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POPULAR CULTURE

Introductory Perspectives

MARCEL DANESI

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twenty-five super-soldiers. Already in 1988 DC Comics published *The New Guardians*, which included an aboriginal girl, an Eskimo man, and an HIV-positive gay man as its superheroes. The great white male hero story of traditional adventure comics has finally been deconstructed and a more expansive story is now being told in its place.

4

RADIO

Captured by the radio as soon as she or he awakens, the listener walks all day long through the forest of narrativities.

Michel de Certeau (1925–1986)

The *War of the Worlds* radio broadcast incident on Halloween night of 1938, mentioned briefly in chapter 2, showed how representation can blur the line between fiction (fantasy) and reality. It was the famous actor and director, Orson Welles (1915–1985), who transformed H. G. Wells's novel into a radio drama, frightening many listeners into believing that Martians had landed and invaded New Jersey. Welles was able to bring about this reality-simulating effect with a series of "on-the-spot" news reports describing the landing of Martian spaceships. An announcer would remind the radio audience, from time to time, that the show was fictional. Even so, many listeners went into a state of panic, believing Martians had actually invaded the Earth. The police and the army were notified by concerned citizens; people ran onto the streets shouting hysterically; and some even contemplated suicide. The reaction took Welles and his acting company by surprise. They did not expect that people would take the show seriously—after all, it was just that, a *show*. The actors and producers had forgotten or ignored Plato's warning that representation and reality are almost impossible for people to separate psychologically, especially when the former simulates the latter.

The *War of the Worlds* incident is now famous in the annals of media and pop culture history, and it underscores the powerful role that the first electronic stage, *radio*, played in promoting pop culture and ensconcing it in the mainstream. By the 1930s radio had become the primary locus for the performance and spread of pop culture fare. That medium is still around,

although it has lost much of its former supremacy. This chapter will look at the electronic venue through which pop culture thrived for many years and through which it still finds a niche that attracts large audiences.

RADIO BROADCASTING

In 1837, the telegraph became the first electronic system of international communications. It soon became obvious, however, that the telegraph was relatively inefficient because it depended on a complex system of receiving stations wired to each other along a fixed route. In 1895, the American engineer Guglielmo Marconi (1874–1937) transmitted an electronic signal successfully to a receiving device that had no wired connection to his transmitter, thus demonstrating that a signal could be sent through space so that devices at random points could receive it. He called his invention a *radiotelegraph* (later shortened to *radio*) because its signal moved outward in all directions (that is, *radially*) from the point of transmission. Thus radio was introduced into the world.

As a mass communications device, at first called appropriately the *wireless*, the radio changed the world when, in 1901, Marconi developed an alternator appliance that could send signals much farther and with much less background noise. This advance led, about two decades later, to the development of commercial technology that established the radio as the first electronic pop culture medium, shaping trends in music, lifestyle, and society generally. Radio could reach many more people than print, not only because it could span great distances instantly, but also because its audiences did not have to be print-literate. Programming could thus be designed with mass appeal. Radio was therefore pivotal in spreading pop culture—a culture for all, not just the literati and the cognoscenti.

Historical Sketch

Evidence of a plan for radio broadcasting to the general public can be found in a 1916 memorandum written by David Sarnoff (1891–1971), an employee of Marconi's U.S. branch, American Marconi, which would eventually become the Radio Corporation of America (RCA). In the memo, Sarnoff recommended that radio be made into a "household utility." This plan was not given any serious consideration by management at first. After World War I ended in 1918, however, several manufacturing compa-

nies began to seriously explore Sarnoff's idea for the mass-marketing of home radio receivers, leading to mass-scale radio broadcasting.

In an effort to boost radio sales in peacetime, the Westinghouse Electric Corporation of Pittsburgh established what many culture historians consider to be the first commercially owned radio station, which offered a regular schedule of programming to the general public. It came to be known by the call letters KDKA, after it received its license from the Department of Commerce (which held regulatory power following the end of the war) in October of 1920. KDKA aired various kinds of popular programs, including recorded music, which was generated by a phonograph placed within the range of a microphone. The station did not charge user fees to listeners, nor did it carry paid advertisements. Westinghouse used KDKA simply as an enticement for people to purchase home radio receivers.

Other radio manufacturers soon followed suit. The General Electric Company, for example, broadcast its own programs on station WGY in Schenectady, New York. Seeing the rise of radio as a mass communications medium, RCA eventually gave Sarnoff permission to develop radio programming for home entertainment. Sarnoff opened stations in New York City and Washington, D.C., and in 1926 he founded the National Broadcasting Company (NBC), an RCA subsidiary created for the specific purpose of broadcasting programs via a cross-country network of stations. The Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) radio service was established shortly thereafter in 1928 and became a dominant force in the American broadcasting industry over the subsequent fifty years. Already in 1922, AT&T began exploiting the possibilities of toll broadcasting—that is, of charging fees in return for the airing of commercial advertisements on its stations. Fearing legal action, however, the telephone company sold its stations to RCA and left the broadcasting business. In return, AT&T was granted the exclusive right to provide the connections that would link local stations to the NBC network.

