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Afterword: In the Eye of the Beholder? A Proposal for a Popular Culture Artefacts Checklist

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One of the main purposes of this special issue was to acknowledge the many different directions from which the topic of ‘popular’ can be tackled, as far as the press is concerned. These diverse approaches can be traced to the academic backgrounds of the researchers, whether cultural, literary, or art historians, or media scholars — all with complementary but not identical perspectives — and the varied academic traditions with which they identify, notwithstanding the general preponderance of the Anglo-American perspective. Moreover, the spotlight was also fixed on sources — that is, periodicals from the interwar period — that exhibit commonalities, such as their wide diffusion in increasingly mediatized environments, thanks to cheaper technology and their responses to the changing cultural needs of national audiences. Nonetheless, several dissimilarities regarding political and social context or opportunity for development according to different economic conditions in each country among the studies are also present.

In light of this, it should not come as a surprise that a great number of very different issues emerge when addressing what is ‘popular’, to the point that any attempt to unequivocally define this concept or category would not only be arduous, but even deleterious, since it would mean trying to give a definite shape to a phenomenon that is multifaceted and constantly changing over space and time. Indeed, there are many different sides to the object of our study, involving an investigation of the press in aesthetic and literary frames of reference, as well as the study of its dissemination and communication and the analysis of its forms of fruition.

Nevertheless, we can identify at least five clear aspects of the idea behind what is ‘popular’. In the first place, popular culture should logically be opposed to high culture, but the contrast between the two is not always explicit and transparent. There are indeed several elements that identify high culture publications as distinctive (for instance their lower frequency or even sporadicity of publication, the difficulty of the texts, the specificity of the content as opposed to the miscellaneous nature of many popular publications, the lack of amusing and directly entertaining content, the exclusiveness of the illustrations, the high price of a publication, and the forms of distribution — since selling in bookshops is very different to selling at newsstands, as Irene Piazzoni’s article points out). Yet, in some circumstances the boundaries between high and trivial culture are voluntarily crossed, and for several reasons. Not by chance, scholars also take into consideration the category of ‘middlebrow’ in order to refer to accessible products that do not involve intellectual commitment, in which high and low culture mingle, and

leisure is a priority. ‘Popular’ is therefore not the opposite of ‘high culture’, but something far more complex and multi-layered, both socially and politically.

Despite being widely considered frivolous and aesthetically inferior, as well as escapist or morally recessive — perhaps as a way to manipulate and socially control consumers — popular culture artefacts are certainly worth studying, as Nicole Immig strongly claims in her article, for both their role in everyday life and their political function. These roles could be linked to passivity or, on the contrary, to their ability to give voice to resistance or even create a ‘mediumship’ with national intent, as Victoria Kuttainen shows in her contribution. Indeed, popular culture artefacts mirror society and allow the society to mirror itself in them. They thus tend to harmonize opposites instead of disrupting them or create a minimum of disruption as a way of reaffirming, by reaction, the framework of reference and the world as it is.¹

In a Gramscian sense, popular culture is not necessarily imposed from above in the interests of the dominant group, nor does it represent spontaneous opposition by subordinates: it resides somewhere in-between, as negotiation, resistance, or incorporation.² For this reason, an analysis must concern not only the artefact *per se*, but its many and changing meanings, as well as both the author’s or editor’s point of view and strategies and the various forms of its fruition. Along with the ‘popular’ creation of something new, the audience is also always formed into the fruit of an uninterrupted mediation between producers and readers, as the articles by Martin Conboy, James Whitworth, and Irene Piazzoni rightly show. Forging a popular culture artefact means integration and not exclusion.

