



The problem of popular culture

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Abstract

This article argues that concept of popular culture, as conceptualized within the media/cultural studies tradition in the Anglophone West, is in crisis. The idea of the “popular” that continues to be embraced by many critical media/communication and cultural studies scholars derives from postwar assumptions about mass media which no longer accurately fit present conditions. However, the resilience of these assumptions has created “the problem of popular culture,” a complicated and longstanding series of dilemmas for contemporary scholarship. This article documents several manifestations of this problem and proposes that scholars reserve the term popular culture for instances of popular practice.

Keywords: popular culture, mass media, cultural studies, culture industry

The problem of popular culture

What is popular culture? For Raymond Williams, “popular” indicates “belonging to the people”; “widely-favoured or well-liked”; “trivial”; and “deliberate,” as in that which courts the people’s desires (Williams, 1983, pp. 236–238). In the 19th and early-20th century, “popular culture” frequently referenced what we might today call “folk culture” or “folklore”—vernacular culture, oral traditions, and the daily ways of ordinary people (Levine, 1990, 1992). Over time, as these activities shared the spotlight with mass-produced culture, the distinction between them blurred. Lawrence Levine, writing about the mid-20th century, called popular culture the “folklore of industrial society,” suggesting that books, magazines, newspapers, and radio “[act] as a form of folklore for people living in urban industrial societies, and can thus be used to reconstruct people’s attitudes, values, and reactions” (Levine, 1992, p. 1372). In the 1957 collection *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America*, Kurt Lang articulated a commonsensical notion of the time: “what people generally have in mind when they allude to ‘popular’ taste is that which somehow has mass appeal. Further, if any radio or TV show or comic strip, any offering typical of the popular culture, has mass appeal this is supposed to be because it holds some attraction for almost everyone” (p. 379). Popular culture and mass media became interchangeable.

Since then, the “what” of popular culture has expanded greatly, and central assumptions have consolidated. In the foundational 1994 reader *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* (2006), editor John Storey explains that cultural studies is invested in popular culture but he does not define popular culture. Instead, he points to authors such as John Fiske and Stuart Hall, who describe popular culture as a site of “struggle” (xvi–xviii).¹ In a now classic essay, Zelizer notes that “all communication has popular dimensions” and returns to time-tested issues—about reach, commercialism, quality, and “the people”—as continued research impetuses (2000, pp. 297–298). In the last two decades, interest in popular culture has grown within media/communication and

cultural studies as well as among cultural commentators, yet shifting technological, economic, social, and political conditions have mostly been added to the concept of popular culture, rather than served as opportunities to rethink its core. As a result, what scholars of popular culture study is immense: not just “legacy” media like television, film, music, and advertising, but also their digital forms as well as the content that populates social media platforms—not to mention fashion, games, material culture and more that are also often included in the mix. It sometimes seems as if we *just know* what popular culture is—and it is everything.

It is a question whether popular culture should be so ubiquitous and obvious, and whether our theories about popularity can and should stretch to fit so many different permutations. After all, within media and cultural studies, prevailing understanding of the “popular” of popular culture still reflect the concerns of a half century ago, when commercial mass media was the engine of both popular culture and its study. Owing to the influence of Marxism on mid-century ideas of media power, “popular” continues to gesture toward age-old claims about both significance and politics: popular culture matters greatly to many people, who may be galvanized or otherwise compelled to “resist” via their consumption. But I argue that, despite widespread usage, it has become unclear what the “popular” of popular culture means and, in turn, what popular culture is.

Does Williams’s notion of “popular” make sense in today’s cultural landscape? Contemporary popular culture is less what is dominant, widely shared, and democratic than complicated, nebulous, and networked sub-, counter-, and intercultures that combine and converge yet do not necessarily cohere into an intelligible whole. Moreover, as traditional media undergo existential reconfiguration; as new genres, platforms, and markets emerge; as it becomes both easier and more difficult to comprehend audience size and composition; as paradigms of consumption are reborn; as data joins content as a primary commodity for media industries; as geopolitics, economics, and technology shift transnational cultural flows; and as users encounter new ways to connect and share,

to watch and be watched, we should no longer assume that the “popular culture” of scholarly imaginations remains unscathed.

It is from this station that I argue that popular culture is in ontological crisis, suffering from a suite of dilemmas which I have come to think about, collectively, as the problem of popular culture. Central to these dilemmas is how assumptions about mass media inform much of the thinking about popular culture to create an unproblematic link between popularity, ubiquity, power, and progressive resistance. Not only has this way of thinking lost its utility, but it is also inadequate for thinking about what is “popular” about digital and social media, which have their own rules regarding spread, significance, and politics. Mistaken assumptions about popular culture not only perpetuate mundane theory, but also misrecognize and misunderstand our object. Critical scholars of media and communication must embrace a clearer framework for what constitutes popularity.

