

EDITORIAL

The Question of Popular Culture

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Culture is ordinary: that is the first fact (Williams, 1993: 6)

In his famous *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, originally published nearly four decades ago, Raymond Williams claimed that culture was certainly “one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language” (1983: 87). The fact that, throughout the last century, a considerable number of authors from distinctive academic fields sought to debate and shape the general understanding of what culture is, should be or could be, has not made the task of uncovering a stable definition for the concept any more simple, and neither has the fact that, alongside culture, other categories have found their way into this equation, namely those of high and low, folk, mass and popular culture.

When, in the late nineteenth/early twentieth century, British literary critics Matthew Arnold, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Frank Raymond Leavis reflected upon the concept of culture, they understood it primarily as a means of pursuing individual perfection and attaining social progress in a modern society marked, then, by mechanical, industrial and scientific rapid developments they were very suspicious of, for the threats they posed with their processes of standardization and intrinsic dangers

of superficiality. A similar conception of culture was also developed at the time by American literary critic T. S. Eliot, who claimed his belief in the potential of a minority elite to preserve the quality of culture from the dangers of emergent massification.¹

The debate around the notion of mass culture was particularly developed in the United States immediately following World War II by authors such as Bernard Rosenberg, Leo Lowenthal and Dwight Macdonald, who embraced a pessimistic view of mass culture as contributing to individual alienation, passivity, manipulation and social dehumanization. However, the most significant contribution to this debate was offered by the authors of the Frankfurt School, especially Theodor W. Adorno, whose writings remain highly influential up to present day, owing in particular to his vision of the culture industry as promoter of standardization and homogenization; his analysis of the implications of commodification and reification under capitalist systems, and his critique of mass culture and its submission to commercial interests and undisguised efforts to induce consent and social manipulation.²

The relevance of Adorno's study of cultural products in relation to capitalist economy and politics proved largely influential to the emergence of Cultural Studies as a discipline and to some of its most important initial contributors (founding members of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham), namely Richard Hoggart, E. P. Thompson, Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall, all of whom challenged the vision of culture as the privilege of a minority high class and, in different ways, emphasized the possibilities of human agency in the production of culture as a site of resistance and struggle over power. Williams's acknowledgement of culture as that which is ordinary and encompasses a whole way of life enabled the refutation of the (until then) prevailing notion of the ignorant passive masses, whilst his cultural materialism approach sought to understand how culture and its social-economic conditions of production reciprocally interact, in a constant negotiation of power through texts, ideas and practices.

Also in his *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, Williams analysed the concept of popular and its relation to culture and art. Noting how, traditionally, the popular could refer to that which was widely favoured and liked, on the one hand, or

¹ "It is an essential condition of the preservation of the quality of the culture of the minority, that it should continue to be a minority culture" (Eliot, 1948: 105).

² "The concoctions of the culture industry are neither guides for a blissful life, nor a new art of moral responsibility, but rather exhortations to toe the line, behind which stand the most powerful interests. The consensus which it propagates strengthens blind, opaque authority" (Adorno, 1991: 105).

that which was identified by others as an inferior kind of work, thus sustaining the opposition of high and low, Williams observed that a more recent emphasis had been placed upon the notion of popular culture as that which was made by people for themselves. He also commented on the fact that the debate around these different understandings of popular culture lent itself just the same to the notions of popular music and popular art, where the popular was eventually shortened to “pop” but the same range of meanings, whether favourable or unfavourable, applied.

As a concept, the popular – or popular culture for that matter – has never ceased to be debatable and ambivalent. Although it has come to occupy a particular place under the spotlight over the past decades within the broad study of culture, such apparently privileged position has not deprived it of the manifold ambiguities, complexities or misconceptions that have often involved its general understanding (Storey, 2001; McRobbie, 1994; Ross, 1989; Fiske, 1989). Popular culture, in itself, is not a historically fixed reality; it is, on the contrary, permanently constructed and ever evolving, located in specific times and places, which makes the task of applying to it any definitive conceptual category even harder. Not being an easy concept, popular culture has, indeed, been widely debated for more than a century now, and for the greater part of that time, it has been used to refer primarily the opposite of high culture, in an equation of bad versus good. This understanding of a hierarchical distinction of culture has had lasting effects and has been really hard to overcome, not just within but also outside the intellectual/academic field.

Following its emergence within the context of processes of industrialization and the changes they brought about, namely for the field of cultural relations and the development of the capitalist market economy, the concept of popular culture was, for a considerable period of time, not only utterly rejected by intellectuals and scholars alike, but also denied any possibility of constituting a serious and valid topic for academic debate. Up until the mid twentieth-century, popular culture was often equated to a poor and simplistic form of entertainment and pleasure, and was even deemed morally and ethically questionable, not to mention aesthetically. However, and particularly after the 1950s, new perspectives came to alter this perception in very significant ways, especially with the emergence of Cultural Studies and the influence their project had on both sides of the Atlantic (Grossberg, 1997). From severe condemnation, popular culture quickly evolved into a discourse of positive reception and celebration, which resulted from critical work developed inside the academia, but also popular demand outside it.