The sale of radios more than justified the expense to manufacturers of operating broadcasting services. According to estimates by the National Association of Broadcasters, in 1922 there were sixty thousand households in the United States with radios; by 1929 the number had topped 10 million. But vast increases in sales of radio receivers could not continue forever. The sale of advertising time loomed, consequently, as the only viable solution for the economic survival of American radio broadcasting. The merger of advertising with radio programming was the event that, arguably, trans-

A Radio Timeline

- 1890s:** Guglielmo Marconi develops the first radio transmitter.
- 1906–1910:** Lee De Forest invents the vacuum tube, called the Audion tube, improving radio reception. Reginald Fessenden makes the first radio broadcast, from the Metropolitan Opera House in New York City.
- 1910:** Congress passes the Wireless Ship Act, requiring ships to be equipped with wireless radio.
- 1912:** Congress passes the Radio Act, the first piece of government regulation for radio transmission.
- 1916:** David Sarnoff, the commercial manager of American Marconi, writes a famous memo, the radio music box memo, in which he proposes to his boss to make radio a “household utility.”
- 1916–1920:** Frank Conrad founds KDKA in Pittsburgh as the first radio station in 1916. The station’s broadcast of the 1920 presidential election results on November 2, 1920, is generally considered to constitute the beginning of professional broadcasting.
- 1922:** The first uses of radio for commercial purposes begin with the airing of the first advertisements, by AT&T on station WEAF. This causes an uproar, as people challenge the use of the public airwaves for commercial messages.
- 1926:** The first radio broadcasting network, NBC, is launched by RCA.
- 1927:** A new Radio Act passed by Congress creates the Federal Radio Commission. AM stations are allocated.

formed the nature of mass communications. Noncommercial broadcasting would play only a minor role in the United States and there would not be a coast-to-coast noncommercial radio network until the establishment of National Public Radio (NPR) in 1970. In Great Britain, on the other hand, radio owners have always paid yearly license fees, collected by the government, which are turned over directly to the publicly run British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC).

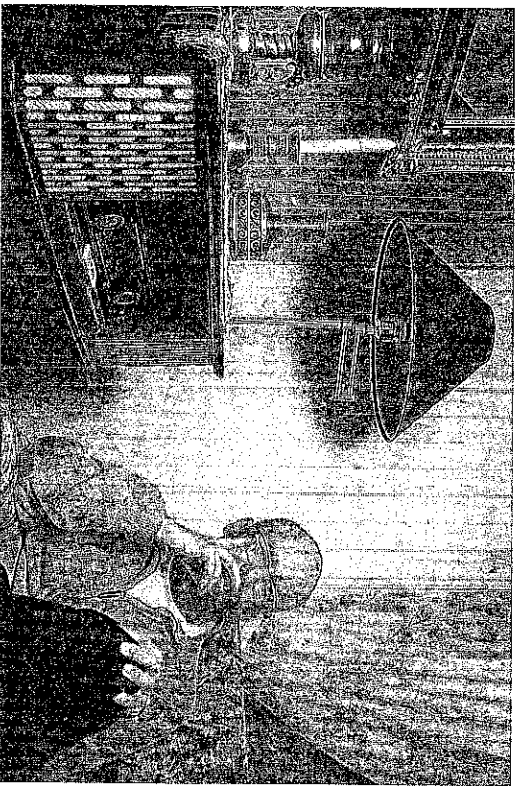
Radio broadcasting reached the pinnacle of its popularity and influence during World War II. In that period, American commentator Edward R. Murrow (1908–1965) changed the nature of news reporting permanently with his sensational descriptions of street scenes during the German bombing raids of London, which he delivered as an eyewitness from the rooftop

- 1933:** FM radio is introduced.
- 1934:** The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) is created by an act of Congress.
- 1938:** Mercury Theater of the air broadcasts *The War of the Worlds*, demonstrating how a mass medium can cause public panic.
- 1947:** Radio starts to lose audiences to television.
- 1948:** The DJ radio era takes off.
- 1949:** *Red Hot 'n Blue* becomes one of the first radio rock-and-roll shows.
- 1955:** Top 40 radio becomes the most popular type of radio format, indicating that radio is becoming more and more a marketing arm of the recording industry. Rock-and-roll enters the scene in the mid-1950s. It will dominate pop music radio until the early 1990s.
- 1970s:** FM radio stations gain popularity, transforming radio into an increasingly specialized medium.
- 1971:** National Public Radio starts broadcasting with *All Things Considered*.
- 1979:** Sony engineer Akio Morita invents the portable Walkman.
- 1987:** WFAN is launched as the first all-sports radio station.
- 1990s:** Talk radio becomes popular. Old and new music genres, from country to gospel to opera, attract niche audiences.
- 1996:** Congress passes the Telecommunications Act, allowing consolidation of radio ownership across the United States.
- 2000s:** Satellite and web-based radio programs emerge in 2002. File-sharing, online radio programs, and the like become highly popular.

of the CBS news bureau there. In the same time frame, American president Franklin D. Roosevelt utilized radio as a propaganda device for the first time. The radio allowed him to bypass the press and directly address the American people with his “fireside chats” during the Great Depression. Roosevelt knew that the emotional power of the voice would be much more persuasive than would any logical argument he might put into print. The chats continue to this day as part of the American presidency. Adolf Hitler, too, saw the radio as a propaganda medium and used it to persuade millions to follow him in his quest to conquer the world. Also, the radio appeal from Japanese emperor Hirohito to his nation for unconditional surrender helped end World War II following the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Radio broadcasting dramatically changed social life wherever it was introduced. By bringing information, critical commentary, and the arts directly into homes it democratized argument and aesthetics more than any other medium in the history of civilization. Historically a privilege of the aristocracy (or the cognoscenti), the arts could now be enjoyed by members of the general public, most of whom would otherwise not have access to venues such as the concert hall and the theater. The parallel growth of network radio and Hollywood cinema, both of which were launched as commercial enterprises in 1927, created an unprecedented mass culture for people of all social classes and educational backgrounds. While it is true that the democratization of culture was started in the domain of print (as mentioned in the previous chapter), it would not have become as widespread without radio for the simple reason that radio could reach more people, print-literate or not, solely for the initial (one-time) cost of a radio receiver.

In the Internet Galaxy, radio has shown itself to have remarkable staying power. It is estimated that there are about 2 billion radio sets in use worldwide, with more than half concentrated in North America, the European Union countries, and Japan. In developing societies, too, most citizens



From the 1920s to the early 1950s, radio broadcasting was society's primary medium of information, arts appreciation, and leisure.