Partially sharing Roland Barthes’s post-structuralist position, according to which a text (and, in a broader sense, a cultural artefact) is actually an experience of fruition and, therefore, cannot be properly analyzed without considering the various ways people read or simply use it in relation to their cultural repertoire, a cultural product must, undeniably, be investigated in the precise context of its fruition, making readers or users at least co-creators of a text.³ In my view, Gustave Flaubert’s milestone novel *Madame Bovary* contains several examples of the ways a cultural artefact (in this case, books) can be used in practice: for instance, we are shown just what an inane medical professional Charles Bovary is by looking at his bookshelf, where the medical volumes have never been read (they are ‘non coupés’ [uncut]) and are simply paraded as a status symbol, while Emma Bovary herself leafs through novels without reading them, merely to create a diversion and not be forced to talk to her despised husband.⁴ The same could be said — in a non-fictional framework — for periodicals. Enrico Landoni’s article, for instance, demonstrates that the coexistence of different types of sports coverage and descriptions of their protagonists on the pages of the same sports magazine opened the doors to an informative and technical fruition that was unlikely to be deeply influenced by fascist propaganda. Moreover, a popular periodical is not only read, but firstly ‘looked at’ or simply ‘leafed through’ (or even ‘listened to’, according to Immig’s reference to reading aloud in coffeehouses). The same can be said, for instance, for Whitworth’s

1 Jörn Ahrens, *Wie aus Wildnis Gesellschaft wird: Kulturelle Selbstverständigung und populäre Kultur am Beispiel von John Fords Film ‘The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance’* (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften-Springer Fachmedien, 2012), p. 298.

2 John Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction*, 7th edn (New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 7.

3 See mainly Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris: Seuil, 1957), and Roland Barthes, ‘The Death of the Author’, in *Image–Music–Text* (London: Fontana Press, 1977), pp. 142–48.

4 ‘Les tomes du *Dictionnaire des sciences médicales*, non coupés, mais dont la brochure avait souffert dans toutes les ventes successives par où ils avaient passé, garnissaient presque à eux seuls, les six rayons d’une bibliothèque en bois de sapin.’ Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary* (Paris: Flammarion, 1986), Part I, Chapter V, p. 91; ‘A table même, elle apportait son livre, et elle tournait les feuillets, pendant que Charles mangeait en lui parlant.’ Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, Part I, Chapter IX, p. 118.

sources, as cartoons must be engaging and depend on the reader's reactions and previous knowledge. Nevertheless, one cannot avoid studying the production process and authors' points of view, if only because plausible methods of doing research on the mere context of fruition are not always available and thus must be inferred from the cultural artefact itself. In this sense, *cultural history* (which deals with mentalities, practices, and narratives, with deep philosophical implications but little attention to economic and political issues) is inseparable from *history of culture* (which focuses on institutions, cultural diplomacy, intellectual networks, etc.).

When talking about what is 'popular', we are dealing with the process of popularization and not simply a product or autonomous object of study, as clearly emerges in Conboy's article. This process entails a mediation between high and commercial cultures and is always bidirectional. Indeed, as illustrated magazines of the interwar period show, the same pages often displayed examples of both the mediation of high culture products and the ennobling of more humble ones. On the other hand, periodicals can themselves be means of popularization (for instance, of sports, as described in Landoni's article), especially in the interwar period, a time in which in several countries audiences broadened and the number of media increased (with cinema in the first place).

These five points can certainly be useful, but they do not contain all of the questions and issues linked to the conceptualization of 'popular'. As a matter of fact, our impressions can change greatly if we focus on a single product, or a group of cultural artefacts (for instance, a literary or cinematographic genre), or a certain creator's or user's (consumer's) approach ('popular' is in the eye of the beholder...), or even a production system capable of creating different products for different audiences (as described in Piazzoni's article). This is why an investigation of the idea of 'popular' should not entail a rigid definition, but rather a more flexible frame of reference. This is the goal of this afterword's presentation of a questionnaire, which, nonetheless, should be adapted to all specific contexts (according to the kind of source, and the social and political frameworks, but also the current academic tradition). This may be useful in order to understand *if* a product or a certain user (or consumer) experience can be defined as 'popular'; but it can also serve as a checklist during analysis to give a full picture of the subject. Not by chance, this checklist was designed in the days preceding and following the ESPRit Postgraduate Workshop on Periodical Studies in Athens (in September 2019) as a tool for young researchers who were, most probably, dealing with popular culture artefacts for the first time, aiming to give them an idea of the complexity of the matter.⁵

This checklist is just a bold attempt to systematize a fluid and magmatic subject and will certainly need further thought and amendments. Moreover, it is only a pragmatic (and didactic) proposal, although it is also the outcome of readings of academic work by historians, philosophers, and cultural analysts. As the empirical output of a theoretical reflection, it also attempts to make use of conflicting philosophical and theoretical approaches, drawing from experience that might be more useful on a practical level. Therefore, the reference to any specific philosophical approach here is not a judgement of its significance or consistency, but simply a reflection on its functionality and utility in the study of what is 'popular'.

