

X-RATED!

THE POWER OF MYTHIC SYMBOLISM
IN POPULAR CULTURE

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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

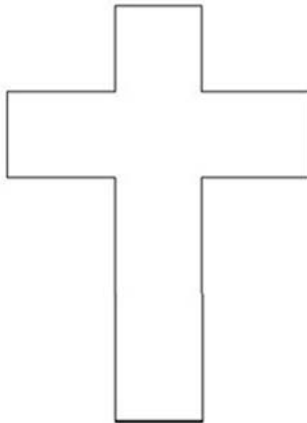
It is little wonder, as an aside, that one of the heroes of Generation X is filmmaker Quentin Tarantino, the slacker par excellence. Movies such as *Pulp Fiction* (1994) and *Kill Bill* (2005) are ultimately about the "fetishization of life" and the "turn of a particular phrase," as Roy puts it. This 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

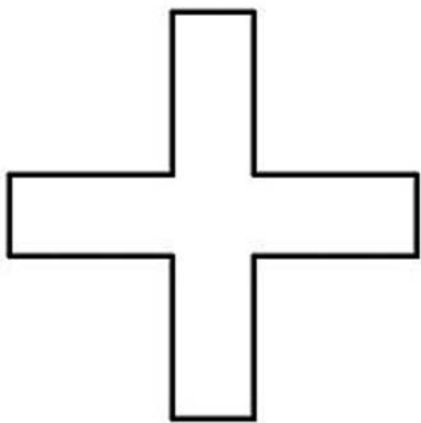
the probable reason for this is that *X* has always held a mythic appeal across the globe and across time. It has always constituted a language unto itself, conjuring up images of things that are just beyond the realm of security and decency. In Robert Priest's 1984 novel titled *The Man Who Broke Out 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 cross-piece 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 (Pantaloen) 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 banded 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 of 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.