascination with the form part of a tragic human story or pure comedy? The movies provide differing answers to this question. In Godard's movie, there is an exchange between actors Jean-Claude Brialy and Jean-Paul Belmondo in which Brialy asks this question directly. Belmondo then answers it insightfully:

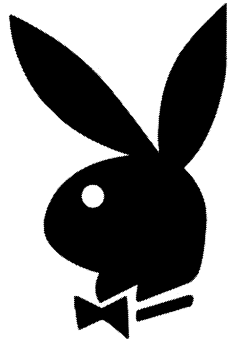
> *Brialy*: Is this a tragedy or a comedy?
> *Belmondo*: With women, you never know.

The main character in Godard's movie is Anna Karina, who plays the free-spirited Angéla. She is Brialy's girlfriend, with whom she wants to have a child. Brialy (Emile in the movie) is not interested in having children. He is anxious simply to become entangled sexually in a love triangle involving Belmondo (Alfred in the movie) and Angéla. So, Emile asks Alfred bluntly, "Will you sire a child for the lady present?" Throughout the movie, both Emile and Alfred are obsessed with Angéla. There appears to be very little else to the movie other than their obsession. The whole purpose of the movie seems to be to celebrate Angéla's erotically overpowering beauty, with the camera constantly zeroing in on her sumptuous body in a peep show fashion. But Angéla, who works as a stripper, stares right back, unnerving the viewer. At home, she talks continuously about sex. But at all times, she is the one who determines when sex is allowed to take place. The unconscious sway of her V-Power comes to the surface when the camera zeroes in on Angéla in her stripper's garb. As in

the movie *Chicago*, the seductive power of her body overwhelms us, turning us all into her voyeuristic victims. The moral of the movie seems to be simply that women are what they are—powerful sexual beings—and that they gain the upper hand over men by simply being women.

The Stepford Wives provides a different answer to V-Power—misogyny. Katharine Ross and Paula Prentiss star as feminist characters who find themselves trapped in a patriarchal world. The men of Stepford, fed up with the nagging requests of their wives, seek to replace them with female-shaped robots that will do anything they ask of them. When one of the men is asked why anyone would do such a monstrous thing, his reply is, "Because we can." The movie is a veritable black comedy, playing on the fear of the feminine form and, thus, standing in stark contrast to Godard's veneration of that same form. The problem, therefore, seems to be not in womanhood, but in manhood. Femininity and masculinity are entangled in an ancient psychic battle that seems to define the nature of life and to motivate art.

The feminine form is particularly overwhelming for societies espousing patriarchal systems, which occasionally respond with "Stepford-like" solutions to its V-Power. Pop culture has always done the opposite—it has taken the Godardian "femme est une femme" approach, putting the form constantly on display, from stripteases and erotic movies to advertising posters and fashion shows. There is no way for the male to resist that form, as Godard's movie and a host of other ones, from *Jezebel* to *Basic Instinct*, have emphasized. That is also the subtext in Thomas Pynchon's 1961 novel *V*, which is about two characters in search of a mysterious lady known as V, representing both the goddess Venus and a pair of legs spread in the form of the letter *V*.[22] Is all this instinctual? Is it cultural? Pop culture does not answer this question, unlike many pundits who take a position on one side or the other. Pop culture does the only honest thing—it simply



represents both sides. As Virginia Woolf so aptly wrote in her brilliant 1929 novel *A Room of One's Own*, "Why are women so much more interesting to men than men are to women?"[23]

The allure of the *V* form is the reason why products are being named increasingly with the letter *V*—V-Power (Shell), Vonage, Verizon, and Vantage (to mention but a few). Perhaps the most famous (and controversial) use of the *V* form is in Hugh Hefner's distinctive Playboy logo:

The logo shows a bunny wearing a bow tie. Its ears are slanted in a *V* shape alluding, clearly, to the feminine meanings associated with that symbol. The bow tie evokes a nightclub scene and its elegant, sexualized atmosphere. The appeal of this logo is due, in part, to this inbuilt symbolism. The other symbolic dimension of the logo is the portrayal of V-Power with the metaphor of the rabbit. Rabbits are highly promiscuous animals that they are perceived as "cuddly" pets in contemporary culture. They embody, in other words, the symbolism associated with V-Power perfectly. The founding of *Playboy* in 1953 with a nude calendar photograph of Marilyn Monroewas a watershed event in the evolution of V-Power in pop culture and society generally. It is little coincidence, in my view, that ever since the feminine form has been front and center in that culture. And it is no coincidence that the social acknowledgement of the rise of V-Power is due to an advertiser, not to a theorist or a critic. That occurred in 1984, and, indeed, researching academic papers and books that predate that year, I was not able to find one single reference to V-Power as such. It was Macintosh's classic "1984" commercial, broadcast during the intermission of the Super Bowl game of that year—directed by none other than Ridley Scott, among whose films are such cult classics as *Blade Runner* and *Alien*—that introduced V-Power to the world. The following is a synopsis of the commercial (paraphrased from Berger's insightful account):

> The commercial starts by showing a gang of male prisoners with shaved heads and heavy boots marching in synch towards a gigantic building. Suddenly a young, voluptuous blonde woman dressed in sexually provocative shorts appears, carrying a sledgehammer, racing through the building. The men are marshaled into a huge auditorium and seated in front of a wide television screen listening mindlessly to an executive-type male spouting senseless gobbledygook at them. The woman enters, smashing the screen with her sledgehammer which then explodes, as the

> automaton males look on open-mouthed. Finally, a message is scrolled across the screen: "On January 24th Apple Computer will introduce Macintosh. And you'll see why 1984 won't be like '1984'."[24]

The allusion in the last line is to George Orwell's (1903–50) famous novel of a world that has turned into a nightmare—a world in which men rule and control people by instilling conformity and subservience. Orwell's novel portrays a terrifying totalitarian society of the future that punishes love, banishes privacy, and distorts the truth in order to exact blind obedience from the masses. Ridley Scott's commercial depicts a similarly terrifying society of automatonic male employees who are enslaved by their jobs and their leader—a Big Brother figure—who speaks to them monotonously on a screen. Orwell set his novel in an imaginary world dominated by three police states continually at war with each other. Scott placed his commercial in a gloomy business setting dominated by a male-centered business world. The hero of Orwell's novel searches for truth and decency, leading him to rebel against the totalitarian government. Joining him in his rebellion is a young woman who becomes his lover. In the Scott commercial, it is a young woman by herself who shatters the existing business order with a sledgehammer, an action that eliminates both Big Brother and the robotic world of his employees. The only true "individualist" human being, in full feminine form, is the bearer of the sledgehammer, who eliminates patriarchy and mindless male-based capitalism with one swing. The subtext of the commercial is a transparent one—the advent of the new Mac computer symbolizes a radical change in society, a change that has been percolating since the 1920s. V-Power will soon rule the workplace and the cultural sphere, the commercial proclaims. Berger describes the symbolism of the woman in the commercial aptly as follows:

> Who is she? We do not know, but the fact that she exists tells us there must be forces of resistance in this totalitarian society, that not all are enslaved. We see shortly that she is being pursued by a troop of burly policemen who look terribly menacing in their helmets with glass face masks. Her color, her animation, her freedom, even her sexuality serve to make the situation of the inmates even more obvious and pathetic. Her image functions as a polar opposite to the enslaved men, and even though we only see her the first time for a second or two, her existence creates drama and excitement.[25]

It is women who will liberate men from the dreary Orwellian world they themselves have created. And the way out of that world is through V-Power. Again, Berger puts it eloquently as follows: "The blonde heroine, then, is an Eve figure who brings knowledge of good and evil, and by implication, knowledge of reality, to the inmates. We do not see their transformation after the destruction of the Big Brother figure—indeed, their immediate reaction is awe and stupefaction—but ultimately we cannot help but assume that something will happen and they will be liberated."[26]

It is no coincidence that the emphasis on conformity in the workplace started to decline shortly after the airing of the commercial. Today, computer geeks and CEOs of companies and businesses of all kinds are conforming to a different workplace model, one that places much more emphasis on the individual employee's role, rather than on robotic allegiance to the company.

Representing the *V* form in media and advertising, however, is still problematic to social critics, since, they claim, it creates expectations of beauty that are unrealizable in common women. Most women do not have an idealized body like that of an Aphrodite, a Diana, or the Mac computer female—taut, toned, strong, and sexy. This look was once considered to be a bonus for a woman; now it seems to be a prerequisite. However, such critics should take a second look at pop culture, where nothing, not even the representation of V-Power, is ever absolute. Indeed, in pop culture, the portrayal of the feminine form is no longer controlled exclusively by men. Today, female movie directors, television scriptwriters, novelists, musicians, and many others are making their voices heard. The underlying message in all this is that women are set to change the world, like the Mac commercial implied, no matter what their bodies look like. V-Power may, in fact, be signaling the advent of a larger unconscious social evolutionary trend—the shift from a largely patriarchal society to a more matriarchal one or, at least, to one in which women control their own identities and their own images.

THE DAWNING OF A V-AGE

The foregoing discussion does not imply, in any way, that women have always been in charge of their own images. In fact, the pattern has tended to be the opposite (at least until recently). It was primarily the men who were initially in charge, behind the scenes, as promoters

of the *V* form in pop culture. But, as the movie *Chicago* brings out, women were never really passive beings in the culture. They have not been manipulated by male fantasies; rather, they have manipulated those fantasies and allowed female fantasies to gain expression. Pop culture is not a gendered culture; since its rise in the Roaring Twenties it has catered to both male and female fantasies. Male sexual gods, from Rudolph Valentino to Brad Pitt, have always been a part of the scene, alongside femme-fatale goddesses like Angéla and Madonna.

The objective of the foregoing discussion has been to emphasize the point that women, who have often been excluded from the social mainstream, have been catapulted into a prominent position within that mainstream today, because of the fact that pop culture has always given them a prominent role to play. Although they have been largely entertainers on the pop culture stage, it has been that very stage that initially gave them a voice. At one time, women were forbidden even to sing in public. Impresarios devised a brutal way around the prohibition by selecting male children to become female singers, removing their testicles, so that they could keep their voices from deepening as they matured. When these "castrati" reached adulthood, they were hired to become public singers.

Given their prominent role in pop culture, it should come as little surprise that the influence of women has seeped into the larger social order. The women's liberation movement could not have occurred without that role. Strangely, all this has not in any way radically altered women's perception of themselves as mothers and wives. A recent ad in *Good Housekeeping* published in the *New York Times* put it succinctly as follows:

> A new kind of woman with deep-rooted values is changing the way we live. Market researchers call it "neo-traditionalism." To us it's a woman who has found her identity in herself, her home, her family. She is part of an extraordinary social movement that is profoundly changing the way Americans look at living—and the way products are marketed. The home is again the center of American life, oatmeal is back on the breakfast table, families are vacationing together, watching movies at home, playing Monopoly again. Even the perfume ads are suddenly glorifying commitment.[27]

Perhaps we have entered a new astrological age, so to speak, which can be called a "V-Age." Evidence of this is everywhere. Brands, such as the V-Phone by Vonage, a phone with soft curves that clearly simulates

the feminine form, reveal a trend toward the "feminization" of product design. Significantly, the marketing of the V-Phone was accompanied by a mid-2000s campaign slogan "Join the Vonage revolution," suggesting that we have entered into a de facto V-Age. It is an age in which women themselves are continuing to come to grips with their sexuality. Take, for example, Christina Aguilera's video for the song *Dirrty* (2002), which opens with Aguilera in a boxing ring, having just defeated her opponent. It is significant to note that she claims to have won by "fighting like a man," thus countering the stereotypical "catfight" image that portrays female fighting as consisting of screeching and hair pulling. Aguilera blurts out, moreover, that she seeks sexual gratification, both verbally ("I need that shit to get me off, sweatin' till my clothes come off") and visually by mock-grabbing her crotch in a male-imitative fashion. At the end of the video, we see her dripping wet in a shallow pool with other girls rubbing up against her in an orgiastic fashion. Is she into kinky sex? Or has she discarded the need for men to validate female sexuality? There is no definitive answer, as far as I can tell. But the fact that Aguilera was able to raise the question without even the slightest stir on the part of the broader society (in the not-too-distant past, she would have been attacked ferociously) is a clear sign that a V-Age has indeed dawned.

Significantly, a critique of artists such as Aguilera now comes not from academia or the broader society, but from another female pop artist Pink, who sees artists like Aguilera as ultimately demeaning womanhood. She scolds them in her song *Stupid Girl* (2006):

> Stupid girls, stupid girls, stupid girls
> What happened to the dreams of a girl president?
> She's dancing in the video next to 50 cent.

Pink seems to be critiquing V-Power itself, appealing to women in the V-Age to shed their sexual persona. The point is not Pink's criticism in itself (which may or may not be valid), but the fact that she herself, a female pop musician, made it is a sure sign that we have entered a new age—an age in which debates about womanhood are being conducted by the women themselves`. In effect, V-Power has generated the currently expanding V-Age. Significantly, a similar type of critique was articulated by another woman, long before Pink. In her 1970 bestseller *The Female Eunuch*, Germaine Greer offered the following rejection of sexualized femininity:

> Maybe I couldn't make it. Maybe I don't have a pretty smile, good teeth, nice tits, long legs, a cheeky arse, a sexy voice. Maybe I don't know how to handle men and increase my market value, so that the rewards due to the feminine will accrue to me. Then again, maybe I'm sick of the masquerade. I'm sick of pretending eternal youth. I'm sick of belying my own intelligence, my own will, my own sex. I'm sick of peering at the world through false eyelashes, so everything I see is mixed with a shadow of bought hairs; I'm sick of weighting my head with a dead mane, unable to move my neck freely, terrified of rain, of wind, of dancing too vigorously in case I sweat into my lacquered curls. I'm sick of the Powder Room. I'm sick of pretending that some fatuous male's self-important pronouncements are the objects of my undivided attention, I'm sick of going to films and plays when someone else wants to, and sick of having no opinions of my own about either. I'm sick of being a transvestite. I refuse to be a female impersonator. I am a woman, not a castrate.[28]

What such contrasting views of V-Power indicate, above all else, is that women are now debating their own representations among themselves. They have taken charge, both aesthetically and intellectually, of the *V* form. Pop culture has evolved into the new arena for the feminist debate over women's bodies to take place, with pop artists replacing academics in the debate, bringing out the difficulties that women face in a culture that is constantly redefining them, at the same time that it venerates them. And this brings us right back to where we started—the age-old mythic dualism of feminine symbolism. Can a woman be both Eve and Lilith? Or are the two mythic personae incompatible? American culture has traditionally had a difficult time accepting the Lilith part of womanhood's symbolic history, using often subtle ways of condemning it, in addition to outright attacks like that of Pink. Perhaps Cindy Lauper said it best with her 1980s hit that, we should leave "girls" alone because they "just wanna have fun."

As the poet Elizabeth Browning (1806–61) once put it, "Eve is a twofold mystery."[29] At no other time has this become so widely understood as it is today. The ancient Greeks idealized the human form in their sculptures and showed the human body as they felt it should look. They admired humanity and its works, and they tried to represent the human form as perfectly as possible. During the Middle Ages, sculptors made the human form longer and thinner than real men and women in an attempt to create a feeling of spirituality. An example of this highly religious medieval style appears in the long, exaggerated

figures in the Tympanum of the central portal of Vezelay Abbey in France. Similar styles and contrasting representations have been found in cultures throughout the world. The difference in contemporary pop culture is that the body is not venerated simply for its form, but as a political text (as the *Good Housekeeping* ad hinted at). Pop culture has become the battleground where sex, gender, and politics have merged and where all kinds of issues are showcased and debated. Television shows, Web sites, movies, and the like are the contexts in which debates of all kinds (philosophical, ethical, etc.) are pitted alongside superficial matters of lifestyle and fashion. Pop culture has become a veritable battleground in the culture wars that are being fought today in America and in the global village.[30]

V-POWER

Naming a fuel V-Power (as mentioned at the start of this chapter) is a sign of the times. V-Power stands not only for a real fuel but for the metaphorical fuel that runs contemporary pop culture—womanhood. This fuel marshaled in the era of sexual freedom starting in the 1920s. Since then, V-Power has shaped all kinds of social trends and revolutions, from merely cosmetic ones to important political and social ones (such as racial and gender equality). As writer Ursula K. Le Guin (b. 1929) has aptly phrased it, the female principle (V-Power) "is, or at least historically has been, basically anarchic. It values order without constraint, rule by custom not by force. It has been the male who enforces order, who constructs power structures, who makes, enforces, and breaks laws."[31]

It is fascinating to reflect, in hindsight (and with foresight) that the ancient Greek civilization, one of the greatest of history, was founded by a woman, Athena. Athena sprang full-grown and armored from the forehead of the god Zeus. She was his favorite child. Zeus entrusted her with his shield and his principal weapon, the thunderbolt. Her temple, the Parthenon, was in Athens (named after her). From there she gained enormous power over the world. She became the goddess of cities, of industry, of the arts, of war, and, in later mythology, of wisdom. In a phrase, the ancient Athenian culture, with all its mathematical, scientific, and philosophical accomplishments, sprang from the wisdom of a goddess. There is a transparent lesson in this myth that is still valid today. As Lord Byron (1788–1824) pleads in his

marvelous poem, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (canto 2, stanza 2), the modern world needs Athena urgently:

> Ancient of days! august Athena! where,
> Where are thy men of might? thy grand in soul?
> Gone—glimmering through the dream of things that were.

In a way the X-Power described in the previous chapter and the V-Power described in this one form a perfect pair. One entails the other. One might even interpret the *X* form as composed of two *V*'s—one on top and the other below in inverted mirror form. There is no evidence that the *X* originated in this way—as two symmetrical mirror *V*'s. But the suggestion is nevertheless there, at least iconically. X-Power and V-Power form a complementary symbolic structure. It is through such symbolism that we can understand the true world-changing power of pop culture. To conclude this chapter, however, there is a question that the discussion of V-Power begs and that many other academics have raised as well: To what extent does the cooption of V-Power by advertising and the media signal a true social revolution? Or is it nothing more than any other trend that gets simply commodified by consumerist society? I will return to this question in the final chapter. Suffice it to say here that Byron's plea is not falling on deaf ears today. Czech writer Milan Kundera has put it appropriately as follows: "Woman is the future of man. That means that the world that was once formed in man's image will now be transformed into the image of woman. The more technical and mechanical, cold and metallic it becomes, the more it will need the kind of warmth that only the woman can give it. If we want to save the world, we must adapt to the woman, let ourselves be led by the woman, let ourselves be penetrated by the *Ewigweiblich*, the eternally feminine!"[32]

CHAPTER 3

LOGO-POWER

THE ROLE OF BRANDING AND ADVERTISING IN POP CULTURE

> Advertising is the greatest art form of the twentieth century.
>
> —Marshall McLuhan (1911–80)

IT IS CLAIMED THAT WE LIVE IN A VISUAL CULTURE, a culture permeated with visual images from advertising, television, movies, and magazines that unconsciously shape lifestyle and even worldview. This is evidenced above all else by the fact that *logos*—the visual symbols used by brand products—have become so familiar that they come instinctively to mind by just mentioning them. Logos of eateries (McDonald's golden arches), shoes (Nike's swoosh logo), clothes (Ralph Lauren's horseman), and so on, are so familiar that we no longer perceive them as simple trademarks but, rather, as cultural symbols. Their placement in the scripts of television programs, movies, and other media spectacles indicates that there is no real distinction between advertising and brand-based marketing and pop culture generally. They are (and always have been) symbolic partners on the same profane stage.

As derivatives of ideographs (pictographs standing for abstractions), logos imbue products and services with ancient symbolic power. In analogy with X-Power and V-Power, this kind of power can be called Logo-Power. Logo-Power explains why logos have an unconscious appeal. As discussed in Chapter 1, pictographs are more ancient than alphabet characters, reverberating with mythic meanings. Carvings of animals on roofs and walls, along with sculptures of animals and female figures, go back tens of thousands of years. According to some

estimates, the earliest known artifact might even be 135,000 years old.[1] It is an animal bone with seventy arcs, bands, and chevrons etched in it. Whether for decorative reasons, to record something significant, or for some ancient rite, it is evident that the bone was created to represent something in visual form before the advent of vocal language or the invention of alphabets.[2] It is an example of the ancientness of visual representation. Visual artists have always understood the inbuilt psychic power of such representation. As the great twentieth century artist Pablo Picasso (1881–1973) aptly put it, communication between humans would become more meaningful if "we could only pull out our brain and use only our eyes."[3] This basic truth has not gone unnoticed by the marketplace, where logos reign supreme as identifiers of products and services, imbuing them with their own mythology. The effectiveness of Logo-Power can be easily tested. When we think of such enterprises as NBC, Apple's Macintosh, Playboy, United Air Lines, IBM, United Way, and so on, what pops up immediately in our minds are images of the NBC peacock, the Mac apple, the Playboy bunny with its V-shaped ears, and so on.

The technique of promoting products through Logo-Power has been a basic one in the marketing world since the turn of the twentieth century. It was (and continues to be) based on the premise that the appeal of a product increases if it can be associated with some distinguishing symbolism. And, it would seem, the more the symbolism evokes the kinds of mystical meanings that early tribal carvings, sculptures, and etched bones evoked, the more psychologically effective it is. As the modern marketer has come to realize, the world of modern human beings is hardly just a world based on logic and science; it is also a world of mystical images and mythic symbols manifesting themselves in many forms and disguises. A logo works on several psychological levels, from the iconic to the mythic. At the iconic level, a symbol such as the V-shaped ears of the Playboy logo simply represents the shape of rabbit ears; but at a mythic level, it taps into the idea of the power of the feminine form and its many archetypal connotations (as discussed in the previous chapter). The combination of these two levels creates a perception of the logo as harboring an implicit mythology—a suggestive story that has culturally relevant meaning. Analogously, the stagecoach logo of the Wells Fargo Company seems to tell a hidden story of early America, since the stagecoach was not only the means by which mail and various goods were once transported in the United States,

but also a symbol of the Wild West and all the adventure imagery that it elicits. Most logos have a similar kind of mythic structure etched in the symbolism of their design. In short, logos are much more than simple trademarks or identifiers of a brand. They are, like *X* and *V*, signs of the times.

LOGOS

What is a logo? An insightful definition is offered by brand specialist Marty Neumeier in his book as follows:

> The term *logo* is short for *logotype*, design-speak for a trademark made from a custom-letter word (*logos* is Greek for *word*). The term logo caught on with people because it sounds cool, but what people really mean is a trademark, whether the trademark is a logo, symbol, monogram, emblem, or other graphic device, IBM uses a monogram, for example, while Nike uses a symbol. Both are trademarks, but neither are logos. Clear? What really matters here is that a logo, or any other kind of trademark, is not the brand itself. It is merely a symbol for it.[4]

The key part of this definition is the last sentence—namely, that a logo is a symbol. And Neumeier is rather perceptive in pointing out that it is a "cool" symbol, hinting at Logo-Power.

A trademark is a name, symbol, or other device identifying a product, officially registered and legally restricted to the use of the owner or manufacturer. Originally, trademarks were, literally, "marks of the trade"—signs put on shops or buildings to identify trades or to indicate what was sold in the shops. For example, the figure of a horseshoe identified the shop where a blacksmith worked. Similarly, a striped pole stood for a barbershop and a three-ball sign for a pawnbroker shop. The reason why trademarks, not names, were used on shops is rather straightforward—print literacy is not required to read them. Trademarks are more apt to be recognized by people. Moreover, they can bring out the essence of what a trade is about in their form or structure. Take, for example, the barber pole, which is still around today. In the Middle Ages, surgeons and barbers both performed operations. But only barbers did bloodletting. Surgeons thought it was useless and demeaning. It is the practice of bloodletting that the red-and-white striped barber pole symbolized—the red standing for blood and the white for the bandage.

As another example, consider the symbol used by the medical profession as its trademark—the symbol known as the caduceus:

The caduceus is a staff surmounted by two wings and entwined with two snakes. In ancient Greece, heralds and ambassadors carried it as a sign of holiness. The caduceus was associated with the god Hermes, son of Zeus. In Roman mythology, it was associated instead with the god Mercury. It is a symbol imbued with various levels of meaning. Above all else, it conveys the sacredness and healing power that the ancients attributed to staffs. The coupling serpents represent instead the opposing principles governing the universe. In effect, the caduceus symbolizes the art and science of curing through a reconciliation of opposites.

The term *logo* emerged in the twentieth century to describe the actual design of trademarks and other distinguishing marks used by manufacturers. But the goal of contemporary logo design is much more complex than was the goal of the makers of the trademarks. As the American historian Daniel J. Boorstin has aptly observed, logography, and advertising generally, is not unlike the ancient occult art of chiromancy, which was intended essentially to identify hidden desires within people: "We read advertisements to discover and enlarge our desires. We are always ready—even eager—to discover, from the

announcement of a new product, what we have all along wanted without really knowing it."[5]

Consider as a perfect example of occult-mythic symbolism Apple's logo for its Mac computer:

There is little doubt that this figure of an apple with a bite taken from it has an implicit mythic significance. It suggests, clearly, the Genesis story of Adam and Eve. For the sake of accuracy, it should be mentioned that the Genesis story tells of a forbidden fruit, not of an apple. Its representation as an apple came about in medieval depictions of the Eden scene, when painters and sculptors started dealing with the Genesis story artistically. Since then, the apple has become the "forbidden fruit of knowledge." This is undoubtedly why Apple has not only named itself with the word for the "forbidden fruit of knowledge" but has chosen it as its trademarked logo. Does this imply that Mac users will have access to forbidden knowledge? Does it link them with Eve, the mother of humanity? By the way, the creator of the latest version of the Apple logo (with its stripes and the bite), a man named Rob Janoff of Regis McKenna Advertising, has consistently denied any intent to connect his design to the Genesis story. However, there is little doubt that the logo is perceived (unconsciously, at least) to symbolize that very story, whether Janoff intended it or not.

Aside from the fact that Mac computers are easy to use, they are perceived generally to be trendy and cool. There are a variety of reasons for this. First, the design of the computers is sleek, attractive, and in line with larger design and lifestyle trends, making them stand out and setting them into an opposition with the more bland PC computers—an opposition brought out by the "Mac Guy versus the PC Guy" ad campaign of the mid-2000s, a campaign popularized through television commercials, print advertising, and Web sites of all kinds. The Mac guy dressed and behaved like a contemporary young,

urban individual with lifestyle savvy. The PC guy looked instead like a leftover from the stodgy 1950s—a lifestyle fossil who had absolutely no understanding of contemporary cool. Second, the names used by Apple to identify its products are perfect examples of how to use Logo-Power effectively. To the best of my knowledge, Apple was the first business to use a lower-case "i" to name its products (iMac, iPod, etc.). As will be discussed in the next chapter, this is a brilliant strategy that taps into several trends at once, simulating not only Internet style but also a new technological cool in lifestyle. Incidentally, in an informal survey, I asked my students at the University of Toronto in 2007 to write down their views of IBM computers versus Mac ones in terms of a series of anthropomorphic categories that I provided. For example, I asked them, "If computers were people, what gender would you assign to the PC computer and which one to the Mac computer?" The student responses (ninety-nine of them) were collected and classified. The results are tabulated below:

Category	PC	MAC
Gender	Masculine	Feminine (or trendy, cool, male)
Religion	Protestant	Catholic
Neurology	Left-hemisphered	Right-hemisphered
Aesthetics	Virile, macho	Effeminate, beautiful (or male, cool)
Intellect	Rational, linear	Imaginative, associative
Politics	Right-wing, conservative	Left-wing, liberal
Look	Traditional, bland	Cool, trendy
Career	Business, science	Arts, design

This was not a scientific study, of course, but it did seem to flesh out the fact that symbolic meanings are built unconsciously into products. Is the IBM logo, with its rigid linearity a symbol of a business world where flair and style are discouraged? Is Mac the way of the future for that world, with women (Eve) starting to penetrate it more and more? Does the Mac logo suggest an "Eve code" and the coming of an Age of Womanhood, or V-Age, as its 1984 commercial discussed in the previous chapter intimated?

