Pop
ologetics

POPULAR CULTURE IN CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

Ted Turnau

Popologetics

Popologetics

POPULAR CULTURE IN CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

Ted Turnau

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked (ESV) are from *ESV Bible* ® (*The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* ®). Copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Italics within Scripture quotations indicate emphasis added.

Printed in the United States of America

To my children,
Roger, Claire, and Ruth,

who have brought so much love, laughter,
joy (and popular culture) into our home.

It has been an honor watching you grow up.
This book is for you.

Contents

CONTENTS

**Part 3: Engaging Popular Culture: Why Critique
Popular Culture?**   **209**

Acknowledgments

A multitude of people deserve my gratitude in getting this book off the ground, so many who contributed to make it better. I won't list them all, but I must mention some. First and foremost in my heart among these is my dear wife, Carolyn. My first editor, the first one I bounce thoughts off, the one who really gets me. I am ridiculously blessed to have her.

Second, I talked over these ideas with many close friends at one point or other. Chris Simmons looms large among these, as do the Inman brothers, Jon and Ben. Thursday night at Greg Gilliam's house watching *The Simpsons* back in 1989 and the early 1990s was an especially formative time for me in thinking about popular culture. A mention should also go to Rick Downs, my pastor for four years. When I was teaching on popular culture from a book I didn't much agree with, he challenged me to respond. Also, my friend Craig Higgins impressed upon me that a book like this was needed.

Many groups have nurtured my thinking about popular culture. The first in my mind is the youth group at the First Korean Methodist Church in Philadelphia (now in Ambler, Pennsylvania). As a youth pastor, I learned from them how to talk about popular music in a way that spoke to them spiritually. The kids would bring me their CDs, I'd listen, and the following Sunday we would discuss them. The expression on their faces as they realized that an adult was taking their music as seriously as they did caught my attention and made me want to dig deeper.

A debt of gratitude should go to Redeemer PCA in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. It was they who asked a newbie apologetics Ph.D. student to teach them apologetics on Wednesday nights. Popular songs were my guinea pigs for those classes. That experience developed my thinking about an apologetics-based approach to popular culture.

When we moved to Prague, I came into contact with several groups that forced me to crystallize my thinking on this topic, usually by asking me to speak on Christians and popular culture. Greg Pritchard was first,

inviting me to give some talks at a new venture of his called the European Apologetics Network (now called the European Leadership Forum). Those talks led to an invitation by Lars Dahle to teach a short course on popular culture and worldview analysis at the Gimlekollen School of Journalism and Communication in Kristiansand, Norway, in January 2005 (what was I *doing*, going to Norway in January?). The coldness of Norway in January was more than matched by the warmth of my stay in Lars and Margun's home. Soon after, I started a relationship with the Baltic Reformed Theological Seminary and the Reformed Church in Latvia. Artis and Viesturs Celmins, Ungars Gulbis, and others enticed me to teach at a church retreat in August 2006 entitled "Faith, Culture, and Worldview—Cultivating a Christian Imagination in a World of Unbelief." What came out of that experience convinced me that I had enough to say to write a book. One further thank-you needs to go out to Jonathan Stephen and the Wales Evangelical School of Theology (WEST) for giving me the chance to teach through this material in the class Popular Culture and Christian Worldview. The feedback from the students at WEST has also been invaluable; they are fun, have keen theological minds, and made me feel quite at home.

I also wish to express heartfelt gratitude to the team at P&R, especially Marvin Padgett and Aaron Gottier, for their support and hard work in bringing this project to completion. They have been a joy to work with.

My gratitude would be very incomplete without mentioning the Troika, three friends who read and reread early drafts of this manuscript: my mentor Bill Edgar of Westminster Theological Seminary, my brother in arms Dan Strange of Oak Hill College, and my sister in Spirit Julia Wilson. Their advice helped the book to emerge in its present form.

Last, but by no means least, I want to thank my three children: Roger, our resident mad scientist; Claire, our resident artist; and Ruthie, the zookeeper. They have taught me much about popular culture, as teenagers will tend to do. We have spent many hours enjoying and talking about popular culture. They are a big part of why I wrote this book in the first place. And that is why I dedicate this book to them.

Introduction

"Why Would Anybody Want to Study That*?"*

A number of years ago, I spoke at a conference for Christian leaders in Europe. I did a few workshops, nothing major. But still, an exhausting half a week. Everyone was having a last breakfast at the hotel, and then we'd pack and go home. One of the keynote speakers came to our table and asked whether he could join us. This man (who shall remain nameless to protect the guilty) is an internationally known apologist, and a fairly brilliant man. As we chatted about this and that, he asked me what I do. I am a college lecturer. He asked me what subjects I taught, and I told him about one of my favorite classes, Popular Culture and Media Theory, and I told him what it covered. He then leaned back in his chair, hand stroking his chin thoughtfully, and mused, "Why would anybody want to study *that*?"

I have been studying popular culture for about twenty years, so that question might have been a tad bit tactless. I wish his response were somehow atypical. But it isn't. It's a response that I've become used to. I can see it in the eyes of people when I tell them what I do and they say, "Oh, well, *that* sounds interesting," as if I dissected slugs for a living. But this apologist was the first one who was honest enough to put it so directly. It's an attitude that many Christians unfortunately share: Isn't studying popular culture simply a colossal waste of time? Who cares about Madonna or *Star Wars* or *World of Warcraft*? Isn't popular culture simply trivial, brain-melting, stupor-inducing, superficial tripe?[1]

---

1. Lately, I have been encouraged because this attitude has been changing. More Christians are becoming interested in engaging popular culture.

Allow me to respond with a few provocative quotations:

If "religion is the opiate of the people", then immersive multiplayer 3D virtual worlds are hard-core Afghani heroin.
—Science-fiction and technology writer Bruce Sterling[2]

Anyway, I stopped going to churches and got into a different kind of religion. Don't laugh. That's what being in a rock 'n' roll band is. Showbiz is shamanism, music is worship. Whether it's worship of women or their designer, the world or its destroyer, whether it comes from that ancient place we call soul or simply the spinal cortex, whether the prayers are on fire with a dumb rage or dove-like desire, the smoke goes upwards, to God or something you replace God with—usually yourself.
—Bono, lead singer of the band U2[3]

Popular culture is the new Babylon, into which so much art and intellect now flow. It is our imperial sex theater, supreme temple of the western eye. The pagan past, never dead, flames again in our mystic hierarchies of stardom.
—Postfeminist social critic and gadfly Camille Paglia[4]

What ties these three quotations together? It is the connection between religion and forms of popular culture: interactive multiplayer online gaming environments in the first, rock 'n' roll in the second, and popular culture as a whole (especially the cult of celebrity) in the third. Whether or not you agree with the details, all three quotations talk about popular culture in terms that used to be reserved for religion. In other words, these writers see popular culture as an influential player in the realm of the sacred, in the realm of ultimate meanings, in the realm of worldview. And such a perspective makes a good deal of sense. Popular culture has become not only a sign of the times, but also something of a rudder of the spirit, a touchstone for our deepest desires and aspirations.