©iStockphoto.com/Kati Neudert

own or have access to a radio. Radio is also technologically adaptive. All-digital satellite radio stations, such as XM and Sirius, are springing up regularly. In sum, the radio is not yet a relic in the Internet Galaxy. It may have come down from its top perch, but it continues, nevertheless, to be an integral part of mass communications and a promoter of pop culture fare.

Genres

At first, radio was no more than a new audio medium for delivering print and theatrical forms of pop culture. For example, it adapted the various genres of traditional stage drama, transforming them into radio dramas. It took the material of pulp fiction and converted it into action serials, situation comedies (or *sitcoms*), and soap operas. It looked to vaudeville to garner and adapt material for its comedy-variety programming. And it modeled its news coverage on the format of daily newspapers—early announcers would, in fact, often simply read articles from the local newspaper over the air. Because of its capacity to reach large numbers of people, from the 1920s to the early 1950s radio broadcasting evolved into society's primary medium of information, arts appreciation, and, above all else, leisure. Only after the advent of television in the 1950s did radio's hegemony begin to erode, as its audiences split into smaller, distinct segments. Today, radio is primarily a medium that people listen to in automobiles (during drive time) and at workplaces (while working). Because radio executives are aware of their audience's typical patterns of listening, stations generally present news and traffic information interspersed at regular intervals throughout their broadcasts and/or present uninterrupted stretches of music during certain periods of the working day. Many radio stations offer programming for niche audiences (sports stations, talk stations, and so on).

Despite the obvious differences between radio and television, the development of programming for both broadcast media is best understood as a single history comprised of two stages—that is, two pop culture venues and also two periods of time. Early radio broadcasting was dominated by adaptations of pulp fiction and vaudevillian genres. The sitcom, for example, was adapted from an improvised form of vaudevillian comedy that, itself, traced its roots back to the *commedia dell'arte*—a comedy form that emerged in Italy in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, characterized by the enactment of a standard comedic plot outline and stock characters. The commedia became a highly popular form of *street theater*, as opposed to the literary drama of the court and the academies that was performed on

court stages. Common folk came in flocks to attend performances. Commedia troupes set up their makeshift stages in piazzas in much the same way as traveling circuses set up their tents in market squares. The script consisted of a *scenario* (an outline of a basic plot) and the actors wore masks to emphasize their character profile. The same actor always played the same role, adapting it through improvisation to the unfolding performance and the reactions of the audience. Most of the farcical plots dealt with love affairs, illicit or otherwise. Some of the characters, like Harlequin the clown and Pantaloon the old man, became so popular that their masks were worn by people at carnival time.

Radio sitcoms were descendants of the commedia genre that were adapted to new social realities. Like the commedia scripts, the sitcoms explored life, love, and romance in the home, the workplace, and other common locations in a comedic and often farcical manner. The sitcom became, consequently, very popular across audiences. The most highly rated sitcom was *Amos 'n' Andy*, in which actors performed the stereotypical roles of African American characters in outrageous caricature. The series premiered on NBC in 1928 and ran for twenty years on radio before moving to television, where it ran from 1951 to 1953. Similarly, *The Goldbergs* (1929–1950), *Life with Luigi* (1948–1953), and other ethnic family sitcoms successfully exploited the vocal character of the radio medium, as actors used thick immigrant accents and malapropisms to carve out their roles and characters. Lucille Ball's radio show *My Favorite Husband* (1948–1951) was a notable exception to the standard radio sitcom fare, developing its comedic artistry considerably. *My Favorite Husband* transformed elements such as the battle between the sexes, arguments among neighbors, and other mundane conflicts into matters of social concern and reflection.

Variety shows and dramas were also popular genres of early radio. The former were taken directly from vaudeville. Many early radio stars, including Jack Benny, Fred Allen, and Edgar Bergen, were originally vaudeville actors and comedians. A radio comedy-variety hour typically consisted of short monologues and skits featuring the host. These were alternated with various acts, including singers, musicians, comedians, and the like. Radio drama also became highly popular early on. The genre was presented in one of two formats—*anthology* and *serial*. The former showcased individual plays, such as one would expect to see on stage or in motion pictures. Anthology drama became highly popular in the 1930s and 1940s. Programs included *Mercury Theater on the Air* (1938–1941), created by Orson Welles (mentioned previously), and *Theatre Guild of the Air* (1945–1954). However,

serial drama, using recurring characters, situations, and settings, was even more popular. Subgenres in this format included urban police dramas, such as *Gangbusters* (1935–1957), private eye mysteries, such as *The Shadow* (1930–1954), and westerns, such as *The Lone Ranger* (1933–1955)—all radio adaptations of pulp fiction stories and characters. The radio narratives became quickly *textual coordinates* for an entire society—that is, they provided reference points to which people could turn in their everyday discourse (“Did you hear how cleverly the Shadow solved the mystery?”). Radio drama virtually disappeared by the mid-1950s as its biggest stars and most popular programs crossed over to television—the emerging pop culture stage of the era.

Another very popular radio genre was the soap opera, or daily serial drama, which was originally developed as a daytime programming format aimed specifically at a female audience. The genre was so named because soap and detergent manufacturers sponsored many of the dramas. Soap operas explored romance, friendship, and familial relations in emotionally involving narrative formats. The invention of the soap opera is credited to Imna Phillips, who began developing proto-soap operas for local radio broadcast in Chicago during the 1920s. However, the first true soap opera is generally thought to be *Painted Dreams*, which premiered in 1930. It was a flop because it included too much advertising. However, its themes of romance, betrayal, and sexual intrigue became the ingredients that made (and continue to make) soap operas such as *The Guiding Light*, *Backstage Wife*, and *The Romance of Helen Trent* popular and entertaining. The genre was well-liked, arguably, because of its carnivalesque admixture of sex, betrayal, and romance. From the 1930s to the 1950s soap operas constituted a modern-day morality play. Sin and violence, which always occurred in “offstage” situations, frequently affected the lives of characters negatively. However, as in the morality plays of old, good inevitably triumphed, or at the very least wrongdoing was properly punished.