Visual symbolism like that of the apple is archetypal. As discussed briefly in the previous chapter, Jung saw the unconscious part of the psyche as containing primordial feelings and thoughts, which have become such an intrinsic part of the human psyche that they are generally beyond reflection. They are to human consciousness what genes are to human biology. He called these primordial images

archetypes. These gain expression in the symbols, narrative themes, and various aesthetic traditions that constitute the myths, tales, tunes, rituals, and other expressive forms that are found in cultures across the world. In a fundamental sense, the letter-symbols *X* and *V*, discussed in the previous two chapters, are archetypes, being essentially primordial pictographs.[6]

Many logos are designed with archetypal qualities. The Apple logo is one of these, and this is perhaps why it is so intuitively appealing (not to mention effective as a marketing strategy). Until the 1970s, logos on clothes were concealed discretely inside a collar or on a pocket. Today, they can be seen conspicuously, indicating that Logo-Power has taken hold of society at large. Logos such as Ralph Lauren's polo horseman, Lacoste's alligator, and Nike's "swoosh" symbol are now shown prominently on clothes, having become symbols of lifestyle chic.

Take the Nike logo, as a case in point:

At one level, the logo iconically conveys a sense of movement, implying the activity of running associated with the shoe. At a deeper mythic-archetypal level, however, it taps into the idea of speed as symbolic of power and conquest. After all, Nike was the goddess of victory. She fought with Zeus against the Titans. She was portrayed as a winged goddess in ancient sculptures, carrying a wreath of victory. The Nike logo is a classic example of a company gradually mythologizing its corporate identity as its business increases. The company's first logo appeared in 1972. It was composed of the word *Nike* printed in orange over the outline of a checkmark. The company then took off, and its logo was re-designed. The logo is now one of the most recognized ones—so much so that the company name itself has become virtually superfluous. In a word, it has Logo-Power.

LOGO CULTURE

Given their suggestiveness, it is little wonder to find that logos are used not just by advertisers, but also by politicians and noncommercial enterprises, among others. One of the most widely known ones is the peace sign, worn on chains and necklaces or as s figure on T-shirts.

The sign became the symbol for philosopher Bertrand Russell's Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament in the 1950s. Its first widespread exposure came when it surfaced in the 1962 sci-fi film *The Day the Earth Caught Fire*, leading to its adoption by the emerging counter-culture youth of the latter part of the 1960s. As can be seen, it is suggestive of several archetypal symbols—including the circle (with its suggestion of perfection and eternal recurrence) and an inverted *V* sign (suggesting V-Power and the sacredness of womanhood). The congener of the peace symbol, a certain Gerald Holtom, designed it as a blend of the semaphore signals for the letters *N* (for nuclear) and *D* (for disarmament). There is no evidence to suggest that he had the above archetypal symbolism in mind when he designed it. Nevertheless, the design features he chose reverberate with archetypal symbolism.[7] Entire corporations (IBM, Ford, etc.) are now identified by their logos, etching themselves strategically into the collective unconscious. The Walt Disney Company, for instance, adopted the cartoon character of Mickey Mouse as its logo in 1929. A year later, Mickey Mouse dolls went into production. As early as the 1930s, the logo came to stand for childhood. In 1955, *The Mickey Mouse Club* premiered on U.S. network television, further entrenching Disneyesque Logo-Power into the cultural mainstream. The marketing strategy behind such uses of Logo-Power is to intertwine a brand with popular culture and thus to render it indistinguishable from that culture. This is why Disney toys, TV programs, films, DVDs, theme parks, and the like have become an intrinsic part of how Americans experience childhood—real or imaginary. In a recent visit to the Walt Disney World Resort with my grandchildren (the first I had ever taken), I was struck by the fact that there were as many (if not more) adults there on their own than children with accompanying adults to enjoy the delights and festivities. One gentleman in his sixties told me that he was there

to relive his childhood, the only meaningful period in his life. Another one told me that he took his children to Disney World as an excuse to be there himself. Clearly, childhood is no longer just for children. It is part of the mythic unconscious of all of us—a mythology symbolized perfectly by the Mickey Mouse logo.

Naomi Klein has cogently argued that, in a fundamental way, modern culture is "logo culture," a culture where brands, spectacles, and people are now interconnected.[8] Consider, as another example, the case of McDonald's. The origins of the brand are traced to 1940, when the first hamburger stand was opened up near Pasadena, California, by movie theater co-owners Richard and Maurice McDonald. The modern-day restaurant chain was founded in 1955 by Raymond A. Kroc, a distributor of milkshake machines. Kroc learned of the hamburger stand, impressed with how quickly customers were served. He persuaded the owners to let him start a chain of fast-service restaurants with the McDonald name. Kroc opened the first McDonald's restaurant in Des Plaines, Illinois, in 1955. It is significant to note that this event coincided with the rise of youth culture in the 1950s. As a consequence, the number of McDonald's eateries began to proliferate, as teenagers flocked to them. They were, originally, "teen hangout joints." By 1961 Kroc had established more than two hundred such hangouts, building McDonald's into a powerful business.

The astute Kroc knew that in order to survive in the long run, he needed to attract adults as well. Aware that fewer and fewer families had the time to prepare meals within the household, he wisely decided to change the McDonald's image into a place where the family could eat together. His plan worked magnificently. Families started en masse to eat at McDonald's. The golden arches logo reflected this new meaning perfectly. Arches reverberate with archetypal mythic symbolism—they beckon people to march through them where they can expect a world of freedom from drudgery. Advertising campaigns reinforced this symbolism, entrenching it throughout society. McDonald's was a place that would "do it all for you," as one of its early slogans phrased it, keeping family members united at meal times. Many outlets even installed miniature amusement parks in them for children to play. Kids meals were introduced throughout the restaurant chain. As a family oriented company, McDonald's started sponsoring Ronald McDonald House Charities worldwide, in which the families of critically ill children may stay when the young patients undergo medical treatment away from their homes. Over a few decades McDonald's

had, in effect, turned fast food for teens into family food, literally and metaphorically.

The origin of the Ronald McDonald clown is informative in this regard. The corporation's first mascot was a winking little chef named Speedee, who had a head in the shape of a hamburger. The character was later renamed Archie McDonald. In 1960, a Washington DC franchisee, named Oscar Goldstein, decided to sponsor *Bozo's Circus*, a local children's television show. Bozo's appearance at the Washington restaurant drew a large crowd. When the local NBC station canceled the show, the franchisee hired its star to invent a new clown who would make restaurant appearances. The clown was hired by the McDonald's corporation, given that he fit in perfectly with the emerging idea of the restaurant offering appropriate family entertainment. An ad agency designed the clown's outfit and the rhyming name of Ronald McDonald was adopted. Clowns make children laugh because they wear funny costumes and makeup and behave in a strange or silly manner. The clown became a perfect sublogo itself, fitting in perfectly into the new system of meanings created by the restaurant chain.

The sociologist Alan Bryman sees logo culture as having been instrumental in reshaping world culture. Using a term coined by George Ritzer in 1993, he defines McDonalidazation as the process "by which the principles of the fast-food restaurant, for example, are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as the rest of the world."[9] One marketing study, cited by Eric Schlosser, found that the golden arches are now more recognizable across the globe than the Christian cross.[10] As a symbol of unabashed Logo-Power, it is little wonder that the fast food eatery has at times been the target of demonstrations, vandalism, and attacks throughout the globe. People react to symbols emotionally, seeing in them meanings that reach far beyond their specific terms of reference, so to speak. To the mind of many, the McDonald's logo stands for America itself, not just for a fast-food eatery.

In some ways, the responses of critics like Klein and Bryman to Logo-Power are part of an anti-American discourse that has arisen over the last few decades. As Leiss, Kline, Jhally, and Botterill have also observed, attacks directed at logo culture and its alleged social impacts are often indirect attacks on the materialistic ethos of contemporary American society or on capitalism as a system.[11] They are, in other words, critiques of American society masquerading as critiques of advertising. Another critic, Henri Lefebvre,[12] also sees American-style

Logo-Power as a negative force obliterating other forms of culture (present and past) and reshaping world culture in radical ways. In his view, Logo-Power is now the force behind the world's obsession with consumption. In the following excerpt, he uses a series of clever rhetorical questions to bring this out:

> Does advertising create the need, does it, in the pay of capitalist producers, shape desire? Be this as it may, advertising is unquestionably a powerful instrument; is it not the first of consumer goods and does it not provide consumption with its paraphernalia of signs, images and pattern? Is it not the rhetoric of our society, permeating social languages, literature and imagination with its ceaseless intrusions upon our daily experience and our more intimate aspirations? Is it not on the way to becoming the main *ideology* of our time, and is it not this fact confirmed by the importance of propaganda modeled on advertising methods? Has not institutionalized advertising replaced former modes of communication, including art, and is it not in fact the sole and vital mediator between producer and consumer, theory and practice, social existence and social power? But what does this ideology disguise and shape, if not that specific level of social reality we call everyday life, with all its "objects"—clothing, food, furnishing?[13]

While there are valid points that can be gleaned from Lefebvre's set of questions, it is obvious that he seems to be reiterating the same kind of critique used by the Frankfurt School—namely, that promoting passive consumerism is the hidden agenda upholding modern capitalism. But is it really? Yes, it is true that the modern capitalist system exploits our innate penchant for mythic symbolism for basically a banal reason—to get us to buy products. And it is true that we are living in a huge distraction factory that eggs us on to buy, buy, and buy again. So what? History teaches us that nothing lasts for very long. If indeed crass consumerism is not a wise thing for the human species as a whole, as critics warn, let's not worry about it. The indomitable human spirit of which the same critics speak will step in to restore whatever is off balance. The words of the South African-born Israeli politician Abba Eban, who served as Israel's first permanent delegate to the United Nations, can be enlisted in this regard: "History teaches us that men and nations behave wisely once they have exhausted all other alternatives."[14]

The origin of logo culture can be traced to the first decades of the twentieth century, when, for the first time in history, a single economic system—the one that took shape after the Industrial Revolution

of the nineteenth century—emerged as being capable of guaranteeing a certain level of affluence to increasingly larger segments of society. With more wealth and leisure time at their disposal, common people became more inclined to live the good life. And with the economic capacity to improve their chances of staying healthier and thus of living much longer than previous generations, a desire to buy goods for the pleasure of doing so started to define the collective state of mind. This desire was nurtured by the messages that bombarded society from radio and print advertising in the early part of the century—messages that became more persuasive and widespread with the advent of television as a mass communications medium in the early 1950s. Advertisers tapped into this Zeitgeist astutely and skillfully in the 1960s. They took on trends in society and made them their own. They did not create them or shape them, as critics would claim. They simply adopted them. As Lefebvre correctly suggests, a society bombarded incessantly by advertising images is bound to become more and more susceptible to its consumption subtext. In a world where the marketplace dictates taste, it is little wonder that Logo-Power runs the social show.

But then, as Michel de Certeau has pointed out, common people are able by themselves to resist forces that seek to dominate them, including Logo-Power.[15] There is really no need for pundits and critics to advise people what to do. Logo-Power has, actually, a kind of aesthetic essence that such critics have failed to recognize. This is perhaps why its forms and styles have even been adapted and co-opted by mainstream artists and writers. Some pages of the contemporary writer Jean Marie Gustave Le Clézio, for instance, reveal an amalgam of traditional literary expression and advertising styles and forms. And, of course, the pop artists have always taken a liking to Logo-Power (as we saw in Chapter 1). Many practitioners of pop art started out, not surprisingly, in the world of commercial design. Andy Warhol, for example, was a designer of shoe ads before venturing into the domain of pop art.

The pop art movement legitimized logo culture and, consequently, the culture that encourages the mass production and consumption of objects. For pop artists, the factory, supermarket, and garbage can became their art school. But despite its apparent absurdity, people loved pop art, no matter how controversial or crass it appeared to be. Some artists duplicated beer bottles, soup cans, comic strips, road signs, and similar objects in paintings, collages, and sculptures; others simply incorporated the objects themselves into their works.

Using images that reflected the materialism of modern consumerist culture, the first pop artists sought to provide a view of reality that was more immediate and relevant to modern-day people than more abstract forms of art. They wanted the observer to respond directly to the object, rather than to the skill and viewpoint of the artist. As Barry Hoffman has aptly put it, "Pop, art like advertising, is interested in the concept more than the rendering. It uses the objects that inhabit the world every individual of every class takes for granted—the mundane, mass-produced stuff that is all around us. The things you use and like. Pop artists don't use these things because there is nothing else to paint, they use them to make a point."[16]

The pop art movement surfaced in the late 1940s, when painters like Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns came onto the art scene, striving to close the gap between artists and mass culture. Rauschenberg did so by constructing collages of household objects such as quilts and pillows and Johns by making collages of American flags and bull's-eye targets. The first critically acclaimed pop art work is *Just What Is It That Makes Today's Home So Different, So Appealing?* (1956) by the British artist Richard Hamilton. In this satiric collage of two ludicrous figures in a living room, crudeness and irony are emphasized. Irony has always been the aesthetic mode of pop art. American pop artist Roy Lichtenstein used this mode to portray the American consumerist worldview. His canvases of comic strips, advertisements, and products draw attention to the intrinsic irony behind consumption. The irony is this—we love to buy things at the same time that we feel foolish about it, since we seem to be buying the same thing over and over. Pop artists have, in fact, captured this irony with the technique of replication. Rauschenberg and Johns created works depicting the same objects over and over. In the early 1960s Warhol carried the idea a step further by adopting the mass-production technique of silk-screening, turning out hundreds of identical prints of Coca-Cola bottles, Campbell's soup cans, and other familiar products, including identical three-dimensional Brillo boxes.

The pop art style and its overall philosophy of representation have penetrated many areas of contemporary society and popular culture. Today, ads and commercials are hardly created to be simple announcements designed to stimulate interest in products. They are part themselves of pop culture, even satirizing the very products they promote in typical carnivalesque fashion. As Leiss, Kline, Jhally, and Botterill point out, "by creating advertisements that poke fun at the very practice

of advertising and marketing," advertisers blend into the contemporary ironic Zeitgeist of pop culture directly.[17] Laughter is an essential ingredient in the carnivalesque, as discussed in Chapter 1. Budweiser beer, for instance, has been using carnivalesque humor since the early 1980s—and with great success. In so doing, the brand has been able keep in step with the general lifestyle attitude of its target market—young males. The humor is consistent with that used on TV sitcoms and other domains of pop culture—from its "Whassup" campaign (a linguistic expression taken from hip-hop culture in the early 2000s) to its "Bud Institute" campaigns of the mid-2000s that humorously gave advice to young males on how to interact with females.

Budweiser's ad campaigns are designed, in short, to be in synch with the carnivalesque comedic styles of the present day. As Hoffman has astutely observed, people like advertising of this kind because it is entertaining, no matter how ambivalent they might feel toward it. He wrote, "What people like about advertising, in print or on TV, is simple. We like its ability to entertain while it informs us about new (or the same old) products. Advertisers like to reflect the desires of their audiences, and audiences, for their part, like to see their desires reflected."[18]

Advertising is spectacle. It is as part of pop culture as are other spectacles. Not surprisingly, among the first to realize its importance was a circus entrepreneur—P. T. Barnum (1810–91). Barnum's posters of the 1870s, for example, introduced expressions such as the following into the common lexicon of the emerging field of product advertising and, through their catchy appeal, into everyday discourse:

> Don't miss this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity!
> Limited edition at an unbelievably low price!
> All items must go!
> Not to be missed![19]

Logo-Power has grown in influence ever since because of its theatrical basis and carnivalesque appeal. It is part of the "Greatest Show on Earth," as Barnum called his circus. The origins of pop culture and advertising overlap considerably.

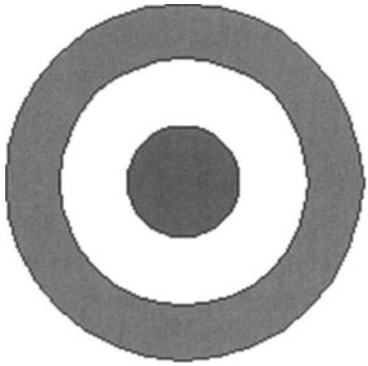
GEOMETRY AND LOGOS

As mentioned, many logos are modern-day pictographs, resonating with mythic or occult symbolism, whether such symbolism is intentionally built into them or not. Occultism is everywhere in pop culture, as evidenced by the popularity of horoscopes and movies such as the Harry Potter ones. I will deal with the theme of occultism in Chapter 5. Here, I will use it as a framework to explain why the more effective logo designs seem to venture into symbolic territories associated with it.

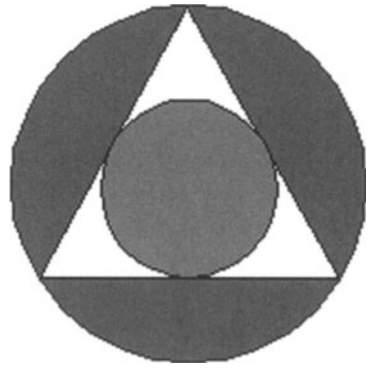
Pictography was held across the ancient world to have a divine origin. According to Egyptian legend, for example, the eye of the Horus—the falcon-headed god—symbolically represented the sun, which was etched on the marks that appear on the falcon's face. The eye was destroyed by Seth, the wicked god of Darkness, and put together again by the good god Thoth, who went on to invent writing. The hieroglyph of the eye is sometimes cited as the first true hieroglyph. Once pictography became widespread in the ancient civilizations, it began gradually to evolve into alphabetic writing (as we saw in Chapter 1). As alphabet characters came to be used more and more to record the sounds constituting words, they lost their previous pictographic functions. But pictography did not disappear from human history. It took on a separate symbolic life of its own. Logos are products of this symbolic life. This is why the good hands of the Allstate Insurance Company, the rock of the Prudential Insurance Company, and the stagecoach of the Wells Fargo Company (among many other logos) tell "pictographic stories" of each brand. Hands represent human sentiments—mirrored in such common expressions as "keeping in touch," "reach out to someone," "you're in good hands," etc. The rock is a symbol of solidity, reliability, and stability—reflected in such expressions as "solid as a rock," "rock of ages," etc. The stagecoach evokes images of the pioneer era in America, when stagecoaches transported the mail and essential goods.

Many early pictographs were geometrical (or pregeometrical) in form. Known as petroglyphs, they have been found etched on ancient rocks, which long predate the advent of Greek geometry. On these rocks, one can see the bodies of animals portrayed with square, rectangular, or circular shapes and their horns with curves and angles. Geometrical forms were also used by early tribes for ritualistic and symbolic

purposes—a practice that has remained to this day. Two examples are crests used by India and Lebanon. The Indian one, which is one of several used in India, shows three concentric circles and the Lebanese one, also one of several, a circle in which an equilateral triangle has been inserted that, in turn, has a smaller circle inscribed within it:

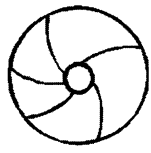


Indian Crest

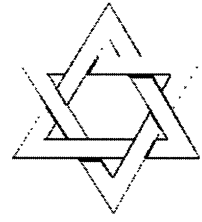


Lebanese Crest

Religions have also adopted geometric shapes to represent themselves. For example, the ancient Mayan symbol of faith was a circle containing a spiral figure emanating from an inscribed smaller circle, and the mystical Star of David consists of two intertwined equilateral triangles at opposite orientations to each other:



Mayan Symbol



Star of David

Such symbolism reverberates with mythical power. It should thus come as little surprise to find that many of today's most recognizable and memorable brand logos are based on geometrical forms. As Gregory Thomas has aptly observed, such logos are contemporary manifestations of "the oldest ideographic symbols."[20] Take, for example, the Mercedes Benz logo:

The design shows a three-pointed star in a circle. The star purportedly represents the company's successful ventures in land, sea, and air transportation because Daimler, the founder of Mercedes, wanted to produce not only cars but also ships and aircraft. After World War I, Mercedes and Benz merged, and their logos, the three-pointed star of Mercedes and the laurel wreath of Benz, were refashioned in the shape of the present logo. The geometrical simplicity of this logo is truly magnificent, evoking a latent form of ancient geometrical symbolism. The triangular style of the internal star suggests a symbol that was used in some ancient cultures for casting out demons. Does the logo suggest, subliminally, that driving a Mercedes Benz will protect the driver from the demons of the modern world (e.g., other cars and horrific traffic jams)? Many carmakers have adopted similar styles of logo design. Kia, for example, has a logo consisting of an ellipse encasing its name; Nissan uses a circle with its name going through it diametrically.

Logos designed to represent or suggest basic geometrical forms tend to be perceived as much more aesthetically pleasing than any other kind. In an informal study I conducted a few years back, I presented several large classes of students at the University of Toronto and at the University of Lugano a series of pictures and drawings, ranging from simple geometrical figures (triangles, circles, squares, etc.) to complicated abstract expressionist designs. I asked them to choose the ones that they thought would be more effective as templates for creating logos for new products. Of the five hundred-plus students involved, over four hundred chose the geometrical figures. The student responses did not surprise me. Simple geometrical figures have always been perceived as pleasing and "ideal" from time immemorial. As the Greek philosopher Plato (c. 427–347 BCE) believed, they are innate forms (or archetypes to use an equivalent Jungian term). The circle, for example, is a universal symbol of perfection and infinity,

probably because its very form suggests eternal recurrence. Geometry, as the Greeks envisaged it, was all about such ideal abstractions, which were considered to have sacred origins.

In a fundamental way, geometrically designed logos perfectly reflect the mythic-religious origins of consumer culture, as Arthur Asa Berger has cogently argued in his fascinating book titled *Shop 'Til you Drop*.[21] Referring to Max Weber's study of the origins of modern-day corporate capitalism in the Protestant work ethic,[22] logo culture crystallized when, as Berger puts it, the largely Protestant society in early America decided that consumption had a "place in God's scheme of things."[23] This led, early on, to the belief that consumption was an earthly reward for diligence and hard work. All this suggests to Berger that "there is, indeed, an important religious or sacred dimension to our consuming passions."[24] Nowhere is the association between consumerism and the sacred as evident as it is in the parallels that can be drawn between geometrical logos and traditional religious symbols.

BRANDING

Pop culture and advertising forged an indissoluble partnership already in Barnum's era. Today, there is little distinction between the two. As Berger aptly puts it, it would seem that the primary objective of the pop media is "to deliver audiences to advertisers."[25] Many television and online commercials are really nothing more than minispectacles, ranging from the satirical to the blatantly sexual. And, of course, brand-name products can be seen everywhere across the pop culture spectrum. The process of placing brand name products in movies, television programs, and the like is called *placement branding*. Today's branding strategies do not constitute a radical departure from the past, however. In the Commedia dell'Arte period (Chapter 1), the sponsors were often merchants and trades people who wanted to reach audiences in the *mercati* and *piazze* where the performances took place. And, of course, those with political, religious, or economic power have always attempted to promote themselves by becoming patrons of the arts. Sponsoring arts events is a way to gain respect, authority, and to reveal concern for the culture in which a sponsor exists. In the past, artists and composers would even dedicate their works to a benefactor or sponsor, acknowledging the benefactor's help and support.

The partnership between business (in whatever form it takes) and spectacles has a long and unbroken tradition. Branding takes this

partnership one step further. As Alex Frankel aptly puts it, it constitutes "an unspoken pact between a company and a consumer to deliver a particular experience."[26] Trends in pop culture cross over to advertising and advertising styles often shape pop culture. This is why pop culture celebrities, from movie actors to sports figures, are often advertising celebrities as well. As P. T. Barnum had cleverly anticipated, consumerism can be fun, especially if advertised to be so.

Branding entails placing products into spectacles as props within them. Brand-name computers displayed visibly in movies, designer clothes shown prominently in sitcoms, and the like, are common examples of brand placement. Actually, such practices go back considerably in time. In the 1940s and 1950s radio and TV programs such as *Texaco Theater, General Electric Theater, and Kraft Theater* were for practical purposes branded since they were associated exclusively with one sponsor. Children's programming, like the *Mickey Mouse Club*, was similarly branded. The show employed young actors hired by Disney who became icons of child culture, promoting the whole Disney line of products. However, this type of branding was not applicable to all kinds of programs and spectacles, leading to the subsequent strategy of including a brand product as part of a movie or television script. The first use of such a placement strategy is in Stephen Spielberg's 1982 movie *E.T.*, in which an extraterrestrial creature can be seen snacking on Reese's Pieces. Sales for the product increased enormously right after. That event started a trend. In 1983, movie actor Tom Cruise donned a pair of Wayfarers in *Risky Business*, and sales for that product also shot up, as did generally the wearing of sunglasses.

Brand placement is now so common that it goes largely unnoticed. Its main objective is to associate brand identity with pop culture celebrities and spectacles. A good example was the launch of the teenage-directed television sitcom *Dawson's Creek* in January of 1998. All of the characters in the program were outfitted in clothing and accessories made by J. Crew. They appeared, in fact, to be models that had stepped out of the J. Crew catalog; and the actors were in fact featured in the catalog that very same month. Two seasons later, as the cool look changed in society, the characters got a makeover and a new wardrobe from American Eagle Outfitters. Once again, the company used the actors as models, featuring them on their Web site and in-store promotions. The list of such strategies has become an endless one. In a 2005 episode of ABC's *Desperate Housewives*, Eva Longoria (in the character of Gabrielle Solis) found herself in need of money

and reluctantly agreed to don an evening gown and extol the virtues of a Buick LaCrosse at an automobile show. In a 2005 show, Amanda Bynes on *What I Like about You* praised Fruity Pebbles and competed against a friend to star in a Herbal Essences commercial.

The celebrity endorsement of brands has become commonplace. It is an effective strategy because it transfers what people perceive in the celebrity to the product. So too is the creation of fictitious characters to promote specific brands. Many of these have become pop culture celebrities themselves, independently of the products they represent. Mr. Clean, Uncle Ben, Charlie the Tuna, and Twinkie the Kid had become, by the millennium, such an intrinsic part of pop culture lore that they were even featured in cameo roles in a 2001 animated film called *Foodfight*. In the same year, Barbie became a ballerina in the movie *Barbie in the Nutcracker*.

Sometimes, the product itself becomes a pop culture fad, a phenomenon constituting a kind of reverse branding. In the 1950s, Silly Putty, Slinkies, and Hula-Hoops became so popular that they were the inspiration of songs and jokes. Silly Putty was introduced in 1949 by advertising marketer Peter C. L. Hodgson, who discovered a substance developed by General Electric researchers looking for a viable synthetic rubber. The useless silicone substance could be molded like soft clay, stretched like taffy, and bounced like a rubber ball. Slinky was a coil toy that could be made to "walk" down a staircase by itself by placing it on a higher step in a specific way. The Hula-Hoop was a light plastic hoop that could be whirled around the body for play or exercise by the movement of the hips. These products became icons of pop culture, remaining so to this day.