Though the problem of popular culture is newly urgent, it is by no means new. Many scholars before me have addressed these concerns, in whole or in part (Bennett, 1980; Curran, 1990; Hall 1981, 1993; Kellner, 1995; Morris, 1988; Parker, 2011). The current article draws from, correlates, and synthesizes many of their ideas. Likewise, it attempts to resurrect and extend this debate within the current conjuncture, in the West and elsewhere, of the digital culture and infrastructure, audience fragmentation, and reactionary populism, which conspires to make the problem of popular culture difficult to ignore. That said, the intervention I propose will be difficult. The study of popular culture is durable, robust, multidisciplinary, and multinational. What constitutes popularity has changed many times and yet “popular culture” endures; calls to discard popular culture for more expansive or representative terms (such as “media culture” have mostly gone unheeded (Kellner, 1995). Moreover, popular culture struggles with inclusivity as both a concept and a media form. There have been numerous attempts to account for these twin shortcomings, the vast majority of which have been both useful and in good faith even if incomplete.² Then there is the problem of semantics: popular culture is not just a scholarly designation but a concept of wide colloquial use (at least in the American context), broadly meaningful if not singular. Nevertheless, the problem of popular culture is existential and demands a reformulation of what popular culture is and can be.

The structure of this essay

The form of this essay is critical to its argument. I have chosen to write a series of notes to underscore one of the core frustrations in making sense of popular culture: its sheer size, complexity, and irreducibility. This has always presented a hard problem, but it is one that has gotten harder. Earlier scholars writing about popular culture faced more modest extant literature, a less fragmented mediasphere, and the latitude that accompanies pioneering work. They likewise wrote during a period when scholarship was typified by modernist un-narratives, stylistic ease, tiny reference lists, Western solipsism, and masculine hubris. Contemporary scholars write in a different milieu, one more deeply invested in postmodern theory, nuance, scholarly subjectivity, and addressing narrow gaps in the literature. To this last point, the enormous number of books, articles, and journals about all kinds of popular

culture across a wide range of languages, locales, and scholarly traditions has complexified, rather than eased, the prospect of “knowing” popular culture. Taken together, it feels challenging to say something without qualification and caveat. I am bound by these conditions and acknowledge their value as well as their confines.

At the same time, expansiveness coupled with irreducibility is fundamental to why I have written this article at all. There is so much popular culture, defined in so many ways, that it becomes difficult to take anything about it for granted. This article is a call to be more attentive: to what concepts we use, what material we draw from, and what claims we make when thinking about popular culture. I also recognize that the same issues that compel me to write this article will make it challenging to execute. In claiming that popular culture has lost specificity, I run the risk of being thwarted by its heterogeneity. Nor is it lost on me that theoretical claims are reductive and abstract by design, including my own. Notes are one strategy for engaging in an argument that will necessarily be piecemeal, episodic, and incomplete. These capsule arguments do not attempt to say everything, foreclose every debate, cite every source, or answer every question. Instead, they aim to be both modest and capacious in their reconsiderations and suggestions. When I know my limitations, I will state them. Here is the first: My conception of “the study of popular culture” is informed by media, communication, and cultural studies. While these are interdisciplinary fields, for the sake of manageability I have attempted to stay within them, meaning work on popular culture in other domains may not be considered here. A second limitation is that I will draw primarily from the narrow yet hegemonic remit of postwar qualitative, critical cultural studies, especially foundational American, British, and Australian texts. The limits of such an approach are clear, especially insofar as scholars writing from/beyond these positionalities and in adjacent fields have already problematized popularity in productive and illuminating ways (Canclini, 2005; Kantaris and O’Byrne, 2013, pp. 1–2; Pinney, 2001). At the same time, these parameters are intentional. The canonical works I primarily focus on here have been enormously influential and broadly applied. That they have been used to speak to, for, and from a central vantage on popular culture continues to shape scholarly inquiry in ways that define both possibilities and challenges.

Mass media becomes popular culture

Mass media have been central to the study of popular culture since the middle decades of the 20th century, as the development and widespread adoption of communication technologies spurred intellectual scrutiny into their promise and power. Mass media are “the main means of mass communications”—technologies, industries, and systems of address that possess the power to reach many people (popular culture, n.d., Williams, 1983, p. 196). Over the course of the 20th century, mass media took on a variety of forms, including printed media such as newspapers, magazines, and books; audio media such as radio and recorded music; and visual and audiovisual forms including television, film, and advertising. These diverse media share a “one to many” method of communication: the capacity to send the same message to countless people simultaneously, either through mass production and reproduction or synchronous, simultaneous broadcast.