In the area of news reporting, radio could offer its audiences live coverage of events—something that newspapers could not do. The immediacy with which radio news reached people redefined the role of news reporting in society. Print journalism became a supplemental medium, focusing on in-depth coverage and editorial opinion. Today, radio continues to be a primary source of news reporting. So-called drive time (7–9 A.M. and 4–7 P.M., when most commuters are traveling to and from work) has become radio's prime time. Programming during these hours includes traffic bulletins, weather reports, breaking and current news items, and time checks. Some

stations have now adopted news-only formats, reflecting radio's evolution into a medium for specialized audiences. National Public Radio's *All Things Considered* (1971–) and *Morning Edition* (1979–), for example, were developed as morning and evening on-air newspapers for sophisticated audiences. The variety and tailoring of radio programs and stations illustrates once again that the pop culture stage has room for all kinds of acts, from the vulgar to the highly sophisticated.

Among the acts that radio has always showcased are music and talk. Radio has traditionally been a promoter of trends in pop music. The jazz, swing, rock, and hip-hop movements would not have become as dominant as they did without radio. Radio hit parades have always featured new and old tunes, spurring consumers to buy records. Today, a host of radio stations provide specialized pop music broadcasting, from adult contemporary to classical music to jazz. Radio has also historically been a medium for talk. The original talk shows were little more than commentaries on politics and current affairs. But this genre soon broadened to include gossip and “shock talk.” The contemporary talk show is usually a pastiche of gossip and commentary. The emphasis on luridness by some talk radio hosts is not unlike the custom of burlesque emcees and actors to enter into salacious and prurient talk with audience members. *Interactivity* is not an invention of the Digital Age. It has always been part of the allure of pop culture performances.

THE RADIO STAGE

Since it took over the vaudevilian and pulp fiction genres and adapted them to a new medium for broader audience reception, promoting pop culture as a society-wide mode of culture in the first half of the twentieth century, radio can be singled out as perhaps the most important media stage in history. Its influence on society cannot be overstated. The German Jewish refugee Anne Frank (1929–1945) perceptively wrote the following about radio in her famous diary (from *The Diary of a Young Girl*, 1947, p. 45):

The radio goes on early in the morning and is listened to at all hours of the day, until nine, ten and often eleven o'clock in the evening. This is certainly a sign that the grown-ups have infinite patience, but it also means that the power of absorption of their brains is pretty limited, with exceptions, of course—I don't want to hurt anyone's feelings. One or two news bulletins would be ample per day! But the old geese, well—I've said my piece!

The radio was the perfect stage for an engagement in fantasy. As former presidential speechwriter Peggy Noonan has aptly phrased it, “TV gives everyone an image, but radio gives birth to a million images in a million brains” (cited in *What I Saw at the Revolution*, 1990, p. 34). Hearing is a more powerful stimulus for fantasizing. Noonan suggests, than is seeing. One cannot but agree with this assessment. Nowhere did radio's image-producing power become more evident than in the partnership that radio formed with advertising—the maximal promoter of dreams and fantasies.

Radio and Advertising

The newspaper was the first medium to converge with advertising. The two still go hand in hand. The same kind of convergence story can be written for radio a little later in time. A radio genre—the soap opera—was even named for the type of advertiser that sponsored it. In the United States advertising agencies produced almost all network radio shows before the development of network television. Stations often sold agencies full sponsorship, which included placing the product name in a program's title, as in *The Palmolive Beauty Box Theater* (1927–1937) or *The Texaco Star Theater* (1948–1953). Entire radio programs became associated with products. The ratings system arose, in fact, from the sponsors' desire to know how many people they were reaching with their advertising. In 1929 Archibald Crossley launched *Crossley's Cooperative Analysis of Broadcasting*, which used telephone surveys to project daily estimates of audience size for the national radio networks. The A. C. Nielsen Company, which had been surveying audience size in radio since the mid-1930s, eventually became the dominant ratings service. The resulting projections, or *ratings*, helped determine the price of advertisements and, ultimately, whether the program would stay on the air or be canceled. Only public radio stations have remained exempt from the “ratings game,” since they are financed by government subsidies, individual donations, and corporate grants.

Radio introduced onto the pop culture stage the *commercial*—a mini-narrative or musical jingle revolving around a product or service and its uses. The commercial became a highly successful form of advertising because it could reach masses of potential customers instantaneously through the persuasive capacity of the human voice—which could be seductive, friendly, cheery, insistent, or foreboding, as required by the nature of the product. Early radio commercials consisted of pseudoscientific sales pitches, satires of movies, and snappy jingles. These commercials became so familiar that pub-

lic perception of a product became inextricably intertwined with the style and content of the commercials created to promote it. The commercial allowed for the first fictitious advertising personalities, from Mr. Clean (representing a detergent product of the same name) to Speedy (a personified Alka-Seltzer indigestion tablet). Commercials also became a source of dissemination of recognizable tunes throughout society, from "Mr. Clean in just a minute" (for the Mr. Clean detergent product) to "Plop, plop, fizz, fizz—oh, what a relief it is" (for the Alka-Seltzer stomach product).

From the outset, radio advertising both reflected and set social trends. A synergy thus quickly developed between advertising campaigns and general lifestyle trends, as advertisers attempted to keep in step with changing trends and, at the same time, shape them through their commercials. Commercials were designed to have great appeal and indeed became popular in themselves. Some jingles became well-liked tunes. Even today, people recognize tunes such as "I'd like to teach the world to sing in perfect harmony" without realizing that they started out as jingles for a product (in this case, Coca-Cola).