Coca-Cola's brotherly love and peace song of the late 1960s and early 1970s "I'd like to teach the world to sing in perfect harmony" became a hit on its own, recognizable by virtually everyone to this day. More recently, a jingle providing musical background to De Beers's "A Diamond is Forever" commercials made its composer famous. The piece was composed by Karl Jenkins, who has since gone on to become an internationally renowned classical composer. Perhaps the most famous case of reverse branding is Coca-Cola's 1939 radio jingle *Nickel, Nickel*, which became a hit record that was translated in fifty-five languages. Given this history, it is little wonder to find that, today, a brand will hire a pop music icon and his or her song as its signature jingle. For example, David Bowie's *Rebel, Rebel* has been used to pitch Audi cars, Cyndi Lauper's *Girls Just Want to Have Fun* to promote

Carnival Cruises, Bob Seger's *Like a Rock* to sell Chevy trucks, and Led Zeppelin's 1971 anthem *Rock and Roll* to sell Cadillacs.[27]

With new media, branding is becoming easier and easier to realize. The toy maker Mattel, for instance, started a Planet Hot Wheels Web site from which one could download a game in the early 2000s. Hot Wheels are small toy cars made to resemble real cars. They were cheap and highly popular with young boys in the 1990s and early 2000s. The Web site was intended to impart a "cool image" to the brand so as to attract teenagers and young adults, offering upgrades for virtual vehicles. The Mattel case was a stimulus for a new form of cyberspace branding. An example is that of Webkinz, which were popular in 2005 and 2006. These are stuffed animals that come with their own Web sites and virtual playgrounds. Each came with a secret code granting access to an online Webkinz World, where the toys come alive in cartoon form. Kids could thus buy them and then build lives for them—feeding them, dressing them, etc. They could earn virtual Kinz cash to spend on their pets by playing arcade games, answering trivia questions, and taking jobs from the employment office. Not to be outdone, Barbie joined the Internet age in 2007. On its Web site, www.barbiegirls.com, kids can create their own virtual characters, design their rooms, and get them to try on clothes at a cyber mall.

Branding is obviously profitable. It has even led to cooperation among companies that would have been unthinkable in the not-too-distant past. The site http://www.neopet.com is a case in point. Offering a host of recreational and educational activities to children, in 2004 it created a virtual McDonald's site, a Lucky Charms game, and other brand embeds in it. The Pillsbury Doughboy was used by the Sprint Corporation in 2004 and 2005 to promote their own product in a campaign in which he paired up with the Sprint Guy. The Maytag repairman has occasionally turned up in ads for the Chevrolet Impala and the Taco Bell Chihuahua in ads for Geico. The merging of bookstore chains with coffee giants such as Starbucks is one of the more emblematic cases of this type of cooperation.

Another way that some brands blur the lines between themselves and pop culture is by creating ads and commercials that are, simply, enjoyable to masses of people. Some ads are minishows. Other brands attempt to blur the same lines by showing themselves to be involved in, or sensitive to, social issues. For example, Natural American Spirit Cigarettes put the following statement on its packages in the early 2000s: "We make no representation, either expressed or implied, that

these cigarettes are any less hazardous than any other cigarettes." This was a transparent ploy by the manufacturer to convey an image of itself as a socially responsible brand. The cigarette packs also contained fliers featuring endangered species and supporting statements of small-scale farmers.

The partnership between advertising and popular culture is a fact of life—one cannot exist without the other. As mentioned, it is a longstanding partnership. As Leiss, Kline, Jhally, and Botterill point out, branding was part of the show, so to speak, since at least the 1920s when advertisers saw the advantages that could be gained by joining forces with technology and with trends within pop culture:

> The first stages of integration of advertising with the new technologies of communication, continuing innovations in industrial production, and new popular cultures oriented around consumer goods, were in place by the end of the 1920s. These integrated forces included the blending of commercial sponsorship, national personalities, and programming content in radio broadcasting; the general use of famous personalities (including movie stars) in advertising; and the heavy emphasis in national advertising on certain key goods (automobiles, tobacco, personal-care products, later alcohol). Most important were the systematic studies of population statistics, opinion polling of media audiences (George Gallup got his start in the 1920s), and the psychological research on consumer motivations. All of these factors were explicitly intended to fuse, through marketing and media, the intentions of industry and the consumer into a single grand strategy for mutual benefit.[28]

One of the first examples of branding is associated with Coca-Cola in the 1920s. Coca-Cola went on sale on May 8, 1886, at Jacob's Pharmacy in Atlanta, as a headache and hangover remedy invented by pharmacist John S. Pemberton. It was made from South American cocoa shrub leaves and an extract of African kola nuts plus fruit syrup. Pemberton's bookkeeper named the product Coca-Cola and suggested writing its name with the familiar flowing script that has become so iconic. The drink was subsequently promoted with such slogans as "Wonderful nerve and brain tonic and remarkable therapeutic agent" and "Its beneficial effects upon diseases of the vocal chords are wonderful." In 1891, Atlanta pharmacist Asa G. Candler acquired ownership of Coca-Cola, changing its image from a "tonic"

to that of a popular 5-cent soft drink—an image that has persisted to this day and has always been the basis of Coca-Cola's continued commercial success.

That image was spread in the Roaring Twenties throughout society at first by imprinting the Coca-Cola name/logo on drinking glasses, providing them to diners and other eateries that featured "pop" and foods meant to be eaten quickly and cheaply. This may well be the first instance of true branding. Since then, Coca-Cola has used a simple, yet effective, strategy—embedding the soft drink into shifting trends and lifestyles, changing and adapting in tandem. It has incorporated social themes, such as the brotherly love and peace one during the counterculture era of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

LOGO-POWER

In the decade following World War I, the American economy embarked on a period of spectacular growth. Spurred on by the good times and a desire to be modern, large numbers of Americans adopted new consumerist lifestyles. The booming economy and fast-paced life of the decade gave it the appropriate nickname of the Roaring Twenties. Shopping for the fun of it became a ritual, as department stores started cropping up all over the United States. People continue to perceive shopping as a form of recreation, buying things that they may not need but finding the act pleasurable in itself. Shopping, advertising, pop culture, art, politics, and other social activities have become so intrinsically intertwined that we no longer are able to separate them in our minds. Everything has become a commodity (or at least perceived as such). As the Frankfurt School philosopher Herbert Marcuse acerbically observed several decades ago, "If mass communications blend together harmoniously, and often unnoticeably, art, politics, religion, and philosophy with commercials, they bring these realms of culture to their common denominator—the commodity form. The music of the soul is also the music of salesmanship. Exchange value, not truth value, counts."[29]

Despite such critiques, Logo-Power marches on. Why? The reason for this, in my view, is that it has mythic power. By imbuing products with ancient pictographic and geometrical symbolism, for example, the marketer strategically recreates our psychic past—a past in which mystical symbols emerged as the elemental building blocks of culture. Early symbolism was inextricably intertwined with an innate

sense of mystery—a sense leading to the establishment of the ancient crafts of astrology and alchemy, whose symbolism and language have hardly disappeared. We have even named the days of the week and the months of the year with astrological language, from the "day of the moon" (Monday) to the "day of Saturn" (Saturday). The principal activity of the alchemists was to search for the "philosopher's stone"—a quest popularized by the highly popular Harry Potter movies of the 2000s—and the production of gold by artificial means.

The marketer is both a modern-day alchemist and a fetishist. The term *fetish* originally referred to inanimate objects believed to be imbued with supernatural attributes. In some cultures belief in the powers of fetishes is so strong that the belief system develops into idolatry. The term fetishism has been applied in our culture to describe sexual urges and fantasies that persistently involve the use of objects by themselves or, at times, with a sexual partner. Logo-Power too is fetishistic. In the 1970s, for example, "pet rocks" became a fetishistic craze. Many blamed the craze on a gullible public spoiled by consumerism and thus influenced by a crafty advertising campaign. But that craze could not have been perpetrated in the first place, unless some unconscious form of fetishism was at work. In effect, as this case-in-point demonstrates, Logo-Power allows us to live through a mythic form of fetishistic fantasy. As the British novelist James Graham Ballard (b. 1930) wrote in the preface to the French edition of his 1973 novel *Crash*, in a world fueled by Logo-Power, we live in an enormous novel:

> We live in a world ruled by fictions of every kind—mass merchandising, advertising, politics conducted as a branch of advertising, the instant translation of science and technology into popular imagery, the increasing blurring and intermingling of identities within the realm of consumer goods, the preempting of any free or original imaginative response to experience by the television screen. We live inside an enormous novel. For the writer in particular it is less and less necessary for him to invent the fictional content of his novel. The fiction is already there. The writer's task is to invent the reality.[30]

CHAPTER 4

I-POWER

POP CULTURE IN THE AGE OF THE INTERNET

> I . . . how huge a word in that small English mark, the shape of a Grecian pillar.
>
> —William H. Gass (b. 1924)

PRODUCTS NAMED IPOD (A DIGITAL STORAGE DEVICE), iTravel (an online travel company), iPath (a shoe brand), iCom (computer software), among many others spelled with a lowercase *i*, are found everywhere one looks in today's marketplace. That little letter is definitely appealing, bespeaking, it would seem, of technological savvy and a new hipness—a hipness that was captured by a mid-2000s ad campaign by Apple, pitting a hip Mac guy versus a dull PC guy (as mentioned in the previous chapter). The Mac guy can now more precisely be designated an "i-Guy," a young man who dresses and behaves in the style of urban geeks that have grown up in a world where computer savvy, along with an attendant "slacker look," is perceived to constitute the basic form of male cool. The PC guy, in contrast, looked like a leftover from the rigid and stodgy business world of the pre-Internet era—a lifestyle dinosaur who had absolutely no savoir faire when it came to understanding the lifestyle patterns of the emerging i-World, as it can be called. The Mac guy was resplendent with what can be called, simply, i-Power (with a lowercase *i*), defined as the ability to adopt and harness emerging trends in digital culture into personal lifestyle. As David Sacks has observantly written, "Today little i, meaning computer connection,

has joined e, X, and a handful of other letters as a brand mark of the digital revolution."[1]

The emergence and spread of i-Power brings out the fact that there is, and always has been, a close synergy between technology and trends in pop culture. From the outset, the spread of pop culture was brought about largely through its partnership with mass media and communications technologies. As mentioned in Chapter 1, recording and radio broadcasting technologies at the start of the twentieth century made music available to large audiences, converting it into a mass art. The spread of American-style pop culture throughout the globe today is due to satellite and Internet technologies. This has had profound social, political, and cultural repercussions. As McLuhan often claimed, culture, social evolution, and technology are intrinsically intertwined.

In the age of the Internet, the use of lowercase *i* resonates with "individualism," "imagination," "ingenuity," and "intelligence," among many other "i-Values." This is why it is used to name new products and services, constituting part of a new language that is slowly coalescing in cyberspace—a language that can be called "i-Language." Popular and trendy forms of language have always played, and continue to play, a key role in the constitution and evolution of pop culture. They are as much a part of the whole carnivalesque spectacle as are dance and music. Pop culture is not only performed; it is also spoken and written.

I-LANGUAGE

The Internet has brought about radical cultural, social, psychological, and linguistic changes. Online services now provide everything from daily news and library services to reservation services for movies, restaurants, vacations, and the like. The range of information available at the click of a mouse, and the speed with which it can be accessed, have made all previous modes of information-gathering and communication appear cumbersome and inefficient. Digital forms of communication have started to have an impact on how we write and, by extension, how we speak. In a study of what he calls "Netlingo," David Crystal has argued that the online mode of writing has become especially adapted to the new world of communicative efficiency and rapidity.[2] The increasing tendency toward simplifying and shortening words and phrases, for example, is the result of a need people feel,

when they go online or send a text message, to write as rapidly as possible so that they can get the message transmitted almost instantaneously. The consequences of this may be more profound than may at first seem. As McLuhan pointed out, the medium shapes not only the form of messages, but also their content and ultimate significance. It is this "media effect" that gradually brings about changes in how we communicate. In a phrase, the writing trends observable online and in text messages are barometers of more general trends that are in the process of evolving in society at large.

Let's take a quick look at examples of Netlingo, as Crystal calls it. Incidentally, these would have shocked teachers of English only a few years ago. However, they have become so common that they hardly cause a stir even among the staunchest of language purists. In text messages, chat rooms, social networking sites, and the like, the following forms have, in fact, become part of a new language code:

afk = away from keyboard
brb = I'll be right back
btw = by the way
g2g b/c pos = got to go because parents on site/over shoulder
hhok = Ha ha; I'm only kidding
how many ppl are there = How many people are there?
how ya doin = How are you doing?
i dont know why = I don't know why
i fine = I am fine
i got enuf = I've got enough
imho = in my humble opinion
it wuz lotsa fun = It was lots of fun
tttt = to tell the truth
u feeling better now = Are you feeling better now?
wanna know why = Do you want to know why?
you da right person = You're the right person

This code is, in my view, not just a passing trend but a new evolving language style, which I have previously termed i-Language. It bespeaks of the kind of hipness exuded by our i-Guy. To the uninitiated, i-Language forms appear to be part of a cryptic code. And indeed, i-Language has many of the characteristics of classic cryptographic codes. Common or frequently used words are shortened, either by removing the vowels from them or by rendering their actual pronunciation in

the spelling: *people* = *ppl*, *because* = *b/c*, *want to* = *wanna*. Punctuation devices are normally eliminated (*don't* = *dont*). Acronyms are employed to reduce entire phrases or sentences: *to tell the truth* = *tttt*, *by the way* = *btw*. Single letters or numbers are used to represent pronunciation compactly: *u* for *you*, *2* for *to* (in *g2g*).

Among the first to realize that such forms of communication held enormous implications that went beyond writing efficiency was the American writer William Gibson, who coined the term *cyberspace* in his 1984 science fiction novel *Neuromancer*. In the novel, Gibson characterizes cyberspace as a place of "unthinkable complexity." Science rules the world in cyberspace and an efficient scientific style of communication becomes the norm.

But then cyberspace style has always been used, in fact, long before the age of Internet, by scientists and scholars so as to facilitate technical communications by making them precise and compact for effective utilization. Abbreviations such as *etc.*, *et al.*, *op. cit.*, and *N.B.*, are still part and parcel of "scholarspeak," as it may be called, and acronyms such as *laser* (for *light amplification by stimulated emission of radiation*) and *radar* (for *radio detecting and ranging*) are examples of "sciencespeak." Abbreviated writing was even used by the Greeks as early as the fourth century BCE, gradually evolving into a true shorthand code, known as *tachygraphy*. It was a slave, apparently named Tycho, who probably invented the first true shorthand system around 60 BCE (after alphabets had become the norm), for recording the speeches of Cicero.

As the foregoing discussion implies, spelling is much more than the simple use of letters to represent the pronunciation of sounds. Spelling is equated with literacy, intelligence, class, and, often, identity. The latter function of spelling would explain why many words in American English are spelled differently from their British counterparts. They constitute a style that conveys an identity that is distinctive from, rather than derivative of, America's British heritage. Words such as *color* (British *colour*), *catalog* (British *catalogue*), *thru* (British *through*), and *thorofare* (British *thoroughfare*) are not simple spelling variants of British counterparts; they are emblems of difference.

But i-Language style goes beyond all previous functions of past spelling practices. It is a style that not only reflects the miniaturization laws of digital communication generally, but also a new lifestyle chic. This is why advertisers have adopted i-Language style en masse. Today, the names of dolls (Bratz, Babyz, Rock Angelz, Twiins, Kool Kat, Trollz,

Younique Gemz), clothing and cosmetics (C-Thru, U-Tint, Tru-Lie Concealer, I-Mark Shadow, Bizzou Clothing and Xccezzories, Pazazz, Lugz, Bonebagz MegaGlo, Bronzzer, Göt2b, Shox 2Bfree), food (Teaz Tea, Krispy Kreme, Max, Krackel, Snack Barz), digital devices (Webpoyntz, Wireless Toyz, iFrogz, Minds@Work), pharmaceuticals (O3Mega, Sleep-eze, 4Play), and media products and artists (Rizing Starz, Kraftwerk, Xzibit, 2pac, Gorillaz, Busta Rhymes) reveal an unmistakable i-Language style. It is a style that perfectly characterizes the ethos of society today—an ethos that bespeaks of nonchalance, composure, and above all else Internet hipness. And it rejects past models of linguistic decorum by promoting implicitly what linguist Naomi Baron calls "linguistic whateverism":

> A convergence of forces is engendering a new attitude toward both speech and writing. We might dub this attitude "linguistic whateverism." Its primary manifestation is a marked indifference to the need for consistency in linguistic usage. At issue is not whether to say *who* or *whom*, or whether *none* as the subject of a sentence takes a singular or plural verb, but whether it really matters which form you use. The challenge to the fundamental principle of language as rule-governed behavior is less a display of linguistic defiance than a natural reflection of changing educational policies, shifts in social agendas, a movement in academia toward philosophical relativism, and a commitment to life on the clock.[3]

Actually, the current i-Language style can be viewed in a completely different light—as a product of an inbuilt principle of least effort in human communication. Such a principle was first put forward formally in the 1930s by the Harvard linguist George Kingsley Zipf (1902–50). Essentially, Zipf claimed that many phenomena in language change could be explained as the result of an inborn tendency in the human species to make the most of its communicative resources with the least expenditure of effort (physical, cognitive, and social). In a phrase, languages evolved along a path of least resistance.[4] In one of his most famous studies, Zipf demonstrated that there exists a correlation between the length of a specific word (in number of letters) and its rank order in the language (its position in order of its average frequency of occurrence in written texts). The higher the rank order of a word (the more frequent it is in actual usage), the more it tends to be shorter (made up with fewer sounds or letters). For example, articles and short verb forms (*the, is, am, do*), conjunctions (*and, or*), and

other function words (*to, it*), which have a high rank order in English (and in any other language for that matter), are typically monosyllabic, consisting of one to three sounds. What is even more intriguing was Zipf's subsequent finding that this "compression force" does not stop at the level of function words. It can be seen to underlie the tendency of people to shorten words or phrases that come into popular use (*hi, bye, ad, photo, Mr., Mrs., Dr., 24/7*, etc.) or change them into acronyms (*aka, VCR, DNA, GNP, IQ, VIP*, etc.). In effect, the general version of "Zipf's Law," as it is now commonly called, proclaims that the more frequent, necessary, or popular a form becomes for communicative purposes, the more likely it is to be rendered compressed or economical in structure. And the reason for this seems to be an inherent tendency in the human species to expend the least effort possible in speaking and writing. As Adrian Mourby has aptly put it, "Language is like a stream; it moves on continually and, like a stream, will always take the easiest route."[5]

So, fundamentally, i-Language is really no more than a modern-day example of the workings of Zipf's Law. Long before the Internet, acronyms such as *ASAP* ("as soon as possible") and *TGIF* ("Thank God it's Friday") were part of everyday communication (and continue to be so). Moreover, as Vivian Cook has shown, the many spelling errors in i-Language (*enuf* for *enough*) are often the same ones that famous writers, from Emily Dickinson to Ernest Hemingway, have made in their original manuscripts, suggesting that there is much more to misspelling than meets the eye.[6] He wrote, "Many of these [famous writers'] mistakes are essentially the same as those on today's Web pages. Some may have a spelling variant at the time the person was writing or may, indeed, have been deliberately chosen for various reasons."

The larger question that i-Language raises, however, is whether or not it is altering human communication drastically. Efficiency and speed seem to rule the digital universe—a universe characterized by what Baron appropriately calls "a commitment to life on the clock." Writing takes time and effort. In today's text-messaging universe, both come at a premium. Not answering the barrage of e-mails or text messages that people receive on a daily basis is perceived negatively. Slowness in response is, at times, even penalized by largely implicit forms of reprobation. Logically, compression helps counteract the situation by making it possible to get back to one's interlocutor quickly and rapidly. But is this mode of communication just a passing fancy? Or is it a sign of a radical shift in how and why we communicate? Maybe. It is

interesting to note that cyberspace has started to encourage self-styled constructions of identity—indicating that the shift may have started to occur. The coinage of "handles"—the names that users create for themselves in order to enter and interact in chat room situations and in cyber communications generally—is a case-in-point. Handles are found commonly in online chat rooms and social networking sites. These are essentially nicknames that have, of course, been around since time immemorial. But while in the past they were given to people by others, in cyberspace people christen themselves. Remarkably, such handles are sometimes used as offline names by their congeners. It would seem that i-Language is indeed a symptom of a broader shift in social structure. Handles are just the tip of the iceberg, indicating that people now feel empowered to construct their own persona in Gibsonian cyberspace. In effect, the Internet is changing not only language, but also assigning linguistic authority to ordinary people in truly radical ways, altering the traditional ways in which languages absorb and incorporate change, as Mark Abley has also argued in his book *The Prodigal Tongue*.[7]

i-Language is a product of an ever-expanding "indie culture," as it is called. People can post their own art, writings, music videos, movies, and the like on popular Web sites, on personal blogs, etc. Media and entertainment enterprises are now using the Internet alongside indie producers. Scientists and scholars use the Internet to communicate with colleagues, to conduct research, to distribute lecture notes and course materials to students, and to publish papers and articles. The Internet galaxy is expanding literally at the speed of light.

The Internet is also leading to a redefinition of the roles of the author and the reader of a text. Online novels, for instance, allow for multiple plot twists to be built into a story. They also enable readers to observe the story unfold from the perspective of different characters. Readers may also change the story themselves to suit their interpretive fancies. While the author sets a framework for the narrative, the actual narrative is realized by the reader. The same kind of editing power is now applicable to all kinds of Internet documents, from Web-based encyclopedias and dictionaries to online textbooks. Electronic documents can always be updated and thus kept up to date. The "popular" in pop culture is now taking on more and more of a literal meaning, as readers interact with authors, scholars, artists, and others in determining how they will ultimately be informed, engaged, or entertained.

Online documents can store the equivalent information of myriad paper books. As a consequence, cyberlibraries have sprung up, starting to replace traditional libraries. Already in 1971, a venture called Project Gutenberg was established by volunteers to digitize, archive, and distribute online the full texts of public domain books. The project continues to make these as free as possible, in formats that can be used on almost any computer. As of 2006, the project had over 19,000 items in its collection, with an average of over fifty new e-books being added each week. Most are in English, but there are also growing numbers in other languages, as similar projects are established in non-English-speaking countries. There is now an infinitude of public domain materials available online.

The main lesson to be learned from studying the evolution of modern societies is that there is no turning back the clock, so to speak. Once a technology is introduced that makes communications and information-retrieval more rapid, cheap, efficient, and broadly accessible, it is adopted widely and the technology, in turn, changes how people interact and behave. Nevertheless, this does not mean that previous media will disappear. As they have in the past, they will evolve new functions as they converge with new technologies. For example, an audience for traditional paper books not only continues to exist but is actually augmented by online versions of the books, which paradoxically help promote the paper versions. Moreover, purchasing books in a super bookstore is a diverting and distracting experience in itself—something that bookstore chains have come to realize, as witnessed by the fact that they have joined forces with coffee chains. The market for paper-based print materials such as novels, trade books, magazines, and newspapers continues to be a strong one, even though online versions are springing up constantly.

SLANG

Many would say that i-Language is really nothing more than a new kind of generic slang, since it derives its features from common people searching for easy and rapid ways to communicate. In a sense, such critics are correct. Moreover, slang has always been an important component of the theater of the profane. The reason for this is rather straightforward—slang is basically theatrical and, thus, well suited for enactments of the carnivalesque. Slang was used, for example, by Commedia dell'Arte actors to satirize pompous discourse, evoking audience

laughter. Slang is to pop culture what prayer is to sacred ceremonies. It is intentionally humorous, vivid, and often crude and offensive. A slang expression may be a new word, such as *glitzy*, or it may be an old word with a new meaning, such as *fly* (stylish) or *cool* (sophisticated). Slangs have typically been fashioned by specific groups and cliques to reinforce identity. Youth slang, gang slang, criminal slang, and other slangs have always had this sociological function. In contemporary pop culture, slang has the same function as it did in the Commedia dell'Arte—to entertain and satirize. It is relevant to note that theater slang is the source of such expressions as *ham it up* (to overact) and *turkey* (failure), and that jazz musicians helped spread *chops* (talent), *cool, hip, gig* (job), *bag* (special interest), and *man* (as a greeting protocol) into general discourse.

The latter word is particularly interesting. The tendency to use *man* in popular discourse—"That guy's a loser, man"; "I'm so hammered, man, I think I'm going to barf"; "He's seriously wasted, man"—emerged in the hippie era as a kind of "code word" for male teens to express camaraderie. Today, it has gained currency with all speakers. A comparable thing has happened to the word *guys*, which refers not only to males, but also females, having lost its gendered meaning. A sentence such as "Hey, guys, let's get going" can refer to males, females, or both. Now, how did such slang items make their way into everyday conversations? The answer is the popular media. As Laroche has aptly put it,

> The media not only help spread new language from all quarters, they also produce it when they coin terms to describe themselves and their activities. Media-related words are especially interesting because they often have social resonance. They're not just appropriate or imaginative describers of a certain medium, but also say something important about our larger world. The hybrid "infotainment," for example, merges information and entertainment, just as some media increasingly do. The hybrid word not only reflects the fact, but it also tells us something about our society and our society's values, pressures, trends.[8]

Examples similar to *infotainment* are *irritainment* (media shows that are both annoying and compelling, such as Jerry Springer and the movie *Dumb and Dumber*), *shockumentary* (a shocking documentary), *adrenaline TV* (a reality program showing actual violence or accidents), and *zitcom* (a blend of *sitcom* and *zits*, a television show that features or appeals to teenagers). The latter is particularly revelatory, as Laroche

points out,[9] "The very existence of a word such as *zitcom* suggests how important appealing to the young is to the entertainment world and to Madison Avenue. That importance derives from money—specifically, youth's spending power. But that we even have or need such a word also suggests American society's general preoccupation with youth as well as its indulgence of the young."

Another very interesting example of media-spread slang is *dude*. Used in movies such as *The Big Lebowski* (1998) and *Dude, Where's My Car?* (2000), it has spread broadly as part of greetings ("What's up, dude?"), as an exclamation ("Whoa, dude!"), as a strategy for gaining an advantage over someone ("That's so lame, dude"), and so on. It is a perfect carnivalesque form, tinged with inbuilt irony. It is relevant to note that, originally, *dude* meant "old rag." In rural parlance, a "dudesman" was a scarecrow. In the late 1800s, the word was used as a synonym for *dandy*, a meticulously dressed man, with an eye for feminine beauty. *Dude* began its foray into the pop culture lexicon with the 1981 movie *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*.

Slang words bespeak of comedic theater. They are used with great panache to evoke laughter and implicit derision. I came to understand this function of slang in the early 1990s, when I recall asking a teenager what the word *dork* meant.[10] At the time, *dork* had not gained the currency that it enjoys today. The informant defined a *dork* as "a greasy guy, who studies chemistry all night." I had certainly seen such adolescent boys, but I had never thought of them as belonging to a social category (dorkness) as such. I simply viewed them as studious, but unpopular, teens. I knew of no word in the English language, previous to hearing *dork*, that called attention to them in a specific way. But after learning the word *dork*, I suddenly started seeing dorks everywhere, eventually believing that dorkness did indeed have a *raison d'être*. I even began using the word myself to describe people in my own social environment.

Much of the slang used by teenagers and movie actors alike is self-explanatory. Interestingly, and significantly, the same types of compression mechanisms at work in i-Language are at work in slang. Slang forms are constructed by: abbreviating words (*delish*, *bro*, *rad*), combining words and affixes (*chill out*, *diss on*, *vomatose*), coining graphic (largely onomatopoeic) expressions (*barf, josing, ralph, skank*), composing rhyming couplets (*sight delight, bad rad*), injecting different meanings into ordinary words (*radical, bad, wicked*), and so on. Each form is comparable, essentially, to a one-word or one-phrase joke.