Debate about whether mass culture and popular culture were synonymous persisted for decades (e.g., McAllister, 2003). Nonetheless, a prominent strand of argument proceeded as though they were. As this transpired, the complexities of “the popular” that had been articulated by Williams (1958, 1983), Hall (1981) and others came into deeper dialogue and starker relief. For example, being widely available is not equivalent to being well-liked, though one is frequently mistaken for the other. Another complexity involves, for example, how the study of popular culture has been theorized to focus on “questions of agency,” “questions of commodification,” and “questions of ideology” (Zelizer, 2000, p. 304)—mirroring the triumvirate of audience, industry, and text that scaffolds so much popular culture scholarship (see also Johnson, 1986; Mittell, 2001: 22). Yet these concerns are hardly the only ones that matter for popular culture, both then and now; agency, commodification, and ideology are all particularly apt for thinking about mass media, but perhaps less important for other kinds of popular culture. As Hermes and Teurling (2021, p. 229) explain,

What we see in recent work . . . is that, even though the words “popular culture” figure prominently, the entire conceptual framework that came with “popular culture” and “the popular” has been relegated to the background: the topological distinctions between elite, mass, folk, and popular culture; the culturalist insight that popular culture is actively produced; the Gramscian idea that popular culture is the place where commonsense is produced and formed. Notwithstanding exceptions, what remains is a “fun” object (“popular culture”) without the conceptual framework that tied everyday practices of meaning making to engaged research of power structures. Or a zone of exploitation, subjection or exclusion, of course.

Hermes and Teurling make their argument on different grounds than I do, but their observations are the same: how scholars study popular culture has not changed in the same direction as popular culture itself, and in the process something has been lost. The first step in addressing the ontological problem of popular culture is refocusing on popular practice: what people do with the culture at hand to produce popularity.

The mass culture debates, resistance, and the defense of popular culture

Concern about the power of mass media helped give rise to the “mass culture debates” among public intellectuals in Britain and America over the 1950s and 1960s, which articulated fault lines within the study of popular culture. Today’s intellectuals mostly chafe at the elitism of figures like Dwight MacDonal and Theodor Adorno, who have since become caricatures of an outdated anti-popular culture position. Nonetheless, the binary opposition established during the mass culture debates persists, underscoring another dimension of the problem of popular culture. In the crudest terms, it is that sympathy or antipathy for “the people” often determined whether someone celebrated or critiqued popular culture. The inverse was also true, in that celebration or critique of popular culture became evidence of one’s sympathy or antipathy for the people.

These issues manifested differently in different national contexts, though there are important harmonies among them. For example, Ray B. Browne, the founder of the American school of popular culture known as the Bowling Green approach, moaned that “[e]litist critics of our culture . . . have always insisted that whatever was widespread was artistically and esthetically deficient, therefore unworthy of study” (1989, p. 16). Browne’s foil is William Gass, whom he quotes: “the products of popular culture, by and large, have no more esthetic quality than a brick in the street . . . Any esthetic intentions is [*sic*] entirely absent and because it is desired to manipulate consciousness directly, achieve one’s effect there, no mind is paid to the intrinsic nature of its objects” (p. 16). But Browne could have just as easily been arguing against Leo Lowenthal, a Frankfurt School sociologist who saw popular culture as “nothing but a manipulated reproduction of reality as it is” where “men free themselves from mythical powers by discarding everything, even reverence for the Beautiful” (Rosenberg and White, 1958, p. 50, 51). These examples illustrate the ease with which one’s disdain for popular culture turned into antagonism toward its effect on people (and thus their mental faculties). Popular culture’s defenders rebuked such snobbery.

In Britain, Marxist scholars writing in the 1950s and 1960s attempted to avoid this argumentative trap, distinguishing between “the people”—whose traditions and proclivities should be validated—and the exploitation that arose from the interests of the market. For example, Williams’s essay “Culture is Ordinary” (1958) defends the traditions of the working-class English people he grew up amongst, whom he says possess a “natural” (p. 5) appreciation for the literature and the arts. He also mourns the erasure of local culture by industrialized mass culture and the false equivalence drawn between the “observable badness of so much widely distributed popular culture” and “the state of mind and feeling, the essential quality of living of its consumers” (p. 11). Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel’s *The Popular Arts*, which appeared a few years later in 1964, agreed. In showing how popular culture served its audience—especially young people—Hall and Whannel took seriously something that intellectuals had long denigrated. As they did, they remained critical of mass media, understanding it as a “*corruption of popular culture*” (p. 68, original emphasis). “For the popular artist stylization is necessary, and the conventions provide an agreed base from which true creative invention springs,” they write. In contrast, “[in] mass art the formula is everything—an escape from, rather than a means to, originality” (p. 69).

These instances exemplify how support for one understanding of popular culture (e.g., what the people do, like, and appreciate) does not necessarily indicate acceptance of the other kind (e.g., what’s commercially successful, or widespread). Yet as scholars began to take popular culture seriously, these arguments hardened into distinct camps. Writing in 1981, Stuart Hall lamented that “[t]he study of popular culture keeps shifting between these two, quite unacceptable, poles: pure autonomy; or total encapsulation” (2019, p. 353). This polarization is one way in which “mass culture” continues to frame the study of popular culture, though sometimes in quite subtle ways.