Radio programs and brand advertising today are totally integrated. Commercials are interspersed throughout a program, informing listeners of products that are relevant to audiences of the program. Radio advertising has the advantage that people can listen to commercials while doing other things, such as driving a car or working at home. Another advantage is that radio audiences, in general, are more easily categorized according to tastes and lifestyle preferences. For example, stations that feature country music attract different kinds of listeners than do those that play rock. Therefore, audience members can be more readily identified as probable consumers of certain types of beverages, automobiles, and the like. By selecting the station in this way, advertisers can intelligently target their commercials, using ad scripts psychologically and socially suited to their customer base.

Orality

Even in a television and online world, radio remains an effective media stage for a basic psychological reason—the emotional power of the human voice. When it was the main stage for promoting the broader spectacle of pop culture, people were mesmerized by radio and often listened together as they sat quietly around the radio after dinner (thus transforming the after-dinner period to what later came to be called *prime time*.) The deep voices that introduced horror programs such as *Inner Sanctum* frightened listeners,

while it was in reassuring tones that the voices of commercial announcers came through the same "magic box" to promote products and services. The voices of sitcom actors turned them into household characters, recognized by one and all through their vocal timbres and particular phonetic mannerisms. And, of course, the sultry and seductive tones of actresses and the virile masculine tones of actors never failed to create sexual interest—an interest that has always been a basis of the appeal of pop culture spectacles. In vaudeville, singers and comedians made their fame as much through quality of voice as through appearance. The ability to control and utilize the voice onstage has always been a basic theatrical skill. To this day, radio announcers are judged on the basis of their vocal qualities more than on the content of their discussions (which are mainly scripted) or on the beauty or handsomeness of their appearance.

Radio revived orality as a mode of mass communication, complementing the print mode discussed in the previous chapter. Orality has great emotional appeal and reaches back into history. Before the advent of alphabets, people communicated and passed on their knowledge through the spoken word. Of course, early oral cultures had invented tools, which were invariably pictographic, for recording and preserving ideas in durable physical form. But pictography did not alter the basic oral nature of daily communication, nor did it alter early societies' oral mode of transmitting knowledge and of entertaining people through storytelling. Storytelling is the oldest form of folk culture. Since people started to communicate with each other, children and adults alike have requested, "Tell me a story." Our familiar myths, legends, and fables all arose out of storytelling culture. Reading and writing activate linear thinking processes in the brain, because printed ideas are laid out one at a time and can thus be connected to each other sequentially and analyzed logically in relation to each other. Orality, on the other hand, is not conducive to such precise thinking, because spoken ideas are transmitted through the emotional qualities of the human voice and are, thus, inextricable from the subject who transmits them. Literacy engenders the sense that knowledge and information are disconnected from their human sources and thus that they have "objectivity." Orality does not impart this sense.

As the history of radio has shown, the social functions of orality have not disappeared from modern life. The spoken word comes naturally; literacy does not. Radio clearly highlighted the differences between literacy and orality. As an oral medium that reintroduced the art of storytelling to modern audiences, it also restimulated interest in oral communication generally.

Our fascination with orality might explain why such seemingly inane genres as talk shows continue to attract large audiences. Like sermons and oratorical performances generally, radio's persuasive effects are due to the sensory qualities of the human voice. As Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790) so aptly put it in his *Autobiography* (1771-1790, p. 234), there is no denying the power of the voice to convince and entertain:

Every accent, every emphasis, every modulation of voice, was so perfectly well tuned and well placed, that, without being interested in the subject, one could not help being pleased with the discourse; a pleasure of much the same kind with that received from an excellent piece of music. This is an advantage itinerant preachers have over those who are stationary, as the latter can not well improve their delivery of a sermon by so many rehearsals.

THE BIRTH OF CELEBRITY CULTURE

Radio personalities were the first true pop icons. Radio names including Louis Armstrong, Bing Crosby, Milton Berle, Bob Hope, and Lucille Ball became as recognizable and important to Americans as those of presidents and writers. From this pattern a celebrity culture crystallized and spread broadly, becoming socially all-embracing.

The topic of celebrities is central in pop culture studies. Celebrity culture and pop culture are really one and the same. Andy Warhol (1930-1987) showed himself to be a perceptive observer of pop culture trends with his comment that today everyone can have his or her "fifteen minutes of fame." Warhol was the first artist to realize the intrinsic connection between celebrity culture and pop culture. He also realized that a celebrity need not necessarily be a real person but could be, instead, a product or a fictional character (for example, a cartoon character such as Mickey Mouse or Bugs Bunny, or a comic book superhero such as Superman or Spiderman). Warhol's artistic subjects included both famous commercial products, such as Campbell's soup cans and Coca-Cola soft-drink bottles, and human celebrities, such as Elizabeth Taylor and Marilyn Monroe.

Celebrities

Adopting Warhol's categories, a celebrity is a person, fictional character, or commercial product that garners a high degree of public and media

attention by virtue of the fact that he or she (or it) is on the media stage. There is a difference between *fame* and *celebrity*. Politicians or scientists may be famous, but they are not necessarily celebrities, unless the interest of the general public and the mass media are piqued in tandem. A classic example is Albert Einstein, who was famous as a scientist but also became a celebrity through the attention paid by the media to his personal life. Like a movie star, Einstein has been represented in comic strips and on T-shirts, greeting cards, and many other paraphernalia associated with pop culture. But Einstein was an exception. It is mass entertainment personalities, such as soap opera actors or pop music stars, who are most likely to become celebrities, even if they deliberately avoid media attention. The inevitability of celebrity for entertainment stars became obvious in the radio era, when a famous radio actor would receive everyone's attention when simply shopping or walking down the street.