The Checklist

How can one analyze a popular culture artefact? What are the questions one should ask one's source? At the same time, how can one consider aspects of leisure and

⁵ *Periodicals and Visual Culture*, 8th ESPRit Conference, *Postgraduate Workshop on Periodical Studies* (National Library of Greece, SNFCC, Athens), 11 September 2019.

entertainment typical of popular culture without losing sight of how serious, complex, and — above all — *political* the ‘popular’ may be?

A first step might be to identify the categories one can analyze: the cultural artefacts (a general label that can indicate a text, books, periodicals, movies, and so on), audience, and the situation of fruition (that is, the relationship between cultural artefact and audience, as a set of practices).⁶ Each of these three categories should be investigated, according to three further dimensions: the political-social-economic dimension; the cultural and ideological dimension; the dimension of the praxis (format, materiality, user’s practices, and manner of socialization through the product). Of course, nothing prevents a scholar from focusing on a single category and a single dimension, but what is ‘popular’ surfaces as an integral, complex phenomenon only through the interaction between all these areas and dimensions, and it is no coincidence that some of the questions can be asked as regards different dimensions. The following checklist should thus guarantee that a beginning researcher not withdraw into the safe space of just one category or dimension, unaware that all artefacts exist only within a web of relationships that can influence their use and meaning.

The Political-Social-Economic Dimension

The following questions can help a researcher delve into the particularly political, social, and economic factors of the cultural artefact(s) being explored:

- Is there an explicit political, social, or economical aim? How are the artefacts and the relationship between artefacts and audience targeted in order to achieve this goal? What is the aim of the artefact? Is it a direct or an indirect form of social control? Is it a way to draw a specific social category into the world of consumerism? Is it a form of empowerment for the consumer?
- What image of the social structure appears from the source?
- In a Gramscian sense, can the cultural artefact be connected to either a dominant or a subordinate culture? To what extent does the artefact reproduce current economic and power structures or, on the contrary, challenge them?
- What images of class, gender, and race relationships appear? How are power relations set up? Does a clear relationship between dominant and dominated subjects emerge (directly or indirectly)? Does the artefact or its relation to the audience give rise to a reading in support of dominant groups?
- What space for negotiation exists among different versions or interpretations of the artefact by different members of the audience?
- To what extent can this product contribute to liberation or act as a liberating tool by disrupting traditions and a specific class culture? On the contrary, to what extent can it be an instrument of manipulation of the consumer (for economic, political or social purposes)?
- To what extent is the artefact, or the relationship between the artefact and audience, part of a ‘consumer culture’? To what extent can one speak of ‘Americanization’?
- What kind of relationship exists between medium and mediator? Who are the mediators (journalists, photographers, editors, etc.)? What role do intellectuals play?
- What role do translations play? Are they de-contextualized? Are they embellished? Are problematic issues (i.e. political, moral) simply removed in the translations?

Many other questions can, of course, find a place here.

6 Storey, *Cultural Theory*, p. 91.

The Cultural and Ideological Dimension

The following questions can help a researcher delve into the particularly cultural and ideological factors of the cultural artefact(s) being explored:

- What is the difference, in theory and practice, between a specific popular culture artefact and contemporary high culture artefacts? Is there a great difference or is there some overlap? How and under what circumstances can borders between high and popular culture be crossed, and why would someone want to cross them? What exactly does the possible overlapping consist of (i.e. the structure of the text, the type of writing, the fruition)?
- What worldview emerges from the cultural artefact and from the practices linked to it? What 'ideology' emerges?
- Is there a cultural purpose, an explicit or implicit desire to impose a specific vision or ideology? How are the artefact and the fruition designed or shaped in order to achieve this goal?
- Does a social or religious function arise? Does it emerge from the practices linked to the artefact?
- What kind of relationship exists between the 'structure' (economical, political, or gender issues, for example) and the 'agency' (that is, 'the role of the human actor as an individual or group in directing or effectively intervening in the course of history')?⁷
- What image of 'the people' appears from the source and from the practices linked to it? Who count as 'the people' and who don't?
- Is specific attention dedicated to the target audience? Do the subjects of the artefact and the audience match and coincide? Or does the artefact 'speak' of a subject or a social category separate from its targeted audience?
- Referring to the artefact only: Where does its meaning come from — from the presence or the absence of specific elements? Is there a surprising omission of specific elements, in an Althusserian sense?⁸ What happens on the 'margins' of the text or artefact, where it does *not* 'speak' directly?
- Is there a patronizing intent? Is there self-indulgence?
- What kind of relationship exists between medium and mediator? Who are the mediators (journalists, photographers, editors, etc.)? What role do intellectuals play?

Many other questions can, of course, find a place here.

The Dimension of Praxis

The following questions can help a researcher delve into the particularly practical factors of the cultural artefact(s) being explored:

- What is the relationship between the artefact and the practices linked to it? How can the artefact be used? Are the methods of use of the artefact explicit? Is there a 'correct' or 'natural' way to use the artefact — and an oppositional way (i.e. ironical, etc.) to use it?
- How can the audience select, purchase, and/or interpret the artefact? How does the appropriation and rehashing or re-elaboration of a source take place? How does the meaning of the artefact change through this process of re-elaboration?

⁷ Peter Brooker, *A Concise Glossary of Cultural Theory* (London: Arnold, 1999), p. 3.

⁸ Storey, *Cultural Theory*, pp. 74–83.

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- What about the quantitative aspects? What data does the researcher have on the source? Are they reliable? Are absolute figures really important, or are percentages (for instance the percentage of sales, etc.) more useful?
- Is there a relationship between successful and 'popular' cultural artefacts (considering that high culture can be successful too)?
- What role does advertising play? Is there a logic behind advertising for the particular artefact?
- Is it possible to distinguish the creator's and the user's point of view? Is the circulation of the artefact consistent with the aim originally set by its creator? What about the user's agency (on a scale from 'passive consumption' to 'explicit oppositional consumption')?
- As far as the uses of the artefact in everyday life are concerned, what kind of fruition (private or public, unshared or collective, legal or illegal, etc.) is linked to it? Are there any specific social norms linked to its consumption?

Many other questions can, of course, find a place here.

This checklist is suitable for several fields of study (from history of culture to literature and media studies). Because it is grounded on reflections from both media and culture theorists, it can become a bridge between branches of knowledge that barely interact with each other.

Some Remarks and a *Renvoy*

It should also be evident that, in the final analysis, periodicals are just one of many popular culture artefacts a researcher can examine. Although specialization is essential, an artefact must be considered as a whole, and each of the above-mentioned dimensions should be taken into consideration. This means that the questions and meditations above might be useful also when referring to single pieces of periodical content (an article, an illustration or photo, an advert, a cartoon), but the choice to 'scrapbook' it for the sake of a legitimate specific case study must not lapse into decontextualization. In fact, it doesn't make any sense to think of a consumer as someone who consumes just one kind of popular culture artefact; for instance, there can be 'main' or 'prevailing' consumers of comics, but they always consume other kinds of popular culture artefacts, as well. Moreover, artefacts and situations of fruition should probably be studied together, because they emerge together, in the same social and cultural context; for example, it is indisputable that a society in which, for instance, a popular book collection is produced is probably producing (or receiving from the outside) popular movies or comics too. Every kind of popular culture artefact lives in symbiosis with all the other kinds (especially in industrialized and urbanized societies), in a shared relationship, just like sharks and pilot fish, which cannot be considered separately.

This checklist, thus, makes research on popular culture artefacts more complex rather than simpler, and is meant to be a framework reference: the challenge is to verify its validity and usefulness, and, possibly, begin a discussion of methodologies that may be convenient and appropriate for researchers dealing with any cultural artefact that could be considered 'popular'.

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