2. Bruce Sterling, "I Saw the Best Minds of My Generation Destroyed by Google," *New Scientist Tech*, September 15, 2006, available online at http://technology.newscientist.com/article/mg19125691.800?DCMP=ILC-OpenHouse&nsref=mg19125691.800INT.

3. Bono, "Psalm Like It Hot," *Guardian*, October 31, 1999, available online at http://www.atu2.com/news/article.src?ID=668&Key=psalms&Year=&Cat.

4. Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 139.

The problem is that popular culture is also a pervasive influence. It seems at once ephemeral and vital. Christians often either dismiss its influence as trivial or become flustered and assume a defensive posture. Popular culture is like something floating in the air around us, and it has the power to influence our beliefs. But we're not really sure what to do about it.

Allow me to illustrate with a parable called "The Flug in the Air":

Once upon a time (in a galaxy not so far away), there lived a community much like ours. One day, their scientists stumbled upon a discovery: there was something in the air they breathed. They called it *flug*, for lack of a better name. They didn't know where flug came from. Perhaps it was generated by the natural activities of the community's life together. Perhaps it was an alien substance that had invaded. No one knew for sure. But one thing they did know: Flug changed people. In some, the change was radical and disturbing. In others, the change was more subtle. But every person, every *breathing* person, underwent a change. Most people didn't even notice, or didn't care. They just kept on breathing and changing and living their lives.

Some people became alarmed and angry. They moved away to the high and lofty mountains, hoping they wouldn't have to breathe the flug-infested air. But since they were so high up, the sheer altitude and isolation changed them, but in a different way from people who breathed in the flug. And as it turned out, they couldn't *really* avoid it anyway, any more than you or I can avoid breathing.

Some people actually enjoyed the change and became flug-enthusiasts. They saw flug as a doorway into a deeper understanding of the mysteries of life, or something like that. They couldn't get enough. They even found a way to distill it and spike their cigarettes so as to increase their intake of flug. They called them *flugarettes*. Some people thought this group was being naive in their surrender to flug, but you couldn't really convince them otherwise. They just really, *really* enjoyed their flug.

And finally, there was a group of people who couldn't decide what to think of flug. So they started asking questions: "How and why are we being changed? Where did it come from? Is flug good or bad for us? What does it mean? What is the best way to live with it in our air?" They, too, distilled flug, and then tasted and tested it. One would dip his finger into the beaker, taste it, and say, "Hey, this stuff isn't half bad!" Another would spit out what he had just tasted and say, "Bleah! This stuff isn't half good!" And as it turned out, they were both right. They managed to build a microscope to study flug-distillate. They would lean over it for hours,

and they could actually see the goodness and the badness of flug, dark and light filaments spreading out like the tendrils of a vine. The problem was, the dark and light filaments were woven and tangled together, so you can imagine how hard and laborious a process it was to disentangle the good strands from the bad. It was all just so mixed together. But still they persevered, for they knew that mixture *meant* something.

This book is for that last group of people, the ones who are interested in taking a closer look at flug. Everything that follows flows from a certain assumption, namely, that popular culture is very similar to the flug in the air we breathe. Popular culture is all around us, and it does tend to get under our skin. It does influence us. Of course, the influence isn't on our lungs, but on our worldviews—on the way we understand God, the world, each other, and ourselves. And like flug, popular culture is a mixed bag, a messy mixture of good and bad. Comedian Oliver Hardy used to say to Stan Laurel, "Another fine mess you've gotten us into!" Living in a world suffused by popular culture has landed us, quite literally, into a fine, meaningful mess.

Popular Culture's Influence on Worldview

Popular culture has emerged in the last hundred years or so as one of the most significant carriers (perhaps *the* most significant carrier) of worldview and values in the West. Popular culture's influence travels far beyond the West as well, now that the forces of globalization carry MTV, viral videos, video games, and shows such as *Baywatch* and *24* to the farthest reaches of the globe. For that reason alone, popular culture deserves attention and serious reflection. It is anything but trivial. It wields considerable influence in our societies, and has done so for a long time.

Even though we think of popular culture as a recent phenomenon (and mass media certainly is relatively recent), popular culture has been a shaping influence for a long, long time—ever since our ancestors sat around campfires telling stories of love and heroism. And those songs and stories have influenced the way people have understood their world. Classicist and literary critic Paul Cantor notes:

Socrates recounts in the Apology (22b–c) that among the most important people in Athens he interrogated were the poets, because, as becomes clear in several Platonic dialogues, the poets both reflect and help shape

popular opinion on wisdom, piety, and other virtues. Poetry in its various forms, including drama, was the popular culture of ancient Greece. As Plato makes clear in the Republic, Homer was the educator of the whole Greek world.[5]

Further, if you actually read the ancient Greek poets, you will find that sex and violence in popular culture are not exactly new phenomena, either. Popular culture has been around for as long as civilization has.

Take a more recent example: in 1744, the publication of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's popular novelette *The Sorrows of the Young Werther* caused a sensation in Europe. It started a continentwide fashion trend of young men wearing open-collared "poet shirts," yellow trousers, and blue vests, all copying the hero of Goethe's book. Later, Europe experienced a rash of suicides as young men and women followed the lead of the book's young lovelorn hero.[6] Popular culture has wielded a powerful influence in societies for a long, long time.

Consider even more recent examples of the effect of popular culture on how we view the world. Think of how men in the West have changed the way they think about women, sex, and beauty since *Playboy* began circulation in 1953. Think of how we understand material success under the influence of the many celebrity-lifestyle magazines and TV shows. Think of how Nike ads have changed how we think about our own bodies, about exercise, about pain ("Just Do It"). Think of how J. R. R. Tolkien's books, and the movies inspired by the books, have shaped our understanding of heroism, sacrifice, and evil. Think of how our sense of humor has changed since the first airing of *The Simpsons* in 1989.[7]

Sometimes the cultural changes caused by popular culture can be profound. In America, there is a generational divide between those who were too old to enjoy *Star Wars* when it was first released in 1977 (that's *Episode IV* for you youngsters) and those who have grown up with it and

5. Paul A. Cantor, "The Art in the Popular," *Wilson Quarterly* 25 (Summer 2001): 28.

6. This effect of copycat suicides inspired by popular culture has even been termed the *Werther Effect*. See Paul Marsden, "The 'Werther Effect': Fact or Fantasy" (Ph.D. diss., University of Sussex, 2000), 11, available online at http://www.viralculture.com/pubs/PhD.pdf. See also John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett, *The Myth of the American Superhero* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 9–10.