For methodological and theoretical reasons, scholarly subfields matured in ways that tended toward the absolutes that Hall cautioned against. For example, fan studies emerged to reconceptualize audiences as not simply a “market for [media]

products” but instead capable of “active participation within their own networked communities, foregrounding their own creative transformations and ideological negotiations with mass media texts, and imagining ways they speak back to texts, producers, and fellow fans, asserting their own agenda about what kind of popular culture they want to consume” (Jenkins, 2018, pp. 13–14). Alternatively, an interest in the political economy of media and popular culture tends to emphasize the negative impacts of commercialism on audiences, including “the dominance of the commercial in the popular, raising issues of commercial intrusion, ubiquitous stereotyping, commodity fetishism and consumer hegemony, and the reduction of nonconsumeristic perspectives” (McAllister, 2003, p. 44). These are just two examples of an issue also identified by Johnson (1986), who questions the utility of an exclusive focus on production, texts, or audience (pp. 73–75) without mind for one another or the broader context in which media objects live. Scholars continue to operate in the shadow of the mass culture debates, despite that we know much more about the limits of both media power and audience agency. Moreover, in a digital environment where audiences are producers, texts are malleable, and regulatory regimes continue to underestimate the influence of technological infrastructures, it is increasingly difficult to maintain these exclusions.

High, low, popular

Popular culture is the bottom tier of a cultural hierarchy predicated on a distinction between high and low culture. The schematic of high/low culture descends from “highbrow” and “lowbrow,” concepts first articulated around the turn of the 20th century to correspond to intellectual capability or aesthetic sense. As Levine (1990) has written, the terms derived “from the phrenological terms ‘highbrowed’ and ‘lowbrowed,’ which were prominently featured in the nineteenth century practice of determining racial types and intelligence by measuring cranial shapes and capacities” (p. 222). The notion of cultural superiority, and appreciation of such, is thereby deeply enmeshed in ideas of both racial and class difference, or as Levine explains, it is “openly associated with and designed to preserve, nurture, and extend the cultural history and values of a particular group of peoples in a specific historical context” (p. 223).

Few people these days use “low culture” to describe the cultural preferences of lower class or marginalized people; instead, popular culture has become the way to talk about low culture, albeit slyly and inconsistently. Moreover, even as scholars embraced the merits of popular culture, cultural tiers associated with unequal social value remain baked into scholarly conceptions in all kinds of ways.

Herbert Gans’s volume *Popular Culture & High Culture*, originally published in 1974 and republished in 1999, is a case in point. It is demonstrative of how difficult it has been for scholars to abandon these hierarchies even when they tried to do so. Gans’s work examines American taste cultures. A sociologist, Gans understood class as the primary basis of cultural distinction, although not the sole determinant of taste differences (1999, pp. 8–9). Gans also contended that cultural output serves audiences in similar ways regardless of where it falls on the cultural hierarchy. Countering views that elite culture is somehow more edifying than popular culture, Gans notes that “Popular culture has played a useful role in the process of enabling ordinary people to become individuals, to

develop their identities, and find ways of achieving creativity and self-expression” (1999, pp. 70–71).

Though Gans saw the utility in all echelons of culture, he did not believe they possessed comparable absolute value. “I do not believe that all taste cultures are of equal worth,” he explains, “but that they are of equal worth when considered in relation to their taste publics” (1999, p. 170). Moreover, Gans mostly fails to acknowledge that taste cultures reflect power imbalances in society. Though he notes that access to resources and power has ramifications for politics, economics, and culture (p. 3), Gans understands culture as primarily a conservative or reproductive force in society rather than a transformative one. He neglects how culture might serve the interests of power to maintain and exacerbate hierarchies and is wedded to the idea that what is mass is lesser.

Gans’s comfort with the cultural status quo is laid bare in the 1999 update of the book, where he reflects upon the changes that have complicated his earlier schema. In addition to convergence (more similarity across class groups), divergence (greater fragmentation), gentrification (popular culture being appreciated by elites), and omnivorousness (cultural tourism across many taste groups), Gans notes that race, gender, and sexuality had become more salient, fueling cultural divergence as well as creating possibilities for tailored cultural production. And yet, his bifurcated way of thinking about culture—as organized between majority and minority, the powerful and the disempowered—continues to frame how he sees identity-based culture. For example, Gans describes Black culture as a “partial culture” because “in many aspects of living, blacks share the taste cultures created by whites, their aesthetic standards, leisure, and consumption habits are little different from whites of similar socioeconomic level and age” (p. 127). This suggests that taste cultures are White by default, hierarchized not only between them but within them. Though he does not argue that Black culture is less than White culture, its dependence on majority culture reflects a stratified rather than truly pluralist worldview.

Though Gans is hardly where one would first look for a trenchant analysis of race and popular culture, this gap points to a broader ontological issue: the problem of the mainstream. In majority White countries, popular culture has maintained an intrinsic relationship to the majority, making both critiques and defenses of it rooted in inequality and racism. Popular culture is defined not just as what lots of people like, but as contrary to what rich, educated, White people appreciate. “Popular,” likewise implies majority rule, which means that it necessarily excludes “unpopular,” minority, or niche culture. “Mainstream” popular culture has long papered over diversity and actively perpetuated forms of exclusion even while, as Hall (1993, p. 105) has contended, “American mainstream popular culture has always involved certain traditions that could only be attributed to black cultural vernacular traditions.” Gans’s theoretical quandary reflects more broadly how the study of popular culture reproduces structural divisions even through its own growing attention to niches, which are rarely considered as the mainstream themselves³ and which are only attended through an ever lengthening and specific array of modifiers, segments, and channels.