From this surge of renewed enthusiasm surrounding the concept of popular culture, resulted the impossibility of assigning to it a restricted meaning or a clearly circumscribed category. According to John Storey, the inevitable difficulty of defining this construct emerges, first and foremost, from its compound shape (Storey, 2001: 5). In fact, the debates around the “cultural” and the “popular”, even if considered individually, contributed widely to transform the field of popular culture into a territory where theories, perspectives and arguments are debated, sometimes opposed, but, as a whole, they have played a significant role in defining contemporary approaches to popular culture. As an object of study, popular culture becomes, then, an “unwieldy subject” (Cruz and Guins, 2005: 2), scattered across a variety of disciplines and multiple theoretical frameworks.

From the moment Raymond Williams claimed that “culture is ordinary” and represents a whole way of life “which expresses certain meanings and values not only in art but also in institutions and ordinary behavior” (Williams, 2001: 57), attempts at applying a hierarchical matrix to cultural manifestations were no longer possible. The presumed distance separating the popular and the erudite was overcome when emphasis was definitely placed upon the uses of culture (Fiske, 1992; Certeau, 1988) and the way cultural objects construct social relations. The popular ceases, then, to be defined as an aesthetic feature of specific objects to become a much broader category involving also the social relations between publics, images, objects and events. At the same time, access to consumption of cultural products improved significantly, therefore enabling the inclusion in the domain of popular culture of new artistic and vernacular expressions. In this sense, the popular dimension of culture in its manifold layers inscribed itself not only in academia but also the societal fabric as a permanent debatable theme, being adopted both as an intrinsic feature and as topic in its own right of artistic creation developed under the sign of pop. From pop art to pop music, a new understanding of culture has been put forth, building from what is embedded in the ambivalence of the popular and its many possibilities of intersection with new artistic forms of expression.

By the time Pop Art emerges, the debate on mechanical reproduction possibilities and large scale consumption of cultural products was already a central topic in the field of Social and Human Sciences. In fact, the well known dispute within the Frankfurt School, which opposed Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin, was centred on the disagreement regarding the totalitarian or democratizing predisposition of such

mechanical reproduction possibilities. Adorno claimed that artistic practices, upon entering a scheme of industrial production similar to all other products, forced the work of art to incorporate the very own purpose of consumption. Walter Benjamin, on the other hand, although conceding that the work of art in the age of its mechanical reproduction was involved in schemes of industrial production which eliminated its uniqueness, authenticity and aura, and annulled its sacred, ritual and symbolic dimension, still considered that the same work of art could find different possibilities of exposure and circulation, thus contributing to its democratizing predisposition.

Simultaneously conditioning and being conditioned by this debate, Pop Art subtly introduced itself as an ambivalent artistic language that both celebrated and condemned the profusion of cultural products in consumption circuits. The appropriation of an industrial aesthetic by artistic practices (Jones, 1996) and the synchronicity of Pop Art with the social, economic and political concerns of the 1960s represented a rupture with canonical modernism, where the work of art was conceived as autonomous in relation to the social fabric (Greenberg, 1961).

Although not an entirely homogeneous artistic movement, Pop Art was the designation assigned to this tendency (primarily by British critic Lawrence Alloway), put into practice by many different artists, to include in the (fine) arts the popular imagery – comics, advertising or craftwork, amongst others. Since then, the popular has become a major theme in artistic production. Post-modernist strategies, which have pervaded the arts over the past decades with their inextricable aesthetic and ethic dimensions, have assumed popular culture as an enduring motto and theme of the artistic gesture. However, critiques have persisted, and the popular is still far from becoming a consensual category, particularly pertaining to its aesthetic validity.

After the first decade of the twenty-first century, popular culture finds itself at a crossroads: has the concept been drained of its meaning because of its overwhelming popularity? After the euphoria around the popular, what afterlife can be expected from it? Should we still be discussing the popular as opposed to high and folk culture? And where and how do pop art forms intersect with the current notion of the popular? These are all questions that remain open for debate and urge us to think about the place that the very concept of popular culture could or should occupy in different academic disciplines today.

In an interview published in this issue of *Diffractions*, David Hesmondhalgh claims that the work developed by early Cultural Studies on popular culture was not only highly accomplished but absolutely essential, particularly in the way influential scholars of the discipline addressed political, historical, social, ethnic and gender issues as they explored the multiple meanings of popular culture products and practices and how these were experienced both individually and collectively. However, over the past decades, Cultural Studies have taken on other directions which he sees as mostly dominated, on the one hand, by a narrow theoretical strand from which history, sociology and politics have been almost entirely removed, and, on the other hand, by close textual reading and empirical research lacking proper theoretical framework. As such, not only has the analysis of popular culture taken a somewhat neglected secondary position, but indeed the term popular culture has almost completely disappeared from the field of Cultural Studies, where it has been consistently replaced by the use of such notions as the “ordinary” or the “everyday”.