7. According to Mark I. Pinsky, the show is watched by 60 million people a week in seventy countries, and includes such people as Al Gore and Tony Blair among its substantial fan base. See *The Gospel according to the Simpsons: The Spiritual Life of the World's Most Animated Family* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 2–3.

have seen it ten times or more (that is, those born in the 1960s or later). For some Americans, *Star Wars* became a quasi-religion, and for many others, it crystallized a turn away from organized religion toward a more open sort of "spirituality," however defined.[8] Popular culture has an immense impact on us and on our worldviews that borders on the religious.[9]

Responding to the Worldview Challenge

Popular culture affects us and those around us on the level of *worldview*—the assumptions we make about reality every day—often without our realizing it. This worldview effect is both obvious and elusive: we know it happens, but we don't often stop to think about what it means. How should we respond when our worldview is challenged? Though it might be tempting to move to a high and lofty mountain to avoid popular culture altogether, such a tactic usually doesn't work; you only end up creating another type of popular culture. Rather, I believe that a Christian's proper response to a worldview challenge from popular culture is to ask questions, to understand from a biblical perspective what popular culture is and how it works. In our parable, consider the Bible as the lens on the microscope that studies the flug. A biblical worldview helps us to sort out the good from the bad. Our task as Christians, then, is to respond to popular culture as a messy, deeply meaningful mixture. And I believe the only appropriate response to something that messy and that meaningful is apologetics.[10]

Consider the connection between popular culture and apologetics. Christians who engage unbelieving popular culture desperately need the tools that apologetics provides. But the reverse is also true: to remain relevant, apologetics desperately needs contact with the messages and world-

---

8. George Lucas, the creator of *Star Wars*, gave a fascinating interview to Bill Moyers, which was published as "Of Myth and Men," *Time*, April 26, 1999, 90–94. One of the sharpest and funniest analysts of popular culture writing today, Chuck Klosterman, claims that Lucas' *next* movie was the truly influential one. He argues persuasively that *Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back* shaped the ethos and style of the whole Gen X crowd (those born between 1965 and 1977—my generation, actually). See his "Sulking with Lisa Loeb on the Ice Planet Hoth," in *Sex, Drugs and Cocoa Puffs: A Low Culture Manifesto* (New York: Scribner, 2004).

9. For more on popular culture as religion, see Michael Jindra, "It's about Faith in Our Future: *Star Trek* Fandom as Cultural Religion," in *Religion and Popular Culture in America*, ed. Bruce David Forbes and Jeffrey H. Mahan (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000); and Theodore Turnau, "Popular Cultural 'Worlds' as Alternative Religions," *Christian Scholar's Review* 37, no. 3 (Spring 2008).

10. For those of you who don't even know what apologetics is, be patient. We'll get there in chapter 3. For right now, let's just say that apologetics is the art of defending and commending the Christian faith in a context of unbelief.

views communicated by popular culture. Popular-cultural engagement and apologetics need each other. Consider what happens when they are isolated from each other. On the one hand, a lot of Christian literature out there deals with popular culture (how to protect your children, media literacy, and so on); but precious little actually deals with popular culture as this messy, meaningful, and ultimately religious phenomenon. For that, you need a worldview approach, namely, apologetics. On the other hand, plenty of apologetics books out there treat apologetics as if it were a hard science (evidence for the resurrection, evidence for an intelligent designer, philosophical arguments for theism, and so on). But precious little apologetical literature actually engages popular culture. I fear that Christian apologists unwittingly contribute to their own perceived irrelevance by presenting arguments that simply do not deal with people where they actually live. And people do indeed live in an atmosphere suffused with popular culture. Christians who want to reach out to their non-Christian friends and neighbors need a worldview-oriented approach, an approach that deals with popular culture in all its complicated, messed-up glory.

The Plan of This Book

The main question that drives this book, then, is: How should we as Christians engage non-Christian popular culture? We won't even touch upon Christian popular culture. That is another question for another time and another book. Also, this book is not primarily intended for scholars of apologetics or cultural studies, though much here might interest them. Rather, I wrote it for thoughtful, everyday Christians who believe that these issues are worthy of serious reflection. This resource is intended for Christians who want to reach people where they live, who want to be able to talk about popular culture with their friends, spouses, and children in a way that has spiritual depth, but that won't scare folks off, either. In short, this book is for those who want to be able to give an intelligent, warmhearted, biblical answer back to the worldviews presented in popular culture. This book is for all who are interested in considering non-Christian popular culture from a Christian perspective.

Here is the territory that we are going to explore together: The first part of the book is called "Grounding." As the title suggests, it concerns getting our feet settled firmly on the ground. That really is the best place for them, especially when dealing with something in the air, like flug. In chapter 1,

we will try to define the two terms that are crucial for understanding the rest of the book: *popular culture* and *worldview*. In chapter 2, we will look at how these two interact. How does popular culture influence worldview, especially in postmodern times? Chapter 3 asks the questions: How do we meet the worldview challenges that we face? What sort of apologetics is most fit for the task? In chapter 4, we will deal with a subject that I think is too often ignored when Christians discuss popular culture: What is the significance of popular culture when viewed from a biblical, Christian-worldview perspective? Answering that question will give us clues about how best to engage popular culture in a biblically faithful way.

Part 2 of the book, "Some Not-So-Helpful Approaches to Popular Culture," surveys some of the ways that Christians have responded to popular culture. While there are lessons to be learned from these Christian approaches, they all go astray in one way or another. Typically, they minimize the messy complexity that lies at the heart of popular culture, a complexity that a sound biblical theology of popular culture should prepare us for (see chapter 4). Part 2 comprises chapters 5–9, each of which deals with a different Christian approach and how each goes astray in different ways.

In part 3, "Engaging Popular Culture," I will present what I believe is a more balanced approach to popular culture. In chapter 10, I will lay out a method of how to watch (or play or listen to or read) popular culture, and how to respond apologetically. I call this approach *popologetics*. In other words, we will explore how we ought to relate our faith to popular culture as cultural consumers, and how to respond thoughtfully to the worldview challenges presented in popular culture. In chapter 11, I unpack the ideas presented in chapter 10 by giving several concrete examples of popologetics in practice.

Then I will close the book with some thoughts on how to use this approach practically. The conclusion should give the whole book a sense of closure, as any good Hollywood movie would.

Feel free to browse and dip in and out of this book as you need to, but one small cautionary note: the whole thing will make a lot more sense if you proceed straight through from the first chapter to the last. I know that linear thinking is somewhat out of fashion in these postmodern times, what with the MTV-ization of our cerebral cortexes and all. But I still prefer it when a book builds up its perspective gradually, brick by brick. I think you will get the most out of the book if you plow straight through, and then come back

and dip in as needed. Also, keep thinking about how the book's content measures up against what the Bible says, for that's our flug-microscope lens. It is the standard against which anything I say in this book ought to be judged. Finally, think about how you can *use* what you read—or, better, how God would have you use it. It doesn't do anyone any good if it simply lies on a page, flat and inert. This book was written to be useful to Christians interested in popular culture. If you are one of those, enjoy! And if you're not (Christian or interested in popular culture), it may turn out that this book has something for you as well. At the very least, you may go away with a better understanding of the flug in the air.