What this means for scholars of popular culture is that renewed attention to popular practice needs to deal substantively and directly with the implications for racism and other forms of injustice. Popularity is often produced through racism. For example, Hermes and Teurling explain how holiday

celebrations involving Zwarte Piet, now central to debates about racism in the Netherlands, might have been considered transgressive in a different era. They point out how Stallybrass and White, in their 1986 *Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, may have conceived of the Sinterklaas celebrations, during which White people wear blackface, as an instance of “temporarily stepping out of line, of suspending the normal order and turning power relations upside down” (p. 235). While rebellion may certainly be taking place, what they miss is that even those “raucous and uncouth times” (p. 235) that participants embrace are themselves invested in racist imaginaries that animate and give meaning to their community and connection. In popular practice, it is possible for something to be both freeing for its White participants and racist. Indeed, that is extremely common.

Popular culture becomes commercial culture

Once interchangeable with mass media, the concept of popular culture increasingly came to default to commercialism. A simple but powerful assumption was common: that popular culture circulated via a mass media system where audiences participated as consumers engaged in a commercial transaction. This view shaped both normative and critical understanding of how popular culture functioned; it determined popular culture’s basic business operations while also rationalizing (for some) why those operations must be rejected or re-envisioned. In this way, mass media was not simply technology which absorbed and disseminated popular culture. Mass media also governed popular culture’s economics, which further demarcated how it would be theorized.

One way to trace how mass media influenced scholarly understandings of the economics of popular culture is via the spread of the “culture industry,” a term first used by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno in their landmark book, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1969). The idea of a “culture industry” has had wide purchase since the 1947 book was translated into English in the late 1960s. As members of the Frankfurt School and anti-Stalinist Marxists, Horkheimer and Adorno used the term to describe a monolithic and oppressive “system” producing standardized movies, films, music, and other cultural goods. Adorno would explain in a later essay that he and Horkheimer preferred “culture industry” over “mass media” because it underscored that “the products that are considered for mass consumption and that determine that consumption to a great extent are manufactured” in deliberate, calculated fashion (Adorno, 1972, p. 9). Adorno and his associates likewise believed that the culture industry’s “antipopulist connotations” distinguished it from truly popular culture, which was authentic and spontaneous rather than fabricated and contrived (Jay, 1973, p. 216). They saw the culture industry not as an expression of the people’s will but an exploitation of it: manipulating audience desire and psychology to create more profitable goods.

Especially in Great Britain, the Marxist industrial frame (Johnson, 1986, p. 54) limited popular culture as a concept, even if the intent of the “culture industry” was to critique and deconstruct those very limits and standards. As Hesmondhalgh (2019) explains, the entanglement of “culture, society and business” over the 1960s and 1970s turned “culture industry”—now often pluralized into culture or communication industries—into both a rallying cry and an organizing concept for a generation of media scholars. Following

Miège (1987), though scholars continued to criticize the power of these industries, they also stressed their heterogeneity and ambivalence, seeing “culture industry” less as a powerful monolith than an accurate description of the reality of cultural production (Hesmondhalgh, 2019; Miège, 1987). Later, the embrace of an industrialized popular culture would provide a counterargument to the charges of elitism levied at Adorno and the like.

As these perspectives took hold across the Atlantic, some scholars rejected the idea that the output of the commercial media industry constituted legitimate “popular culture” (McAllister, 2003). Moreover, the centrality of the culture industry does not mean that all studies of popular culture focused on media industries per se. To the contrary, in the US in particular, interest in culture industries did not translate into a dedicated subfield of media industry research until recently (Editorial Collective, 2014), while other approaches, like textual analysis and audience studies, proliferated. And Marxism, while continuing to underlie many economically oriented perspectives on popular culture, has ceded some of its dominance to other approaches, including Foucauldian, actor-network theory, and others (Couldry, 2008; Hermes and Teurlings, 2021). The more critical point is that the culture industry concept gave rise to the assumption that popular culture is industrially produced and “popularized” through consumption. Even as debates ensued over what counted as popular, an industrial focus within popular culture scholarship diminished attention to nonindustrial culture. Growing conglomeration within the media industries also shifted the study of popular culture to assume, for example, centralized production and distribution, advertising subsidy, and private rather than public consumption (Allen, 2003, p. 12; Hesmondhalgh, 2019; Zelizer, 2000, pp. 303–304). Popular culture became privatized, an economic determination. As Corner (2009) puts it, “the ideas of market-relations embedded in, and underpinning, dominant notions of the ‘popular’ become naturalized (and often nationalized as well as internationalized) beyond effective questioning” (p. 143).

