

Fiftieth Anniversary Best Essays

ANN LARABEE, BRIA HARPER, CAMERON CLARK, SEAN GUYNES, JUSTIN WIGARD, EMILY YATES, AND ZACK KRUSE

TO CELEBRATE THE FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF *THE JOURNAL OF POPULAR CULTURE*, we have compiled two lists of essays that best represent its history. Ray Broadus Browne founded the journal in 1967, introducing the serious study of popular culture to the academic world and relentlessly promoting it as public scholarship. Browne established this eclectic mission for the journal:

The popular culture movement was founded on the principle that the perspectives and experiences of common folk offer compelling insights into the social world. The fabric of human social life is not merely the art deemed worthy to hang in museums, the books that have won literary prizes or been named “classics,” or the religious and social ceremonies carried out by societies’ elite. *The Journal of Popular Culture* continues to break down the barriers between so-called “low” and “high” culture and focuses on filling in the gaps a neglect of popular culture has left in our understanding of the workings of society.

Browne edited the journal for many years, from 1967 to 2002, when it was housed at Bowling Green State University. Browne’s protégé Gary Hoppenstand, who had become an outstanding scholar in the field, took over the journal, now published by Wiley Blackwell, and moved its operations to Michigan State University, where it has received robust financial support from the English Department and the College of Arts and Letters. In 2013, Ann Larabee, who had also studied at Bowling Green State University and is William J.

Beal Outstanding Professor of English at Michigan State University, took over as editor. The mission of the journal has never swayed from Browne's initial conception and has maintained its status as the top journal devoted to the study of popular culture.

We have included two lists of best essays: the current editor's choices and the choices of young emerging scholars in the field, some of whom have worked as editorial assistants on the journal. These emerging scholars were students in a graduate course on the study of popular culture, taught by Ann Larabee and David Stowe at Michigan State University in 2016. They were each assigned a range of issues and asked to choose the best essay in those years and articulate a method for their choices.

Editor Ann Larabee's Top Ten Essays

I chose the essays below because they have made a significant contribution to the field, have been highly cited, and have stood the test of time. In a nutshell, these essays represent an intellectual history of *TJPC*'s lasting approaches to the study of popular culture, as inaugurated by Ray Browne.

Cawelti, John G. "The Concept of Formula in the Study of Popular Literature." *TJPC*, vol. 3, no. 3, 1969, pp. 381–90.

An effort to establish an approach to the study of popular culture distinct from traditional literary studies, Cawelti's essay is important for its discussion of terms. Cawelti argues for the use of formula over more limited concepts like medium, genre, and theme. Focusing on stories, Cawelti argues that popular culture narratives, like other forms of literature, exist on a continuum between convention and invention, falling more toward convention. He also distinguishes popular stories, which he says are more aligned with cultural expectations and mores, from myths, which carry archetypal, "universal" themes. Ultimately, he defines formula as a limited cultural repertory of plots, characters, and settings with added dimensions of collective dreams, rituals, and games.

Wilson, William A. "Herder, Folklore, and Romantic Nationalism." *TJPC*, vol. 6, no. 4, 1973, pp. 819–35.

Ray Browne started out as a folklorist, and folklorists gave him the language of “the people.” Many of the early contributors to the field worked also in American Studies, influenced by the “myth and symbol” school. In this essay, “Bert” Wilson, the editor of *Western Folklore*, reminds the emergent field that the study of folklore and of “the common people” has historically been entwined with nationalism and “winning the minds of men to that idea.” Focusing on the German intellectual Johann Gottfried Herder, Wilson discusses two strains of nationalism: Rousseau’s humanistic “popular sovereignty” which aimed at liberating the entire human community and a Central and East European version that fused ethnicity and nationalism into a “romantic nationalism” that subordinated the individual to an ethnic-national will. Folklore scholars like Herder provided the idea of a “national soul,” embodied in myth and folklore, as the foundation of the nation state. This was an important caution to an emergent field to examine what it meant by “the people.”

Russ, Joanna. “Somebody’s Trying to Kill Me and I Think It’s My Husband.” *TJPC*, vol. 7, no. 4, 1974, pp. 759–75.

An acclaimed feminist science fiction and fantasy writer, Russ lent her exuberant voice to the conventions of the Modern Gothic, a typical form of 1960s women’s fiction alongside confession magazines and “nurse novels.” She identifies a pattern of tales in which a “latter-day Jane Eyre forms a personal connection with an older man, a dark, magnetic, powerful brooding, sardonic *Super-Male*, who treated her brusquely, derogates her, scolds her, and otherwise shows anger and contempt for her.” The heroines participate in adventures while remaining passive, despite pressures on them to act and decide. Anticipating the work of Janice Radway, Russ argues that Modern Gothics provide a necessary, but safe escape for hard-working women bound by “the feminine mystique.” This essay displays the enjoyable, accessible writing to which the journal has almost always aspired in its notion that the elites (as Ray Browne called university professors) are not the only ones capable of writing and reading incisive scholarship.