Before we embark on this journey together, however, it is important to understand what engaging popular culture can and cannot do. Engaging popular culture will not save the world. It will not feed the starving in Africa or bring peace to the Middle East. It won't heal broken marriages or turn the hearts of fathers to their children and vice versa (Mal. 4:6). It won't bring spiritual revival that will sweep across the land, bringing thousands to Christ. It may strike some of you practically minded people as a waste of time. Let me assure you that it is not. What engaging popular culture *will* do is to allow you to enter into the broader cultural conversation that involves you, your family, your friends, the folks you work with, and the folks you relax with. It will allow you to enter into dialogue with them and speak truth into their lives with sensitivity, insight, and grace. And maybe, just maybe, it will help you love these people and be salt and light in the lives of those around you. And then, who knows how far the ripples of such conversations can go?

PART 1

Grounding

Before we can understand how to approach the worldview challenge of popular culture, we need to know what we are talking about. What do we mean by *popular culture*? What do we mean by *worldview*? What do we mean when we speak of popular culture's influence on worldviews? Is there such a thing as a biblical perspective on popular culture? How does popular culture fit into God's grand story? If it is true that popular culture presents a worldview challenge, how do we go about meeting this challenge, especially in our postmodern, media-saturated age? We will explore these questions in this section. They should help to ground us in biblical truths about culture and worldview, and that grounding will prove invaluable as we consider the best way of engaging the worldview challenges posed by popular culture.

1

Puzzle Pieces

Popular Culture and Worldview

Think of a Christian apologetical approach to engaging popular culture as a puzzle. It does not simply come together all at once. We have to build it carefully, piece by piece. Otherwise, we will not get a biblical, careful approach, but rather a hodgepodge of prejudices and shoot-from-the-hip reactions. So where do we begin? The first pieces that we need to obtain are *popular culture* and *worldview*—concepts that we will use throughout the book. Let us start with popular culture.

Sculpting the Elephant: What Is *Popular Culture*?

Defining *popular culture* is a deceptively tricky task. The "I know it when I see it" approach simply won't do.[1] Everybody has a vague idea what it means; the challenge is to be precise. The devil is, as they say, in the details. To make things even more complicated, each definition of *popular culture* carries hidden assumptions about what popular culture is *not*. And that negative space, that "not-ness," shapes our attitude and approach to popular culture. Allow me to illustrate.

---

1. That famous definition was written by Justice Potter Stewart as a commentary on the 1964 Supreme Court case *Jacobellis v. Ohio*. The full quotation has to do with the definition of *hard-core pornography*, and runs thus: "I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced within that shorthand description; and perhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly doing so. But I know it when I see it, and the motion picture involved in this case [Louis Malle's *Les Amants*] is not that."

There's a story about a man watching a sculptor chipping away with a hammer and chisel at a huge block of stone.

"What are you making?" the onlooker asked.

"I'm sculpting an elephant," the sculptor replied.

Curious, the onlooker inquired, "How *do* you sculpt an elephant?"

The sculptor shrugged. "That's easy. I just knock away all the bits of stone that don't look like an elephant. What's left is elephant."

The moral of the story is that the bits of stone you don't think look like an elephant will define what your elephant sculpture looks like in the end. The nonelephant bits guide the shaping of the elephant, making your elephant bigger or smaller, emaciated or robust, ugly or beautiful. Many times, hidden biases contained in what we define *popular culture* against make for a very pitiful elephant indeed.

For example, in the Czech Republic, my adopted home country, popular music is defined against *serious music*, that is, classical music. *Popular* in this case means "not serious." Something similar occurs in the English language when *popular culture* is contrasted with *high culture*, or *Art*. Whatever else popular culture is (entertaining, fun, and so on), it simply cannot be truly serious creative work. In this case, our elephant is defined against *Art* (with a capital *A*). Popular culture equals non-Art. It is assumed to be noncreative and nonartistic. Media scholar William Romanowski challenges this bias by using the term *popular art*.[2] But it sounds strange to our ears. Popular *and* art? *Popular* for many means not fit for thinking people, lower quality, overcommercialized, superficial, lowest common denominator, juvenile, vulgar, and so on.

There are serious problems with this way of carving the elephant. One of the most serious is that it leads to an unthinking, dismissive attitude toward any culture that is popular. Something must be bad *because* it has been enjoyed by many people. The truth is more complex. There are good and bad pieces of popular culture, just as there are good and bad pieces of high, elite culture. Being popular doesn't mean that something must be trash. In fact, a piece of culture's popularity ought to make Christians curious *why* so many find meaning there. Defining *popular culture* as inferior culture contains a hidden bias. And that bias will not serve us well if we are trying to understand and engage particular works of popular culture.

---

2. William D. Romanowski, *Eyes Wide Open: Looking for God in Popular Culture*, rev. and expanded ed. (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2007).

Webster's New Millennium Dictionary defines *popular culture* as "contemporary lifestyle and items that are well known and generally accepted, cultural patterns that are widespread within a population."[3] How does that definition carve the elephant of popular culture? The nonelephant part in this case might be "elite or specialized culture." *Popular culture* for *Webster's* means widespread, nonelite culture. This gets closer to what I mean by *popular culture*. *Popular culture* means cultural creations that reach the many. Unlike the typical *high culture/low culture* distinction, the term *popular* has nothing to do with the quality (or lack thereof) of the cultural work. Rather, this definition focuses on *the context within which the cultural work is received*. High culture, through a very particular history, has become associated with social elites.[4] Therefore, high culture tends to dwell in rarefied spaces, away from the hustle and bustle of everyday life, in areas that we may call "sacred spaces." Sacred spaces are places where we must speak in hushed, reverent tones: museums, concert halls, libraries, and the like. Popular culture, by contrast, circulates in rather busier quarters, such as prime-time television, commercial radio, the local multiplex, bookstores, and viral video websites. Because elite culture has been withdrawn from the everyday world and is placed instead in sacred spaces, popular culture has naturally taken over the functions traditionally associated with art: transmitting values, collective memory, and social criticism, as well as unifying communities.[5] Popular culture has become widespread in the wake of elite culture's withdrawal into sacred spaces.

And yet even "widespreadness" does not seem to capture all of what we mean by *popular culture*. There are many artists, storytellers, musicians, television shows, and films that we would call popular, but that are not well known. For example, take Joss Whedon's show *Firefly*, which ran for only eleven episodes. For a certain fan group, the show is the best thing ever written, on a par with Shakespeare. But most television viewers, especially those not versed in the fantasy/sci-fi genre, will never have heard of it. *Firefly* is

---

3. Dictionary.com, *Webster's New Millennium™ Dictionary of English*, preview ed., version 0.9.7, http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/popular culture.

4. We will discuss this history in a little more detail in chapter 7. For even more detailed accounts of this history, see Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), and Paul DiMaggio, "Cultural Entrepreneurship in Nineteenth-Century Boston: The Creation of an Organizational Base for High Culture in America," in *Rethinking Popular Culture: Contemporary Perspectives in Cultural Studies*, ed. Chandra Mukerji and Michael Schudson (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991).