Celebrities who become extremely popular and symbolic of something are known as pop icons. The actress Marilyn Monroe (1926-1962) is an example of a pop icon. Marilyn's great beauty in movies made her an overnight sex symbol in the ever-expanding pop culture carnival of her era. But in spite of her success, Monroe had a tragic life and died at the age of thirty-six from an overdose of sleeping pills. Since her death, she has become one of the most written-about film stars in history. Elvis Presley (1935-1977) is another example of a pop icon. Elvis was one of the first American stars of rock music and perhaps the greatest in the genre. He gained popularity through the radio, as his songs constantly hit the top of the charts. His voice and his particular style of musical delivery became the standards of rock, as every Saturday hordes of teenagers listened to Top 40 radio to hear their hero excite them with his unique brand of singing. His popularity continued after his death and he has risen to almost legendary status, as in the case of Marilyn Monroe. Movies and programs about Elvis are made to this day, and his music continues to be re-released. As mentioned throughout this book, nostalgia is a powerful force in the preservation of pop culture through the ages. Highlighting the importance of nostalgia, Elvis has become an even more celebrated figure since his death. The devotion of his fans is almost religious in its intensity, although it is starting to diminish as they age or pass away. His home in Graceland has become a major shrine to his memory. Thousands of fans from around the world continue to make pilgrimages to Graceland, especially on the anniversary of his death.

Decoding Celebrity

The analogy between Elvis and religion is not purely figurative. It is intended to show the probable underlying rationale for the crystallization and spread of celebrity culture. Indeed, the use of the term *icon* in *pop icon* is appropriate on various counts. First, an icon is something that can be easily recognized (the word is used this way in the terminology of computers). Pop icons are clearly recognizable by virtually everyone. Second, the word has a religious sense. It can refer to a painting considered sacred in the Eastern Orthodox Churches, created according to rules established by church authorities, which are intended to emphasize the heavenly glory of the holy subjects portrayed. Pop icons are similarly imbued by the media stage on which they perform with a quasi-religious quality. As a consequence, they are idolized in ways that parallel the idolatry of religious figures.

Thus, pop culture's celebrity-making effect can also be called a *mythologizing* effect because the celebrities that it creates are perceived as mythic figures, larger than life. Like any type of privileged space designed to impart focus and significance to someone (for example, a platform or a podium), a media stage such as radio, cinema, or television creates mythic personages simply by containing them, suspended in a mythic world of their own. It is because of its mythologizing powers that the radio was called a "magic box." It was at first perceived as similar to the speaking boxes of childhood fantasies. Radio personages became infused with godlike qualities by virtue of the fact that they were heard emanating from the magic box. The same effect is created by all media stages. It is because of the "magic" of pop culture that meeting movie actors, sitcom stars, and the like causes great enthusiasm and excitement in many people. These stars are perceived as otherworldly figures who have stepped out of the magic box to take on human proportions, in the same way that a mythic hero such as Prometheus came into our human world to help us.

Early or tragic death often helps establish pop icon status. Marilyn Monroe and Elvis Presley both died relatively young and under tragic circumstances—Monroe apparently committed suicide and Elvis died of a drug overdose. Similarly, James Dean, Bruce Lee, Tupac Shakur, and Kurt Cobain (to mention but a few) have achieved pop icon status through their premature and tragic deaths. The assassination of John F. Kennedy transformed the young president into a pop icon as well. But pop icon status can also be achieved through longevity. Many still-living celebrities attain the status of pop icon if they are able to continue being popular across genera-

tions. Examples include the Rolling Stones, Cher, and Madonna—and also such fictional characters as Bugs Bunny, Superman, and Batman, and such products as Campbell's soup, Coca-Cola, and Pepsi. The earning of pop icon status is in contrast to the overnight assumption of *pop idol* status. The latter type of fame tends to be brief. The pop icon, on the other hand, like a mythic figure, is perceived to have left a lasting and indelible mark and attains an enduring place of recognition in society at large. It is because of their pop icon status that Elvis and the Beatles are represented on such public items as stamps, alongside the figures of presidents and scientists. Indeed, a poll of the best-known personages of the previous one hundred years, taken at the millennium (in 2000), showed that most were pop icons. It is amazing to ponder how many people today recognize the names of pop icons of the present and past, as I myself discovered in a 2006 survey of my own students at the University of Toronto (nearly one thousand students in total). Virtually all my students recognized the names I selected from my own recollection of pop culture history. From each of the various pop culture eras I chose four names (as they came to my mind), covering the whole spectrum of spectacles, from music to sports. Of course, some of these celebrities are still around. But even the names of those who have passed away were easily recognized.

The list could be expanded almost ad infinitum and, I am sure, it would still garner a high degree of recognition with people of all ages today. The reason is that many former pop icons (indeed, probably all) continue to have some form of fan basis or acknowledgment through reissues of their work or replays of the spectacles in which they starred. They are the *figures*

Table 4.1. Pop Icons Chosen Randomly

Era	Pop Icons
1920s	Rudolph Valentino, Charlie Chaplin, Mickey Mouse, Babe Ruth
1930s	Bing Crosby, Superman, Louis Armstrong, Greta Garbo
1940s	Humphrey Bogart, Judy Garland, Batman, the Lone Ranger
1950s	Marilyn Monroe, Elvis Presley, James Dean, Lucille Ball
1960s	the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Bob Dylan, Aretha Franklin
1970s	John Travolta, the Grateful Dead, Bruce Lee, Burt Reynolds
1980s	Madonna, Michael Jackson, Tina Turner, Cher
1990s	Michael Jordan, Tiger Woods, Courtney Love, Tom Cruise
2000s	Britney Spears, Matt Damon, Angelina Jolie, Paris Hilton

(as the term *icon* implies) that have become part of pop culture nostalgia. Without them there would be no continuity in pop culture. There is no form of culture without history, and it therefore comes as no surprise that pop culture has generated its own historical personages and institutions, including museums, academic disciplines, and the like, which tend to perpetuate it.

