

Popologetics: Engaging Popular Culture

This talk addresses a vital need in practical apologetics: relevance and plausibility. Too often, apologists speak a language that fails to engage their listeners at the level of worldview. The arguments may be sound, as far as they go. They just don't go very far. Popular culture has emerged in the past 70 years as one of the biggest influences on worldview. If we want to engage people at the level of worldview, we need to become familiar with popular culture. This talk will present a method engaging the worldviews of popular culture apologetically, revealing the frailty of its idols, and the glory of God's grace.

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Introduction: "Why would *anybody* want to study popular culture?"

Popular culture deals in the realm of the sacred, of ultimate meaning. Christian apologists need to understand that.

I. The Impact of Popular Culture on Worldview

- A. Popular culture has changed the way we think about sex, material success, our bodies, pain, heroism and evil, even our sense of humor. It has changed the way we think about religion.
- B. Popular culture affects us on the level of worldview and imagination, and we need an apologetic that can respond to this rich and subtle influence.

II. The Problem with Traditional Apologetics

- A. Traditional apologetics defines itself thus: *Apologetics is a science that endeavors to show that Christianity is the most rational option through the use of evidences of various kinds.*
- B. While these evidences are interesting, they often fail to connect because traditional apologetics misunderstands the people we talk to. These people are:

1. Whole creatures embedded in certain cultures (surrounded by popular culture);
 2. Fallen creatures that *know* God, and use popular culture to suppress and substitute for knowledge of God.
- C. Both this cultural embeddedness and rebellion suppression expresses itself in worldview.

Perhaps we need another strategy that engages this type of unbelief imaginatively – a worldview apologetic that deals with the complex imaginative structures circulating in popular culture.

III. Popular Culture, Imaginary Worlds, and Worldview

A. How Does Popular Culture Influence Us: Krill versus Beaver

1. The “direct assault approach”: passive minds are manipulated by popular culture. We are sucked in like krill into a whale.
2. While there is some truth to this approach, it never deals with popular culture as a meaningful form of communication, and the ways that we appropriate those meanings. Like beavers, we build lodges of meaning, worldview homes for ourselves.
3. Beavers or krill, we need to be able to respond to popular culture’s influence on the level of worldview.

B. How Does Popular Culture Shape Worldview? By Creating a World to View Through

1. “In a world . . .” Popular cultural texts create imaginary worlds of meaning for us to inhabit.
2. Worldview is not something stapled onto these texts, but something woven into the imaginative landscape of that world.

IV. A Few Thoughts on Engaging Popular Culture Apologetically

Our task: to come alongside unbelievers and remind them of something they already know at some level (and desire and are repelled by).

A. Five Steps for engaging popular culture

1. What's the story?
 - a. Figure out the narrative (characters, plot points, etc.).

2. Where are we (the style and shape of the imaginative world we are in)?
 - a. What sort of stylistic *feel* does this world have?

 - b. What sort of moral and spiritual universe is implied by the world of the text?

 - c. By asking these questions, you develop instincts for how this world works.

3. What is good and true and beautiful here (and why)?
 - a. Don't reject a piece of popular culture too quickly. Instead, look for the "fragments of grace."

 - b. These grace fragments belong properly to God and exist for his glory. Figure out how they relate to God and God's story.

4. What is ugly, false and perverse here (and how can I subvert it)?
 - a. Locate where this world lies about reality. Locate the idol.

 - b. There is often a connection between the grace fragments and the idol, as the grace baits the trap for idolatry.

 - c. Exposing the trap helps it lose its power, like the "Emperor's New Clothes." Gifts of God don't make good gods.

5. How does the gospel apply here?

- a. The fragments of grace claimed by the idol actually find their *natural* home in God's story. There they shine to their full potential, and provide real answers to people's desires – answers that reveal the Lordship of Christ.

Examples: In a pop song, what is “true love,” really?

- b. In a Hollywood movie, what is justice, really? Does the gospel talk about these realities?

B. Popular Culture as Mission Fields

Think of different media, genres and sub-genres as so many mission fields that you may be called to.

Conclusion: By becoming familiar with popular culture and learning to engage it critically, we learn to speak the “worldview vernacular.”

V. Workshop Examples

Helpful Resources for Understanding and Engaging Popular Culture:

Godawa, Brian. *Hollywood Worldviews: Watching Films with Wisdom and Discernment* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002).

A solid, biblical guide about how to understand the worldviews behind film.

Romanowski, William D. *Eyes Wide Open: Looking for God in Popular Culture*, revised and expanded edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2007 [2001]).

He's one of the most reliable guides to popular culture writing today.

Turnau, Theodore A. "Popular Cultural 'Worlds' as Alternative Religions." *Christian Scholar's Review* 37, no. 3 (Spring 2008): 323-45.

A bit technical, but if wading through some philosophy of religion and culture doesn't bother you, this is my fullest statement in print (so far) about how to approach popular culture.

_____. "Popular Culture, Apologetics, and the Discourse of Desire" (2004). Available online at <http://www.apologeticsnetwork.org/articles/popular-culture.htm>.

An investigation about the relationship between popular culture and apologetics. It goes deeper into some of the themes I talked about here today.

_____. "Equipping Students to Engage Popular Culture." In *The Word of God for the Academy in Contemporary Culture(s)*. Edited by John B. Hulst. (Budapest: Károli Gáspár Reformed University Press, 2003).

A more practical essay on how to approach popular culture as a Christian.

_____. "Reflecting Theologically on Popular Culture as Meaningful: The Role of Sin, Grace, and General Revelation." *Calvin Theological Journal* 37, no. 2 (November 2002): 270-96.

An earlier work reflecting on popular culture as meaningful discourse that must be engaged by Christians. It's available on the Ransom Fellowship website at <http://www.notesfromtoadhall.com/articledetail.asp?AID=288&B=Theodore%20A.%20Turnau%20III&TI D=7>.

Vanhoozer, Kevin J. Charles A. Anderson, and Michael J. Slesman, editors. *Everyday Theology: How to Read Cultural Texts and Interpret Trends*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007).

A very fine collection of essays on how to read contemporary culture as a text. The introductory essay by Vanhoozer is very dense and theoretical, but worthwhile. The rest of the essays give examples of his method as applied to grocery stores, Eminem, blogging, and other phenomena.