5. See Romanowski, *Eyes Wide Open*, chaps. 4–5, especially pp. 86, 94–98.

popular and influential within its fan community, but not outside of it. Or consider the alternative hip-hop band Lifesavas. They may be known to fans in the Seattle area, but elsewhere they are virtually unknown, except to the hip-hop cognoscenti. And yet hip-hop is a popular genre, and Lifesavas works within that genre. The band produces non-widespread popular culture. Other popular artists have a limited audience not in terms of geography or fan base, but in terms of other sorts of communities. Many of you won't recognize the names *Pogo*, *Ray William Johnson*, and *Schmoyoho*, but hard-core YouTubers probably will. Yet these are also examples of popular culture: an Australian DJ who creates songs by remixing sounds from movies, a vlogger (video blogger) who comments on viral videos, and a musical group that creates music videos by auto-tuning news clips and other videos. Other popular artists would be recognizable only within certain restricted communities, such as fan artists and fan-fiction writers among Trekkers, or those writing and creating within the Buffyverse.[6] Yet such fan drawing, costuming, and fiction-writing would be classified by nearly everyone as *popular*.

The phenomenon of non-widespread popular culture is a fairly recent trend that is likely to continue. New media technologies and marketing strategies that deliver popular culture—cable and satellite television channels, websites, MP3 files—have effectively fragmented popular culture into niche markets. Instead of "broadcasting," we live in an age of "narrowcasting." The paradoxical effect is that there are now plenty of cultural works that are recognizably popular and yet fly below the general public's radar: popular, but not exactly widespread. That has to be taken into account when we define *popular culture*. It seems, then, that *popular* refers to the type of culture received, rather than the individual work itself, which may not be well known. In other words, *popular culture* refers more precisely to specific *media* that inform our everyday world (television, radio, cinema, magazines, Internet video files, and so on), and in *genres* that are widely accepted and enjoyed in a given society (rock, hip-hop, detective novels, science fiction, crime drama, comedy, and so on).

So here is my working definition of *popular culture*: *Popular culture is made up of cultural works whose media, genres, or venues tend to be widespread and widely received in our everyday world*. So a television show (or the iTunes or bit-torrent re-narrowcasting of the show) would be an example of

6. *Trekkers* is the preferred name for committed *Star Trek* fans. The *Buffyverse* is the imaginative world associated with the American television serial *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

popular culture. So would be a local band or DJ playing at a club. A concert of classical music at your city's symphony hall would *not* count as a popular-cultural text[7] because it inhabits a "sacred space," placed at a distance from the everyday world. *Popular culture* could include both folk culture (such as telling ghost stories around a summer campfire) *and* mass-media culture (such as a movie in which teenagers tell ghost stories around a campfire . . . and start disappearing one by one). Popular culture has to do with *access*. It dwells in spaces not too far from where we live.

This is not a watertight definition. There are, of course, exceptions. Take, for example, the late Luciano Pavarotti, the classical-music star. He became a popular icon even while he maintained his allegiance to classical music. He performed in relatively inaccessible spaces, such as concert halls with expensive tickets, *and* in more accessible spaces, such as the free concert he gave in 1991 in London's Hyde Park.[8] But although there are exceptions, this definition works pretty well. It avoids the kind of negative bias associated with the "popular culture as aesthetically inferior" definition by focusing on how culture is received. Popular culture is widespread in terms of the media, genre, and venue through which we take it in. This widespread reception explains, in part, why popular culture's influence on worldview is likewise widespread. And *that* makes popular culture worth thinking about.

Seeing the Tree for the Forest: What Is a *Worldview*?

Now that we have a working definition of *popular culture*, we need another piece of the popular-cultural apologetics puzzle: an understanding of the term *worldview*. For many Christians, worldview talk sounds too intellectual to be practically helpful. Others find the idea attractive, but most have a sketchy idea at best of what a worldview is.[9] In the next few pages, we will attempt to nail down what exactly a worldview is and why it is important.

---

7. Any piece of popular culture is a "text" in that it can be interpreted. When I use the word *text*, I mean it in that broad sort of way. A text can be a television show, a song, a movie—not just a book or magazine article.

8. See John Storey, *An Introduction to Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*, 2nd ed. (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1998), 9–10.

9. In an interview, Chuck Colson cited a George Barna poll (without naming the specific study) in which only 12 percent of American evangelicals could give an adequate definition of *worldview*, and only 4 percent said they needed to know anything about it. See "Backyard Apologetics: An Interview with Charles Colson," by James M. Kushiner and David Mills, *Touchstone: A Journal of Mere*

Worldview is a concept with a long and storied history.[10] While the implications of worldview are profound, the concept itself is fairly simple and straightforward. A worldview is the perspective from which you understand reality, your "view of the world." If you want a little more detail, Christian philosopher James Sire's definition serves nicely:

> A worldview is a commitment, a fundamental orientation of the heart, that can be expressed as a story or in a set of presuppositions (assumptions which may be true, partially true or entirely false) which we hold (consciously or subconsciously, consistently or inconsistently) about the basic constitution of reality, and that provides the foundations on which we live and move and have our being.[11]

Let us unpack that definition, using the metaphor of a tree.[12] A worldview can be thought of as a whole system that, like a tree, extends from the roots to the fruits.

The Roots: Presuppositions

Each worldview is rooted in presuppositions: assumptions that we make about reality. Presuppositions are, literally, prejudices. They are the lenses through which we prejudge any given situation. Here are some characteristics of presuppositions:

1. They are "basic," the foundational roots of the worldview. All other beliefs in a worldview flow out of these presuppositions, unless the worldview is inconsistent (and most are in some way or other).

2. Presuppositions are nonnegotiable and nonrevisable. They change only if a person undergoes a huge shift in perspective, something

---

Christianity (November–December 1999): 45, available online at http://www.touchstonemag.com /archives/article.php?id=12-06-041-i.

10. See David K. Naugle's landmark study *Worldview: The History of a Concept* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

11. James W. Sire, *Naming the Elephant: Worldview as a Concept* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 122. When Sire talks about the "heart" in his definition, he does not mean merely the source of our emotions. Rather, the heart (as it is in the Bible) is the integration point of the whole personality, the center of one's being, and so it includes the intellect, emotions, and will. It is close to what the Puritans used to call the *affections*.

12. Credit for the inspiration of the "worldview as tree" metaphor must go to Mark Potter of GreenTree Campus Ministries, though I have developed the tree idea somewhat differently than he has.

akin to conversion. These are the types of beliefs that we consider nearest and dearest, held with the utmost loyalty. Thus, they are not open to change, for they are the heart of the worldview. People become most threatened when you start talking about their beliefs on the level of presuppositions, for you are touching on what is most deeply meaningful to them, life-and-death matters.

3. Because presuppositions form the foundation of the worldview, they are not based on something more basic. In other words, presuppositions are not simply founded on neutral evidence. Rather, it is in light of presuppositions that something *counts as* relevant evidence rather than as a fluke, something that can be safely ignored. To borrow an image from the apologist Cornelius Van Til, these beliefs are like tinted glasses that color all that we see.[13] The world to us really will seem pink . . . if we're looking through rose-colored glasses.