Expressions such as *MLA* = massive lip action ("passionate kissing"), *barf* ("vomit"), and *blimp boat* ("obese person"), which were in vogue in the early 1990s, never fail to evoke the kind of sardonic chortle or snicker that only comedic language can summon forth. As the American author and critic Elizabeth Hardwick astutely observed a few years ago, "The language of the younger generation has the brutality of the city and an assertion of threatening power at hand. It is military, theatrical, and at its most coherent probably a lasting repudiation of empty courtesy and bureaucratic euphemism."[11]

Some slang expressions provide implicit references to pop culture (and society generally) or else make implicit critiques of it—for example, *24/7* ("all the time," short for "twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week"), *5-0* ("police," derived from the reruns of the TV program *Hawaii Five-0*), *I'm ghost* ("I'm leaving"), and *wassup*? Other coinages show a coded savvy about certain topics—for example, *chick flick* ("sentimental movie," indicating that it is a genre watched by females), *crib* ("home," emphasizing the childish treatment teens receive at home), and *issues* ("personal problems"). Some coinages are graphic metaphors depicting sexual desires, organs, or activities—for example, *bombs* ("female breasts"), *booty* ("rugged"), *dip* ("girlfriend"), *gettin' nice* ("going steady"), *hittin' it* ("having sex"), *player* ("promiscuous male"), and *skank* ("promiscuous female").

Not only have some of these words found their way into general everyday conversations and in the media (on television, in movies, in newspapers, etc.), but some have even been listed in standard dictionaries of the English language. Expressions such as *easy* ("see you later"), *floss* ("to show off, brag"), *ice* ("diamonds set in platinum"), *mad* ("anything to its extreme"), and *tight* ("to be broke"), have been added to no less an authoritative dictionary than the Random House one. The spread and acceptance of slang are no doubt due to the media world in which we live. On television sitcoms and talk shows, in movies and ads, and in pop music lyrics slang abounds. The carnivalization of language, as it can be called, has become a widespread phenomenon indeed.

Needless to say, for many the most upsetting feature of slang is profanity. Glorified by movies and music videos, profanities allow people to come across as tough, just for the sake of it. Interestingly, the late influential and controversial comedian Lenny Bruce used the f-word as a key component of his act. Bruce did not really tell jokes. Instead, he attacked hypocritical attitudes toward sex, politics, and religion,

by speaking in a conversational manner, injecting frequent Yiddish words and profanities into his stage act, especially the f-word. Many were offended. He was frequently arrested on obscenity charges. His use of the f-word clearly had a subversive impact; its use today in movies and television programs, on the other hand, has virtually no such impact. If it is offensive, then it is so in a theatrical way. In a single two-hour 2002 episode of the original uncensored HBO series *The Sopranos*, Robert Wachal recorded one hundred uses of the f-word.[12] No one associated with that program has ever been arrested for using the word.

Today, profanities have even become acceptable as part of a new "opposite-meaning" code, as it can be called. Take, for example, the word *slut*. Along with *ho* and *pimp* to describe a fiancée and fiancé respectively, slut emerged in rap lyrics to refer to an attractive female. Anyone not privy to that style would be baffled to understand why this word has acquired such a meaning. The word *slut* originated in the Middle Ages to refer to a promiscuous woman. Obviously, rap artists (and others) came to adopt the very same word in order to subvert or turn this meaning on its head, indicating that the world had indeed changed drastically. In a duet with Eminem, Nate Dogg describes his search for a "big old slut" in the single "Shake That"; in the Broadway musical *Avenue Q*, an ample-bosomed puppet is named Lucy the Slut; even shops and Web sites now promote a brand of cosmetics called Slut. It seems that in contemporary culture, subversion quickly becomes conversion. Words such as *slut* and *ho* seem to suggest to many social critics that females exist to be of service to males as sexual entertainers and pleasers, as do slang terms such as *hump* (or *trunk*) and *lumps* for the female buttocks and breasts. Men, on the other hand, are depicted typically as endowed with unique sexual prowess, as *playas*—an image satirized, by the way, by Beyoncé in "Me, Myself, and I," a song about how disappointing her boyfriend turned out to be.

But in the age of V-Power, all this does not go unanswered. The women have indeed answered the men lyrically, indicating that they realize that the purported "sexual double standard" implicit in rap lyrics is nothing more than a carnivalesque form of talk. The 2005 song by pop artist Gwen Stefani, "Hollaback Girl" brings this out perfectly. The term "hollaback" is not defined anywhere in the song by Stefani. It could mean, for example, "hollering back," suggesting that females should take a firmer stand against male attitudes with regard to the

"slut-view" of women (as it can be called). It could also refer, in contrast, to a desire to play along with the male game, since the phrase is also used in cheerleading. Both meanings seem plausible, given that Stefani portrays herself as aggressive ("So I'm ready to attack"), physical ("Gonna get a touchdown, gonna take you out"), and decisive ("Both of us want to be the winner, but there can be only one"). Ultimately, Stefani has used the double entendre strategy of V-Power to articulate a very clever response to the meanings built into words such as *slut* and *ho*.

Stefani's response is not unique. Throughout the history of pop culture, female voices have always been heard in similar ways. From the Shangrilas to Madonna, the Spice Girls, and Avril Lavigne, pop music has consistently provided a channel for female voices to articulate their slant on sex, romance, patriarchy, patronization, and romantic relations. Female pop music performances, such as the one by Stefani, are contemporary derivatives of this historical trend. As Britney Spears's 2004 song "Toxic" brought out, women can indeed be "toxic," especially for men.

POP LANGUAGE

The use and spread of i-Language and slang style suggest that language is being used more and more as a form of acting than it is as a means of relaying information or of expressing reflective thoughts. Dramatic language is required by the movies, by the radio, by the TV medium, and by other mass media so that the message can be literally "acted out." There is nothing particularly surprising about the presence of such dramaturgy in discourse. It is an option for every speaker. What is surprising is the degree to which it has become normal discourse. Whereas the main source of linguistic innovation once came from the literary domain, it now tends to come from the "language of the street," in synergy with the "language of the tube" and the "language of the chatroom."

The use of dramaturgy as a delivery style and of slang coinages ass part of conversation, is a common characteristic of carnivalesque language. Some would say that such style is way too trendy and bound to impoverish overall communication. Journalist and social critic Leslie Savan has recently suggested that such style should be called *pop language*.[13] She decries, for example, the use of slang forms and mannerisms, such as *like* in TV sitcoms: "She's like so cool." In many ways, Savan's worries may be well founded. The sitcom-style rhythms

and mannerisms of everyday speech, which seem to carry with them a built-in applause sign or laugh track, as she points out, are becoming defining traits of conversation generally. Formulaic everyday phrases such as "I hate it when that happens," "It's *so* yesterday," "Don't go there," and the sneering "I don't think *so*" seem to be part of a sitcom script designed to garner an audience reaction. Pop language, Savan emphasizes, is light, self-conscious and replete with put-downs and exaggerated inflections, just like sitcoms and many movies. She compares the 1953 Disney cartoon *Peter Pan* with the 2002 sequel *Return to Never Land* showing how remarkably free the former one was of packaged phrases and slang. The sequel, on the other hand, is replete with such trendy phrases as "In your dreams, Hook," "Put a cork in it," "Tell me about it," "You've got *that* right," and "Don't even *think* about it."

Savan is, of course, right. But, then, what she calls pop language has always existed. In medieval Italy, university students referred to their professors as *i lupi* ("wolves"). In the 1920s, jazz introduced words such as *hip, stylin', cool,* and *groovy* into everyday talk. The words *pot* and *marijuana*, which were part of a secret criminal jargon in the 1940s, became common everyday words in the 1960s when the hippies adopted them and the media recycled them to everyone else. In the 1990s, hip-hop culture supplanted jazz and rock culture as a source for pop language. Expressions such as *bad, chill,* and *nasty* come from that culture. The first word is particularly interesting, since it means "good" or "attractive"—a meaning that was introduced by Michael Jackson with his album titled *Bad* in 1987. Then, in 1989, hip-hop artist LL Cool J introduced the phrase *not bad*, "meaning bad, but bad meaning good," as he defined it in his song "I'm Bad."

Pop language has so many sides to it that it would require a separate treatment that is well beyond the scope of the present chapter. Suffice it to say that it is carnivalesque language that people take to rather quickly, not because it is better than other forms of language, but because it is everywhere, thanks to the media and the dominance of pop culture in modern society. In a postscript to the published version of his play *Amadeus*—which became a 1984 movie—British playwright Peter Shaffer (b. 1926) makes the following insightful comment on this subject:

> Cinema is a worrying medium for the stage playwright to work in. Its universal essence offers difficulties to anyone living largely by the

> spoken word. Increasingly, as American films grow ever more popular around the world, it is apparent that the most successful are being spoken in Screenspeak, a kind of cinematic esperanto equally comprehensible in Bogotà and Bulaway. For example, dialogue in heavy-action pictures, horrific or intergalactic, now consists almost entirely of the alternation of two single words—a cry and a whisper—needing translation nowhere on then planet: Lessgidowaheer ["Let's get out of here"] and Omygaad ["Oh my God"].[14]

Cinema and other media continue to be a source of "Screenspeak," as Shaffer calls pop language. The way actors speak on screen seems to constitute a model of how to speak on the streets. *Animal House* (1978) introduced terms still used today, such as *wimp*, which is now a common word for someone who is scared or has no courage and *brew*, which means getting a beer. *Clueless* (1995) introduced *As if*, an exclamation of disbelief, and *whatever* to convey that one does not care what another person is saying. In 2004, the film *Mean Girls* helped spread a new gendered form of pop language used by young females across North America, called "chick speak," with words such as *plastic*, meaning "fake girls who look like Barbie dolls," and *fetch*, which is an abbreviation of *fetching*; to describe something cool and trendy. Many of the forms of chick speak are, predictably, funny and critical at the same time:

biphonal = holding multiple phones to one's ears at the same time
e-mauling = stalking someone via e-mail
fatkins = disciples of Atkins's diet system
guyatus = a hiatus from guys
mousewife = a male housewife
reverse evolution princes = men who at first seem to be princes, but turn out to be frogs
teenile = someone who is way too old for what she or he is wearing

As I write, chickspeak has even its own Web site (DailyCandy.com). To the pop culture analyst, it is yet another example of how language is a mirror of trends within the larger pop culture domain.

MISSPELLINGS

As mentioned, spelling has always played a significant role in society, being linked to literacy, breeding, and other socially positive values.

In actual fact, however, spelling rules are often matters of pure accident and random decisions, rather than part of a time-honored code of learnedness. Spelling is a product of agreements among language users brought about by negotiations and social events that reach well beyond language as a fixed system of rules. In English, for example, the following words have had different spellings at some point in their history (I give just one historical antecedent in each case): *daisy (daizy), sunflower (sunflow'r), cabbage (cabache), lettuce (letuse), cucumber (cucumer), cauliflower (cawly flower), onion (oignion)*, and *carrot (carroote)*.[15]

Intentional misspelling is a popular reaction to the association of spelling with social highbrowism. It should come as no surprise to find that it is a pattern in i-Language, slang, and pop language. Generally, it is used to defy and mock the rules that are perceived to uphold the social order. This is particularly visible in the way hip-hop artists have respelled the English language, so to speak, to suit their particular fancy. The way they spell their names, for example, bespeaks of an attitude that declares, "I'll do it my way," not the way of white American speakers of English. Here is a small sampling of rap artists' names:

Snoop Dogg
Ja Rule
Eazy-E
Lil Jon
LL Cool J
Timbaland
Busta Rhymes
Coolio
Jay-Z
Mystikal
The Notorious B. I. G.
Bubba Sparxxx

Such transparent violations of standard American English spellings, twists of phrase, and phonetic adjustments makes rap language appear to be an antihegemonic subversive code, at least on the surface. Rap language is, actually, phonetically correct, by and large, since it often spells English words exactly how they are pronounced. An example is *boyz* instead of *boys*. The rap spelling is thus

an ironic poke at verbal traditions that bespeak of pseudocorrectness, indicating, at the same time, that such correctness reverberates with victimization. In a phrase, it reveals what black youths think about traditions that have historically excluded them from the mainstream.

Such spelling strategies are, in effect, identity-forging techniques. Aware of the power of spelling to convey character, Snoop Dogg has even invented his own spelling system based on the suffix *izzle*, which he employs in phrases such as *fo shizzle* ("for sure"). In mock style, Snoop Dog rewrites standard American English words with this suffix, creating a quasi-subversive language that he designed to take a jab at white America at the same time that it exudes black empowerment. In early 2005, http://www.Gizoogle.com was founded by Web designer John Beatty to promote izzle-speak. Emulating Snoop Dogg's MTV comedy show, *Doggy Fizzle Televizzle*, which started in 2003, the Web site began more or less in jest and as an homage to Snoop Dogg's role in redefining African-American identity. Unexpectedly, the site became very popular, indicating that the subversive intent of izzle-speak had lost its original function. It should also be noted that the roots of izzle-speak might, actually, go back to a 1981 song titled "Double Dutch Bus" by Frankie Smith in which the title (*Double Dutch*) is transformed at the end into "Dilzzouble Dizzutch."

Not surprisingly, many of the linguistic patterns used by rap artists are those that now also characterize i-Language. It is difficult to pinpoint the direction of influence, since both rap language and i-Language came onto the scene at about the same time, although misspellings for social effect on the part of African Americans long predate the age of Internet. So, my guess is that rap language has influenced i-Language. Vivian Cook gives some interesting excerpts of rap lyrics that show the interrelation between the two:[16]

Supadupa fly
Tell me whatcha gon do?
I'm in love wit chu
Rainbow flava
It ain't nothing nobody can say cuz you're the one for me baby
It payz to be tha boss
I ain't tryna wanna fight with ya man
Neva gave her tha cold shoulda'
Might of heard me spittin' with Cain and Fab playa
Got doe ma didn't know

Cook goes on to argue (correctly in my view) that rap language has come to mirror a new hipness. This would explain why it has spread to other domains of American culture. Rap spelling now surfaces in names for dogs (Mystymoor, Xtreme Hero, Lil Sassy Kassy, Turn the Paige, Kwontum Leap), horses (R Cool, Ugotta Do It, Bizzy Bee, Da Hoss, Dat Goose, Run Z Road, Misti Light), businesses (4 Ever Nails, Xpert Stationers, Jaycee Fruits, Kleen Rite, Girlz Nite Out, Lo Cost Foodstores, Hotpak), and taxicabs (EZ Taxi, Go2 Cars, Tony Xpress, Klass Kars, Gaz Cabs)—to mention just a few.[17]

The noncompliance to standard spelling and punctuation built into such constructions has a playful function, tinged with a rebellious undertone. As rap artists know, to endorse a language is to accept the culture that uses it. It is a break from this culture that intentional misspelling is designed to convey. New spellings and coinages imply new social realities. And these allow for the construction of new identities. Some of the specific linguistic features that are used in rap language to convey identity include the following:

- Eliminating syllable-final *r* and replacing it with *h*: *summahtime* ("summertime"); *sho 'nuff* ("sure enough")
- Stressing the first syllable in some words: *póh-leece* ("police"); *déeh-troit* ("Detroit")
- Eliminating the verb *be* in many types of sentences: *Wha up*? *He big*
- Replacing *th* with *t*: *Git wit it* ("Get with it")

Through such devices rap artists are reshaping American English on their own terms. Rap language, like the rap movement itself, is a blend of reality, fiction, and mockery. It was, originally, an artistic response to joblessness, poverty, and disempowerment. It gave black youths an artistic platform on which to air their views of the world and on which to create a sense of order for themselves. Rap language was initially resistance discourse—a discourse against white America's history of racism and cultural domination. It was intended to focus on the urban black social experience and to place the participation of whites on the periphery. Rapper Chuck D brought this out eloquently in a 1992 interview with *XXL* (a popular rap magazine): "This is our voice, this is the voice of our lifestyle, this is the voice of our people. We're not going to take the cookie cutter they give us to let them mold us."

As rap continued to grow in influence in the 1990s and early 2000s, influencing the lifestyles of youths of all social classes and races, its audience became broader. As a result, by the mid-2000s, it started losing its subversive edges, becoming more and more part of general pop culture than a vehicle for protest and identity-construction. Major record labels started putting out rap music in the same way that they did other kinds of music. The idea that rap culture could be sold to youths on a larger scale and possibly make it compete with rock and other styles of pop music has led, arguably, to the demise of true rap culture. This does not mean that rap's original antisocial subtext has completely dissipated. Like other trends in pop culture, past and present, rap has found a niche in pop culture history analogous to the niche allotted to the counterculture movement of the 1960s. Artists such as Mos Def, Canibus, Talib Kweli, Common Sense, and Hieroglyphics have recorded songs, in fact, that transcend the initial paradigm of rap culture to include broader themes, ranging from AIDS awareness and shortage of clean water to the importance of political lobbying.

Rap artists are not unique in using misspelling as a deliberate social strategy. It has been an inherent tool of youthful rebellion since the 1920s, when young people spelled *rats* as *Rhatz* and shortened *that's too bad* to *stoo bad*. In the same era we find products spelled as follows: *Pret-O-Lite, Ra-dee-Om U All Kno After Dinner Mints, Uneeda Biscuit, Phiteezi Shoes*, and *U-Rub-It-In*.[18] Pop culture, language, and the business world have had a synergistic relationship with each other for a very long time. In the 1960s and 1970s, when the suffix *-delic* in *psychedelic* became a shibboleth for hippie lifestyle, words such as *Shag-a-delic, Funk-a-delic, Pop-a-delic*, and *Dance-a-delic* started cropping up all over. In the same era, youths spelled *tough* as *tuff*, called themselves *freeks* (spelling it this way), and wrote *Amerika* with a *k*. But even before the advent of pop culture, typesetters referred to type that was easily set as being *phat* and, logically enough, type that was difficult to set as being *lean*. And, as far back as 1885, the Post Express Printing Company in Rochester, New York, published the *Phat Boy's Birds-Eye Map of the Saint Lawrence River* with a drawing of a corpulent boy. The temptation to play mischievously with spelling rules and traditions has been with us since time immemorial. Within black culture itself, the use of misspelling to reflect the phonics of black English originated at least as far back as 1952 (if not earlier), when the African American musician Lloyd Price spelled his hit song *Lawdy Miss Clawdy*, in obvious imitation of black English pronunciation.

Cook goes on to list the names of various pop musicians and groups who have used spelling techniques similar to those discussed, highlighting their role in identity construction. Here are a few of them:[19]

Letters for Syllables
X-wife, Qfx, V-male, Pay as U Go, L8r

Numbers for Words
2 Sweet, 4clubbers, 2Pac, 6 Teens, 2gether

N for And
Red 'n White Machines, Paps 'n Skar, Bald 'n Spikey, Salt 'n Peppa

K for C
Outkast, Uniklubi, Kaskade, Kontakt, Uncle Kracker, Krossfade, Kurupt, Boomkat

Z for S
Jay-z, 4 Girlz, Airheadz, Az Yet Feturing Peter Cetera, Ralph Myerz, Rascalz, Sporty Thievz, Def Rhymz, Young Gunz, Outlawz, Beginerz

Consonant Doubling
G-spott, Gang Starr, Puddle of Mudd, Caramell, Dizzy Lizzard, Snoop Dogg

Y for I
Zyx, Sylver, Sylk-e, Fyne, Kevin Lyttle, Sillk The Shocker featuring Mystikal, Tymes 4, Profyle, Prymary Colorz, Big Tymers, Cyn, Def Rhymz

Puns or Sound-Alikes
Raymzter, Reelists, U2

A for Ar, Er, Our
Rhythmkillaz, Floorfilla, Twista, Platinum Bound Playaz, Gorillaz

X for Ex, Cs, Cks
Xploding, Plastix, Rednex, Xscape, Xtraordinary, Trance Jax

Ph for F
Phreeworld, Phixx, Phish

Odd Punctuation
@junkmail, &g, S.h.e., 'nSynch, W-inds, Fu:el, D!-nation, D-rrect, B'z4

Lack of Word Spaces
Wiseguys, Americathebeautiful, Amillionsons, Goodshirt

As can be seen, some constructions make indirect reference to various themes and texts in pop culture or society in general—the name *V-male* is clearly ironic in its use of V (the quintessential feminine symbol, as we saw in Chapter 2); and the use of X in names such as *X-wife* and *Xploding* resonates with X-Power meanings (Chapter 1). Sometimes, spelling is used deliberately by a pop musician in imitation of how he or she spells his or her name. For example, the title of some of 2Pac's songs are "Letter 2 My Unborn" and "2Pacalypse."

Such playful spelling brings out, once again, the fact that in pop culture carnivalesque irony and mischievousness reign supreme. Parenthetically, I should mention that a similar playfulness was used by great writers. For example, e. e. cummings, whose name was Edward Estlin Cummings (1894–1962), was probably the first to use lowercase spelling for his name and his poetry. He also violated rules of punctuation and grammar and incorporated slang into his compositions. James Joyce, to mention one other writer, invented not only his own words, but also wrote English as a composite language, a self-styled Esperanto made up of parts of words from various other languages in his 1939 masterpiece *Finnegans Wake*.

In sum, misspelling is (and always has been) a strategy for making socially meaningful statements. Americans set themselves symbolically apart from their British heritage by spelling certain words differently (*color* instead of *colour*, *center* instead of *centre*, *realize* instead of *realise*). Pop culture has simply made this intrinsically American attitude part of its theater of the profane. As Vivian Cook observantly remarks, "English spelling now presents a rich set of possibilities for our use and for entertainment. Pop musicians call themselves *The Beatles, Eminem*, and *Sugarbabes*. Novelists hint at dialects, *ax* (ask) and *tole* (told), and think up unusual book titles—*Pet Sematary* (Stephen King). Owners invent names for drugs like *Zytec* and for racehorses like *Sale the Atlantic*."[20]

It was actually Noah Webster who proposed in 1828 the elimination of *u* in words such as *colour, harbour, favour*, and *odour*. His proposal was accepted, distinguishing American from British spelling and thus, by implication, America from its British past. Current misspellings are really nothing more than contemporary tokens of a long-standing penchant in America to constantly break from the past and

to instinctively reject preestablished canons of perfection in language and in other areas of culture.

Perhaps the long-awaited spelling reforms that have been suggested for centuries might finally come to pass not because of the will of grammarians and language purists but because of trends in pop culture. For example, using *f* for *gh* and *ph* (*ruff* for *rough* and *graf* for *graph*), *j* for the soft *g* (*juj* for *judge*), *y* for *igh* (*sy* for *sigh*), cutting out superfluous letters (*hed* for *head*, *frend* for *friend*), regularizing irregular forms (*luvd* for *loved*), and the like might finally make their way into standard English, especially since they are already present in i-Language. It certainly would simplify the teaching of phonics and the learning of English greatly. But this might take some time, because spelling is (and always has been) an emotional topic. As Vivian Cook states, "Our discussions of spelling often suggest that there is an ideal of perfect spelling that people should strive for. Correct spelling and punctuation are seen as injunctions carved on tablets of stone; to break them is to transgress the tacit commandments for civilized behavior. Spelling and punctuation can become an emotional rather than rational area of dispute." [21]

i-POWER

With their iPods, iPhones, and many other iThings, people today are living in a new kind of mystical Xanadu, governed not by politicians or philosophers but by technologists. Indeed, i-Power is the new fuel that drives symbolism in the age of Internet, which is really the new age of *techne*, as the Greeks called the power that comes from possessing craftlike knowledge. The current age can in fact be renamed the age of Hephaestus, the Greek god of technology.

The theme of i-Power brings me logically to the doorstep of the late Marshall McLuhan, the Canadian cultural critic and communications theorist mentioned at various points in this book who maintained that the method of communicating information through changing technologies had more influence on social structures and individuals than the information itself, which he expressed in the phrase "the medium is the message": "The medium is the message. This is merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium—that is, of any extension of ourselves—result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology."[22]

The point that McLuhan often made in his writings (explicitly or implicitly) was, in fact, that one cannot ignore the relation between innovations in technology and trends in pop culture. To make the study of this relation meaningful, he introduced the key concepts of *hot* and *cool* media. The former have high definition, since they are based on a single sensory reaction; the latter, on the other hand, require much more involvement on the part of the listener or viewer:

> There is a basic principle that distinguishes a hot medium like radio from a cool one like the telephone, or a hot medium like the movie from a cool one like TV. A hot medium is one that extends one single sense in "high definition." High definition is the state of being well filled with data. A photograph is visually "high definition." A cartoon is "low definition," simply because very little visual information is provided. Telephone is a cool medium, or one of "low definition," simply because very little visual information is provided. Telephone is a cool medium, or one of low definition, because the ear is given a meager amount of information. And speech is a cool medium of low definition, because so little is given and so much has to be filled in by the listener. On the other hand, hot media do not leave so much to be filled in or completed by the audience. Naturally, therefore, a hot medium like the radio has very different effects on the user from a cool medium like the telephone.[23]

The power of pop culture lies in its ability to incorporate both types of media, "cutting-and-pasting" texts and ideas within each medium and then promoting them as new "wholes." This pastiche of forms and structures is what has eliminated the separation of culture into "high" and "low." McLuhan showed, for instance, that the front page of the April 20, 1950, issue of none other than the stodgy *New York Times* had been constructed with a pastiche of elements, ranging from the techniques of Pablo Picasso to the literary techniques of James Joyce.[24]

McLuhan argued that history is really a testament to how technology and social evolution are intertwined. Pictography, or the craft or representing the world visually with the aid of hand (carving) tools, brought about the rise of sophisticated culture, although it did not alter the basic oral nature of daily communication, nor did it alter the oral mode of transmitting knowledge of early societies. It laid, however, the foundation for the rise of the first civilizations. Ancient

cuneiform writing, for example, allowed the Sumerians to develop a great civilization; papyrus and hieroglyphics transformed Egyptian society into an advanced culture; and similar stories could be told about ancient societies across the globe, from China to Africa and beyond. The second true cultural revolution was brought about by the invention of alphabetic writing around 1000 BCE. The efficiency for recording knowledge that the alphabet afforded (in terms of time and space) spurred the ancient Greeks on to make extraordinary advances in science, mathematics, philosophy, and the arts; the alphabet also made it possible for the Romans to develop an effective system of government based on written laws. These events led to the establishment of a protoglobal civilization by the fifteenth century, a reality bolstered by the development of the printing press, which made it possible to print and duplicate books cheaply. McLuhan designated the type of social order that ensued from that event the "Gutenberg Galaxy," after Johannes Gutenberg (c. 1400–68), the German printer who invented movable type in Europe. The printing press facilitated the dissemination of knowledge broadly and widely, paving the way for the European Renaissance, the Protestant Reformation, and the Enlightenment.

The next step toward the founding of a worldwide civilization was taken at the start of the twentieth century, after advancements in electronic technology established sound recordings, cinema, radio, and (a little later) television as new media for communicating information and bringing about the rise of a global pop culture in the twentieth century. Since electronic signals can cross borders virtually unimpeded, McLuhan characterized the world that was being reshaped by electronic media as the "global village." Finally, the Internet and the World Wide Web have emerged to put the finishing touches on the establishment of McLuhan's global village blueprint and to trasnfrom technology itself into a lifestyle option. This would explain why such things as video games have become so popular, especially for members of the i-Generation, as the generation that has grown up in the age of Internet can be called. Video games have overtaken movies in popularity, having become one of the fastest-growing areas of the Internet. They are no longer just for kids; they engage people of all ages and from all walks of life. And, revealingly, the structure and forms of the games themselves are influencing other media, from movies and television to books and toys.[25]

Actually, video games started out as arcade games in the Roaring Twenties. A modern video game is really an arcade game with

expanded capabilities. In the early 1970s the electronic tennis game named *Pong* propelled the video-game industry in the United States. After this industry nearly collapsed in the mid-1980s, Japanese companies, such as the Nintendo Corporation, assumed marketplace leadership, improving game technology and introducing popular adventure games such as *Donkey Kong* and the *Super Mario Brothers*, thus spawning a video game subculture that is now blossoming into one of the most dominant trends in contemporary pop culture.

