

FILMS THAT INSPIRE

Culture · Identity · Representation · Stereotype · Diversity in Content

Learning Objectives

01 KEY CONCEPTS

Explain the meanings of and relationships among culture, identity, representation, stereotype, and diversity.

02 GLOBAL MEDIA ANALYSIS

Analyse examples drawn from global media content using Cultural Studies frameworks to identify how culture shapes content and reflects societal values.

03 CULTURALLY AWARE PRODUCTION

Apply this knowledge to media production that is attentive to cultural diversity — ensuring representations honour difference and challenge stereotypes effectively.

What Is Culture?

Culture is a system of shared meanings, values, beliefs, norms, and symbolic expressions transmitted through learning and communication (Geertz, 1973; Williams, 1976).

Williams (1976) identified three levels:

- ① Intellectual & spiritual development
- ② A particular way of life of a group
- ③ Artistic & intellectual works and practices

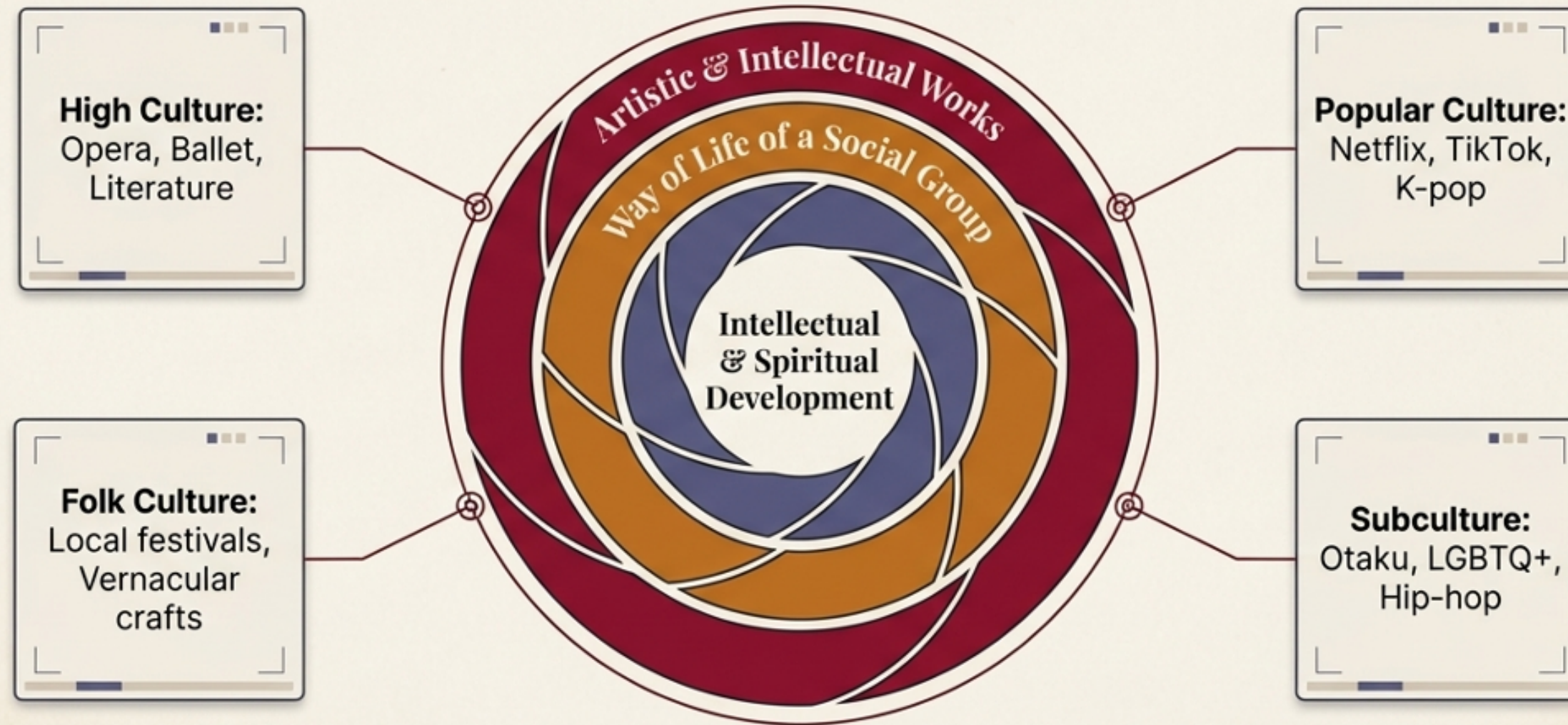
In creative media, culture is not just customs — it is a meaning-making process that people use collectively within society (Hall, 1997).