While it would be foolish to exclude products of the culture industry from the conception of popular culture, scholars need to pay attention to how these products are used. Not all popular culture is commercial, and for that which is, its commerciality is not necessary its most important feature. Additionally, for reasons I will expand upon later, assuming that commerciality means reach or influence is not always true and can prompt scholars to rely on problematic metrics. Finally, social media renders these issues even complex. Nearly everything is surrounded by the norms of the attention economy and used to create more valuable and exploitable data. Even so, when considered as popular culture, it is reductive to think of that activity as primarily or exclusively commercial.

Popular culture, the people, and resistance

Mass media and popular culture can be spheres of empowerment or terrains of manipulation; they can represent the power of the people or the apparatus enforcing their subjugation. To understand how mass media have framed the politics of popular culture requires recognizing how much mass media elevated “popularity” as the taken-for-granted assumption within popular culture. Put another way, the study of popular culture within media and cultural studies frequently

assumes that popularity—specifically, the style of popularity mass media affords—is in and of itself political, whether those politics result in resistance, oppression, or an ambivalent admixture of the two.

As I've explained above, the enormous influence of Marxism on cultural studies had both intended and unintended effects (see also Zelizer, 2000). The vogue of Marxism within the blossoming cultural studies movement gave language to intellectual concerns about capitalism and invigorated sympathies for the common man (Hawkins, 2012, p. 233). Calhoun et al. (2007, p. 80), writing about the impact of Marx on social theory, claim that he “offered a way to understand society framed in a morally empowering language of critique that savaged the half-hearted and incremental reforms that were endorsed by many in western societies and unflinchingly took the side of the oppressed”; this made Marxism “the only theoretical system to offer such a complete repudiation of existing society and a radical call to arms.” Marxist critique of popular culture thus *was* a style of politics, believed to be a vector into the political mobilization of the people. Marxism also cut the opposite way. Some of the staunchest critics of popular culture were also Marxists, whose concerns about mass media, especially in the wake of Stalin and Hitler, gave them a broad perch from which to denigrate popular culture.

Critics and proponents agreed that the power of mass media came from its ubiquity. Mass media was superstructure; their messages were widely consumed, their effects broadly felt. Moreover, mass media reflected the ideals of the dominant class. Popular culture, conceived as the guts of mass media, thus gave everyday people the opportunity to encounter, respond to, and potentially resist dominant messages (Morley, 1974). Those effects were themselves often registered in terms of popularity: sales, subscriptions, box office receipts, and ratings were proxy not just of audience taste but of relevance. Popularity therefore was not just the sheer fact that many people encountered a media object, but also was taken to be a form of endorsement: omnipresence and circulation indicative not just of power but also of well-likedness, and an emblem of the people's moods, desires, and values (Levine, 1992).

This is obviously erroneous—a fact which digital and social media frequently reveal. As I have written elsewhere, “Consumption is not synonymous with endorsement, but it is increasingly read that way” (2012, p. 868). The attention economy that understands engagement as endorsement may lead to reading popularity as evidence of democracy and signal of the people's will; it may also cynically question, ignore, or gamify popular metrics in ways that ultimately undermine public trust. Scholars of popular culture need to show more care in how they read any kind of metric of reach, but especially those recent creations which are so easily and obviously manipulated.

Scholars also must resist calling examples of widespread uptake evidence of resistant politics without other evidence. As Hall (1981) has usefully written, “Popular culture is neither, in a ‘pure’ sense, the popular traditions of resistance to these processes; nor is it the forms which are superimposed on and over them. It is the ground on which the transformations are worked” (Hall, “Notes,” p. 348). Hall's point is important because it makes popular culture less a specific designation than an ongoing process, played out within cultural contestations over power and privilege (see also Storey 2016).

Yet scholars have too often used this argument to superimpose struggle onto every cultural act, every site of consumption. In the most egregious instances, “early work on popular culture in cultural studies, in its enthusiasm to defend the relevance and importance of this new domain of critical work, developed a penchant to cast different kinds of everyday, often media-related practices as transgressive and resisting dominant culture”—claims which, in their worst incarnations, amounted to “narcissistic ventriloquists, who make ordinary people utter the words they want them to speak” (Hermes and Teurlings, 2021, p. 230). While the study of popular culture has moved on from this reflex, the temptation to assume struggle means resistance and to see it everywhere remains commonplace. In criticizing this impulse, my point is not that popular culture is never political. Rather, I argue that it has become too easy to assume that audience politics align with scholarly politics, and that their resistance belongs to us.