White, Hayden. “Structuralism and Popular Culture.” *TJPC*, vol. 7, no. 4, 1974, pp. 759–75.

The advent of structuralism as a mode of literary analysis was important to a field with roots in the study of folklore. Here, White, a formidable literary scholar, makes a case for using the approach in

the study of popular culture, delivered as a keynote address to the fourth annual meeting of the Popular Culture Association. He argues that structuralism's detailed description, attendance to surface patterns, focus on the present rather than the past, and eschewal of "essentialism" and "hierarchism" make it highly suited for this study. White gives an intellectual history that finally settles on Roland Barthes's analysis of "complex sign-systems," especially in his work *Mythologies*, which shows the complexity and subtlety of their "decoding." Although the journal has tended to avoid "theory," as it came to be known, traces of structuralism can often be found in its eclectic explorations of popular culture.

King, Margaret J. "Disneyland and Walt Disney World: Traditional Values in Futuristic Form." *TJPC*, vol. 15, no. 1, 1981, pp. 116–40.

Amusement and theme parks have long been of interest to scholars in the field. When, in 1978, Ray Browne offered a three-credit course Coastermania at Bowling Green State University, a public outcry ensued against popular culture studies that gave students credit for riding roller coasters. In this essay, King—the first to earn a graduate degree in popular culture from BGSU—defends the study of the Disney parks against a withering appraisal of them from the "literary-intellectual establishment." The parks are quite interesting, she argues, because of their encapsulation of "American myths and belief systems" and their experimentations with and humanizing of technology. Reminiscent of Alan Trachtenberg's historical writing on American cultural works, King discusses the distinction between the amusement and the theme park, the Disney parks' design as technology-driven "enclosed environmental artworks," their evocation of both nostalgia and futurism, and their status as "national popular culture capitals." The result is rich, still useful study that proved that public spaces like theme and amusement parks are well worthy of intellectual attention.

Gordon, Beverly. "The Souvenir: Messenger of the Extraordinary." *TJPC*, vol. 20, no. 3, 1986, 135–46.

Although much of popular culture research is on media narratives, it has often extended to popular artifacts. In this essay, design professor and fiber artist Gordon unpacks the deceptively simple souvenir. Her anthropological framework articulates the souvenir as the metonym for journey in a "sacred space and time," the "process of leaving behind the ordinary state and entering the extraordinary

one.” The souvenir, including mementos and tourist items, is a tangible piece of that journey. Gordon discusses various types of souvenirs, including the often tacky, humorous gifts brought home for others; picture postcards and photographs; materials and objects taken as pieces of a site; items with the name of the tourist site; and handcrafts. As she roughs out a classification for souvenirs, she has many evocative and useful observations, demonstrating the great worth of this anthropological approach to the study of popular material objects.

Gailey, Christine Ward. “Mediated Messages: Gender, Class, and Cosmos in Home Video Games.” *TJPC*, vol. 27, no. 1, 1993, pp. 81–96.

A sociologist, Gailey blends interviews, gathered through the snowball sample technique, and content analysis to make illuminating observations about the emerging world of the video game. An avid game player herself, Gailey sees children as active interpreters, rather than passive recipients. Of video games’ content, Gailey writes that they “present a grim, even Hobbesian, picture of life, replete with sexism, racism, class hierarchy, competitive exclusion and other Social Darwinist notions.” However, she finds that children respond creatively in their interpretations of this world through conversations with other players, changing, for example, the names of the creatures. This attention to the minds and hearts of popular culture’s consumers, and their power to effect and alter what they are consuming, has been a cornerstone of the field from its beginnings, far predating fan studies.

Brown, Jeffrey A. “Comic Book Fandom and Cultural Capital.” *TJPC*, vol. 30, no. 4, 1997, pp. 13–31.

To analyze comic book fandom, Brown takes as his framework Pierre Bourdieu’s analysis of the French bourgeoisie’s taste and status seeking through their acquisition of cultural capital. With an eye to cultural economics, Brown usefully navigates the difficulties in assessing comic book readership, discusses transformations in the industry such as the rise of direct distribution and the dedicated comic book store, and gives a brief history of condemnation of comic books as bad taste. Comic book fans thus have created a “shadow economy” where cultural capital is acquired within their own milieu. Collecting canonical texts and developing discrimination among works and their creators to develop that canon are central activities, as fans develop

“an unintentional parody of high culture.” Brown argues that comic book fans are unique among fan communities in the ways they acquire social prestige through the possessable text.