Levels of Culture in Media

The anatomy of culture extends from the intellect to the screen.

Raymond Williams (1976) defined culture across three interconnected levels. Creators operate primarily on the outer level, but their work is fueled by the inner core.



Culture as a Meaning-Making Process

We are not just studying 'food' or 'dress' — we are asking how things are made meaningful.

- Encoding & Decoding (Hall, 1980): media encode meaning; audiences decode through their own experience
- Signification: everything in content is a sign — warm colours may signify hope; folk music blended with contemporary beats may signify a contemporary Thai identity
- Contextual Meaning: meaning is not fixed. Tattoos once signified criminality; today they may signify art, freedom, or self-expression

Identity: Constructed, Not Born

Identity should not be understood as the 'true self' of an individual. It is the result of social positioning, recognition, and acceptance within cultural contexts.

Hall & du Gay (1996): Identity is not fixed or permanent — it emerges through language, narrative, history, difference, and relations of power.

"Who we are" cannot be separated from "how society sees us."

Key concepts: Imagined Communities (Anderson, 1983) • The Other • Strategic Essentialism



Fluidity of Identity in the Digital Age

In digital culture, identity is no longer confined by passport or place of residence.

- Cultural Hybridity: when cultures collide, a 'Third Space' emerges (Bhabha, 1994)
- Glocal Content: universal themes told through local settings — Squid Game, Parasite
- Digital Persona: avatars, VTubers — identity shifts across platforms
- Personal Branding, Filter Bubbles, Cancel Culture, Deepfakes



6 Types of Identity in Media Studies

NATIONAL IDENTITY

Sense of belonging to a nation — 'Thai-ness' or 'Americanness' — constructed through media, symbols, and national narratives. (Anderson, 1983)

GENDER IDENTITY

Self-definition in terms of gender. Media plays a major role in establishing norms. (Butler, 1990)

CLASS IDENTITY

Media often presents the middle class as the norm, turning other classes into 'otherness'.

CULTURAL IDENTITY

Identification with a cultural group, which may overlap or conflict with national identity.

RACIAL & ETHNIC IDENTITY

Ethnic identity often reduced in mainstream media to skin colour and physical appearance, marginalising lived complexity.

DIASPORIC IDENTITY

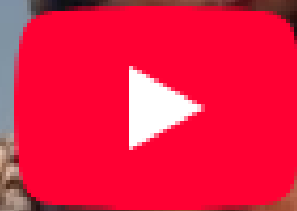
Identity lived 'in-between' two or more cultures — Thai descendants living abroad. (Hall, 1990)



Top 10 Best Modern Movies for Representation



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Representation: More Than Just Presence

Representation = the process through which media uses language, images, sound, and cultural codes to make people and groups appear meaningfully. (Hall, 1997)

Two levels:

- ▶ Presence — a group simply exists in the story
- ▶ Quality — does the character have voice, agency, complexity, and through whose gaze?

The presence of female, LGBTQ+, or working-class characters is not enough if they have no agency or exist only to support the main character.

Power dynamics: major studios often determine how groups are represented.