Pop icons and celebrities influence society broadly. Their clothing styles, for example, are imitated, as are their speech mannerisms. I recall that many of my adolescent peers in the 1950s imitated the southern drawl of Elvis and in the 1960s the British accent of the Beatles—mainly in a subconscious fashion. Instances of such mimesis have occurred throughout pop culture history. During the 1920s, many young men wore patent leather hair, which they slicked down with oil in the manner of the movie star Rudolph Valentino. In the 1950s, many sported a crew cut, in which the hair was cut extremely short and combed upward to resemble a brush, in imitation of movie actors; while others sported a ducktail (with the hair long on the sides and swept back), in imitation of stars such as James Dean. During the 1960s, young men copied the haircuts of the Beatles, who wore long bangs that covered the forehead. Also, needless to say, imitation of the clothing styles, speech mannerisms, and overall demeanor of rap stars in the 1990s was evident across the youth spectrum, as was a “girl power” fashion and body style on the part of women, in imitation of Lara Croft, Xena the Warrior Princess, and others.

Of course, each country has its own celebrity system, with its own history of film, radio, television, and sports stars. In Italy, for example, names such as Marcello Mastroianni, Sofia Loren, Renato Carosone, and Totò evoke the same kinds of iconic responses as do American names such as Marlon Brando and Marilyn Monroe. A similar celebrity-based history of diverse pop cultures can be written for India, Germany, Japan, Spain, or France, to mention but a handful of nations. In the Internet Age, though, the celebrity-making stage has become truly international. The global village has even made it possible for people outside of the usual stage to gain celebrity status. Two well-known examples include the late Mother Teresa and Pope John Paul II. In the global village, the media spotlight is cast on anyone who is deemed to be newsworthy. The media spotlight similarly mythologizes both actors and saints. It also brings before the public eye the exploits of *déjà celebrities*, as they may be called, including serial killers and ruthless businessmen such as Donald Trump. Even academics can gain celebrity status if their ideas are showcased by the media spotlight. The blur-

ring of the lines of who and what is considered newsworthy, and eligible for celebrity status, is evidenced moreover in the tendency of evangelical preachers to take on the very personality features seen in celebrity culture, and to use the very props employed in pop culture (such as entertaining music and overall spectacle), to promote their version of Christianity. From Jimmy Swaggart to contemporary “celebrity preachers,” it would seem that the search for celebrity status is, as Warhol suspected, a symptom of the modern world—a world that now writes its history using references to Marilyn Monroe and Elvis Presley alongside references to John F. Kennedy and Albert Einstein.

From its crystallization in early radio and movies, the celebrity culture in which we live today is part and parcel of the modern world, connected to economic, political, technological, and general cultural developments. As a consequence, the media now have developed a sector devoted to the documentation of celebrities. Magazines like *People* and various tabloids, talk shows, and entire channels and websites devote their full contents to celebrities and their private lives. These sources of news regarding celebrities have become templates for evaluating and assessing what life is all about. Celebrities are alternately portrayed as shining examples of perfection (when earning Grammy awards, Oscars, or Nobel prizes) and as decadent or immoral (when associated with sex scandals or criminal behavior).

The notion of celebrity has become self-reinforcing, even though it is ultimately vacuous. Many celebrities are famous not for their accomplishments but merely for their place in the spotlight. For example, Paris Hilton would not be a public figure without her wealth, which has gained her a place in that spotlight. Like other celebrities of the past and present, she is famous in a negative way, since her lifestyle is provocative to moral purists, as were the performances of Madonna. However, unlike Madonna, Paris Hilton offers very little substance in her performances. As with any starlet in the carnival hierarchy, her moment in the spotlight will quickly pass (if it has not already passed at the time of this book’s publication).

THE IMPORTANCE OF RADIO IN POP CULTURE HISTORY

As the foregoing discussion has indicated, the radio stage has been crucial in spreading pop culture, especially from the Roaring Twenties to the early 1950s. Radio’s spectacles were society’s spectacles for three decades. Trends

in radio complemented and spread trends in movies, music, and other domains of pop culture, either by showcasing them or simply by announcing them. The radio stage had a singular captive audience. There were no niche audiences in the golden era of radio. Stars on radio were known to everyone.

Radio also highlighted a basic tendency within pop culture—namely, the blending of high and low forms of culture. If one thinks of cultural spectacles, events, and products as lying on a continuum with “pure entertainment” at one end and “aesthetic engagement” at the other, then all one can say about pop culture is that any one of its events, products, or personages will fall somewhere along that spectrum. The movie *Amadeus* would fall on the engagement end, while the *Jackass* movies would fall near the other end. Most fall near the center. The amalgamative aspect of pop culture was evident on the radio stage from the very outset.

Entertainment vs. Engagement

Playing and promoting recorded music is, and always has been, at the core of radio broadcasting. Today, most stations specialize in one kind of music, such as rock, classical, country, rap, or jazz. Some stations broadcast several kinds of music. From the outset, radio showed that the lines between the two levels of culture were irrelevant. What counts is the popularity of the music. Popularity or enjoyability became and has remained the only criterion of taste. As mentioned in chapter 2, pop culture’s democratization of taste has brought about its harshest critiques, from those of the Frankfurt School theorists to those of current culture industry critics. Pop culture has obliterated the traditional dividing lines between entertainment and engagement, becoming a culture for one and all. It is carnivalesque in the general sense of that word—promoting a world of fantasy where any pleasure can be indulged, from the sublime music of Beethoven (available on CDs and iPods) to the sounds of any garage band (similarly available on CDs or iPods). The Saturday afternoon NBC opera radio broadcasts from New York’s Metropolitan Opera are as popular today as they were in the 1920s. Indeed, these broadcasts were responsible for making opera stars pop icons like any other celebrity. Tenors such as Enrico Caruso have become household names alongside other musical celebrities such as jazz great Louis Armstrong. Opera played a vital role in the first experimental radio broadcasts, which began around 1910, when Lee De Forest produced a radio program from the Metropolitan Opera House in New York City, starring Caruso.