The term *video game* is now used to refer to any electronic game, whether it is played on a computer with appropriate software, on a game console, on some portable device (such as a cell phone), or online. There are now genres of video games, and various formats in which they can be played. One of the most relevant ones to the discussion at hand is the so-called role-playing genre, which gained popularity with the *Dungeons and Dragons* game. Participants pretend to be in a situation or environment, such as a battle or newly discovered place; each situation has its own rules and each participant plays a specific role or character in the scenario. Occult and horror themes exploited by such games, along with related fantasy themes, bring out the fascination with the macabre and the grotesque that has marked the history of pop culture, as we shall see in the next chapter. Rather than allow filmmakers or others to create the horror and adventure, the games allow users to do so themselves. The increase in the popularity of online gaming of this type has resulted in subgenres emerging, such as multiplayer online role-playing games, which are designed for sociability and interaction, rather than for the simple thrill of the game.

The question of why video games have become so popular with the i-Generation has, to my mind, a simple answer. We are living in the age of Internet, where i-Power reigns supreme. In video game scripts, the player is the scriptwriter, actor, and director at once. It is virtual cinema. It now has its own culture, with attendant Web sites, blogs, magazines, and the like. Video games are perfect for the technologically savvy audiences of the contemporary world, with their fusion of three-dimensional techniques, reality-inducing effects, sounds, music, and so on. The technology enables players to participate in the outcome of a story or plot, to explore its variables, and to take charge of the scene. The *spectator* is no longer a passive viewer of the *spectacle* (as the word implies), but a participant in it. Only in carnivals does such a possibility exist, as for example in feasts such as the Mardi Gras

of New Orleans, where festivities are essentially in the hands of the participants. Video games constitute an engagement with the "imaginary" subtext in i-Power.

As Gary Alan Fine observed a while back, video games constitute an avocation, calling players unto an occupation of sorts. But they have nothing to do with traditional work, since they are built around play.[26] They also provide a context for making friends and for developing a sense of community. When players enter the video game world they assume a fantasy identity, abandoning their real-life one. The game thus allows people to endow themselves with attributes that they may not possess in real life, such as courage, good looks, intelligence, and wisdom.

Like other aspects of pop culture, video games have been the target of opposition and censorship, especially those that involve macabre themes or sex and violence. To a pop culture analyst this comes as no surprise, for these are the elements of pop culture that have always created moral panic in different eras. And it is the usual suspects who oppose this new form of "profane theater," namely politicians, organized evangelical groups, and other special interest groups. Interestingly, recent surveys have shown that video games are attracting more diversified groups than the typical i-Generation male youth (our i-Guy), and now include almost as many female players as males and many older individuals, especially for casual online and mobile phone games.

Video games give participants the feeling of being immersed in a simulated world that resembles the real world. The Nintendo Wii (notice the revealing use of two ii's) now records and sends the speech and movements of the participant to the simulation program. This interface feature, which relays the sense of touch and other physical sensations, is making the video game world virtually indistinguishable from the real world. The division between the imaginary and the real is now totally blurred. Living in a fantasy land, it would seem, is much more exciting than living in reality.

As Steven Johnson has cleverly argued, video games may in fact be fostering in a new and more powerful form of consciousness and intelligence.[27] Computer games, Johnson has claimed, provide a locus for the same kind of rigorous mental workout that mathematical theorems and puzzles do. They improve abstract problem-solving skills. The complex plots and intricacies of video games are thus making more people sharper today than at any other point in the history of

civilization. Johnson calls this the effects of a "Sleeper Curve." The term comes from Woody Allen's 1973 movie *Sleeper*, in which a granola-eating New Yorker falls asleep but reawakens in the future, where junk and rich foods actually prolong life, rather than shorten it. According to Johnson, the subtext of the movie is clear: the most apparently debasing forms of mass diversion turn out to be cognitively nutritional after all.

We are a "problem-solving species," Johnson claims, hence the addictive power of video games, which are based on problem-solving of various kinds. This may or may not be true. Will our next great scientific minds and artistic geniuses be addicted video game players? It is quite a stretch to say that video games enhance problem-solving skills and that these are essential to the future evolution of our species. One thing is for certain, video games, like any other prop in pop culture, are fun to play. If fun enhances cognition, so be it. The lesson to be learned from studying pop culture is not that it is intertwined with intellectual or cognitive growth, but with more carnivalesque (fun) aspects of our existence.

In the age of Internet, pop culture has seemingly found a new stage for itself, where virtually anything goes. The freakishness of the sideshows has now been transferred online. On VampireFreaks.com, so-called cybergoths congregate en masse by simply clicking on, sharing their goth philosophy in cyberspace. Online videos, blogs, and Web pages created by amateurs are remaking the cultural landscape, as unknown directors, writers and producers are catapulted into quasi-celebrity status on a daily basis. The *i* in i-Power clearly stands for the "individual." Individualism has, actually, always been a part of American mythology, built into everything from Hollywood Westerns to goth Web sites.

Cyberspace allows for all kinds of new ways for people to join pop culture trends and even to mock them—a kind of mockery of the mockers. One recent way to do so is *animutation* or *fanimutation*, which allows images to be "mutated" so as to make fun of them: for example, attaching George Bush's face to the body of Daffy Duck. Animutation is satire, irony, and social criticism packed into one. While I see all such trends as contemporary ones that are played out on the theater of the profane, the breadth of their diffusion made possible by the new technologies poses several philosophical issues that are problematic for me—issues that I will discuss in the final chapter. Suffice it to say here that i-Power has far superseded the fears that

Orwell portrayed so effectively in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Aldous Huxley in *Brave New World*. I-Power can only unfold in a post-Orwellian universe, which is as socially alienated as it is technologically sophisticated. We seem indeed to be living in a time in which people speak in sound bites. In an insightful paper, Bob Stein characterizes this situation eloquently, writing, "When 1984 came and went, Americans congratulated themselves on the fact that Orwell's Big Brother had not materialized in the West. But what people missed, of course, was that Huxley's infinitely darker vision had come true. As Postman put it, in *Brave New World*, Huxley saw a time coming when 'people will come to love their oppression, to adore technologies that undo their capacities to think.'"[28]

CHAPTER 5

N-POWER

OCCULTISM IN POP CULTURE

> Nobody before the Pythagoreans had thought that mathematical relations held the secret of the universe. Twenty-five centuries later, Europe is still blessed and cursed with their heritage.
>
> —Arthur Koestler (1905–83)

ALPHANUMERIC NAMES FOR PRODUCTS ARE EVERYWHERE, HAVING become part of a widespread naming trend in the contemporary marketplace. Take one area of that marketplace as a case in point—car model names. Here we find Mercedes Benz's E3-20, the Mazda RX-7, the Pontiac G6, the Corvette C6, the Audi A4, among many other similarly named vehicles. At one level, these naming trends, like the use of *i* in iPod, are designed to appeal to a new generation of customers accustomed to i-Language style (Chapter 4). But at another level, they conjure up images of mystery and the occult, similar to those evoked by the kinds of secret codes and cryptography used in pop fiction narratives, from detective stories to supernatural thrillers.

Whether the secretive or occult senses that such car names evoke are intentional or not, it is clear that numbers and letters, separately or in combination, are part of an increasing utilization of numerological power (or N-Power for short), as it can be called, in the contemporary marketplace—a form of symbolism that is based on ancient numerological concepts and forms. N-Power manifests itself everywhere, not just in car-naming trends. It can be seen, for instance, in the fact that many high rises in American cities do not have a thirteenth floor, because of the unlucky connotations that this number evokes. Similarly, it can be seen in the avoidance of the number 666—the so-called number of the devil. N-Power is the belief that numbers possess special

powers—a belief into which advertisers and marketers have obviously tapped. Consider the Chanel No. 5 perfume product as another case in point. There are, of course, practical or historical reasons behind the choice of this name—the perfume was the fifth one created by Coco Chanel (so the story goes). But the instant a product is named in this way, our reaction to it is hardly literal—imagine naming a perfume product with the number 666, no matter what practical reason may be behind it. A little investigation into numerological symbolism reveals that the number five was associated in ancient cultures with the figure of the pentagon and its derivative, the pentagram. The Pythagoreans considered this to be the symbol of all forms of perfection, which included the perfection of feminine wisdom (V-Power). Could this be why the most powerful nation in the world has named and designed the headquarters of its defense system, the Pentagon? There is little doubt that the Chanel No. 5 product unconsciously evokes the symbolism of V-Power, whether or not that was the intention of the manufacturer.

The number seven is similarly steeped in mystical traditions. There are seven days and seven nights, seven wonders of the world, seven dwarfs (all serving one overwhelmingly beautiful woman as we saw in Chapter 2), seven deadly sins, seven gods of good fortune in Japanese lore, and seven demons, represented by the seven points in the star cluster Pleiades, in Akkadian and Sumerian legends. In the Bible we find seven branches of the Menorah, seven horns and eyes of the lamb, seven heads of the dragon, and seven seals. In the Parsi traditions of ancient Persia there were seven immortal saints. In ancient China, on every seventh day after someone's death, there were sacrifices carried out on his or her behalf. The list of the mythic meanings associated with the number seven is a truly mind-boggling one. No wonder that so many products now incorporate it as part of their brand identity, from the soft drink 7-Up to Mazda's RX-7 model. As Hans Biedermann puts it, "After three, seven is the most significant of sacred numbers of the ancient civilizations."[1]

An early founder of mathematics, Pythagoras established a society, known as the Pythagorean Brotherhood, around 500 BCE to study number patterns, believing firmly that knowledge of the universe could only come from contemplating how it revealed itself through these patterns. The term Pythagorean Brotherhood is in all likelihood a mistranslation, because Pythagoras encouraged women to participate fully in his so-called brotherhood. Late in life, he married one of his

students, Theano. An accomplished cosmologist and healer, Theano headed the Pythagorean society after her husband's death, and even though she faced persecution, continued to spread the Pythagorean philosophy throughout Egypt and Greece alongside her daughters. A basic tenet of the Pythagoreans was that each natural number stood for something symbolic. They claimed, for instance, that the number one stood for unity, reason, and creation. This is why they thought the single horn of the unicorn possessed magical powers. In the form of a cordial, it continues to have this meaning in many cultures, where it is purported to be able to cure diseases as well as to neutralize the poisons of snakes and rabid dogs.

The topic of N-Power brings me to the broader theme of occultism, which has always been a main one in pop culture (as discussed briefly in previous chapters). Sideshows (the precursors of pop culture) have always had a card reader, a fortuneteller, or psychic, alongside strippers and freaks. Movies with occult themes have always been among the most popular, as have pop songs such as *Voodoo Woman* and *Black Magic Woman*, which continue to cast their magic spell on us. Horror movies, alien and UFO movies and TV programs, and even many thriller stories are as part and parcel of pop culture as are sexual and comedic theatrical forms. Even a serial killer with the occult pseudonym Zodiac Killer has become part of pop culture lore. In a phrase, occultism is everywhere in pop culture.

OCCULTISM

The topic of the Zodiac Killer is an appropriate one for starting off the discussion of N-Power. Two movies have, actually, dealt with the mysterious serial killer. The first one was 1971's *Dirty Harry*, a movie inspired by the rash of senseless killings perpetrated by the Zodiac Killer. In that movie, a killer, named aptly "Scorpio," is exterminated by Dirty Harry Callaghan, a ruthless cop played by Clint Eastwood. The second movie is David Fincher's 2007 *Zodiac*, with its unsettling narrative that taps into our fear of the unknowable that the Zodiac Killer evoked in his heyday and continues to evoke today. These movies bring out the grip that the figure of the serial killer has on pop culture. While the figure of the random thrill-killer can be traced as far back as Alfred Hitchcock's silent 1926 masterpiece, *The Lodger*, it did not reach full-fledged popularity until the 1970s when real serial killers started proliferating. Movies and real life had become mirrors

of each other. By the 1980s, slasher movies emerged as among the most popular of all film genres. That's when Hannibal Lecter made his first screen appearance in *Manhunter*, and when Hitchcock's *Psycho* was revived several times. When *Silence of the Lambs* hit the screen in 1991, followed by *Se7en* in 1995, the figure of the sadistic killer gained A-list status. One of the key questions that Fincher's *Zodiac* raises is whether or not the proliferation of real serial killers is tied to pop culture's fascination with, and archetypal fear of, them. Serial killers seem to love the media attention they get for their crimes, even admitting to committing them for their own macabre "fifteen minutes of fame." Did we create this new monster? Is the current television frenzy over crime scene stories, mostly involving serial killers, and the proliferation of movies such as *Saw* and *Hostel* really nothing more than contemporary offshoots of our obsession with Zodiac figures?

Occultism is essentially the belief that mythic symbolism (such as number patterns) can be used to unravel hidden secrets about the universe and its mysterious forces. Occult practices are found in all civilizations. Western occultism has its roots in ancient Babylonian and Egyptian mysticism. Augmented by Jewish mysticism, it became an obscure but important intellectual force in the Middle Ages. Even eminent Church figures, such as thirteenth-century Italian theologian Saint Thomas Aquinas, believed in the powers of alchemy and other occult arts. The late medieval and early modern period saw occultism increasingly as being connected with the worship of the devil. For this reason it was censured, resulting in the persecution of "witches" during the Renaissance, since they were seen as the devil's helpers. Occultism was revived as an intellectual trend in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, adopted by the romantics, who saw great value in its traditions. It surfaced in various forms again in the New Age movement that gained momentum in the 1960s.

In having been banished from the sacred realm five centuries ago, occultism acquired new life as part of the profane. Occult practices, from palm reading to magic shows, have always been a part of circuses, sideshows, and early vaudeville. And of course, one of the most popular narrative genres of the modern age—the mystery or thriller narrative—is really nothing more than a form of occult storytelling. It was Edgar Allan Poe (1809–49) who invented this genre. Poe emphasized the occult nature of the story by injecting a macabre tinge to his plots. Among the early movie directors most closely associated with the thriller is Alfred Hitchcock (1899–1980), noted for his

technically innovative and psychologically complex treatments of the genre. Hitchcock entered the movie-making business in 1920 as a designer of silent-film title cards and worked as an art director, scriptwriter, and assistant director before directing his first picture, *The Pleasure Garden*, in 1925. It was his third picture, *The Lodger* (mentioned earlier), about a man suspected of being Jack the Ripper, that thrust the thriller genre into cinematic center stage. In 1929, Hitchcock made his first talking film, *Blackmail*, which was acclaimed for its imaginative use of sound in evoking suspense and a feeling of "creepiness." Hitchcock used a continually clanging shop bell to convey the heroine's feelings of guilt and fear, making her situation a "chilling" one indeed. The term "spine-chiller" became widespread shortly thereafter to describe movies that played on our sense of fear. During the 1930s and 1940s, Hitchcock gained international fame with a series of immensely popular suspense thrillers, including *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1934), *The 39 Steps* (1935), *The Lady Vanishes* (1938), *Suspicion* (1941), *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943), and *Notorious* (1946).

Hitchcock embarked upon the most creative period of his career in the 1950s. In rapid succession, he produced and directed a series of spine-tingling thrillers, beginning with *Strangers on a Train* (1951) and continuing with *Rear Window* (1954), a remake of *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1956), *Vertigo* (1958), *North by Northwest* (1959), *Psycho* (1960), and *The Birds* (1963). These movies are surreal nightmares that take place in daylight—a small town appears calm on the surface but reveals dark tensions underneath; an innocent man finds himself suddenly the object of suspicion; a wholesome-looking motel clerk is actually a psychotic killer who impersonates his dead mother. These movies are also notable for their innovative use of quick shots, unusual camera angles, and carefully placed sound effects that are designed to evoke "chills" in the viewer. So effective was Hitchcock's occultist cinematic art that all subsequent thriller movies are now cast in his shadow. Every new thriller movie either implicitly or explicitly refers to his work, and the adjective "Hitchcockian" has entered the movie lexicon permanently. The thriller is now an intrinsic part of pop culture and a prominent aspect in its continuing historical evolution. Incidentally, the American Film Institute's 2001 listing of the one hundred most popular thrillers of all time, voted on by 1,800 cinemagoers, showed that Hitchcock's *Psycho* was number one. Two other Hitchcock films made the top ten: *North by Northwest* at number four and *The Birds* at number seven.

A recent film that falls into the category of the Hitchcockian thriller, meriting comment here because of its popularity among cinema buffs and pop culture theorists alike, is the 2001 film *Memento*, written and directed by Christopher Nolan and based on a short story written by his brother Jonathan Nolan (*Memento Mori*). The plot is chilling and spine-tingling in true Hitchockian style. The main character, Leonard, is forced to live totally in the present, unable to create new memories after suffering a head injury, as he seeks revenge for the rape and murder of his wife. Leonard writes notes on his body, takes Polaroid photos, and keeps pieces of paper so that he can remember what he has discovered during a twenty-four-hour span—hence the title *Memento*. The time sequence unfolds in reverse manner. In true Hitchcockian style, the audience is thus denied the key clues of which the protagonist is also deprived, due to his amnesia. Much like in *Spellbound*, the viewer is projected directly into the horror of what it means to lose one's memory. Fragmentation and dislocation are the result—both technically in the filmic narrative and psychologically in the viewer.

We know that Leonard's wife was killed at the very start. Leonard was apparently hit on the head during the commission of the brutal act, being left without memory. He carries with him a picture of a man he suspects of the murder. The death of this man ends the tale. We are not sure who kills him, but we are left to infer that it was probably Leonard. Leonard goes on to write a letter, in the style of previous mementos, perhaps to himself, knowing that he would otherwise forget that he was the one who wrote them. The movie leaves us horrified.

As in many of Hitchcock's thrillers, Nolan employs surreal symbolism to evoke a sense of mystery and fear. The movie is replete with symbols of time—alarm clocks ringing, a wristwatch, notepads, etc. But it denies us any real or concrete sense of time, normally evoked by such devices, by showing the plot in both forward and reverse order, distinguishing the two orders by black-and-white and color cinematography. Color sequences show what actually happened; black-and-white ones what Leonard believes happened. The first color scene, in which Leonard shoots and kills Teddy, the man suspected of the crime, is, in actual fact, the last scene of the narrative. In that scene we see a Polaroid undevelop, a bullet fly back into the barrel of a gun, and Teddy come back to life after we hear the sound of a shot. This is followed immediately by a black-and-white scene of Leonard in a

motel room talking to an anonymous person on the phone explaining his circumstances.

To make the movie even more spine chilling, Nolan intersplices the parallel story of a man named Sam Jenkins. As an insurance investigator, Leonard came across a medical claim from Jenkins, who eerily had the same memory problem that he has now. Leonard investigated the case, denying Sam the money he sought because Leonard believed that he was faking his condition. Sam's wife also wasn't sure if her husband was faking or telling the truth. So, she came up with a memory test herself. She had diabetes and it was Sam's job to administer shots of insulin to her. If she repeatedly had to ask for the shots, she would be able to prove that his condition was real. To her dismay, Sam administered the shots robotically, giving her shots continually because he seemingly forgot that he had just given her one a little before. Eventually, she slips into a coma from the overdoses and dies, leaving Sam a patient in a mental institution. The Sam Jenkins subplot creates a creepy, disturbing sense in the viewer that Leonard may, himself, be a patient in the same mental institution, because he had also killed his wife.

Why do we get so much excitement from thrillers (and other occult genres) such as *Memento*? Perhaps they provide a channel for our sense of fear to become sublimated. We sense fear whenever the main protagonist of the story is threatened; we experience pity when the character actually experiences threat or danger; and with the "release" of inner fears and pity through the narrative, we experience catharsis (an inner cleansing). But in movies like *Memento*, catharsis is suspended and not allowed to be released because of the lack of any real resolution at the end of the movie. The movies end up providing a thrill just for the heck of the thrill, without catharsis. Perhaps that is why we find them unforgettable, as we search for catharsis outside of the movie context in our own lives.

Crime stories too are occult genres, in the sense implied here, because they also exploit and play on our sense of fear. The pulp fiction periodicals and novels that were popular at the turn of the twentieth century featured crime stories prominently. The crime and gangster movie genre flourished in the 1930s, capitalizing on people's fears, as the movie *Pulp Fiction* (1994) directed by Quentin Tarantino so cleverly brought out. *Little Caesar* (1930) made actor Edward G. Robinson a star in the role of Italian-American Rico Bandello, and actor James

Cagney won acclaim portraying Irish-American Tom Powers in *The Public Enemy* (1931). Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* (1972) paved the way for TV programs like the *Untouchables* and the *Sopranos* to become extremely popular. Today *CSI* (Crime Scene Investigation) and *LA Law*-type programs and movies populate the pop culture landscape. Even "gangsta rap" fits into this paradigm. The first major album of gangsta rap, *Straight Outta Compton* by NWA, was released in 1988. Songs from the album generated an extraordinary amount of controversy on account of their violent content, stirring protests from a number of organizations, including the FBI. So too did the early music of Ice-T, Dr. Dre, and Snoop Dogg. However, attempts to censor gangsta rap only served to publicize the music more widely, and, thus, to make it even more attractive.

Occultism surfaces in many domains of pop culture. It can be seen, for instance, in the fascination with astrology (with horoscopes being regular features of dailies, magazines, etc.) and in a bizarre interest in Satanism. Satanic themes (in such movies as *Rosemary's Baby*, *Omen*, and *The Exorcist*), or "sympathetic" depictions of the devil (such as the Rolling Stones's *Sympathy for the Devil* song and humorous movies that portray Satan as a goofy humane fellow), have become commonplace. As Amelia Wilson has cogently argued, this fascination with the devil is a legacy of nineteenth-century occultism—the century in which satanic figures were fictionalized in popular novels.[2] These brought about a revival of interest in the devil and, thus, of the emergence of Satanism, constituting a classic example of life imitating art: "it was the nineteenth century's fascination with everything and anything supernatural or occult that spurred the creation of religious Satanism."[3] Satanism is everywhere in pop culture. It surfaces, for example, in rock music. Groups such as Black Sabbath and other heavy metals bands of the 1970s and 1980s cashed in on the Satanism fad with lyrics, hard rhythms, and sounds extolling satanic ideas—a trend that continues with "shock-rocker" Marilyn Manson and various neopunk and goth groups. The practice that got the most attention of the general public, initially, was so-called backwards masking, or the supposed insertion of satanic messages in a record that became audible when the record was played backwards. The most famous accusation of the utilization of this technique was leveled at Led Zeppelin's classic song *Stairway to Heaven* (1973) in which the line, "Your stairway lies on the whispering wind" is claimed to be actually, "Cause I live with Satan" in reverse.

Hell and the devil have, in fact, been the subject of quite a number of rock albums. Here are a few:[4]

James Brown, *Hell*
AC/DC, *Highway to Hell*
Eagles, *Hell Freezes Over*
Meat Loaf, *Bat Out of Hell*
DMX, *It's Dark and Hell Is Hot*
Black Sabbath, *Heaven and Hell*
Judas Priest, *Hell Bent for Leather*
Pogues, *Hell's Ditch*
Slayer, *Hell Awaits*
Alice Cooper, *Alice Cooper Goes to Hell*

This artistic fascination with the devil is not a contemporary one, however. One of the most popular of legends, in fact, is the so-called Faust legend. Faust (c. 1480–1540) was a real person. He was a German fortune-teller and magician, who purportedly traveled about performing magic tricks and telling fortunes. The various tales about Faust first appeared in literature in *Historia von Dr. Johann Fausten* (1587), published in Frankfurt. According to one version of the legend, Faust made an agreement with the devil, named Mephistopheles. The devil promised to increase Faust's knowledge of magic and to give him twenty-four years of pleasure and power in return for his soul. At the end of the twenty-four years the devil carried Faust off to hell. Faust repented for bartering his soul for illusory knowledge and pleasure. But it was too late. The subtext in pop culture's version of this legend varies from the serious to the satirical. Are groups such as Black Sabbath serious about their devil worship or are they using it simply as part of their stage persona?

During the Middle Ages, parodies of the devil were common. Much like the parodic use of satanic themes on *South Park*, the mockery of Satan in the medieval period transformed him into a carnivalesque figure. To quote Chuck Chrisfulli and Kyra Thomson,

> The horned, hoofed, often leering Satan began to turn up in all sorts of popular entertainments, including parades, plays, festivals, puppet shows, and semipornographic hell-related pamphlets that offered up equal helpings of fiery sermonizing and calculated titillation. In these presentations the devil began to display a sense of wicked humor, using

his cunning to tempt and entice vulnerable humans into actions that would lead to their descent into hell. Devil tales offered a way to make scenes of lewd and lusty behavior acceptable to a public audience, for the lubricious sinners were, after all, going to be punished by story's end for their carnal sins. Such tales also offered a bit of satisfying class consciousness: The devil often brought out a delicious comeuppance to haughty, self-important figures of wealth, authority, and outright wickedness, with members of the clergy frequently turning up in one of these categories. (He's still doing some of the same work on hell-based episodes of *South Park*).[5]

What makes Satanism harmless in pop culture is the fact that it's treated both in a serious vein, as in *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), and in jest, as in *Little Nicky* (2000) and *Bedazzled* (2000). Here is a list of movies that have treated Satanism in one (or both) of these two ways:[6]

Le Diable au Convent (1899)
The World, the Flesh and the Devil (1914)
The Kid (1921)
The Devil's Cabaret (1931)
Glen or Glenda (1953)
The Story of Mankind (1957)
The Private Lives of Adam and Eve (1960)
The Devil's Messenger (1961)
Katarsis (1963)
Autopsy of a Ghost (1968)
The Evil (1978)
Wholly Moses! (1980)
The Forbidden Zone (1980)
The Company of Wolves (1984)
Legend (1985)
The Witches of Eastwick (1987)
Hellraiser (1987)
Exorcist III (1990)
Witch Academy (1993)
The Devil's Advocate (1997)
End of Days (1999)
G-Men from Hell (2000)
The Devil and Daniel Webster (2001)
Constantine (2005)

Arguably, among the most hilarious treatments of Satanism are the ones by the TV sitcom *South Park* and by Woody Allen in his 1997 movie *Deconstructing Harry*. In early episodes of the former, the only true religion is said (sarcastically) to be Mormonism. Non-Mormons, the sitcom intimates (with tongue in cheek), will all end up in hell, where Satan lives by the River Styx Condominiums. *South Park's* Satan is a sensitive softie and he is gay. And he is available as a plush toy and an action figure.

In an obvious satirical spoof of Dante's circles of hell in the *Divine Comedy*, Allen descends into hell in an elevator stopping at various floors on the way down (in place of Dante's circles). For example, on the fifth floor there are subway muggers, aggressive panhandlers, and literary critics; on the sixth floor, Allen finds right-wing extremists, serial killers, and lawyers who appear on TV; on the seventh floor, he finds representatives of the media; on the eighth floor, there are war criminals, televangelists, and members of the National Rifle Association; the ninth floor, the last one before reaching hell, is reserved for those on the elevator. And like Dante's *Inferno*, the last floor shows pits and caverns; but decidedly unlike the Dantesque underworld, the damned souls run around nude, and the demonic attendant is a man who invented aluminum siding.

The devil is even into pornography. In the 1970s porn movie *The Devil in Miss Jones*, a woman who has committed suicide can win her soul back only by coming back to earth and engaging in torrid sex with all those against whom she had sinned. The ironic subtext of the movie is rather transparent and requires no commentary here. Incidentally, the combination of sex with occultism has always been a pattern in pop culture—in circuses and sideshows, for instance, booths hosting a palm reader were right next to those where sexual performances were put on.

Interestingly, but not surprisingly, the devil is also found in the marketing field. In 1971, the Dodge division of Chrysler gave one of its Plymouth models the name Demon. The car came with hellish graphics including a tough little cartoon devil as its trademark. The model was a bust because of political correctness. Several religious groups made it known that they were offended by the choice of the name. Chrysler decided to discontinue the model after 1973.

