What is Popular Culture?

I. DEFINE: **Popular Culture**

II. Where did the concept of popular culture come from?
   a. In the mid-to-late 19th century, “culture” was divided into different types – high, folk, and popular being the most common distinctions…
   b. In the United States, the ______________________________ created a new upper class made up of successful entrepreneurs, bankers and businesspeople.
      i. As the economic gap between the classes grew, the rich began to fear that the lower classes posed a cultural danger to the elite.
      ii. The rich therefore started to use culture as a way of drawing boundaries between the classes.
   c. Remember the theory of Social Darwinism was widely supported in this time. The rich believed that the working class was actually a less evolved form of life and they therefore had little to nothing to offer society other than their labor.
   d. The rich believed that they were more civilized than the lower classes, and it was therefore their duty to bring true "culture" (music, art, literature, manners, and values) to everyone else.

III. **Characteristics of High Culture**: (LIST)

IV. **Characteristics of Folk Culture**: (LIST)

V. High culture and folk culture only represented a very small percentage of the population, even put together. A large number of people were left hanging in the middle, with entertainment that seemed not worthy of a label.
VI. Eventually, as the culture of the masses became more widespread, it was no longer possible to continue to ignore the culture of everyone else. This culture came to be known as “mass culture” or “popular culture.” (DEFINE)

VII. Characteristics of Popular/Mass Culture: (LIST)

VIII. What early criticisms did historians have of mass culture?

IX. Terminology

a. Popular: (DEFINE) _____________________________________________________________

   i. Challenge to this definition alone is that numbers alone are not enough. (How many people have to like something for it to be considered popular?)
   
   ii. Serves the interest of the people

   iii. Something that is produced with the goal of winning the favor of the people.

b. Culture: (DEFINE) _____________________________________________________________

i. Culture is all around us. It refers to how a society operates and the things that influence us.

c. Consumerism: (DEFINE) _____________________________________________________________

   i. How does pop culture contribute to consumerism?
X. Now let’s pull it all together – what is popular culture?

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XI. Why study popular culture? (LIST)

XII. Where does popular culture come from?

a. This is a matter of some dispute.

XIII. Opinion #1: Voice of the people

a. Some historians assert that pop culture is a way for less powerful groups in America to actively create their own culture, one that is different from the more powerful/elites.
   i. MEANING?
b. Pop culture is a way for outsiders (immigrants, women, the poor, racial minorities) to find success within a rigid power structure.
   i. MEANING WHAT?

   ii. CAN YOU THINK OF AN EXAMPLE OF THIS?

c. Pop culture is a way for common folks to influence society (Consider Obama’s election: years of groundwork laid by African-American entertainers who opened up the door for Americans to consider African-Americans in a variety of role.)

XIV. Opinion #2: Controlled by corporate elites
   a. The U.S. was once focused on manufacturing but now the focus is increasingly focused on production of entertainment
      i. The U.S. has been referred to as the “national entertainment state.”
      ii. Not only do we produce entertainment but that entertainment shapes the lifestyles and values of Americans.
   b. Entertainment is produced, funded and marketed by powerful corporations and a handful of wealthy businessfolk.
   c. Corporate media consolidation

XV. Opinion #3: A little bit of both!
   a. We are influenced daily by the popular culture that is packaged and sold to us powerful corporate elites. Yet without the people opting to watch, listen, consume, these powerful companies and celebrities would have no audience and no profit.

XVI. Criticism:
   a. The concept of popular culture, as we know it, only came about in the second half of the 19th century.
   b. For the first 50 years or so, it was viewed negatively by those who acknowledged its existence.

XVII. Dangers of popular culture? (LIST 3)

What do you think? Is there a value to studying American popular culture? What do we have to gain by doing so?