Concurrently, in a number of different disciplines in the Humanities, it is now possible to conduct serious research on popular culture products and practices which, earlier on, would have been dismissed as too trivial and unworthy of academic work. The so-called “cultural turn” that took place particularly from the 1970s onwards may have granted popular culture its own particular place within the social and human sciences, but that does not obviate much work that still needs to be done regarding critical approaches to popular culture that account for the value of its aesthetic and ethic dimensions, particularly in the current era of neo-liberalism still very much characterized by cultural inequality and exclusion. Culture, or popular culture for that matter, is still a site of struggle over contentious ideas, meanings and relations of power, as the articles included in this fourth issue of *Diffractions* clearly reveal.

In the first article of this issue, “**Mic Checks and Balances: Politically Conscious Hip-Hop’s Engagement with the Presidency of Barack Obama**”, Kareem R. Muhammad analyses the hip-hop subculture as an anti-establishment space and its contribution to discursive critiques directed towards U.S.’s presidents, especially after 9/11 and the War on Terror that ensued. Contending that it is in hip-hop that some of the strongest and most unfiltered critiques against the federal government can be found nowadays, Muhammad discusses how the election of the nation’s first black president has challenged hip-hop’s long standing traditions to, on the one hand, stand up to power and speak the harshest truths, and, on the other, to mobilize and band together the black community, particularly when its members are found under attack from

outsiders. Through a qualitative content analysis conducted on politically conscious rap music produced between 2001 and 2013, the article supports the claim that hip-hop has definitely toned down its criticism on the White House since President Obama's election in comparison to previous presidents, specifically President George W. Bush.

The American context after 9/11 and the War on Terror is also brought to the forefront in the second article, **“Popping (it) Up: an exploration on popular culture in TV series *Supernatural*”**, where Diana Gonçalves discusses the TV show in relation to post-9/11 culture and how this has been deeply affected by an underlying sense of terror, anxiety and insecurity. Looking at the specific features of the horror genre that the show privileges in its approach to diffused apocalyptic fears in the present cultural and political context in America, the article also explores *Supernatural's* incorporation of contemporary pop culture references and how these reveal the manifold ways the TV series should be understood as both a cultural manifestation and a manifestation of culture, that is, a specific product that impacts popular culture and is, simultaneously, impacted by it.

Also inflected towards the conjunction of popular culture and politics is the article **“(Re)creando al ‘Otro’ extranjero a través de pósteres de propaganda maoísta: entre manifestación popular de identidades y recuerdo kitsch”**, where Beatriz Hernández discusses the image of western foreigners promoted in China between 1949 and 1976, using the mechanism that Mao Zedong put massively into circulation: the propaganda poster. These popular printings included a great amount of visual information, intended to serve as a way to identify friends and foes, and were conceived to prove that the Maoist ideology was the supreme principle and living gospel, having been used as a massive weapon to indoctrinate the population, inside and outside China. Removed from their original context, reproduced as new cultural products and exploited as new commodities, some of these images (re)emerged during the 90's as emblems of the Political Pop movement, showing that popular images can be used as media text to examine what has been excluded, neglected, repressed or affixed in the process of rearranging beyond the original context. Observing the evolution that the image of the ‘Other’ experienced, this analysis suggests that the meanings of Maoist imagery in contemporary practices are a short of supplemented outcomes: neither the traditional nor the present meanings determine its meaning, but rather a combination of the two. The present, as a consequence, is a product of the constant accumulation of meanings, which have been adjoined due to experiences and

shifting contexts, even more in a complex environment such as ‘post-colonial’ Hong Kong, as this article address.

Finally, in “**Teatro de Feira: o Genuíno Popular do Público Erudito?**”, Paula Gomes Magalhães debates the long standing scission between popular culture and erudite culture as an artificial exercise promoted by the critics, based on the example of theatre plays performed at popular fairs in Lisbon, during the second half of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century. Considering how these Fairs were originally conceived as leisure spaces for underprivileged classes, the article analyses the contribution of travelling theatres to the creation of heterogeneous audiences that proved how these popular artistic manifestations also included an erudite audience that enjoyed these plays just as much as the opera performances at their local theatres. Despite the mostly negative criticism reserved for these popular, hence “inferior”, performances, the author claims that the genuinely popular dimension of the plays performed at these Fairs was supported by some of the intellectuals at the time as a singular and aesthetically valid cultural practice.

This ambivalence of the concept of popular culture, its complex articulation with the disciplinary field of Cultural Studies, the longstanding distinction between elitist and commercial forms of culture and popular culture’s aesthetic and political qualities are at the centre of the interview with **David Hesmondhalgh**, Professor at the University of Leeds, who also looks at a specific cultural practice – popular music – and discusses its real importance to individuals, communities and nations, as well as its transformative potential. Also focusing on music is the interview with musician/singer/writer **Fernando Ribeiro**, leader of Portuguese metal band Moonspell, who questions the band’s turbulent relationship to Portuguese culture and identity, and analyses the specificities of the music genre they have privileged and its positioning within an increasingly complex context where global and local dynamics continually intersect. Finally, **Carlos Rojas**, Professor at the Duke University Department of Asian & Middle Eastern Studies, discusses this same growing cross-cultural transnational environment and how it relates to the particular features of the complex and rapidly changing Chinese cultural context.

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