Symbolic annihilation: total absence signals a group does not matter. (Tuchman, 1978)



Encoding / Decoding & Media Power

Media do not reflect reality in a one-to-one way — they select some elements and omit others (Hall, 1997).

Three Reading Positions:

- ▶ Dominant Reading — audience accepts the preferred meaning
- ▶ Negotiated Reading — partially accepts, modifies based on own context
- ▶ Oppositional Reading — reads against the grain

Power dynamics: studios control whose stories get told.

Symbolic Annihilation: absence signals a group does not matter (Tuchman, 1978).



Stereotype: Fixing Difference in Place

Lippmann (1922): stereotypes are 'pictures in our heads' — simplifications used to quickly categorise the world.

Hall et al. (2013): stereotype is not a neutral shortcut. It is a mechanism through which groups are repeatedly reduced to a few traits until those traits appear natural and unchangeable.

Stereotype fixes difference in place — causing some groups to be seen as 'abnormal,' 'inferior,' or 'useful only for certain roles.'





Racist Suburbs - Key & Peele

Key & Peele



K&P

KEY AND PEELE



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5 Types of Stereotype

POSITIVE STEREOTYPE

'Asians are good at maths' — still reduces individuality; creates pressure on those who don't fit the expectation.

NEGATIVE STEREOTYPE

Racial groups shown as criminals in action films — directly devalues groups and reinforces real-life discrimination.

CULTURAL STEREOTYPE

Thai people always deferential, always smiling, and unwilling to express opinions — flattens cultural complexity.

GENDER STEREOTYPE

Women care for the home; men are strong and do not cry — media normalises these as 'natural' gender roles.

OCCUPATIONAL STEREOTYPE

Programmers must be nerdy and lack social skills — limits how people perceive careers and possibilities.

Stereotype Threat & Real-World Harm

Steele & Aronson (1995): when individuals are aware they may be judged according to a negative stereotype about their group, their performance measurably declines — even if they do not personally believe the stereotype.

Stereotype is not just an inaccurate description — it is a social process that affects recognition, opportunity, and dignity in real life.

Students should therefore learn to view stereotype not merely as a description, but as a mechanism of power (Hall et al., 2013).



Diversity in Content: Beyond Visibility

Diversity is not simply 'putting many kinds of people into a story.' It means creating space in which difference has presence, voice, role, and complexity.

Key question: not only who is seen, but who gets to speak, who drives the story, and who produces it.

7 Dimensions:

Race & Ethnicity • Gender & Sexuality • Age • Disability •
Socioeconomic Class • Body Diversity • Religion & Culture



3-Dimension Framework for Evaluating Diversity

IN FRONT OF CAMERA

Are the characters, actors, and people who appear diverse? Examine the proportion of main vs supporting roles and the agency each is given.

BEHIND THE CAMERA

Are writers, directors, and decision-makers diverse? A diverse team can tell stories accurately from the inside and catch blind spots.

IN STORYTELLING

Does the narrative genuinely portray diverse experiences, or is it surface diversity? Characters must have full humanity — not exist merely as symbols or tropes.

Diversity Done Well — 5 Case Studies

EVERYTHING EVERYWHERE ALL AT ONCE (2022)

Asian-American immigrant experience with full emotional complexity. Won 7 Oscars incl. Best Picture. Proves diverse stories can succeed commercially.

BEEF (NETFLIX, 2023)

Asian-American experience with full complexity. Characters are flawed and fully human — not model minority stereotypes.

MS. MARVEL (DISNEY+, 2022)

First MCU Muslim South Asian superhero. Developed with significant Muslim American creative involvement — authentic identity, not tokenism.

ENCANTO (2021)

Colombian culture through a multigenerational family. Colombian cultural consultants on the creative team. 'We Don't Talk About Bruno' became a global viral hit.

HEARTSTOPPER (NETFLIX, 2022)

LGBTQ+ teen romance. LGBTQ+ actors in LGBTQ+ roles. Gentle and honest toward real adolescent experience.