Let me give you an illustration of this point from popular culture. A scene in Quentin Tarantino's movie *Pulp Fiction* (1994) illustrates the impact of presuppositions well. College students have stolen a briefcase from a local crime boss. He sends two contract killers, Vincent and Jules, to retrieve the case and kill those responsible. Vincent and Jules burst into the apartment to do their job, but what they do not know is that one of the students is hiding in the bathroom with a gun. After Vincent and Jules have executed two of the thieves, the man bursts out of the bathroom, surprising the hit men, and empties his gun in their direction. Bullet holes appear in the wall directly behind Vincent and Jules, but they themselves are unscathed. After shooting their assailant, Vincent and Jules argue about the significance of what's just happened to them. They should have been killed, but weren't. For Jules, the incident is proof of divine intervention. For Vincent, it is "just one of those things," a random event without larger significance. In other words, their presuppositions guide their view of events. For Jules, it had to be an act of God. For Vincent, there is no room in his worldview for an intervening God. His presuppositions exclude it as a possibility, regardless of the evidence. The "evidence" in both cases is exactly the same: being shot at and having bullet holes appear in the wall directly behind where they stood. But the facts, the evidence, don't

13. Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1955), 94.

"speak" in the same way to both men. The evidence is not neutral. Rather, the *significance* of the evidence is decisively colored by the differing presuppositions held by these men.[14]

Worldviews, then, are not simply rooted in "the facts," as if we could gather the relevant facts to build a picture of the Truth with complete, presupposition-free objectivity. Rather, the way in which we process the facts is always already involved in a specific set of presuppositions. We are, in a sense, always "captured" by our worldview, our presuppositions.[15] Worldviews are ultimately based on fundamental faith commitments from which we understand evidence, truths, facts, and all of reality. Presuppositions are like a base camp for the mind: where you start out in your exploration of reality, and the place you come home to. Your set of presuppositions is the most basic place you know from. At this level, worldviews are fundamentally *religious*. That is, they are types of faith: they deal with life at the level of deepest commitment. That will be an important insight to hold on to when we begin discussing how to understand the worldviews displayed in popular culture. Worldviews are religiously rooted in these basic, nonnegotiable beliefs called presuppositions.

The Trunk: The World-Story

Flowing from these presuppositional "roots" is a story that people tell themselves and each other about how the world really is. Sometimes called a *metanarrative*, this is *the* story that claims to interpret all other stories. The world-story works to makes sense of all the other stories in the world.

Why does worldview flow from a story? There is something about human nature that understands things in story form. Humans have been this way for a long, long time. The oldest writings we have are stories, and most likely people were telling stories before humans could write. We seem to be hardwired to find life's significance in story form. And that addiction

14. Without giving away too much of the film, I will comment that this scene is pivotal. Jules' and Vincent's different interpretations of that event (was it a miracle or just a fluke?) determine the choices and the paths that each of the characters takes in the rest of the story. For all its intense violence and obscenity, *Pulp Fiction* has a lot to do with worldview interpretation and apologetics.

15. That is not to say that presuppositions *create* evidence, or that facts should be ignored. I am not arguing for relativism, in which each worldview is valid and correct on its own terms. God's creation is what it is quite apart from our interpretation, and our presuppositions can be in harmony or disharmony with reality (that is, with God's authoritative interpretation of his own creation). The point is that presuppositions carry the power to distort or clarify our perception of that data, no matter how objective or empirical we believe ourselves to be.

to the story persists to the present day. American writers Joshua Glenn and Rob Walker recently conducted an experiment that they called "Significant Objects." They bought worthless knickknacks at flea markets or antique stores, contacted a fiction writer to write a story about each object, and then resold the items on eBay. For example, an ugly plastic Russian doll, bought at a flea market for $3, was given to writer Doug Dorst. Dorst wrote a story about a Russian woodcutter named Vralkomir who saved his village from freezing one winter by dancing on a pile of wood until it burst into flames. The doll *with* the story sold on eBay for $193. In total, Glenn and Walker sold $128.74 worth of useless junk for $3,612.51. The stories gave the objects a 2,706 percent increase in value.[16]

The point is that we humans see our reality as meaningful *through* stories. When we do science, talk about relationships, discuss politics or work or love, all of these have a story form. This means (and this is crucial) that worldviews embed themselves in our minds as *narratives* rather than as sets of abstract, analytical propositions. People tend to believe stories and analyze life from the stories they believe about the world. That is why popular culture is so influential: because more often than not, it gives us stories. It feeds our imagination *narratively* through its songs, shows, movies, magazine articles, games, books, and websites. And these stories end up shaping our world-story.

We make sense of our experience of life, of our moving through time, as a story.[17] You could think of these basic world-stories as presuppositions moving through time, each having its own distinctive plot. In other words, our world-stories deal with the past (Where did we come from? How did we get here?), the present (Where are we now? What am I doing here?), and the future (What is our purpose? Where are we going?). Our perspective on reality is, in a sense, just one big storyline with a beginning, a middle, and an end. This story is the context for our lives, how we understand the meaning of life.

16. Information from Selena Simmons-Duffin, "Significant Objects: A Doll with a Story," *NPR.org*, December 20, 2009. A transcript of the news story can be found at http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=121690381.

17. Philosopher Paul Ricoeur argues in his three-volume work *Time and Narrative* that humans experience time through stories. That is how we humans make sense of the ebb and flow of time itself. See Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984, 1985, 1988). See also his "Life in Quest of Narrative," in *On Paul Ricoeur: Narrative and Interpretation*, ed. David Wood (London: Routledge, 1991): 20–33.

In fact, the world-story's purpose is to provide answers to the questions that life raises, *even if the questions are never explicitly asked*. Several Christian-worldview writers have tended to treat worldviews as ways of answering the "big questions" such as "Who are we?" and "What happens after death?"[18] While worldviews *do* function this way, this is not how they function most of the time. More often, world-story functions as something that screenwriters call *backstory*: stuff that you've got to know in order to understand what's going on in the movie. It is not the plot, but rather the background against which the plot makes sense. The influence of a world-story is therefore subterranean, and it usually surfaces only in moments of stress (personal tragedy or a midlife crisis) or overwhelming joy (falling in love, weddings, the birth of a child), or when confronted with a radically different worldview (which happens more and more frequently in our increasingly pluralistic societies). But most of the time, it remains an assumed story, part of the furniture of the mind.

A couple of examples of world-stories: In certain African animist tribes, if a woman has twins, one is left to die. The question "Why?" might never be raised. Rather, the assumed world-story gives the answer before the question has been raised: one of the babies is a demon masquerading as a human child, and keeping that demon-child will bring bad luck to the village. Or take another example that is closer to home: Why do many people in consumer-oriented societies work so hard? Most people don't stop to ask themselves until relatively late in their careers. Instead, they tacitly buy in to a story about how working hard brings success in your job, which in turn gives you lots of money to buy lots of things, and that in turn brings happiness to you and those you love. It is not until they see the end of their careers (and their lives) that people begin to question the story they have been assuming all along. In these and myriad other ways, world-stories lay the background against which people live their lives.