A recent addition to pop demonology, as it can be called, comes by way of the comic books and novels by Mike Mignola, the creator of *Hellboy*, starting in 1994. Hellboy is an occult detective who fights

Nazi scientists and grotesque human monsters. He is a hero fighting for good, even though he has a devilish appearance, with a tail and a large right hand made of stone, keeping his devil horns sanded down to numbs. Maybe this type of demonological representation is a derivative of the "sympathy" that the Rolling Stones expressed toward the devil. The devil is as much a figment of the carnivalesque imagination as he is of the religious one. Clearly, in pop culture, nothing is sacred (pun intended), not even the devil. Mark Twain also had a soft spot for the devil. In his *Chronicle of Young Satan* (1887), he painted a sympathetic portrait of the devil child; in *Letters from the Earth* (1909), he had Satan write eleven letters to the archangels Michael and Gabriel that portray the absurdity of life on earth.

Why, the reader may ask (as did several students of mine during one lecture), is there such a fascination with magic, wizardry, Satanism, demonology, astrology, and other occult themes in today's world of sophisticated technology and science? As mentioned, my guess is that this fascination provides an outlet for expunging fear. Afraid of the mysteries of the real world, humans seek solace in symbolism that, by its very nature, puts a label on unexplained phenomena, thus taming them in an imaginary way. The inclusion of occult themes, characters, and spectacles, from card reading to freakish characters (a bearded lady, an eight-foot giant, and so on) in carnivalesque spectacles, and in pop culture's derivatives of these spectacles, bespeaks of an intrinsic need to domesticate fear. Jung, as mentioned several times in this book, furnished an interesting theoretical framework for understanding the connection between primal emotions, such as fear, and symbolic practices. He posited that there are deep organizing tendencies in the human psyche that allow us to connect emotions to symbols. The connection between fear and the dark, for example, comes out in practices as diverse as Halloween and Batman stories. Jung called the archetype that generated such symbolic and narrative practices, appropriately, the Shadow.

Another reason why occultism finds fertile ground in pop culture is because it flies in the face of traditionalism. As Gary Lachman has argued in his perceptive book, *Turn Off Your Mind*, in the 1960s, occult beliefs started to proliferate because they were adopted by counterculture youths.[7] Groups like the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, and other counterculture bands and artists, along with their countless followers, introduced (or more correctly reintroduced) everything from the Tarot, the I Ching, astrology, Kabbalah, yogis, witchcraft, UFOs,

and J. R. R. Tolkein's *Lord of the Rings* into pop culture, where they remain firmly entrenched to this day. And this has had a profound effect on all of us, he claims. The movie *The Matrix*, for instance, has led (according to Lachman) to the rise in brutal serial murders, suggesting a possible osmotic effect between pop cultural spectacles and real life horror. Lachman puts it as follows:

> The rise of seemingly pointless serial killings gives pause for concern. Likewise the horrific happenings at the Columbine High School near Denver, Colorado, when Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold shot dead a dozen of their fellow students. Dressed in black raincoats, the two casually slaughtered their classmates, before turning their guns on themselves. It later turned out that they had devised a plan for even greater destruction, including hijacking a plane and crashing it into a major city. If the killings weren't macabre enough—an although there's no causal link, both were fans of various "shock rockers"—they seemed eerily paralleled in a hit sci-fi film of the time, *The Matrix* (1999), in which Keanu Reeves, guns-ablazin', leads a band of black leather-clad psychic hackers out of the prison of a false reality. The Gnostic motif of breaking through to the other side had a mini-renaissance in some late-nineties sci-fi thrillers, like *Dark City* and *The Cube*. But in *The Matrix* this theme is coupled with a Gestapo-like dress code, shades and plenty of guns. Dark glasses, leather coats and automatic weapons met the ancient Gnostic dream of escaping the prison house of the flesh. Magic is still alive today. It is just that its practitioners don't all wear sandals.[8]

The need to "escape the prison house of the flesh," as Lachman puts it, has often been satisfied by occult practices and traditions. Simon During has similarly shown how fortunetellers, palm readers, numerologists, along with magicians and hypnotists, have allowed people to escape their bodily prisons, at least in popular lore.[9] It should come as no surprise, therefore, that N-Power is part of how people now come to grips with the world around them. It is the reason why certain number-based events, such as 9/11, the millennium, or the year 2012, are perceived as being apocalyptic.

THE ROCKY HORROR PICTURE SHOW

Nowhere has occultism taken a more carnivalesque turn than it did in the mid-1970s in the form of a cult event called *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. The event was, clearly, a parody of 1950s rock and

roll culture and bourgeois America wrapped into one, utilizing occult symbolism in an ironic way. As Greenwald remarks, it was an attempt "to shock by departing from the tradition of rock and roll machismo established by Elvis," vaunting a new form of sexual theater that favored "makeup, cross dressing, and an overall smearing of the lines between the sexes."[10] A similar form of theatricality blending occultism with transgendered sexuality was embodied in the stage roles adopted by the members of the hard rock band, Kiss, throughout the 1970s. Kiss's performances on stage were designed to shock in a satirical way. Each member of the band adopted a comic-book persona—a glamour boy, an alien from outer space, a kitty cat, and a sex-crazed Kabuki monster. Each wore makeup and the stage act included fire-eating, smoke bombs, hydraulic lifts, and the smashing of instruments. Other transgendered occult artists and musicians came onto the scene at about the same time, or shortly thereafter, including Michael Jackson, Alice Cooper, and Marilyn Manson.

The Rocky Horror Picture Show debuted in 1975 in Britain. It was carnivalesque sexual theater at its best, mocking traditional gender roles, fashion practices, and pseudomorality. It has become a tradition in many areas of the world for the event to take place at midnight on Halloween, when patrons show up dressed in drag and lingerie. Like the ancient and medieval carnivals, the audience is not only part of the show, it is the show. Audiences dance and sing, shout lewd comments at the screen, and throw objects at certain points in the film, such as toast, toilet paper, water, or rice. The master of ceremonies, called sardonically Dr. Frank-N-Furter, instructs and exhorts the audience, saying, "Give yourself over to absolute pleasure. Swim the warm waters of sins of the flesh—erotic nightmares beyond any measure, and sensual daydreams to treasure forever. Can't you just see it? Don't dream it, be it."

To his entreaty audience members start to indulge themselves in "absolute pleasure" by drinking alcohol and smoking (among other things). *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* never made it into mainstream movie theaters because its carnivalesque elements were so weird and transgressive that, as the movie itself warns, in parodic imitation of censorship ratings: "Society must be protected. You're lifestyle is too extreme." The sole intent of the movie seems to have been to ensure that its transgressive carnivalesque symbolism would never be appropriated by the mainstream. Men wearing corsets and fishnet stockings, and women displaying themselves in blatant sexual ways, are things

that simply will never trickle their way down into the mainstream. Nor will any of the movie's props, such as Dr. Frank-N-Furter's animated sex toy in the form of a corpse, or its lifestyle themes, which include transvestism, homosexuality, cannibalism, voyeurism, adultery, and incest.

The use of the word horror in the spectacle is significant. In a nonsatirical way, horror movies have the same function as *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and the freak shows of the carnivals. Like P. T. Barnum's sideshows, with its displays of Siamese twins, bearded ladies, eight-foot wrestlers, and eight-hundred-pound individuals, the horror genre taps into our fascination with, and fear of, the grotesque. The genre has always been popular for this reason, since it came onto the pop culture scene through the pulp fiction medium in the 1920s. It is still a staple of the movies and television. From the zombie films of the 1950s and 1960s to current day gory films like *Hostel* and *Saw*, the horror movie provides a cathartic relief from inner psychic horrors. Not all critics would agree with this assessment, however. Many see in a monster horror movie such as *King Kong* (1933) a metaphor for xenophobia, homophobia, or some other phobia, with the monster representing the targeted "Other." Another contrary reading (to mine) of the horror genre is that it caters to men's scopophiliac instinct (the pleasure of viewing women as erotic objects). In this interpretive frame, the heroine who falls for King Kong is seen as the true victim, succumbing to masculine sexual interests. But in my view such interpretations really are no more than vehicles for expressing particular ideologies on the part of certain critics. To my mind, neither type of interpretation seems to really get at the emotional roots of the appeal of a movie such as *King Kong*—an appeal that is evident in many folklore traditions. The fascination with the grotesque throughout the ages suggests a deeper motivation for the appeal of horror stories. Whereas Disney allows viewers to escape into a fantasy world of beauty, horror forces us to escape through the "other side" of fantasy—the dark horrific side. To put it differently, Disney flicks are to sweet dreams what horror flicks are to nightmares. There is, literally, more than meets the eye in horror viewing than any social or scopophiliac interpretive schemes might suggest. As British film critic Robin Wood aptly observes, "One might say that the true subject of the horror genre is the struggle for recognition of all that our civilization represses and oppresses," including our inability to face our "nothingness and probable purposelessness."[11]

The director who has shown an understanding of this more than any other is the Canadian David Cronenberg who, in his classic *Videodrome* (1983), suggests that the only horror is the video genre itself. In the film, a video "virus" emits infectious rays that induce hallucinations (a television screen, for example, becomes a huge pair of lips, a video cassette is forced into a woman's genitals). The protagonist at the end mutates into a videocassette, prepared to bring about hallucinations in others. The movie is both a warning and a parody against modern day censorious critiques of horror. As Cronenberg himself has put it, "Censors tend to do what only psychotics do: they confuse reality with illusion."[12]

The first modern horror story, *Frankenstein* (1818), was penned by a woman, Mary Shelley (1797–1851), a fact that seems by itself to contradict the male-accusing subtext of scopophiliac theory. The monster in the story was created by the Swiss physician Frankenstein from parts of corpses. Frankenstein ends up destroying its creator. And that may be the true subtext of the entire horror genre—the secret desire to destroy our creator for having given us life in all its horror. *Frankenstein* was one of the first Gothic novels, which gained broad popularity, revolving around mystery, horror, violence, and the supernatural. This is something that the early filmmakers did not miss. In Germany, director Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919), with its disfigured sets and twisted narrative of a sleepwalking murderer who is controlled by a mysterious doctor, is an exemplar of an early serial-killer horror flick. It was followed by F. W. Murnau's classic vampire film *Nosferatu* (1922) and *The Last Laugh* (1924), which portrayed the morbid thoughts of an aging doorman demoted to a washroom attendant.

The golden age of cinema started (not surprisingly) with a cycle of horror films, including *Dracula* (1931), *Frankenstein* (1931), and *The Mummy* (1932), which spawned a series of sequels and spin-offs that lasted throughout the 1930s. The horror genre continues to be an intrinsic part of popular cinema, no matter how silly or formulaic the plots and the "scare techniques" might seem to be. The appeal of horror movies is the same appeal of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* or of occult carnivalesque spectacles generally. As the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1901–81) suggested, horror films tap into our fear of the body and its essentially grotesque nature. This can be seen in the classic flick *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), where the character called Hitchhiker slits his hand open just for the thrill of it. Onlookers recoil

in horror, except for the invalid Franklin, who realizes that what lies between the body and the outside world is really only a small membrane of skin, protected merely by a social taboo against its violation. The gap between the inner and outer worlds, the movie suggests, is blurred by what Lacan calls *glissage*, whereby the inner body "spills out" into the world, becoming nothing but meaningless matter. That is the true horror, as Tod Browning's 1932 movie *Freaks* emphasized. The movie included a shot of an armless, legless man crawling with a knife between his teeth, and emerging from under a circus wagon like a gigantic worm. As Browning clearly understood, freaks are metaphors for our fear that we are nothing more than an assemblage of meaningless organs and limbs. At the end of the movie, the high-wire artist is somehow transformed into a chicken with the head of a woman—a scene that brings out the absurdity of the human condition in mock circus fashion. In a phrase, the horror is inside us, not out there. In *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), Ridley Scott's *Alien* movies (1978, 1986, 1992, 1997), and John Carpenter's *The Thing* (1982), aliens (freaks) invade our most private spaces, impressing themselves more and more indelibly on us. The subtext is a transparent one: the ultimate threat to humanity comes from within the human psyche itself.

If some critics see something different in the horror genre it may be because of the fact that many contemporary horror movies have updated the theme of freakishness to fit contemporary social themes. In *The Exorcist* (1972) it is the parent-child relationship that provides the context for horror—Reagan's parents are divorced, her father neglects her, and Father Karras's mother dies in poverty. If the family can survive the crisis together in spite of everything, the evil entity will die; if the family collapses, the entity will have successfully destroyed them and, by metaphorical extension, the concept of the family itself.

Monster movies and rock videos (such as Michael Jackson's classic *Thriller*) about zombies, vampires, monsters, and the like are also part of pop culture's fascination with the grotesque and with freakishness.[13] The monster movie is particularly interesting in this regard. Originally from the Latin word *monere*, "to warn," in the Middle Ages those who were born disfigured or with some abnormal or grotesque feature were called "monsters." It was believed that their monstrosity was a punishment for the parents for having done something unworthy. The monster genre in pop culture is really nothing more than a modern-day descendant of the medieval monster theme, complete with its moralistic subtext. This is especially evident in spectacles and programs such

as television's *Beauty and the Beast* series (1987–90). And it is evident in the works of Stephen King (b. 1947). King's works turn ordinary situations into terrifying, monstrous ones.

A particularly interesting monster genre is the werewolf narrative, a genre that goes right back to antiquity. In an ancient Greek myth, for instance, Lycaon was a wicked ruler who planned to murder Zeus. He did not succeed, and Zeus turned him into a wolf.[14] Werewolves appear in many tales. In some, people turn themselves into wolves by putting on a wolf skin, by drinking water from a wolf's footprint, or by rubbing a magic ointment on their bodies. In others, they are transformed into wolf monsters by someone else's magic power. The werewolves in most stories try to eat people. The most famous story of this kind is Little Red Riding Hood. In the original story, the little girl does not survive the wolf attack. Interestingly, ever since the tale a sexually rapacious man is called a wolf in colloquial language. The people in the stories who are threatened by werewolves use various methods to bring them back to human form. These methods include saying the werewolf's real name, hitting the werewolf three times on the forehead, or making the sign of the cross.

VAMPIRES AND GOTHS

One of the consequences of pop culture's fascination with occultism is the rise of "pop vampirism," as it can be called, both in fictional representations and in the actual lifestyle choices made by some people. The starting point is, of course, the novel through which the figure of Dracula was introduced to the modern world, namely Bram Stoker's famous novel of 1897. Coming at the end of the romantic period, the Dracula figure fit in perfectly with the times, challenging authority, exuding passion and sexual power, and resuscitating the mythic search for immortality. Belief in vampirism actually goes back to ancient times.[15] But it really came to the surface in Eastern Europe in the eighteenth century when it was considered to be a real condition. It was believed that a vampire rose at night because of his intense sexual desires. The only way a vampire could be rendered permanently dead was by driving a stake through his heart. Incidentally, Stoker had his vampire come out in daylight, and he had no cape. The cape was added to the legend by the 1931 movie *Dracula* (from the 1927 stage production) with Bela Lugosi. And the fact that exposure to sunlight

is fatal for the vampire was added by *Son of Dracula* in 1943, starring Lon Chaney, Jr.

What is vampirism, psychologically speaking? Fiction has, of course, transformed the vampire into a suave nobleman (Count Dracula), highly attractive and seductive, and fascinatingly dangerous. His bite on the female neck is strangely erotic, though. Like the legendary Don Juan, could Count Dracula be the unconscious sublimation of a fantasy figure—a secret erotic lover that women, in the eighteenth century at least, were expected to avoid as a danger to them (and by implication the social order), since he could turn them into purely sexual creatures? They could, however, dream about him, as Linda Sonntag suggests: "The potent combination of eroticism and fear, blood and death, sends down many skeins of recognition into the unconscious mind. The kiss and the bite are both sexual. He comes at night to innocent maidens dreaming in their beds, ravishes them and leaves them bleeding, whereupon they are transformed into rampantly sexual beings. By day they remain pure and listless, but by night they become voluptuous harpies who in turn need the sexual kiss-bite to survive."[16]

The vampire is, arguably, a symbolic vehicle for representing the sexual liberation of women. Aware of this latent symbolism, poets such as Wolfgang von Goethe and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who created the first fictitious female vampires in *The Bride of Corinth* (1797) and *Christabel* (1800), respectively, expanded the narrative to allow women in it the right to express their erotic desires overtly. In 1872, Sheridan Lefau created the first lesbian vampire in his novel *Camilla*—a novel that has inspired subsequent films, including Roger Vadim's *Mourir de Plaisir* (1962).

Whatever the symbolic meaning of vampirism, there is little doubt that it holds great appeal on the stage of the theater of the profane. Blending sex with horror is a formula that draws and fascinates audiences, scaring and titillating them at the same time. For this, and probably other related psychological reasons, vampirism has surfaced as a lifestyle subculture. As Tony Horne has written in his book, *Children of the Night*, members of vampire clubs enact rituals on a nightly basis in the belief that the drinking of human blood is somehow purifying and transformative.[17] This is a perfect example of how a mythic legend and its fictitious offspring have spawned an ersatz reality through which people can live. Vampirism is ersatz theater that seems to provide

a meaningful lifestyle to those who feel marginalized or existing emotionally outside the confines of the social mainstream.

The vampirism theme is everywhere in pop culture. It can be seen on television with programs (current and defunct) such as *Dark Shadows* (1969–71), *Forever Knight* (1992–96), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003), *Blade* (2006–7), among many others. And, of course, it is a main ingredient of the goth lifestyle. In having adopted the same vampiristic-parodic horror attitude of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, goths have become a veritable subculture, although their numbers are dwindling as I write. *Subculture* is the term used by anthropologists to designate a group of people who set themselves apart from the mainstream culture, living in parallel with it through their own set of values, ethics, symbols, and lifestyle. It is essential to distinguish between a subculture and a counterculture. The former, as mentioned, is a group that acts symbolically against the dominant culture and the society that upholds it; the latter is a group that pits itself culturally and politically against the mainstream society in order to overthrow it or change it drastically. The goths have no intention of replacing the mainstream culture and its social system. They have decided simply to live in a parallel world, symbolizing their difference through clothing, hairstyle, jewelry, cosmetics, slang, music, and overall lifestyle.

Goth culture is a derivative of a subgenre of punk called gothic rock in the late 1970s. From the outset, goths distinguished themselves with bodily symbols, such as jewelry and tattoos, along with black clothing, white makeup, and black cosmetics.[18] These cohere into a pastiche of "magical meanings" that the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss termed *bricolage*. Dick Hebdige has, in fact, used this term to characterize all subcultures:

> In particular, the concept of bricolage can be used to explain how subcultural styles are constructed. In *The Savage Mind* Lévi-Strauss shows how the magical modes utilized by primitive peoples (superstition, sorcery, myth) can be seen as implicitly coherent, though explicitly bewildering systems of connection between things which perfectly equip their users to "think" their own world. These magical systems of connection have a common feature: they are capable of infinite extension because basic elements can be used in a variety of improvised combinations to generate new meanings within them. Bricolage has thus been described as a "science of the concrete" in a recent definition which clarifies the original anthropological meaning of the term.[19]

There is, of course, variation within the goth lifestyle code. There are "romantigoths,' "deathrockers," "cybergoths," "rivet-heads," and others who are distinguished from mainstream goths by means of differential details in the basic model of black and leather attire. Vampirism is, needless to say, a dominant theme in goth lifestyles. Like fictional vampires, goths live on their own terms, apart from the social mainstream, socializing mainly in the wee hours of the night, in obvious observance of an implicit vampirism code of conduct. Goth lifestyle is, in effect, an engagement in occultism. Goths deem themselves to be highly independent and individualistic. In effect, they are really the offspring of the same mindset that made punk rock and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* attractive to many youths of the era.

The use of the term *goth* is informative because it comes ultimately from the novel genre called Gothic. The novels were called this way because they took place in gloomy, medieval castles built in the Gothic style of architecture, which included secret passageways, dungeons, and towers that provided ideal settings for strange and bizarre happenings. Most of the novels were set in Italy or Spain, because those countries seemed remote and mysterious to English readers. In the 1800s, elements of the Gothic style appeared in other novels, such as *Wuthering Heights* (1847) by Emily Bronte. The style also influenced such American writers as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, and Edgar Allan Poe.

Although it does not have a large number of adherents today, the influence of the goth subculture and vampirism generally has nevertheless reached deeply into general American pop culture. It can be seen in the fascination with gothic themes on current and past television programs, in mainstream Hollywood movies, and in some cosmetic and clothing trends (dark clothing, dark cosmetics, etc.). It is also a cinematic style that many critics call erroneously postmodern. Films such as *Edward Scissorhands* and *The Crow* are modern-day Gothic narratives, not postmodern texts, as some would claim. The same Gothic style and textuality can be seen in Anne Rice's vampire novels, and in the lifestyles and lyrics of bands such as Nine Inch Nails. And of course, it is an intrinsic part of the allure of the Batman narratives which, not by coincidence, take place in Gotham City—a name that is an obvious variant of Gothic. In effect, goth has become an unconscious pattern within general pop culture, whether it is realized or not.

UFOs

As Lachman suggested, another occult theme ensconced into pop culture by the hippies was that of UFOs and aliens. Since the 1960s, in fact, the topic has saturated the pop culture landscape, with an unprecedented proliferation of movies, TV programs, documentaries, bestselling books, Web sites, and magazines that deal with UFOs either as fiction or scientific fact. Some culture critics see this fascination with UFOs as a search for meaning by a secular culture beyond the traditional religious paradigms. Others see it as a means of critiquing government through a collage of stories that emphasize alien visitors, abductees, government cover-ups, conspiracies, and the like. Whether the fiction is serious, as in programs such as the now defunct *X-Files*, or ironic, as in the series of *Men in Black* movies, the UFO phenomenon is clearly part of a New Age occultism, as Lachman suggests, which sees extraterrestrial activity as being inextricably linked with spirituality.[20]

The UFO theme is in all pop media. On TV it can be seen in programs such as *Star Trek* (in all its versions and editions, the original series running from 1966–69), *The Twilight Zone* (1959–64), *ALF* (1986–90), *Mystery Science Theater 3000* (1989–99), *Quantum Leap* (1989–93), *Babylon 5* (1994–98), *X-Files* (1993–2002), *Third Rock from the Sun* (1996–2001), *Farscape* (1999–2003), *Roswell* (1999–2007), and many others. There is even now a TV channel (Space) which broadcasts science fiction programming that often involves UFO themes on a twenty-four-hour basis. Needless to say, the topic of alien beings has been a major attraction for movie audiences since the origins of cinema. Below is a sampling of this fascination:

Le Voyage dans la lune (*Voyage to the Moon*; 1902)
Flash Gordon series of films (1930s)
The Day the Earth Stood Still (1951)
The Thing (1951)
It Came from Outer Space (1953)
Invasion of the Body Snatchers (1956)
Not of This Earth (1957)
UFO Incident (1975)
Close Encounters of the Third Kind (1977)
Alien (1979)
E. T. (1982)

Predator (1987)
Mars Attacks (1996)
Independence Day (1996)
K-Pax (2001)
Signs (2002)

It is no coincidence, incidentally, that many of the contemporary media products of "UFO-think," as it can be called, show many parallels and connections with other occult-horror themes. The *X-Files*, for example, often focused on freakish aspects of the body, as Gedalof, Boulter, Faflak, and McFarlane aptly observe, "One might call to mind the television series *The X-Files*, specifically those episodes not following the alien conspiracy arc: more often than not, these episodes focus on some 'freakish' aspect of the body, from psychopathic killers whose metamorphic bodies awake to feed every 33 years, to uncanny half-man, half-worm creatures inhabiting and feeding off the waste products of the contemporary city. As a good gothic text, *The X-Files* explores the extreme boundaries of our understanding of what constitutes the 'human.'"[21]

Certainly, the theme of freakishness is implicit in the *Alien* series of movies, with their textual allusion to Franz Kafka's nightmarish *Metamorphosis* (1915), in which a man awakens to find that he has turned into an enormous insect. Some critics see *Alien* as a filmic channel for expressing the fear of otherness. If by otherness, one includes the carnivalesque fear of, and fascination with, freaks, then I would agree. *Alien* taps into a primal form of fear, expressed in many occult traditions through terrifying images of the body, ranging from satanic creatures to human monsters.[22] As Oscar Wilde has aptly put it, real monstrosity is found in nature and art, not in others. He wrote, "Art, like Nature, has her monsters, things of bestial shape and with hideous voices."[23]

There are now UFO churches and UFO organizations (scientific and recreational). Believing that a UFO behind the Hale-Bopp comet would carry them to heaven, thirty-nine similarly dressed members of Heaven's Gate even committed suicide in the United States—an event that received wide media coverage. To the Heaven's Gate community, the distinction between fact and fiction was nonexistent. The term often used in media studies to refer to this phenomenon is the *simulacrum*—a term associated with late French philosopher Jean Baudrillard (1929–2007) that he used to explain why it is that people

can no longer distinguish, or want to distinguish, between reality and fantasy.[24] Baudrillard claimed that the borderline between representation and reality has utterly vanished in today's media world, collapsing into a simulacrum, a mindset where the distinction between fact and fiction has broken down completely.

All this might signal a return to a primordial mythic state of mind, where the real and the fantastic, consciousness and dream states, are not perceived as distinct but as continuous. The event that showcased the simulacrum-inducing power of media was a 1938 radio broadcast by Orson Welles (1915–85) on Halloween night of 1938. Welles took H. G. Wells's novel *The War of the Worlds* and turned it into a radio drama, frightening many listeners into believing that Martians had landed and invaded New Jersey. He was able to bring this "reality-simulating" effect about with a series of "on-the-spot" news reports describing the landing of Martian spaceships. An announcer would remind the radio audience, from time to time, that the show was fictional. Even so, many listeners went into a state of panic, thinking that Martians had actually invaded the Earth. The police and the army were notified by concerned citizens, and many people ran onto the streets shouting hysterically. The reaction took Welles and his acting crew by surprise. They did not expect that people would take the show seriously; after all it was just that, a show. They had forgotten (or ignored) Plato's warning that representation and reality are almost impossible for people to take apart psychologically, especially when the former simulates the latter.

The incident is now a famous one in the annals of media and pop culture history, underscoring the powerful role that the first electronic stage, radio, played in promoting and ensconcing the simulacrum effect into daily life. Motivated by events of this nature, media critic George Gerbner has claimed that the power of the media to blur the distinctions between fiction and reality has taken over from traditional cultural forces:

> The historical circumstances in which we found ourselves have taken the magic of human life—living in a universe erected by culture—out of the hands of families and small communities. What has been a richly diverse handcrafted process has become—for better or worse, or both—a complex manufacturing and mass-distribution enterprise. This has abolished much of the provincialism and parochialism, as well as some of the elitism, of the pretelevision era. It has enriched parochial

cultural horizons. It also gave increasingly massive industrial conglomerates the right to conjure up much of what we think about, know, and do in common.[25]

To understand the popularity and simulacrum-inducing effects of UFO-think, it is necessary to take a step back and look at the rise and spread of science fiction in pop culture. Unlike traditional forms of fiction, this genre deals typically with the effects of science or future events on human beings. Although it has ancient roots—in his *True History* (160 BCE), Lucian of Samosata described a trip to the moon; the seventeenth century British prelate and historian Francis Godwin also wrote of travel to the moon; and the English statesman Sir Thomas More wrote about a futuristic world in *Utopia* (1516)—science fiction, as we know it, traces its origins to the period after the Industrial Revolution when, in her novel *Frankenstein* (mentioned in this chapter), Mary Shelley explored the potential of science and technology for doing good or evil. Horror and science fiction, in fact, have a common origin, as Lachman has also argued. Right after the publication of her novel, the science-fiction genre emerged as a new form of popular fiction. The first writer to specialize in the genre was French author Jules Verne (1828–1905). His highly popular novels included *Journey to the Center of the Earth* (1864) and *Around the World in Eighty Days* (1873). The first major English writer of science fiction was H. G. Wells (1866–1946), whose *Time Machine* (1895), *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896), and *The War of the Worlds* (1898) became classics the instant they were published. In the twentieth century the popularity of science fiction grew with the publication of *Brave New World* (1932) by Aldous Huxley (1894–1963) and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) by George Orwell (1903–50), and with the advent of movie sci-fi thrillers, starting at the turn of the century with Georges Méliès's *A Trip to the Moon* (1902). By the 1920s, science fiction had become a highly popular genre in pulp novels, movies, and radio. It remains so to this day.