Today, most radio stations that broadcast music have DJs (disc jockeys) who introduce and comment on the music, playing the role of *ipso facto* music critics. Although most of the music on the radio today is for the entertainment of niche audiences, from country to rap and even classical, it must not be forgotten that radio was once a powerful stage that showcased not only entertainment but also engagement. The radio brought into the living room not only the exciting new music of band leaders like Tommy Dorsey, Duke Ellington, Benny Goodman, Harry James, Guy Lombardo, and Glenn Miller, but also concerts from symphony halls.

In the golden age of radio broadcasting (from the 1920s to the 1950s) the radio was the major source of family entertainment. Every night, families gathered in their living rooms to listen to comedies, adventure dramas, music, and other kinds of radio entertainment. Children hurried home from school to hear afternoon adventure shows and woke up early on Saturday mornings to listen to children’s programming until the noon hour. In the daytime, homebound people listened to soap operas. Golden age radio dramas included not only pulp fiction delights such as *Buck Rogers in the 25th Century*, *Gangbusters*, *The Green Hornet*, *Inner Sanctum*, *Jack Armstrong, All-American Boy*, *The Lone Ranger*, *The Shadow*, and *Superman*, but also plays by Ionesco and other contemporary dramatists. Radio soap operas such as *The Guiding Light*, *John’s Other Wife*, *Just Plain Bill*, *Ma Perkins*, *One Man’s Family*, *Our Gal Sunday*, and *Stella Dallas* were complemented by documentaries on issues of concern and programs on science. Comedians like Fred Allen, Jack Benny, Eddie Cantor, and Bob Hope and ventriloquists like Edgar Bergen and his dummy, Charlie McCarthy, shared the same spotlight as presidents and scientists who talked about the state of the world or the theory of atomic fusion. This pastiche of levels and discourse styles that characterized radio broadcasting became the defining characteristic of pop culture.

The radio also became a source for producing change in society. Radio’s capacity to induce change was highlighted, for instance, by the popularity of *Amos ’n’ Andy*, a situation comedy that was broadcast each weekday throughout the 1930s. While the program was being broadcast (from 7:00 to 7:15 p.m. Eastern Standard Time) many movie theaters stopped their films and turned on radios so the audiences could listen to the program. Some stores and restaurants played radios over public address systems so that customers would not miss it. The actors and actresses on the show were whites who portrayed blacks. Many people criticized the program for portraying African Americans as a stereotyped group. There is little doubt that the controversy stirred by that program led a few decades later

to the civil rights movement, since it emblazoned in people's minds the inequities that existed between the races. Treatises and even newspaper articles could never quite have had the kind of broad impact that the radio stage had.

The radio stage was communal—everyone listened to virtually the same programs broadcast by the networks. As television took over in the 1950s, radio lost its communal status and became instead a source of individualized entertainment. With technology, however, radio is changing its character once again. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, digital audio broadcasting (DAB), a system that converts sounds to digital (numeric) code before transmission, made radio an enduring medium. DAB was introduced at a world conference in Spain in 1992. In 1998, the first commercial DAB operation began in the United Kingdom. Because DAB can carry multiple signals, radio programs are now supplemented by images, text, graphics, and other data.

Information Culture

The advent of DAB and other information-carrying devices highlights the fascination with information in the modern world. Radio was the medium that ushered in the Information Age, with radio news reporters becoming as well-known as entertainers. Early radio news reporters included Edward R. Murrow, Lowell Thomas, and Walter Winchell. News casts became especially important during World War II, when millions of people turned to radio every day for the latest news on the war. Murrow won fame during the war for his on-the-scene radio broadcasts describing German bombing attacks on London. His listeners in America could hear the bombs exploding in the background, giving them the illusion of being ersatz participants in the war. As a result, governments have since made widespread use of broadcasts for propaganda purposes. The Voice of America, an agency of the United States government, began broadcasting overseas in 1942 to inform the world of America's role in the war.

Aware of the growing importance of information, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, as mentioned previously, started a new trend in politics—the use of the media stage for political purposes. His radio fireside chats were instrumental in helping him gain support for his policies. Earlier presidents, beginning with Woodrow Wilson in 1919, had spoken on radio. Roosevelt, though, was the first to fully understand the great emotional power of the oral medium and the opportunity it provided to take government policies

directly to the people. Other political leaders, including Winston Churchill of the United Kingdom and Charles de Gaulle of France, made similar use of radio to address their nations in times of crisis. In some ways, World War II was fought as much over the radio waves as it was on the battlefield. The fight was for people's minds in the former, and radio proved itself to be highly effective in this regard.

Today, we live in an ever-expanding information culture. Information is itself part of entertainment. Programs that provide information are among the most popular on radio, on television, and online. These include news casts, talk shows, and live broadcasts of sports events. News casts are now broadcast at regular times—every half-hour or hour on some stations—a trend established during the golden age of radio. In addition, radio stations present on-the-spot news coverage of political conventions, disasters, and other issues of public importance. Radio stations also broadcast specialized information such as stock market indicators. Other information features include public service announcements about community events and government services. All of these informational uses of radio broadcasting have gained great entertainment value. Like pop culture in general, information programs emphasize variety. Some, such as Howard Stern's talk show, are pure carnival.