18. See, for example, Brian J. Walsh and J. Richard Middleton, *The Transforming Vision: Shaping a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1984), and James W. Sire, *The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalogue*, updated and expanded ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988). Sire, however, has broadened his definition of *worldview* in the more recent fourth edition, and in his new book, *Naming the Elephant*. Walsh and Middleton have also more recently fleshed out their understanding of worldview, seeing it in terms of not just life questions, but narrative and cultural practice. See their *Truth Is Stranger than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), cited in Andy Crouch, *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 274–75.

Branches and Fruit: Life-Philosophy, Applied Beliefs, and Lived Behavior

So a worldview is rooted in presuppositions, and it flows out into a world-story that people tell themselves about reality. Branching out of the world-story is what we could call a life philosophy.

Western philosophy has typically dealt with perspectives on reality by asking three basic questions, encompassing three categories: "What exists?" (ontology), "How do we know what exists?" (epistemology), and "How should we respond?" (ethics). Most of us don't use the technical terminology, for we aren't philosophers. But it is important to realize that even for non-philosophers, these three areas are important and interrelated. All three flow out of the same world-story rooted in the same presuppositions.[19] It is important to remember that they are organically connected; therefore, they always impact and influence one another. What you believe about the nature of reality will determine what you believe you can know about reality. The question of how or even whether you can know reality will determine, to some extent, how you live. Furthermore, how you know is ultimately an ethical question. There *is* such a thing as knowing wrongly, distorting the facts, blinding yourself to an uncomfortable truth. For instance, if God really does exist and has revealed himself, and if you know the world around you in a way that excludes him from the picture, then that is *ethically* wrong—not simply mistaken, but an ethically perverse use of knowledge (see Rom. 1:18–23, about how sinful people "suppress the truth by their wickedness"). This is just to say that the parts of a life philosophy work together and influence each other. They form a *system*, even if it is only a very rough, intuitive system, because they flow from the same world-story. As we shall see, rudimentary systems of life-philosophy can be found throughout popular culture.

But most people don't have formal training in philosophy, and won't use philosophical categories such as *epistemology*. More typically, people express their life philosophy in what we could call a *street philosophy*, some informal statement that captures the gist of one's perspective on reality. Popular culture is full of such street philosophies, such as:

---

19. Cornelius Van Til brought this out very clearly in his writings. See Greg Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic: Readings and Analysis* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1998), 263–66.

"I look out for number one, because no one else is going to do it for me."
"Life is short, so play hard."
"Live life to the fullest."
"Believe in yourself!"
"I deserve the best."
"Honor, family, nation."

Street philosophies can also employ *root metaphors*: ways in which we use language that color our understanding of reality.[20] For instance, one root metaphor (that is also a street philosophy) in American culture is that "time is money." That belief expresses itself in a whole host of metaphors that have to do with "investing" and "wasting" and "spending" time.[21] Such metaphors color how we understand all sorts of things: relationships, career, entertainment, and even worship.

Each of these street philosophies and root metaphors rests on assumptions about these questions: "What exists?," "How can we know what exists?," and especially "How should I live?" If we want to engage culture, we will need to question some of the assumptions built in to these street philosophies and metaphors, assumptions that are rarely challenged or reflected on.[22]

The next level up on our worldview tree, flowing out of this system of life-philosophy, are all our specific applied beliefs about race, culture, the media, politics, family, church, sex, money, power, reputation, and so forth. Someone whose life-philosophy proclaims that life is about "grabbing all the gusto you can" is, of course, going to have very different beliefs about money (it's there for the taking), sex (get all you can while you can), and church (an irrelevant institution for the timid) from someone else with a different life-philosophy.

Last of all, out of these applied beliefs we actually live. The worldview tree bears fruit in our lives, so to speak, through our actions, words, and attitudes.

To sum it all up: Worldviews are rooted in assumptions about reality (presuppositions); and from these assumptions flows a story that tries to

20. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 5, cited in Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "What Is Everyday Theology? How and Why Christians Should Read Culture," in *Everyday Theology: How to Read Cultural Texts and Interpret Trends*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Charles A. Anderson, and Michael J. Sleasman (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 52.

21. Vanhoozer, "What Is Everyday Theology?," 52.

22. I will say more about how to challenge such assumptions in chapter 10.

make sense of our lives and reality (world-story); and out of this world-story flows a specific life-philosophy system (even if it is only a rudimentary street philosophy); and from this life-philosophy flows our applied beliefs about all sorts of things; and from these beliefs we live and act. Worldviews are organic, complex roots-to-fruits systems (see Fig. 1).

Fig. 1
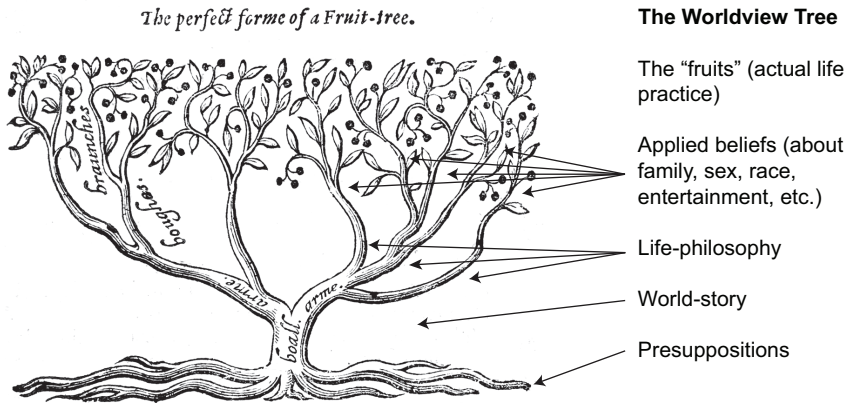
Reproduced and adapted from William Lawson's *A New Orchard and Garden* (London: 1648). By permission of University of Glasgow Library, Special Collections.

Chopping Wood: The Limits of the Worldview Model

The whole concept of worldviews has come under fire lately for being rather too neat and tidy. For instance, Christian cultural critic William Romanowski points out that there is a great deal of disparity *within* worldviews. For instance, Christians (who are supposed to share the same basic worldview) disagree on a whole host of topics, ranging from entertainment, to war, to the relationship between faith and science, to divorce.[23] How do we account for the wide and sometimes acrimonious diversity among people who share the same basic worldview?

