

POPULAR

INQUIRY

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**FROM PUBLIC TO PUBLICS
TO PURVEYORS**

REVIEW

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**Marcel Danesi (2018): *Popular Culture, Introductory Perspectives* (4th edition).
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Rowman & Littlefield Publishers; Fourth edition (July 12, 2018), 400 pages.
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Popular culture is too broad and too misunderstood a term, especially when pitted against our common understanding of ‘culture’ that the comprehensive understanding of what all it encompasses has been beyond the mindscapes of even intellectuals. Marcel Danesi, in the fourth edition of his book *Popular Culture* has done a tremendous job in giving the readers an all-inclusive account of popular culture with a standpoint that makes it a balanced study. Apparently aimed at and apt too for helping the student community, it is undoubtedly a good reference book for teachers too. The book seems on the bulkier side but the nature of the topic and the author’s organization of the content by adding and updating the timeline/highlights/illustrations for each form of popular culture, relevant questions and glossary, entail the length it has. Although the author talks about popular culture exclusively in the context of America, nevertheless it can be good template for studying it in any other context too.

Marcel Danesi is a well-known semiotician, linguist and anthropologist currently teaching at The University of Totonto. His oeuvre stamps his expertise in these fields. This book presents the kaleidoscopic variety of the collage of popular culture in such a way that popular culture comes out as being reflective of the ever-changing living collage called society. Reading this book is like being on a navigational tour which starts with Danesi familiarizing the reader onboard with the compact itinerary, taking well into account the general apprehensions and reservations about popular culture. Tracing its origin in the Roaring Twenties as a populist culture, “crystallized as a new form of recreational lifestyle and a huge business enterprise” (14),

Danesi makes the reader travel back in time to witness how the ever progressive, ever evolving and ever adapting nature of popular culture has survived the test of times and trials by 'cognoscenti' and advocates of so called high culture.

True to his words in the Preface of the book, Danesi has extensively revised the chapters in this fourth edition, "taking into account the rise and dominance of digital media and new contexts for the delivery of pop culture." Although the content is finely laid out in twelve chapters like in the previous edition, the 'Origin and Spread' section in the First Chapter has been expanded to include an in-depth study of the eras and trends that were historically crucial for the evolution of popular culture: Mediaeval entertainments, Carnivals and Circuses and Opera surviving popularly in the form of ballads, amusement parks, media spectacles and rock concerts respectively. He further dismantles the general myopic view branding popular culture as 'low' through discussing its various features like Spectacle, Collage, Bricolage, Pastiche, Nostalgia, Occultism, Make-believe, Celebrities and Laughter, and reminding that many of their forms have easily assimilated within the texture of the 'high' culture.

Backing his arguments with the theoretical framework provided by Marshall McLuhan, Danesi showcases the dialectical synergy between popular culture, mass media and communication technologies through various examples. The author draws attention of the naysayers towards the functional value of the popular culture too; youth has always co-opted certain traits of the populist/mass culture to dissent or resist or project new, evolved attitudes. He declares, "In this framework, pop culture is much more than entertainment and a money-making enterprise; it is a mirror and a source of social change." (52)

In the second chapter, Explaining Pop Culture, Danesi offers its analysis from various interdisciplinary perspectives like communication models and various critical, psychological, sociological, semiotic and transgression theories. The obvious fact that so many disciplines have been exploring and trying to understand the workings of the multi-hued phenomenon of popular culture, speaks volumes about the all-pervasive presence and impact of popular culture. Danesi stamps the veracity of popular culture as a subject of serious critical study when he traces it to be a topic of analysis for even Plato and Aristotle to Frankfurt School to Carl Jung to Ferdinand de Saussure and Jean Baudrillard to Mikhail Bakhtin.

Danesi then moves on another crucial task of reiterating that the multiple popular channels of culture: materials, conceptual, performative and aesthetic have cemented their relationship with consumerist marketplace/economy and media platforms, which have now vastly converged in the digitalized global village today. In the well cutout discussion of the third chapter, Business of Popular Culture, Danesi provides the reader with answers to many of the complex questions about the sustainability of popular culture and its agents in the differently populated

cyberspace. In line with his assertion on the immense power of media to create celebrities, he introduces a new section in this edition, Nano-celebrity. It surely is a phenomenon made possible by the power of Internet to make the content and the resultant popularity viral but short lived.

Chapter fourth to eleventh has been organized as per the media that has transmitted popular culture to the masses. The discussion on offline/online print culture, radio culture, pop music, cinema//video, television, advertising/branding, pop language, online pop culture renders the reader confronted with the question of the future of popular culture in the digital age, which the author diverts onto a path of hope. While analyzing the whole popular culture industry, he convincingly substantiates his arguments on popular culture factoring effective structural changes in the social fabric through incorporating references like the flappers, Elvis Presley, Marlin Monroe, Marlon Brando, Louis Armstrong, Marcel Duchamp, the juke box, the Cadillac, Ford Mustang, Charles Schulz, Disney's Fantasyland, South Park (TV series), The Decameron (fiction), soap operas, Cabbage Patch doll, Barbie dolls, Rubik's Cube, Fast food, Park Jae-Sang (Psy), twitter, youtube, so on and so forth. It may be disturbing for a few that Danesi does not give enough space to the negative dimensions of the populist nature of popular culture. However, it cannot be denied that he recognizes its positive and negative aspects but intentionally dwells much on the progressive and sustaining aspect of it.

In every chapter, under every heading, the author emphasizes on the digitally transformed societies witnessing transformed formats of creating, spreading, accessing and responding to the content/trends of popular culture. The last chapter deliberates exclusively on the shifting landscapes of popular culture in the internet age where lines between real and hyperreal have blurred and commercial framework has changed. Although he rightly sees it to a challenge for the survival of popular culture in its traditional forms, but is positive too. It is right that "Pop culture perpetuates itself (and has always perpetuated itself) by adapting to the technologically changing media that deliver it to large masses of people" (48). We cannot agree more with him that the world and the world of pop culture have changed 'drastically', it remains to be seen what the next course will be.

Popular Culture is overall an interesting and engaging read which can enlighten the academia or even enthusiastic readers on the intricate bonding of popular culture and consumerist market when it comes to certain phenomenon happening on regular basis like the closing of Mad Magazine publication and the social platforms flooded with reactions; the production of two critically acclaimed ten seconds films under the Thumbstoppers challenge; the widely featured old female fan of Indian cricket team being made the brand ambassador of Pepsi and so on.