The recuperation of popular culture

Popular culture, especially industrially created media and platform social media, is no longer a “bad” form (even as it continues to sometimes be associated with “low,” for reasons I explain above). Instead, it has become default culture through which various kinds of capital may be expressed. As early as the 1980s, a Gramscian turn gave rise to the notion that class positions were not intrinsic to cultural forms but were determined by how culture was used and what values were articulated in connection to it (Bennett, 2006, p. 96). This theoretical position coincided with how popular culture had begun to look and feel. Recent decades have seen the emergence of blockbuster museum shows and pops orchestras, rock operas and hip hop musicals, prestige television, graphic novels, and art videogames. These formats and more complicate crude and formulaic cultural divisions between “high” and “low,” along lines of taste as well as in their relationship to the market. Likewise, since the 1970s, the rise of cable and satellite television, FM and satellite radio, independent music labels and movie theaters, and an alternative press—to say nothing of the abundance of online and social media forms—have allowed cultural production outside the boundaries of mainstream taste to develop both audiences and markets. All the while, formerly popular forms, such as rock, jazz, and rap, have become more specialized and canonical at the same time traditionally elite forms, such as ballet, poetry, or fine art, have democratized or attempted to democratize.

As segmentation and fragmentation altered the landscape for media, taste cultures continued to erode, as did the strict, classic associations between taste and identity. More recently, the rise of cultural omnivorousness privileged new consumption postures such as ironic consumption, hate watching, and popitism. Likewise, new genres, like reality TV, have cropped up in so many different channels—from *The Great British Bake Off* to *My 600lb Life* to *Euphoria* to *Queer Eye*—that it is hard to define them as partial to one taste culture or another. In saying this, I do not mean to suggest that taste has lost its capacity to communicate cultural identity or sow division, nor to deny that popular culture is marketed to different audiences in distinct ways. The key point is that what was known as “popular culture” has for many reasons become culture, plain and simple. When it comes to format or

genre, it is less and less clear what the modifier “popular” aims to communicate.

If “popular” no longer sends a clear message about one’s approach to or the quality of culture—opposed to something understood as high, elite, or enduring—what does “popular” mean? The logical assumption might be that “popular” tells us something about reach, economics, or politics. Yet in light of developments such as cable, the internet, and social media, the ongoing fragmentation of audiences, taste communities, and media channels has continued to alter the very idea of the popular. Scholars use the term “popular culture” to refer to both a videogame played by a relatively small group of people or a successful bestseller. That we regularly accept these gymnastics speaks to how meaningless the word “popular” has become.

Another important consideration is how digital media shift the terrain. In his book, *Popular Culture and New Media* (2013), David Beer writes that “it has now become almost impossible to think of popular culture outside of its new media infrastructures.” He continues: “when thinking of new media, we should be thinking of the popular forms of culture that are a central part of their use and incorporation into everyday practice” (p. 1). Beer was concerned with how technological infrastructures, datafication, algorithms, and metrics were reconfiguring conceptions of popular culture, endowing it with an endemic “recursivity” (p. 4, p. 165). Now nearly a decade later, his work shows both how thoroughly digital media have shifted the ontology of popular culture, in ways scholars have accounted for but not adequately incorporated into conceptions of popularity itself.

In recent years, important research has considered how metrification, datafication, and algorithmic curation have reshaped what becomes popular and for whom. Work on trending algorithms (e.g., Gillespie, 2016), algorithmic bias (e.g., Noble, 2018), virality (e.g., Jenkins, Ford and Green, 2013), platform monopolies (Hindman 2018), and cumulative advantage (e.g., Watts 2007) represent just a fraction of the research that transformed understandings of how popularity works. Relatedly, in conceiving of “algorithmic culture,” Striphas (2015) points to a grand project in which what culture is made available has reverted to an Arnoldian “apostolic vision for culture” (p. 407), where the best things surface and the rest is hidden.

It is telling that Striphas and many others who work on social media and digital platforms refer not to popular culture but simply to culture. This is not because they aren’t interested in popularity; quite the opposite. Culture is the right word, because it is everything: interpersonal and mass, serious and light, spanning identities and time periods and associations and, yes, popular and not so. The internet affirms this. For all of Striphas’s critique, the internet generally posits a content agnostic view, privileging engagement over type. Moreover, it is increasingly evident that when something is “popular” online, that popularity is created, shaped, and maintained by technological infrastructure in ways both visible and invisible. This isn’t surprising—it is well known that older forms of metrics, like Nielsen ratings or newspaper circulations, are often questionable despite the important decisions that are made using them (Bermejo 2009). The digital environment brings about new, nascent, and (for now) more visibly manipulated metrics; scholars should be expected to practice even more caution, but so far haven’t. Instead, views, follower counts, Google search results, and social media

interactions such as likes and retweets have become routine proof of whether something has captured the popular imagination. For this reason, I return to the idea of popular as a distinguishing practice that “popularizes” culture. Otherwise, “popular” is too much, and not enough.