One answer is that worldviews do not come fully formed. Rather, they develop as we interact with the world and culture around us.[24] That is, worldviews form in conversation with experience. Each of us gains pieces

23. Romanowski, *Eyes Wide Open*, 60.
24. Ibid. A big part of that cultural dynamic has to do with the influence of popular culture on worldview. We will explore this concept more fully in the next chapter.

of worldview over time. And each piece comes with its own unique "spin" given by our cultures, regions, families, and friends who have influenced us, through whom we have "caught" our worldviews. So there is a limit to the tree metaphor I have been using, because worldviews often don't grow and flow seamlessly. Worldview systems are always incomplete, hesitant, and searching. They are perpetually "in process."[25]

And like conversations, worldviews often take unexpected turns as we are confronted with the shocks, surprises, and recurring pains and delights that life throws at us. Our personal stories alter our worldviews, even in self-conflicting ways. Take, for example, a Christian man who has just been betrayed and abandoned by his wife of fifteen years. On the level of worldview assumption, he still believes in the goodness and power of God (his presuppositional roots), but on the level of applied beliefs, he might deeply doubt whether God has been good and powerful for him. On the level of world-story, he could acknowledge that women are created in God's image and are as full of dignity and worth as men. On the level of applied beliefs, he may begin to see women as trash and sly deceivers (and there are plenty of misogynistic messages in the culture to reinforce that attitude). His is a worldview in conflict with itself, in which deeply held beliefs war with newly formed beliefs. And these new beliefs may, over time, take root and work themselves deeper into his worldview system. Worldview systems are in constant conversation with the surrounding world of our experience, even as they filter our experiences. Worldviews remain, in a sense, open, even self-conflicted.

To further complicate the picture, humans are weak and rebellious creatures. Sin (which also takes on specifically cultural and personal forms) ensures that no Christian thinks or acts in a way that is completely consistent with his deepest worldview convictions. And the effect of sin is not peculiar to Christians. Every person experiences a tension between what he says he believes (worldview) and how he actually lives (the fruits). Christians can sometimes think and act in ways that are patently unchristian. And non-Christians can sometimes live in ways that make absolutely no sense given their particular worldview.[26]

Given the obvious fragmentation and inconsistencies that exist, should we simply abandon the model? Should we chop down the worldview tree and

25. Ibid., 61.
26. This worldview inconsistency is very important for popular-cultural apologetics, as we will see in chapter 10.

move on? Probably not. While we must admit the conversational, inconsistent, and sometimes downright self-conflicting nature of worldviews, the worldview model still has value. People do make assumptions about reality, and they do still try to make sense out of life in a *systematic* way, even though these systems are messy and rudimentary rather than rigorously thought out and consistent. The real value of the worldview model as a tool is that it captures the systemic nature of people's perspectives and explorations. And what is true of people is also true of popular culture, since popular culture is, after all, made by people.[27] As we explore the worldview tree, we need to keep in mind that some of the branches might be bent in strange ways, or some might even be missing altogether, and a branch from a different species of tree might be grafted in. In other words, we need to look both for the general system of thought and for the specific ways that this particular expression of the worldview might deviate here and there, in ways that show its own unique contours.[28]

Summary and Overview

Let us sum up the ground that we have covered in this chapter:

- We sought to define *popular culture*. Some definitions contain an overly negative bias that would burden our engagement with popular culture. Instead, we defined *popular culture* as texts whose media, genre, and venue are widespread or widely received in a given culture.

---

27. To further complicate matters, popular culture is never simply an expression of an artist's worldview. A whole host of other factors are at play: market forces, deadlines, limitations of the chosen medium, and so forth. See Romanowski, *Eyes Wide Open*, chap. 5, for a discussion of these factors. Nevertheless, worldview perspectives do emerge through the contours of the imaginative worlds of popular artworks (see chapter 2 below). That is what makes popular culture worth discussing.

28. James K. A. Smith's *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009) offers another sort of challenge to the worldview model. Unfortunately, I came across his book too late to fully engage with it in this text. Briefly, Smith feels that worldview talk overintellectualizes what actually orients us in the world: our desires, our imaginations, which are formed more by unreflective, repeated bodily practice (what he calls *ritual*) than by conscious belief systems. For Smith, we are less "believing animals" than "desiring animals," and so we should therefore abandon worldview talk. While I appreciate his insights, I don't think we need to eschew a worldview approach. Rather, I believe that there are ways of reformulating worldview that take into account the roles of desire and imagination, as well as intellectual reflection.

- We also explored the concept of *worldview.* I suggested the metaphor of a tree.
- A worldview is rooted in presuppositions that are basic, through which we see reality.
- Presuppositions flow into a world-story (or metanarrative), a narrative backdrop against which we understand reality.
- This world-story flows out into an organically interrelated system called a life-philosophy, which is most often expressed as street philosophy or root metaphors.
- This life-philosophy governs our beliefs about all sorts of specific topics, and these applied beliefs bear fruit in our specific actions, words, and attitudes.
- A worldview is not simply a stated opinion or a code for living. Rather, it is an integrated system that dynamically interprets the world, emphasizing some things, obscuring others.
- Each worldview tree grows in specific conditions, and it may not always grow straight, or in a way that makes sense. Nevertheless, it still forms a rough, if messy, system.

When all is said and done, popular culture is a system of texts that find their way into our everyday worlds, shaping our reality. A worldview is a profile of the human heart as it interacts with that reality. But how should we understand the interaction between popular culture and worldview? When we say that popular culture influences worldview, what does that mean? And how are we to respond? We will explore these questions in the next chapters.

It's everywhere . . . all around us . . . so widespread it's almost part of the air we breathe. Some people love it, some people hate it, and some try to shrug it off or pretend it's not there. But, like it or not, notice it or not, popular culture plays a huge role in our day-to-day lives, often influencing the way we think and see the world.

Some people respond by trying to pull away from it altogether, and some accept it without question as a blessing. But Ted Turnau reminds us that the issue is not so black-and-white. Popular culture, like any other facet of society, is a messy mixture of both grace *and* idolatry, and it deserves our serious attention and discernment.

Learn how to approach popular culture wisely, separating its gems of grace from its temptations toward idolatry, and practice some *pop*ologetics to be an influence of your own.

"Ted Turnau does a great service toward helping Christians engage their culture with both conviction and open-mindedness . . . and offers excellent practical application for how to both appreciate pop culture and fairly critique it."
—**Brian Godawa**, Hollywood Screenwriter, Author of *Hollywood Worldviews*

"This is one of the freshest and most original books I have read in ages. . . . A fine blend of worldview apologetics and cutting-edge cultural analysis. . . . I thoroughly commend it."
— **Richard M. Cunningham,** CEO, Intervarsity UK

"Turnau recognizes the vitality of popular culture and knows that because God has spoken in Scripture we have a plumb line by which to uncover the idolatries that seek to seduce us away from the truth."
—**Denis D. Haack**, Director, Ransom Fellowship

"A tour de force. Written incisively, with appropriate humor, and especially using up-to-date examples from the field of popular culture . . . there is nothing remotely like it in print today. I recommend it enthusiastically."
— **William Edgar,** Professor of Apologetics, Westminster Theological Seminary

Ted Turnau is a teaching fellow at the International Institute for Christian Studies. He currently teaches cultural and religious studies at Anglo-American University and cultural studies at the Social Science Faculty of Charles University in Prague.