It is probably no coincidence that the sighting of UFOs and aliens started in earnest in 1947, when the colorful term *flying saucers* was coined by the press to describe a sighting by Kenneth Arnold, a civilian pilot, who reported unknown objects speeding through the air. In the same year, the most famous of all UFO incidents occurred, with reports of a UFO crashing to earth near Roswell, New Mexico, and alien corpses being taken away to a secret location—an incident that

has been transformed into a pop culture movement of its own since the late 1970s. In 1967, Wesleyan University became the first academic institution to offer credit courses on UFOs, followed in 1969 with the establishment of the Mutual UFO Network (MUFON) to investigate UFOs and, then, of the Center for UFO Studies (CUFO) in 1973, and SETI (Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence) in 1984.

Together with the fascination in crop circles and various unexplained phenomena (from the construction of the Egyptian pyramids to the mysterious disappearances in the Bermuda Triangle), the UFO phenomenon, as a template for understanding the power of occultism, or N-Power, inherent in pop culture, would certainly need much more treatment than I can give it here. Moreover, in no way is my brief assessment of the phenomenon intended to berate either those who claim to have seen UFOs or captured them on film or those who make it their profession to study the UFO phenomenon. On the contrary, the line between truth and fiction is always a fine one, and those studying UFOs scientifically are standing right on that line to see what it yields. The only point I want to make here is that it is no coincidence that interest in UFOs coincides with the rise of occultism in pop culture. "Is there anybody out there?" was a constant theme of the *X-Files*. I will leave that possibility, known as the Fermi Paradox, for others better qualified than I am to investigate. Rennay Craats explains it as follows:

> Ufologists and believers are optimistic that the age-old question of whether there are civilizations beyond our knowledge will soon be answered. It is a question posed by many great minds, including physicist Enrico Fermi, who spent a great deal of time pondering the existence of technologically advanced civilizations in the universe. The Fermi Paradox asks where such civilizations are, and if there are many advanced alien civilizations, why has evidence of this existence eluded people on Earth for centuries? The paradox suggests that the two contentions are oppositional—if there are so many civilizations, there should be some signs, such as probes or radio transmissions. So, Fermi states, either intelligent life is, in fact, rare and our current observations are incomplete, and so we haven't received these signs, or the way in which we are searching for them is faulty.[26]

In a sense, the UFO phenomenon shows how science and myth have fused in today's pop culture. The truth may be out there, as the *X-Files* put it, but more often than not it is within us, shaped by the world in which we live and with which we interact.

N-Power

I started off this chapter with a consideration of car models with alphanumeric names. That branding practice resonates with what I have called N-Power. Models named C55, E55, S55 (Audi), 323i, 330xi, 750Li, and X32.5i (BMW) seem to hide some secret numerological code that cries out for interpretation. What is the secret code? There is, of course, no code in this case, just an implied one. This marketing practice is appealing because it taps into an ancient form of symbolism and an ancient philosophy that has resurfaced in pop culture in practices and themes that range from alphanumeric car names to horoscopes, vampirism, horror movies, and UFOs.

As discussed, number symbolism is ancient. Pythagoras held that number existed prior to physical reality and that this reality is mirrored in the numerical patterns we discover partially through reasoning and partially through serendipity. Early cultures imprinted numbers in pottery, fabrics, monuments, and other surfaces and objects as enactments of this belief. In the medieval period, the mysteries of number were studied under the rubric of the Quadrivium—arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music—the four liberal arts considered to be essential for understanding reality along with the Trivium of logic, rhetoric, and grammar.[27] The story of numbers is, thus, not just a story highlighting the role of logical reasoning in human life; it is also one that brings out the importance of occult symbolism in that same life. The number three, for instance, is held to have special meaning in both the Old and New Testaments of the Bible—three men visited Abraham as he sat by his tent on the plains of Mamre (Genesis 18:2); the plague of darkness covered Egypt for three days (Exodus 11:22); Balaam's ass refused to proceed on its journey three times, and was thus smitten three times for refusing to move (Numbers 22); Jonah was in the belly of the whale for three days and three nights (Jonah 1:17); Saul was blind for three days (Acts 9:9); Christ said to Peter at the Last Supper that before the rooster would crow two times, Peter would have denied him three times (Mark 14:30); and the list could go on and on. Other religious meanings ascribed to this number can be seen in the Christian concept of a Triune God and in the belief that three worlds are found in the afterlife (Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven).

The number seven (as mentioned earlier) is viewed as equally important by the Bible. For instance, there are seven deadly sins, seven virtues, seven sorrows, seven devils cast out by Mary Magdalene, and

seven joys experienced by the Virgin Mary; the Sabbath was the seventh day of Creation; after the flood subsided, Noah sent out a dove every seven days to look over the land and in the seventh month the Ark rested on Mount Ararat; Jacob worked seven years for the hand of Rachel, but was given Leah instead; and so on.

Number symbolism is universal. In the Ga language of Ghana, for instance, seven is considered to be an ominous number and is always spoken of as six plus one. In parts of Northern Africa, five is thought to be a protective number, since there are five fingers in the human hand. It is often woven into banners and painted over doorways to avert evil. A thick volume could be written about the many meanings ascribed to the number thirteen. So widespread is the fear of this number that it has even been assigned a clinical name: triskaidekaphobia. In Christianity, thirteen is linked with the Last Supper of Jesus and his twelve disciples and the fact that the thirteenth person, Judas, betrayed Jesus. In the book of Revelations, the number 666 is mentioned as the "number of the beast." It has been surmised that this referred to Nero the Roman emperor, whose name has this numerological value if written with the Hebrew alphabet. The interpretation of this number as referring to the Antichrist is due to Martin Luther (1483–1546), the German leader of the Reformation. Luther claimed that 666 years was the duration of the Papal regime.

Even π is mentioned in the Old Testament (II Chron. 4:2) where we read, "Also he made a molten sea of ten cubits from brim to brim, round in compass and five cubits the height thereof, and a line of thirty cubits did compass it about." This tells us that the Hebrews took the ratio to be three. The Babylonians also thought it was three, and the Egyptians estimated it to be 3.1604. This constant holds great mythic appeal. In a fascinating 1997 movie, titled π*: Faith in Chaos*, directed by Darren Aronofsky, a brilliant mathematician, Maximilian Cohen, teeters on the brink of insanity as he searches for an elusive pattern or code hidden in π. For the previous ten years, Cohen was on the verge of his most important discovery—decoding the numerical pattern hidden in the seemingly chaotic stock market. As he comes close to a solution, real chaos begins to surround him. Pursued by an aggressive Wall Street firm set on financial domination and a Kaballah sect intent on unlocking the secrets hidden in their ancient holy texts, Cohen races to crack the π code, hoping to defy the madness that looms before him. Instead, he uncovers a secret for which everyone is willing to kill him. In the end, he succumbs to madness.

Human beings seem to possess the basic notion that the world is itself a magical bricolage of numbers arranged in patterns. Across cultures, people tend to think of certain things such as dates, street addresses, or certain numbers as having great symbolic significance. N-Power is a driving force in many domains of pop culture, as we have seen. It is evident, for example, in the popularity of TV programs such as the series *Lost* (2004–), where plots revolve around secret codes, such as the number sequence 4 8 15 16 23 42, a string that came from the cryptic content of a radio transmission broadcast from the island in episode eighteen. These numbers reached the mainland through two Navy characters, one of whom wound up insane, mumbling numbers incoherently.

Lost began with a group of passengers on Oceanic flight 815 from Sydney, Australia to Los Angeles, who were blown off course, crashing on a remote, deserted island. Certain that they would be rescued, the surviving forty-eight passengers set up camp on the beach, attempting to make the most of their temporary situation—note that forty-eight and 815 are digits in the mythic sequence. One of the passengers, Dr. Jack Shephard, suggests that they look for the plane's transceiver so that they can radio for help. When a terrifying howl comes from the jungle, it becomes obvious that they are not on an ordinary island. Mystery is heaped on top of previous mysteries, and clues are left for the passengers to figure out what is going on. A monster and a group of mysterious people, whom the survivors refer to as "The Others," roam the island. They also find several research stations around on the island as part of a project called "Dharma Initiative." The sequence is the code that must be inputted into the Dharma computer every 108 minutes—a number representing the sum of the numbers in the sequence, a fact designed evidently to suggest the mystic qualities associated with the Fibonacci Sequence—a sequence used also in *The Da Vinci Code*. The Fibonacci Sequence is a series of numbers in which each member is the sum of the two preceding numbers. The series results from the solution of a puzzle found in the book *Liber Abaci* (1201) written by the Italian mathematician Leonardo Fibonacci (c. 1170–1240). Fibonacci numbers have many interesting properties and are widely used in mathematics. Natural patterns, such as the spiral growth of leaves on some trees, often exhibit patterns that are mirrored in the Fibonacci Sequence.

The N-Power appeal of the series is evidenced further by the fact that (as I write) the series has spawned an infinitude of Web sites, blogs, and the like. Here are some of the serials on network television (present and past) that, in my view, owe (or owed) their inspiration to *Lost*:

- *The Nine* (ABC) looks at the aftereffects of a brutal hostage taking of nine people, including a policeman, exploring the mystery of what happened during the ordeal.
- *Heroes* (NBC) deals with ordinary folks who discover that they have superpowers, including the capacity to bend space-time. Will they band together to prevent a disaster?
- *Six Degrees* (ABC) revolves around six people who are unaware of a secret relationship that exists among them.
- *Jericho* (CBS) concerns a prodigal son figure who tells suspicious stories of where he has been.
- *Day Break* (ABC) is about a detective who keeps on reliving the same day over and over on which he was framed for a murder (recalling the classic movie *Ground Hog Day*).
- *The Knights of Prosperity* (ABC) revolves around a group of unlikely thieves who try to realize their dreams by robbing Mick Jagger.
- *Kidnapped* (NBC) is a missing-person serial with many bizarre twists.
- *Vanished* (Fox) is another missing-person serial, which typically uses cryptic themes to hold interest in the plot.
- *Numbers* (CBS) is about a mathematician who uses his discipline to help his brother solve crimes.

Lost has also been referenced in television shows, comic books, commercials, and song lyrics. And it has been the focus of novels such as *Endangered Species* (2005) and *Secret Identity* (2006) by Cathy Hapka and *Signs of Life* (2006) by Frank Thomson, and of video games such as *The Lost Experience*. There is also a *Lost* board game, *Lost* action figures, *Lost* trading cards, and a *Lost* game for mobile phones. Pop culture is nothing if it is not an intricate web of intertwining products and events.

Perhaps the product that best emblemizes that we live in a Pythagorean world is the 1975 concept album by Cat Stevens (a musical hero of the hippie generation) titled, appropriately, *Numbers: A Pythagorean Theory Tale*. The album is based on a fictional planet called Polygor in a far-off galaxy, where Polygons inhabit its palace. The suggestion seems to be that contemporary pop culture is locatable in Polygor, a mindspace where Pythagorean mysticism and Pythagorean science have merged completely.

CHAPTER 6

SPECTACLE-POWER

WHY WE HATE TO LOVE AND LOVE TO HATE POP CULTURE

> The present age prefers the sign to the thing signified, the copy to the original, fancy to reality, the appearance to the essence, for in these days illusion only is sacred, truth profane.
>
> —Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–72)

FROM 1978 TO 1985, NETWORK TELEVISION VIEWERS TUNED IN EN MASSE to watch a cartoon show, titled the *Bugs Bunny/Tweety Show*, based on the well-known and loved Looney Tunes cartoons. The show started with the goofy character Daffy Ducky singing, to full orchestral and choral accompaniment, the following signature tune:

Overture, curtain, lights!
This is it, the night of nights.
No more rehearsing or nursing a part.
We know every part by heart!

The lyrics and the theatrical fanfare of the opening segment captured, in my view, what the spirit of popular culture is ultimately all about—the laughter and fun that comes with the "big show." In fact, Daffy goes on to say that the show is "it," and with it they will "hit the heights." The same spirit was encapsulated in the 1953 hit song "That's Entertainment" featured in Vincente Minnelli's Hollywood musical *The Band Wagon*. And it was revived in the 1974 movie bearing the title of that song—a movie in which various MGM stars from

the past presented their favorite musical moments from the studio's fifty-year history.

Spectacle and entertainment is what pop culture has always offered to mass audiences. As Daffy Duck so aptly put it, pop culture allows people to "hit the heights," and "oh what heights" they are. Like a guilty pleasure that a child is not allowed to indulge in (such as eating chocolate), pop culture is something people have always loved to hate, yet at the same time, hated to love—much like eating the chocolate they have been told is not very good for them. It has always garnered contrasting reactions and assessments, not only on the part of common folk, but also on the part of intellectuals and academics, ever since it became a mainstay of American society in the early part of the twentieth century.

But pop culture is not just fun and games. After all, one can be "entertained" profoundly by Beethoven's last magnificent quartets. It is really all a matter of degree and of defining what entertainment is. I have argued in this book that a large part of the appeal of pop culture comes not only from its entertainment value, but also (and more importantly in my view) from its unconscious incorporation of mythic symbolism—a symbolism that manifests itself in microcosmic ways in the use of single-letter symbols such as *X* and *V*. Pop culture is certainly all about spectacles and the emotional appeal that they have. But like ancient carnivals, there is much more than meets the eye here. Why is pop culture so appealing across the globe? And where it is not, the reason is, more than likely, that a particular society has taken steps to keep it away, so to speak, fearing that it might radically alter its existing (more traditional) culture. Even in America—where it is the default form of culture—the debate on what constitutes legitimate or acceptable culture seems to be always an ongoing one. If it has always been controversial, why has pop culture survived and spread? My inference in this book has been that it provides an outlet for an engagement in the profane—an engagement that is as necessary as an engagement in the sacred.

My purpose in this chapter is to go over the main themes that I have attempted to interweave throughout this book, tying some loose ends together in an attempt to answer my student's question of why we love and hate pop culture at the same time (mentioned in the Preface). I have argued, in large part, that like the ancient carnivals, pop culture is a theater of the profane. However, it has evolved into a multifaceted form of theater. It is now also the primary locus where

aesthetic creativity and innovation take place. Although many popular texts (musical, cinematic, etc.) are designed to be ephemeral and fall by the wayside as quickly as gadgets and daily consumer products; others are not, becoming part of larger artistic traditions in America and throughout the world.

LOVING AND HATING POP CULTURE

Readers of this book will probably recognize many (if not most) of the names, events, fads, products, songs, movies, programs, etc. mentioned throughout it. This is testimony to the lasting power of pop culture. In fact, my guess is that the following will be recognized by many readers of this book, which I will list in no particular order or according to no particular criterion:

The Song from the Moulin Rouge
Hound Dog
Your Cheatin' Heart
Corvettes
Audrey Hepburn
Marilyn Munroe
Jane Russell
Deborah Kerr
Burt Lancaster
From Here to Eternity
House of Wax
Playboy
I Love Lucy
Agatha Christie
The Beach Boys
Chubby Checker
the Twist
the Limbo
James Dean
Lawrence of Arabia
Tom Jones
The Pink Panther
The Feminine Mystique
Bonanza
The Fugitive
Pink Floyd

Al Pacino
American Graffiti
Last Tango in Paris
All in the Family
Michael Jackson
Lawrence Welk
Star Wars
Stephen King
Dallas
Dynasty
Hula-Hoops
Elvis Presley
Frisbees
Beverly Hills 90210
Harry Potter
Britney Spears
Paris Hilton
Larry King

The fact that readers will probably recognize most of the items on this "culture trivia test" suggests that pop culture has become the default form of culture. If I were to list the names of scientists, symphonists, philosophers, and others working today outside the domain of pop culture, it is unlikely that I would get the same level of recognition.

Why is pop culture so pervasive and so powerful? The Polish-born British anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942) contended that cultures originated to provide contexts and symbolic resources for solving psychic problems. He claimed that across the world these have allowed humans to ritualize their psychic needs in remarkably similar ways, no matter how divergent the rituals might seem. My claim here is, analogously, that pop culture emerged as a means for the profane part of the psyche to gain a ritualized outlet in a secular society. As mentioned in the opening chapter, it is culture "by the people for the people," rejecting both the supremacy of traditional arts sponsorship as well as the pretensions of pseudointellectualist tendencies that continue to exist even within contemporary societies. It is a marketplace culture. Like the Commedia dell'Arte, it has to appeal to common people, for they are the ultimate sponsors. But this does not deny pop culture an aesthetic value. A movie such as *Amadeus* (1984) is appealing to masses of people as pure entertainment at the same time that it is aesthetically powerful. On the other hand, dance fads such as the

Twist, magazines such as *Mad*, fashion shows, and wrestling matches have little more than a purely recreational function. Pop culture makes little or no distinction between art and recreation, distraction, and engagement. Although most of its products are designed to have a "short shelf life," some gain permanency, like the so-called great works of art of the past. Such is the paradox and power of pop culture.

Diverse forms of folk culture have existed since time immemorial—that is to say, common folk have always produced music, stories, and other forms of expression for recreation and ritualization. So, in a way, pop culture has always existed. But it existed in localized situations. Modern-day pop culture, on the other hand, exists everywhere, spread by mass communications media. For this reason, it has become a target of admiration and condemnation. Among those who love to hate and hate to love pop culture are culture theorists of various ideological and political stripes. From the appearance of such popular trends as the Charleston and pulp fiction, theorists have asked if these have had negative impacts on society. Are people victims of popular fads and spectacles, as Brian Wilson Key suggests, "as they scream and shout hysterically at rock concerts and later in life at religious revival meetings"?[1] Does "hitting the heights," as Daffy Duck puts it, produce a kind of vertiginous cultural downfall, to extend the metaphor? Have we, as a society, become as dependent upon entertainment as a drug addict is upon some chemical substance?

As discussed in the opening chapter, the Frankfurt School theorists were among the first to critique pop culture vitriolically, proclaiming that it lowered aesthetic standards through its crude and tasteless forms—a view that continues to have adherents to this day. This critical approach to pop culture is known generally as "culture industry theory," since it is claimed that pop culture spectacles are designed to maintain the political status quo of capitalism by banalizing cultural products so that they can be sold as quickly and as ephemerally as material products. Theodor Adorno saw the pleasure derived from pop music, for example, as being superficial and false and the listener as being nothing more than a slave to its catchy beats and simple melodies.[2] Perhaps the most discussed critique of pop culture was the one put forward by Antonio Gramsci, called "hegemony theory" (mentioned briefly in Chapter 1). According to Gramsci, the popular media support the ruling classes by placating common people with senseless entertainment fare and by presenting certain socially disruptive events (strikes, demonstrations, etc.) with the rhetoric of

moral panic. Such events are portrayed not as healthy aspects of political dissent but as crises in law and order. This is done typically by accessing and highlighting the views of the primary actors and agencies involved in the crises—the police, the courts, and the politicians. Hegemony theory claims, in essence, that pop culture is a tool of the ruling classes, allowing them to rule not by force but by promoting consensus for their sentiments. Gramsci, like other Marxists, also believed that people failed to question the hegemonic structures and forces at work in the societies in which they lived because the pop culture products to which they are exposed induce them to accept a false definition of themselves. Thus, what people call common sense is really nothing more than a "false consciousness." For Gramsci pop culture was, as Brenda Downes and Steve Miller put it, "the process by which the dominant ideology was able to naturalize aspects of how society is organized and this was achieved through the control of cultural practice."[3]

Marxist critics have always seen pop culture as part of a master plan by those in power to keep the masses passively happy so that they can control them politically and socially. In their 1933 book, *Culture and Environment*, which reads more like a resistance manifesto than a scholarly treatise, Frank R. Leavis and Denys Thompson called for resistance to pop culture and a return to "real culture."[4] Resistance to what, one might ask? Against the makers of pop culture, namely the artists, actors, movie directors, and the other people who make up its world? Should we resist vulgarity because it induces a false consciousness? Such resistance proposals ignore history. After all, in the domain of music, the operas of Mozart were often critiqued as being too vulgar, and yet now we consider them to be works of high culture, not as products designed by the ruling classes of Mozart's time to keep people in a state of slavery. In my view, the critiques put forward by culture industry theorists hide within them an elitist subtext—namely, that only intellectuals (the theorists themselves) know what good culture is and thus what is to be done about eliminating bad culture. The masses are assumed to be zombies, unaware of the manipulation to which they are subjected on a daily basis. As Downes and Miller correctly state, Marxist theory itself paradoxically "promotes elitism and the class system."[5] Moreover, it assumes that the members of the ruling classes form a monolithic and united group ready to indoctrinate masses of people in consort with each other. This is a naïve view of how modern societies operate—societies in which the diverse interests

of different classes of people clash in media and pop culture representations. As John Lough has aptly phrased it, the Marxist critique "presupposes an audience as powerless dupes, with all constituents making the same reading."[6]

In 1970s Britain, the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham was established to investigate pop culture, adopting a basically Marxist framework. The scholars at the center took the view that pop culture had debased art by turning it into a "commodity" controlled by profit-making enterprises. And, though not affiliated with the center, some British and American critics of pop culture today continue to draw heavily upon the general arguments made by the center. But this whole line of argument ignores a basic question: Why has commodity culture brought about more favorable changes to the social status of common folk than any other cultural experiment in history, including (and especially) Marxism? The emotional appeal of pop culture, moreover, cannot be logically dismissed in a cavalier fashion as a mere pacification instrument. As many others have argued, pop culture has actually provided the means for common people to resist those in power, by providing them with the opportunity to utilize music and other artistic media to vent their critiques in the public arena.

Already the 1930s and 1940s, American sociologist Paul Lazarsfeld (1901–76) argued against such models, maintaining that the media and pop culture are part of a broader social system, which has nothing to do with those in power.[7] In an influential study, titled *The People's Choice*, Lazarsfeld and a team of researchers found that the popular media had virtually no ability to change people's minds about how they would vote in an election. People simply took out of newspapers or radio broadcasts only the views that fitted their preconceptions, ignoring the others. Follow-up research has largely corroborated Lazarsfeld's findings. For example, antipornography individuals who watch a TV debate on the relation of pornography to freedom of expression tend to take away from the debate only the views that are consistent with their particular viewpoint—namely, to restrict pornography under any and all circumstances. On the other hand, libertarian individuals tend to take away from the same program a sense of triumph by virtue of the fact that the debate occurred in the first place (thus legitimizing the topic). In some cases, it has been found that the interpretation of a program is mediated by so-called opinion leaders within a community or class. Lazarsfeld and Elihu Katz had

argued as far back as the mid-1950s that people tended to come up with interpretations that are consistent with the values of the social class or group to which they belonged. Audiences are, in other words, interpretive communities that crystallize from real communities such as families, unions, neighborhoods, and churches. In such communities, there are members, called "opinion leaders," who mediate how the other members will interpret cultural content.

Lazarsfeld's work brought into question not only Marxist theory, but also the more narrow psychological view that had arisen as far back as the 1920s that popular media and spectacles had a negative impact on people. Recall the incident of the 1938 radio broadcast of the *War of the Worlds*, mentioned in the previous chapter. That broadcast was designed as a radio drama simulating the style of a news broadcast. Many listeners believed that it was a real news broadcast, despite periodic announcements that it was a dramatization. Hysteria resulted. The event led to the first true psychological study of media effects, called the *Cantril Study*, after Hadley Cantril, who headed a team of researchers at Princeton University. The researchers wanted to find out why some believed the fake reports and others not. After interviewing 135 subjects, the team came to the conclusion that the key criterion was critical thinking—better-educated listeners were more capable of recognizing the broadcast as a fake than less-educated ones.

The Cantril Study seemed to demonstrate that the media did indeed produce effects on audiences, opening the door to a host of follow-up psychological studies intended to determine the extent to which the media impacted upon people. Classified vicariously under the rubric of "hypodermic needle theory" (HNT) or "magic bullet theory," the studies claimed that media are capable of directly swaying minds with the same kind of impact that a hypodermic needle has in modifying bodily processes or a that bullet has to injure or kill. But not everyone agreed with the findings. A number of other studies, such as those headed by Lazarsfeld, showed, in contrast, that audiences got out of media content what they were already inclined to get. To this day, HNT has instinctive appeal, as many continue to blame popular media representations as being responsible for violence, disrespect, and a host of other perceived deviations in society. Seeing the inbuilt weaknesses of this view, George Gerbner (1919–2005) decided to look at the long-term effects of media and pop culture exposure. Known as "cultivation theory," he argued that popular media such as television have small, gradual, imperceptible effects that are cumulative and thus

significant.[8] But Gerbner saw the popular media as socializing, rather than as disruptive, agents. He argued that the over-representation of violence on television was part of a subtext about the need for law and order in society, rather than being a factor in bringing about violence. Since the baddies get their just reward in the end, the objective of such representations is to instill or reinforce faith in law and order. Many of the *Cops* and *Police Videos* reality programs on television today seem to corroborate this theory.

As mentioned, Elihu Katz (in partnership with Lazarsfeld) carried out a series of studies that showed rather convincingly that audiences are not passive creatures but actively involved in deciding what they will be exposed to.[9] Known as "uses and gratifications" theory, Katz claimed that people see popular spectacles and media products as sources of gratification, selecting one or the other as part of personal schemes. As Dennis McQuail has suggested, uses and gratifications theory implies that popular media products (bestselling books, TV programs, etc.) serve as the following:[10]

- A diversion from the problems of daily life
- A way to gain "company" when alone
- A way to compare oneself to other people
- A means to gain information about current issues, events, trends, and so on

In the 1980s, Stuart Hall carried out further work that showed that, indeed, audiences decoded popular spectacles and media products differentially, not as a monolithic group.[11] He found, more specifically, that it was social class and political beliefs that influence how people will interpret a pop culture text or spectacle, regardless of what the makers of the text or the performers in a spectacle believe they have put into it. Downes and Miller summarize Hall's "reception theory," as it has come to be called, in the following manner:"the individual's personal context influences whether she or he accepts information as it is offered, that is, accepts a 'dominant' reading; whether she or he accepts only part of the information, that is, 'negotiates' with the text; or refuses to accept what is being said and therefore 'opposes' the text."[12]

Hall's findings allow us to understand a host of patterns, such as why and how people respond to texts and spectacles.[13] Overall, however, there really is no one theoretical framework that can explain

the effects, if any, of pop culture on people or why pop culture is so appealing. Actually, there seems to be an element of truth in each of the theoretical perspectives discussed here. Perhaps this is due to the nature of pop culture itself, since its products are not easily pigeonholed. A movie such as *The Seven Samurai* (1954) can be appreciated simply as entertainment, as a work of art, or as a political commentary on feudal Japan. It is somewhat ironic to note that those who most condemn pop culture and the media the most are the ones most inclined to use them for their own purposes. The vociferous religious right groups in the United States, who are wont to blame pop culture spectacles for all that ails the country, have no qualms of conscience in using them to great advantage themselves, promoting the sales of their own products (videos, CDs, etc.) for gaining salvation. Televangelism is a perfect example of how the very people who condemn the media and pop culture use both for their own goals.

