

Key Terms for Analyzing Pop Culture / Media Texts

The term **pop media** is the literal combination of the terms *media* and *pop culture*. *Media* is a collective noun referring to screen and print sources of information and entertainment dissemination; *pop culture* is another collective noun that refers to the products, arts and activities created for general audiences available for mass consumption. *Culture*, more specifically, refers to the stories people tell each other about the meaning of their lives. For our purposes, we'll smash the terms together, so, *pop media* means something to the effect of: stories and messages distributed through the media commonly shared; patterns and narratives oft repeated throughout cultural art forms.

For better or worse, we are all exposed to pop media daily, even if we try to avoid it. Pop media wears many hats in our society, but key to our exploration is the assumption that pop media:

- mediates. Pop media acts as a filter for our experiences. (We understand the concept of love at first sight *because* we see this example in the media and not because it “exists” tangibly in our brains or DNA.)
- is an agent of socialization (socialization is the ongoing process of learning social conventions/expectations and behaving accordingly within a culture)
- creates expectations (like amazing proposals while skydiving or at games or concerts)
- influences primarily at the conscious, and especially, the subconscious levels.

A **text** is any unit of meaning for the purposes of analysis. A text can be an essay, a book, a song, a movie, or a video clip. It can also be a series of scenes from multiple movies that relate to each other, tv commercials, or things like the vocabulary used to sell yogurt to women. Any thing that we can parse for analysis can be a text. A text, then, is often a pattern or theme, as these are platforms for analysis. What you put on the text analysis platform is up to you. Here are some kinds of texts we often analyze in the academy:

- **Cultural practices** are the ways people do particular things (such as dating, using cell phones, proposing marriage, patterns of speech and interaction) in a given community.
- **Cultural developments/trends** are changes or trends that occur in a particular culture at a particular time. Examples of cultural developments might be the fact that more people are reading books electronically nowadays than ever before, that vampires are popular (again), or that '80s fashion is making a comeback (which is seriously good for no one. '80s fashions did not look good in the '80s and looks worse today.)
- **Cultural objects** are single objects that are a part of larger cultural practices or developments (such as monogram jewelry, truck nuts, vibrators, or toilet paper).
- **Cultural productions** include books, movies or movie franchises, songs, news broadcasts and articles, and any other tangible piece of art or pop culture. *Twilight* books, Adele songs, and quirky-girl movies are all productions. (Quirky-girl characters are also a trend. So, of course, there is overlap between these platforms.)

A **trope** is a rhetorical device. When we're speaking of tropes in writing, we're mostly talking about figures of speech. However, when we speak of cultural and media tropes, what we mean is common (sometimes to the point of over-use) themes, elements, scenes, characters, etc. within cultural productions. Examples of tropes in popular media number into the tens of thousands, but a few have already been mentioned on this page, like love at first sight—that's a common theme in drama and comedy. The gay bff to the straight girl looking for love is another. And, the dorky, serious girl with glasses who has to let her hair down (literally) to find love. Thousands of examples for all forms of media can be found at TVTropes.org.