Blum, Martin. “Remaking the East German Past: *Ostalgie*, Identity, and Material Culture.” *TJPC*, vol. 34, no. 3, 2000, pp. 229–53.

Although *The Journal of Popular Culture*, as an English-language publication, has often focused on American culture, it has also dedicated special issues to and published many essays on the popular culture of other nations and regions. In this essay, Blum refutes the generally accepted view that Western cultural products dominate everywhere, moving along with the expansion of capitalism, and gives a rich description of East Germans demanding their old products and brands. Although many of these old products and brands are unavailable, their images are nostalgically remembered in card games, postcards, t-shirts, and other objects. The preservation and proliferation of these images are called *Ostalgie* (East plus nostalgia), in which Blum finds “a sense of loss and dislocation” as “an entire state, together with its institutions, cultural values, and individual hierarchies, has been swept away.” Using the study of material culture as its foundation, Blum’s essay is a fine example of how everyday objects can reveal profound historical and cultural changes.

Choi, Sejung Marina and Nora J. Rifon, “Who Is the Celebrity in Advertising? Understanding Dimensions of Celebrity Images,” vol. 40, no. 2, 2007, pp. 304–24.

Advertising experts Choi and Rifon explore what makes a celebrity endorser successful. Celebrities are defined, according to the sociological literature they survey, as “symbolic icons” that “transfer their symbolic meanings to the products they endorse.” Using a quantitative sociological approach, Choi and Rifon set out to clarify the notion of celebrity “image” through an examination of celebrity effectiveness and credibility, ultimately broken down to genuineness, competence, excitement, and sociability. One of their goals is to consider how certain celebrities might be chosen for certain brands, based on these qualities. This essay reflects the overall growth of celebrity studies across many fields and the continuing rise of celebrity worship, partially fomented by brand endorsements. *TJPC* has published many studies of individual celebrities—from Ernest Hemingway’s Hollywood reputation to Lady Gaga’s monstrous appeal,

from Kate Moss's public addiction to Oprah Winfrey's spiritual capitalism—using a variety of approaches. Indeed, the study of celebrity has always been central to popular culture studies.

Emerging Scholars' Choices For Best Essay

Sean Guynes's Best Essay

Madden, David. "The Necessity for an Aesthetics of Popular Culture." *TJPC*, vol. 7, no. 1, 1973, pp. 1–13.

Southern author and literary critic Madden follows in the intellectual tradition of John G. Cawelti's "Notes toward an Aesthetic of Popular Culture," published in *The Journal of Popular Culture* in 1971. Madden's article is, in fact, a direct response to Cawelti, a professor of English at the University of Chicago, who, despite teaching in one of the most highly regarded English programs in the United States, was able to get away with writing about popular culture, and especially popular fiction, in the age of New Criticism with little institutional resistance.

Cawelti's "Notes" looked to the then-burgeoning field of film criticism, and its use of aesthetics, to argue for the use value of aesthetics in approaching the many "modern popular forms." He pointed out, for example, that "the analogy between Shakespeare and a film auteur like Hitchcock is not totally absurd," since both worked in the popular media of their time; by extension, then, the aesthetic language used in literary studies to think about Shakespeare and in film studies to think about Hitchcock should not be withheld from the study of popular culture. For the most part, for Cawelti, this meant popular fiction, his primary investment. He concluded by arguing that the concept of the film auteur (then at its most influential in film studies) should be broadened to conceptualize the popular culture auteur. He suggested that any popular culture producer at the peak of their art form ought to be studied through the lens of aesthetics just as any film auteur or literary master would be. Cawelti asserted that "there are always a few [popular] writers who, without losing sight of the convention structures of the story type they work within, still manage to create a distinctive person art," claiming as "the auteurs of popular literature" writers like Raymond Chandler, Ross MacDonald, Dorothy Sayers, and even Ian Fleming. Cawelti concluded with a line

that might be of interest to us still today: “it is not so much the unique totality of the individual work, but the artistic dialectic between auteur and convention, the drama of how the convention is shaped to manifests the auteur’s intention, that excites our interest and admiration.”

Two years later, Madden adopted Cawelti’s suggested use of aesthetics to historicize and provide direction for the future of popular culture studies, arguing that its early pioneers (just a few years prior, really) needed some way to unify their field in methodology or theory. For Madden, aesthetics provided the unifying theory of field needed by popular culture studies. Madden’s “Necessity” is significant because it combines a call for the study of popular culture aesthetics with a dual survey of what work had been done so far on the aesthetics of various popular forms (hint: he’s not impressed) and what aesthetics scholars themselves had said about popular culture (they were not generous, but he points out there is much to learn from them). Madden spoke to what was clearly an important concern for many at the dawn of popular culture studies; that is, that the field was too focused on generalized, perhaps even overly fannish observations. Madden thus expresses some anxiety about the need a “serious” direction for popular culture studies; a method, a theory, something that scholars outside of the PCA might make use of (a concern many of us still share). Madden’s attempt to develop an aesthetic approach to popular culture was one early attempt at legitimizing the field.