In the end, who decides what type of culture is good or bad? For the sake of argument, cultural products can be seen as existing on an aesthetic continuum. At one end of this continuum, one can easily locate products that are intended solely for distraction, crass entertainment, and titillation. At the other, one can just as easily locate products that have a high aesthetic value, even though they may have been intended originally for entertainment. For instance, the operas of Giuseppe Verdi (1813–1901), as great as they are, had an initial entertainment function—people went to them to be entertained, plain and simple. The fact that the operas rose above their entertainment value is a consequence of various factors, not the least of which is the musical genius of the composer. Everyone in our pop culture world can easily locate a jingle at the distraction end and a musical work such as *Amadeus* at the other. As apparent as this line of reasoning is, it nonetheless brings out concretely that people, by and large, can discern quality in the smorgasbord of options that pop culture makes available. The problem lies in media products that fall on other parts of the continuum, creating cultural confusion. Where would one put the TV cartoon sitcom *The Simpsons*?

Moreover, as Hall has insightfully argued, people do not absorb texts passively, but rather *read* them (interpret them) in one of three ways, which (as mentioned) he called preferred, negotiated, and oppositional. The preferred reading is the interpretation of the text that its makers hope audiences will take from them. The negotiated reading is the one that results when audiences agree with, or respond in part, to the

meanings built into texts. And an oppositional reading is one that is in opposition to what the maker of the text had intended. A simple way to understand the difference between the three types is to consider a comedian who has just told a joke on stage. If the audience laughs wholeheartedly, then the joke has produced the preferred reading. If only some of the audience laughs wholeheartedly, while others chuckle or sneer, then the joke has brought about a negotiated reading. Finally, if the audience reacts negatively to the joke, with resentment, then it has produced an oppositional reading.

To sum up, why do people love and hate pop culture, as my student asked? The answer seems to be that people "love" those parts of pop culture that appeal to them but "hate" the others that do not. It can be called the "my-music-is-better-than-yours" theory. All this shows that pop culture is an emotional culture, as I have attempted to argue throughout, thus tending to produce all kinds of emotional reactions.

SPECTACLE-POWER

Of all the theoretical frameworks proposed for explaining pop culture, the one that seems most capable of providing a truly meaningful understanding of the phenomenon is Bakhtinian theory, which claims that pop culture is essentially a derivative of carnival culture, arising as a ritualizing vehicle for the expression of the profane instinct in modern secular societies. Like traditional carnivals, circuses, and fairs, the pop culture spectacles, products, texts, and fads provide release valves for the profane side of our nature, thus rendering it socially harmless. Pop culture is cathartic, as philosopher Walter Benjamin argued (Chapter 1). It has Spectacle-Power—the power of spectacle to provide a channel for people to vent pent-up emotions. This would thus explain why sexuality, occultism, and mythic symbolism are so intrinsic to it, and why the eradication of vulgarity in pop culture has never succeeded.

As Bakhtin emphasized, the only way to understand the appeal of pop culture is to look at the meanings of the laughter-inducing rituals performed at carnivals—from those involving the phallophors of the Roman Saturnalia (the seven-day festival of Saturn, which began on December 17) whose role was to joke and cavort obscenely, to the vulgar antics of the rogue comedians at turn-of-the-century country fairs. From ancient times, ritualistic laughter has served to balance

the psychic tension between the sacred and the profane within us. Carnival performances put the social order (politics, religion, business) under the microscope of comedy, where it can be critiqued harmlessly and cathartically. As Beatrice Otto has carefully documented, this is why fools and jesters are found across time and cultures, from the courts of ancient China and India to the courts of medieval Europe, Africa, the Middle East, and the Americas.[14] Not surprisingly, they have had the same function everywhere—to mock and entertain at the same time, fulfilling a deep human need to understand oneself through the comedic sphere of spectacle. As Jung often claimed, buried in the collective unconscious of humanity there exists a predilection for puerile mischief. This may manifest itself as a desire for frivolity, as playing devil's advocate in a discussion, as a sly craving to mock someone's success, as an urge to steal something for the sheer thrill of it, and so on. This predilection finds its main expressive outlets today in such spectacles and venues as comedy clubs and sitcoms such as *South Park*.

Especially troubling to many is the role of sexuality in pop culture. But as argued in this book, sex is nothing more than part of the show. It has Spectacle-Power. The Canadian director Atom Egoyan (b. 1960) clearly understood this in his brilliant 1994 movie *Exotica*. Using a blend of genre styles—police story, tabloid, fantasy, melodrama, erotica, and journalism—Egoyan revolves his filmic narrative around a stripper whose salacious performances constitute a metaphor for the emotional power of pop culture. In the strip joint the real voyeur is the camera—hence the audience. The presence of strip joints, populated by common people, from lawyers and judges to factory workers and housewives, threatens false standards of morality. The people are there for the pure enjoyment of it, Egoyan proclaims insightfully through his cinematic portrayal.

The same kind of understanding of sexuality was evident in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, discussed in the previous chapter. As a collage of vampirism, rock culture, transvestitism, pornography, and all the other aspects that make up the pop culture carnival, the movie provided an outlet for the Jungian predilection for puerile mischief. The movie is still being put on in some places. It is carnival at its transgressive best. Men wear corsets and stockings, while the women display themselves in revealing costumes and act in an overtly erotic style. The film itself is replete with sexual acts and references, from Dr. Frank-N-Furter's sex toy, to the liberaliza-

tion of the uptight, morally hypocritical couple Brad and Janet. As in traditional carnivals, the audience dances and sings along, shouting lewd comments at the screen, and throwing objects at certain points in the film. The group experience and feeling of community that is achieved, through such ersatz transgressive behavior, creates a cathartic effect. Such spectacles have emancipatory power, allowing people to engage in fantasy forms of anarchy through a ritualistic ridiculing of the artificial norms that society imposes. As Danny Fingeroth has aptly put it, in pop culture, "reality informs fantasy, fantasy informs reality."[15]

The sacred was mythologized in Greek culture as the realm of Apollo—the god of beauty and of the fine arts—and the profane as the realm of Dionysus—the god of wine, representing the irrational, undisciplined, and orgiastic side of the psyche. Pop culture is Dionysian, ritualizing all that is carnal and orgiastic; the sacred world is Apollonian encompassing all that is ritualized in a spiritual and rational way. Pop culture forces us to come to grips with the carnality of the human condition before we tackle its divinity. This dualism is found in narrative traditions throughout the world, from the story of Siddhartha to that of the Prodigal Son. Siddhartha Gautama (c. 563–483 BCE) was an Indian philosopher and the founder of Buddhism. He married at an early age and participated in the worldly life of the court but found his self-indulgent existence dull. He left home and began wandering in search of enlightenment. One of the lessons to be learned from the Siddhartha story is that passage from the world of the profane (the courtly life) to the world of the sacred (enlightenment) involves living and aging.

The importance of ritualizing the profane instinct is brought out by the Jungian scholar Joseph L. Henderson in his classic study of initiation rites. He puts it as follows:

> The symbols that influence many vary in their purpose. Some men need to be aroused, and experience their initiation in the violence of a Dionysiac "thunder rite." Others need to be subdued, and they are brought to submission in the ordered design of temple precinct or sacred cave, suggestive of the Apollonian religion of later Greece. A full initiation embraces both themes, as we can see when we look either at the material drawn from ancient texts or at living subjects. But it is quite certain that the fundamental goal of initiation lies in taming the original Trickster-like wildness of the juvenile nature. It therefore has a

civilizing or spiritualizing purpose, in spite of the violence of the rites that are required to set this process in motion.[16]

Dionysian rituals are everywhere in pop culture spectacles. Even a simple act like smoking can be seen to be part of those rituals. In *Casablanca*, for instance, cigarettes are conspicuous sexual props in Rick's Café. Swaggering imperiously in his realm, Rick (Humphrey Bogart) is rarely seen without a cigarette in his mouth or in his hand. So captivating was this image of sexual cool to cinemagoers, that it became a paradigm imitated by hordes of young males in the 1940s and 1950s. That very paradigm was satirized by Jean Luc Godard in his 1959 film *Breathless*. In one scene, Jean-Paul Belmondo stares at a poster of Bogart in a cinema window. He takes out a cigarette and starts smoking it, imitating Bogart in *Casablanca*. With the cigarette dangling from the side of his mouth, the sexually conversant Belmondo approaches his female mate with a blunt, "Sleep with me tonight?" The parodic intent was obvious.

It is true that we see less smoking in movies now—a fact reflecting a radical change in social opinions on smoking due to health factors. There are even movies that parody the association between smoking and sex. I mention, as a case in point, the 1980 movie *Caddyshack*, which contains a scene parodying smoking as a come-on, when actor Chevy Chase smiles at a woman as smoke comes out of his mouth in a ludicrous, farcical way. Nevertheless, the "sexual allure" of the cigarette is alive and well even in such a prohibitive environment, and it will be so until the cigarette is replaced by some other sexually suggestive prop in the Dionysian realm of pop culture. As Margaret Leroy has suggested, smoking is attractive because it is taboo.[17] The history of smoking shows, in fact, that tobacco has been perceived at times as a desirable thing and at others as a forbidden fruit. But in almost every era, as Richard Klein has eloquently argued, cigarettes have had some connection to sex, or to something that is erotically, socially, or intellectually appealing.[18] In a phrase, smoking is fun to do, despite the dangers it poses. The 2006 movie *Thank You for Smoking*, directed by Jason Reitman, showed the absurdity of the prohibitionist mentality against smoking. Today, it would seem, smoking is a much more subversive act than it has ever been at any time in its history. The transgressive symbolism of the cigarette has not as yet been erased from communal memory, despite efforts by people to do so.[19]

Spectacle-Power is independent of the medium used for its delivery. The media stage for pop culture might have changed in the age of the Internet, but the script remains essentially the same. Everything from independent movies on YouTube to Web casts of various kinds are still based on the same kinds of concepts and styles that have characterized pop culture spectacles since the Roaring Twenties. The online narratives and songs still have to appeal broadly in order to "make it." Pop culture perpetuates itself (and has always perpetuated itself) through the technologically changing media that deliver it to large masses of people. And this has, in turn, brought about social change. Before the advent of the mass media, the only form of culture that survived was, primarily, the one that received support from authority figures or traditional institutions, from the Church to the nobility. With the advent of cheap media technologies, the conditions for delivering popular forms of culture, independently of sponsoring institutions, became a reality.

As mentioned several times in this book, perhaps no other contemporary text has understood the nature of Spectacle-Power than the movie *Chicago*. The movie's subtext is that the changes experienced by the Puritan-based American social order would never have come to pass without Spectacle-Power. As far back as 1907, a spectacle called *The Ziegfield Follies*, produced by the American theatrical producer Florenz Ziegfeld (1867–1932), became a cultural barometer for what was starting to happen in American society—a process of liberation from its Puritan heritage through Spectacle-Power. The musical became popular for its extravagant follies, its beautiful chorus girls, its dazzling sets, and its catchy tunes. Today, *The Ziegfield Follies* is hardly seen as "folly," but part of an early chapter in the history of American society itself.

Musicals, blockbuster movies, the Super Bowl, rock concerts, shopping malls, bookstores, among many other things, are imbued with Spectacle-Power. As mentioned in the opening chapter, most historians trace the origins of contemporary pop culture to vaudeville, which was the most popular form of variety entertainment in the United States from the 1880s to the early 1930s, producing many of the celebrities who later gained success in other entertainment media, especially the motion pictures and radio. These included Jack Benny, George Burns, Eddie Cantor, W. C. Fields, Al Jolson, Ed Wynn, and Sophie Tucker. Some vaudeville theaters featured more than twenty acts in a single bill. But the standard pattern was a dozen acts, which ranged

enormously, from jugglers, animal acts, comedy skits, recitations, singers, comics, and magicians, to burlesque actresses who performed various forms of stripteasing (most of them sanitized for broader consumption). Vaudeville was an offshoot of the circus, where the term *spectacle* had a specific meaning. It was the segment that opened and closed circus performances, consisting of a lavish production number of performers, animals, and floats. As the band played and the ringmaster sang, performers dressed in elaborate costumes walked around the circus tent or arena. Animals were also part of the parade. The spectacle usually ended with a trick called a long mount, in which the elephants stood in a line with their front legs resting on each other's backs.

Through the efforts of powerful producers and theater owners, vaudeville became a highly organized nationwide big business with its own theater chains. It turned out to be the major form of live entertainment for family audiences. The term *variety show* eventually replaced *vaudeville*. Jazz music became an intrinsic part of vaudeville in the Roaring Twenties. One cannot underplay the role of jazz in the spread and development of pop culture. The movie *Chicago* also brought this out, encapsulating it in its opening musical piece titled "All that Jazz." The main character, Roxie Hart, is a burlesque-style performer. People react against her at first because of it and because she dances to the rhythms of jazz music. For courtroom purposes, Roxie and her lawyer devise an "acceptable persona" for her—the persona of a pregnant and loving mother figure. The sexual persona that she assumes on stage, however, is the one that gives Roxie great appeal.

As the movie suggests, it was a blend of V-Power and Spectacle-Power that changed society, starting in the 1920s. The Roaring Twenties was an era of spectacular economic growth, rising prosperity, and far-reaching social change. Consequently, large numbers of Americans wanted simply to enjoy life and to amuse themselves with liquor, fancy clothing, jazz music, and listening to the radio. It was also an era of women's liberation, expressed through lifestyle and fashion, rather than political protest. Before World War I, women had worn long hair, ankle-length dresses, and long cotton stockings. But in the 1920s, many started wearing short, tight dresses and rolled their silk stockings down to their knees. They cut their hair in a boyish style called the bob and wore flashy cosmetics. They danced cheek-to-cheek with men in public dance halls. Like Roxie, they decided to put on a sexual persona in public. The era of pop culture had arrived. The literature, art, and music of the 1920s also reflected the nation's changing

values. In his novel *Main Street* (1920), Sinclair Lewis attacked what he considered the dull lives and narrow-minded attitudes of people in a small town. Many American authors, including F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway, analyzed the attitudes and experiences of the era's so-called Lost Generation. H. L. Mencken, in his witty magazine the *American Mercury*, ridiculed the antics of dimwitted politicians, prohibitionists, and others.

MYTH-POWER

As discussed throughout this book, pop culture reveals mythic structure—a structure constituted by X-Power, V-Power, Logo-Power, i-Power, N-Power, and Spectacle-Power. Overall, the unconscious psychic power of pop culture can be called Myth-Power, a power that, like the ancient myths, is based on contrast and ambiguity. This is perhaps why the semiotic notion of *opposition* has recently become widely used in the study of pop culture. This notion allows us to flesh out the hidden mythic meanings built into characters, plots, performances, and the like. Take, as a simple example, the differences that are associated with the *white vs. black* opposition in our representational practices. The color *white* suggests "purity," "innocence," and many other "good" things, while its counterpart *black* suggests "impurity," "corruption," and other "bad" things. In the early Hollywood cowboy movies, this opposition came out concretely in the fact that many of the heroes wore white hats and many of the villains black ones. This does not mean, however, that black was never associated with the positive pole of the opposition. Since it also suggests "mysteriousness" and "dauntlessness," it was at times built into the symbolism of the hero. This is why the *Zorro* character of television and movie fame wears black, as did several Hollywood western heroes of the past (such as *Lash Larue*).

The French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss has claimed that mythic oppositions (night vs. day, white vs. black) are built unconsciously into all human texts (rituals, fables, etc.) and social systems (kinship, language, etc.). This has suggested to some that the very structure of human thought is oppositional—that is to say, relational and associative, rather than linear and categorical. Whether or not this is true, as an analytical technique in pop culture studies, opposition is highly useful because it provides a template for reading (interpreting) spectacles and texts. For the present purposes, suffice it to say that

opposition is the essence of Myth-Power. As French semiotician Roland Barthes claimed, a large part of the emotional allure of pop culture is due to the fact that it is based on the recycling of unconscious mythic oppositions. To distinguish between the original myths and their pop culture versions, Barthes designated the latter *mythologies*. In early Hollywood westerns, for instance, the heroes and villains were mythological reconstructions of the ancient mythic heroes and their opponents. The heroes were honest, truthful, physically attractive, strong, and vulnerable; the villains were dishonest, cowardly, physically ugly, weak, and cunning. As in many of the ancient myths, the hero was beaten up at some critical stage, but against all odds he survives to become a champion of justice. Because of the unconscious power of myth, it is little wonder to find that early Hollywood cowboys such as Roy Rogers, John Wayne, Hopalong Cassidy, and the Lone Ranger became cultural icons, symbolizing virtue, heroism, and righteousness above and beyond the movie characters they represented.

The Superman character of comic book and cinematic fame is another example of the recycled mythic hero, possessing all the characteristics of his ancient predecessors but in modern guise—he comes from another world (the planet Krypton) in order to help humanity overcome its weaknesses; he has superhuman powers; but he has a tragic flaw (exposure to the substance known as kryptonite takes away his power). Sports events, too, are constructed mythically on the good (the home team) vs. evil (the visiting team) opposition. The whole fanfare associated with preparing for the "big event," like the Super Bowl of American football or the World Cup of soccer, has a ritualistic quality to it similar to the pomp and circumstance that ancient armies engaged in before going out to battle and war. Indeed, the whole spectacle is perceived to represent a battle of mythic proportions. The symbolism of the team's (army's) uniform, the valor and strength of the players (the heroic warriors), and the skill and tactics of the coach (the army general) has a powerful effect on the fans (the warring nations). Like their ancient ancestors, modern-day people need heroes subconsciously to "make things right" in human affairs, at least in the world of fantasy.

NOSTALGIA

Myth-Power is the likely reason why people literally "hang on" to the trends and fads that they found meaningful in their younger years,

reacting to them nostalgically in their later years. Whether it is Elvis Presley movies, Disney cartoons, Beatles albums, disco dancing, Barbie dolls, and even punk clothing, people react nostalgically to the symbolism built into the popular celebrities, products, texts, etc. of their eras. Boomers react nostalgically to the beautiful strains of the Platters, and GenXers to those of Donna Summers and Madonna. Many others simply cannot get enough of Lawrence Welk in reruns or of ABBA. By clinging onto their memories, people have made it possible for pop culture to perpetuate itself.

Memorabilia is a product of this mindset. And it is a profitable one indeed, as sales of Elvis and Beatle records continue to make conspicuously obvious. Pop culture nostalgia has permanently changed the sociology of the modern world. More and more, people maintain and cherish their youthful experiences well beyond adolescence. The late Canadian literary critic Northrop Frye wrote, "Popular art is normally decried as vulgar by the cultivated people of its time; then it loses favor with its original audience as a new generation grows up; then it begins to merge into the softer lighting of 'quaint,' and cultivated people become interested in it, and finally it begins to take on the archaic dignity of the primitive."[20]

But, as argued throughout this book, this does not mean that pop culture is incapable of producing truly meritorious and lasting forms of high art. Some of the modern world's most significant artistic products have come out of pop culture. The comic-book art of Charles Schultz (1922–2000) is a case in point (as mentioned in Chapter 1). His comic strip *Peanuts*, which was originally titled *Li'l Folks*, debuted in 1950, appealed (and continues to appeal) to mass audiences. Through the strip, Schultz dealt with some of the most significant philosophical themes of human history in a way that was unique and aesthetically powerful. The same kind of story can be told in other domains of pop culture, from music to the movies.

X-RATED

The question of what is art brings me back to the event with which I started off this excursion into pop culture—the X-rated movie *Deep Throat*, which caused great moral panic in the 1970s and opened up a still-ongoing debate on the difference between art and vulgarity. The X-rated movie genre is clearly the most profane of all the genres of pop culture. Once considered to be the type of prurient spectacle to

be seen secretly in squalid theaters, primarily by "dirty old men," it is now perceived as essentially another movie-seeing option. This occurrence is, in my view, central to understanding pop culture. When *Deep Throat* premiered, it was seen to be an act of pure transgression against stable social institutions, from the family to religion. It generated enormous moral panic, as mentioned. But people of both sexes and of different social classes went to see it just the same. That movie was the reason, in my view, that the *X* symbol became shortly thereafter a sign of the times, bringing out in a concrete symbolic way that pop culture is, and always has been, X-rated. This is why it is highly emotional—a culture that we love to hate and hate to love. Perhaps the reason why pop culture is seen to pose a threat from theorists (such as the Frankfurt School critics) to politicians and religious leaders throughout the world is that it seems to give great emphasis to the profane, while relegating the sacred to the margins. But history has shown that when there is an imbalance between the sacred and the profane, people instinctively start restoring it. There seems, in other words, to be a "corrective mechanism" in the human species, as it can be called, that is constantly seeking to ensure that there is a perfect balance between the two sides of our nature. Without the restoration of this balance, as a matter of fact, there is a serious danger that pop culture will not survive, to be replaced by a more authoritarian form of culture, controlled by extremists (to the left or the right of the political spectrum).

My apology for pop culture in this book has been implanted on the notion that both the sacred and the profane require cultural ritualization. As mentioned, there are many who would disagree with this assessment, viewing pop culture as nothing more than one huge ploy revealing capitalism's ability to profit from our base instincts. It was, as discussed in the opening chapter, Matthew Arnold who got the ball rolling against it, portraying it as a corrupting force in human social evolution. But, like the Marxist critics who came after him, and who took up his rally against pop culture, Arnold's stance was really nothing more than an expression of his own particular tastes, since he certainly found no fault in the popular spectacles and rituals associated with folk culture. In my view, someone like Arnold put the cart before the horse. The horse is the unconscious appeal of pop culture itself. It provides the fun, the thrills, the nostalgic memories, and even the vulgar disgust (which is certainly what porn movies tend to evoke in most people), among many other emotions to gain expression;

capitalism is a cart that provides the means to deliver it. Like pop culture itself, capitalism is really a collage of economic, social, and political ideas and forms that involve consumption, art, and lifestyle choices coming together into one huge bricolage that we call modern life. It is the gaining of pleasure through consumption that sets the capitalist agenda apart from all other previous systems of politics. This is why the distinction between capitalist economics and pop culture is now a barely discernible one.

The spread of American pop culture started with recordings, long before the era of satellite TV. Music needs no linguistic translation. So, records of American pop music were bought in other countries already in the 1920s because the music held great appeal. With the advent of television in the 1950s, the spread gained momentum, reaching truly international proportions in the 1990s. As a consequence, debates about the quality of American culture and the impact it purportedly has on world culture and politics have become common and widespread. On one side, critics say that such culture feeds a constant stream of simplified ideas and sensationalistic images to unwitting audiences, that it negatively influences politics and voting patterns, that it destroys local cultures in favor of a bland Hollywood-based distraction culture, and that it encourages passivity in people. On the other side, defenders say that it provides a great deal of high-quality spectacles, that it is the major source of recreation for many people, and that it is a stimulus for making changes in politics that would otherwise never cross people's minds. Whatever the truth, one thing is for certain—people throughout the world react to pop culture emotionally, not rationally. And this betrays its mythic structure, as I have attempted to argue in this book.

Some of the critiques are justified. For example, it is claimed that advertising and pop culture have joined forces to promote bad eating habits. The subject of junk food, in fact, is a main one in the overall debate. When fast food eateries first appeared in the 1950s—called burger and milkshake "joints"—they were designed to be socializing sites for adolescents. The food served at such places was viewed, correctly, to be "junk" injurious to one's health and only to be consumed by young people, because their metabolism could ostensibly break it down more quickly and because they could purportedly recover from its negative health effects more easily than older people. But in no time whatsoever junk food, promoted by effective advertising campaigns, became an indulgence sought by anyone of any age, from very

young children to seniors. The compulsion to consume junk food has, consequently, become a fact of contemporary life. The inordinate consumption of junk food is one of the main factors contributing to the rise in obesity, not only in America but also throughout the developed world. In a phrase, McDonaldization has been a negative force.

But, then, the ravages of overeating or undereating are not just contemporary maladies caused by American advertising and pop culture. They have always been part of lifestyles, rituals, and traditions across the world. The ancient Assyrians and Babylonians observed fasts as a form of penance. The early Christians associated fasting with penitence and purification. Native North Americans hold tribal fasts to avert impending disasters. The counterpart to fasting is indulging in food. Traditionally, this has been the prerogative of the aristocracy. But "overeating" feasts and festivals for common folk reach into the history of all eras, from the Roman Saturnalia to contemporary carnivals such as the Mardi Gras.

In this debate, one conveniently ignores the fact that, by and large, pop culture has been a positive social experiment. Because of it, today there are many more tolerant attitudes around, especially with regards to sexuality and women. As Linda Scott has aptly observed, "This era [the Roaring Twenties] brought a wave of sensualism, in which legions of young women—particularly though not exclusively those of modest means—asserted themselves by their dress, their dancing, and their romances."[21] Without pop culture, it is unlikely that V-Power could have ever emerged, let alone gained the momentum that it has today.

To sum up, there is little doubt that pop culture has had a profound effect on society. Above all else, it has made personal choice in art and entertainment a reality. However, it has also created the conditions whereby people tend to hang on to their youthful lifestyles well beyond their adolescent years. To wit, in 2002, the remix of Elvis's song, *A Little Less Conversation*, spliced with techno sounds, electronic warps and woofs, which was a minor song from 1968, and used on the soundtrack for the even more minor film *Live a Little, Love a Little*, made its way to the top of the charts. All that can be said is that Elvis has become a pop culture legend—a poor country boy who made good and became an international mythic symbol. His memory continues to fuel a passionate denial of aging and extinction. His home, Graceland, has become a pilgrimage for people to whom he remains an ageless hero.

The critique leveled at pop culture as a tool of American capitalism is, today, no longer valid (if it ever was). The reason is the Internet, where it is becoming evident that the makeup of pop culture is no longer a homogeneous one, with people from different societies now playing an increasingly prominent role in the global pop culture village. For years, Japanese "manga" comic books and "anime" animated features, along with characters like Pokémon and Hello Kitty, have been the rage of youths throughout America and the rest of the world. Such trends are broadening the stage on which pop culture is being enacted, bringing out the fact that the structure of pop culture is hardly an invention of America. It is universal. This was brought out by the brilliant movie *Unbreakable* (2000), directed by M. Night Shyamalan, which was inspired by the mythological nature of comic books. Comic books, we are told in the movie, are modern manifestations of something universal, constituting a mode of pictorial mythic history mirroring the same kinds of stories imprinted in the Egyptian hieroglyphs. Both the camera work and the dialogue in the film are suggestive of comic books—the shots are long, with infrequent changes and very little action during shots; movements by the actors are static, suggesting the stationary illustrations of comic books; the dialogue between characters never overlaps, like that in the comic book sequences; and as in comic books, the hero's first and last names, David Dunn, are alliterative. In effect, Shyamalan sees in comic books the same mythic structure that I see throughout the pop culture landscape.

The movie implies, moreover, that pop culture now has its own true theorists—the makers of pop culture themselves, namely, the filmmakers, the TV programmers, and the bloggers. They do it by highlighting or sometimes even directly discussing pop culture themes in their spectacles and texts. In effect, pop culture is itself becoming a metatheory of itself. The best theory of the cinema is the movie *Cinema Paradiso* (1988), and the best theory of rock music is Bob Seger's tune "Old Time Rock and Roll." To paraphrase a well-known brand name (Toys R Us), there is little doubt that pop culture is us.

In this vein, let me quote again the words of Daffy Duck with which I started off this chapter in order to provide a final thought. The Looney Tunes epitomize what pop culture is all about—a brash attitude that bespeaks of Spectacle-Power. Some of the verbal mannerisms of the Looney characters have in fact become part of communal memory, ranging from Bugs Bunny's ever-satirical "What's up doc?"

NOTES

PREFACE

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CHAPTER 1

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