While today PCA boasts thousands of members and our journal celebrates its semicentenary, popular culture continues to morph in response to contemporary economic, political, and social shifts, generating new aesthetic movements and problems. In an era of heightened political and academic interest in the popular, our need to confront its aesthetics as much as its social and political dimensions, often intertwined with the aesthetic, and thus to look to other fields’ approaches to aesthetic criticism, is absolutely clear. Madden wrote nearly fifty years ago, but his comments about the utility and power of aesthetics-critical practices in popular culture studies echo today.

Cameron Clark’s Best Essay

Faderman, Lillian. “Lesbian Magazine Fiction in the Early Twentieth Century.” *TJPC*, vol. 11, no. 4, Spring 1978, pp. 800–17.

A seminal scholar of American LGBTQ history and culture, Lillian Faderman establishes thematic tropes for popular early twentieth-century lesbian magazine fiction in this article. Through what she calls “homoaffectional” attachments—a term that predates yet correlates with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s more popularized moniker “homosocial”—Faderman argues that sensual, rather than overtly sexual, relationships between women in publications such as *Ladies’ Home Journal* and *Harper’s* ultimately showcase a broader capacity for same-sex love and female bonding prior to World War I, the advents of psychoanalysis, and a growing public awareness of medical discourse on homosexuality. Noting that a literary categorization of lesbian magazine fiction would have been inconceivable at the time, Faderman nevertheless proposes that such a distinction can help us understand shifts from representations of non-threatening affection between women to expressions that connote psychological instability in same-sex encounters. As the first article of gay and lesbian criticism to be published by *TJPC*, Faderman’s essay has paved the way for scholars working at the intersections of popular culture and sexuality studies, and its compelling analysis of suggestively queer archival sources could still yield rewarding connections for future scholarship.

Emily Yates’s Best Essay

Koziski, Stephanie. “The Standup Comedian as Anthropologist: Intentional Culture Critic.” *TCPC*, vol. 18, no. 2, 1984, pp. 57–76.

Koziski’s article stands out because it covers a topic rarely discussed in contemporary articles from the journal: standup comedy. Including quotations from greats like George Carlin, Koziski argues that standup comedians act like anthropologists because their material includes insightful cultural critique. Koziski’s article helps to continue to define what the study of popular culture *is* while simultaneously proving that analyzing comedy is a worthy endeavor because it can reveal the structure of harmful institutions and it can reflect contemporary political and social concerns.

Justin Wigard’s Best Essay

Browne, Ray B. “Internationalizing Popular Culture Studies.” *TJPC*, vol. 31, no. 1, 1996, pp. 21–37.

I chose this particular selection by Browne (of which, he had three to four across the 1990s) because it seemed to be the most forward-

thinking of his articles. His title gives much of his thesis away (popular culture studies should be much more globally minded than it was at the time) but also that most other forms of academic thinking should start to consider their position as “parts of the large mosaic of the world.” This article also seemed to embody much of what Browne might have envisioned for his work with the journal during the 1990s, as there are several themed issues exploring international facets of popular culture.

Zack Kruse’s Best Essay

Pinheiro, John. “Extending the Light and Blessings of Our Pure Faith’: Anti-Catholic Sentiment among US Soldiers in the US-Mexican War.” *TJPC*, vol. 35, no. 2, 2001, pp. 129–52.

Pinheiro makes a historical case that the Mexican-American War was fueled by anti-Catholic sentiment to such a degree that it amounts to something of a religious war between the Protestant US and Roman Catholic Mexico. Not only is the article itself fascinating, but its timing and discussion of a covertly religious war between the US and non-Christians heightens the intrigue.

Bria Harper’s Best Essay

Melancon, Trimiko. “Reading Race And The Difference It Makes”: (Post) 9/11, Black Performance, And Cultural Production.” *TJPC*, vol. 47, no. 3, 2014, pp. 489–502.

Melancon dissects the differences between perception and reality within the context of race in the post 9/11 era. One of the central arguments asserts that post-9/11 patriotism has helped to create a sense of postraciality that has proven detrimental to the lives of minorities. Also, it has created a dichotomy of Americanness vs. everything else such that anything deemed un-American by the majority has been labeled a threat to the American way of life and is therefore subjected to social, institutional, and physical violence. Ultimately, Melancon ties the act of performance to nationalism and race to reveal the ways that the idea of performing as the perfect citizen has created new boundaries of terror for other citizens in America.