Popularity and populism

Cultural studies has engaged in longstanding debates centering on the question of populism—whether popular culture’s overtures to “audience empowerment, pleasure, and ‘popular discrimination’” make it a net positive, compensating for or even overriding its more oppressive tendencies (McGuigan, 2006, p. 605; see also Kellner, 1995). Cultural studies has also debated the populism of its own practice. On one level, the act of taking popular culture seriously is deeply populist. To establish favor for “the people” and their culture means rejecting a condescending “elite” who frown upon the people’s desires; academics show their populism not only when they celebrate popular culture, but also when they champion the capacity of the people to advocate in their own self-interest. Yet on another level, the study of popular culture is anti-populist. This is not only due to the rarefication and abstraction that happens through academic study, but also because of how “the people” can be invoked as a tool of reactionary or fascist politics that clashes with the progressivism inherent to most critical media and cultural studies. Moreover, as Sutherland (2012) acknowledges, “the rhetoric of populism is not the only populist rhetoric, nor is it ever only a populist rhetoric; the aesthetic relations of popular spectacle itself reproduce this rhetoric on their own terms all the time” (p. 342). This is to say that the spectacularization inherent to popular entertainment itself invokes a concept of “the people,” and that invocation may serve noxious ends.

These points are important to keep in mind in digital contexts where, further metricizing their analog and broadcast counterparts, the line between “popularity” and “populism” of varying kinds grows ever blurrier. As Marwick and Lewis (2017, p. 39) explain, for those seeking to manipulate the media, even negative attention is prized. This goes beyond the adage that “there’s no such thing as bad publicity”; instead, it points to how the economy of online platforms incentivizes outrage and misinformation in hard-to-counteract ways. A further concern stems from what Phillips (2018) has called “the oxygen of amplification.” She argues that by playing into the conventions of journalism—such as reporting on incendiary topics and debunking false claims—bad actors can easily spread false, misleading, or damaging information. What these dynamics mean is that popularity, as determined “by the numbers,” may not tell us anything about importance, liking, or audience taste. It may instead tell us about what audiences deplore, what trolls think is funny, or what antidemocratic forces want to promote.

Here is where popularity, classically conceived as the positive and resistant will of the people, brushes up against the reactionary populisms that, among Anglophone scholars writing from the West/Global North, have too often been dismissed or neglected with the study of popular culture.⁴ Though media and cultural studies has often embraced the upsides of populism, populism can take many forms and need not be aligned with progressive values. Misogyny, racism, and bigotry of all kinds have long garnered sizeable audiences, but they now do so often in plain sight, easily networked

and discoverable by anyone with an internet connection (see [Banet-Weiser, 2018](#)). Some platforms have algorithms that drive audiences toward such content, finding political extremism is good for engagement. The study of popular culture, then, needs to discard the assumption that popular culture is benign or progressive, or only regressive insofar as it promotes dominant ideology. Instead, popularity itself can be used as a tool to promote viciousness and hate, and popularity can be a net negative.

If “popular” becomes a designation of a particular type of consumption practice, it is capable of being used for a variety of ends. Popularity thereby becomes what happens when people put culture to work to make meaning, community, and connection. What politics emerge from this are not a function of popularity per se.

Global popularities

As [Kraidy \(2018\)](#) has explained, media studies has been hyper-dominated by American perspectives, mistaking or in some cases actively campaigning that the US is a proxy for the world (p. 340). Decentering popular culture from the US/Western and Global North perspectives is a way of seeing how deeply these contexts have shaped the field’s understanding of what popular culture is, what it means, and how it functions.

Social and digital media illustrate how “popular culture” takes on radically different meanings, forms, and functions when viewed through a global lens. For example, [Cunningham and Craig \(2019\)](#) point out that social media entertainment is a new global media industry, parallel to and distinct from Hollywood and other major centers of cinema and television. They highlight that a vast amount of social media content, while being potentially monetizable, is not industrial in the sense in which cultural studies has typically imagined. Their work necessitates a questioning of what the “culture industry” even means and what commercial popular culture is, especially as major global players such as China’s Tencent create powerful, innovative, and widely used apps such as TikTok and WeChat. These new, global formats also present an opportunity to reset assumptions about the primacy of Anglo-American cultural dominance. For years, robust cultural markets in many parts of the world have flourished, with South Korea, India, China, and Nigeria, among others, becoming major exporters of cultural production. Even so, discourses of cultural imperialism have mostly focused on the power of the West to transport its products everywhere, or on globalization as a homogenizing force against which affected countries can mount resistance. Scholars working in/on national contexts beyond the West have usefully theorized cultural and technological flows and “contra-flows” ([Thussu, 2006](#), p. 4), which have more complex routes and origins. Studies in this vein underscore how one can acknowledge Western power while also complicating our understanding of how culture moves.

The internet has facilitated the growth and spread of cultures around the world, in flows and forms that depart from the past. Even so, scholars who did not believe that the global consumption of Western products signaled a “global popular culture” ([Street, 2013](#)) often still assumed that popularity carried a generalizable significance, was universally measurable, and held the same station in life outside the West as it did within it. This is problematic. As [Kim \(2014, pp. 3–4\)](#) writes, “[t]o theorize the popular culture of an emergent nation outside the conventional framework of the traditional cultural

capital is to disclose the way the discourses of the West construct the center-periphery divide and reassign the values of popular culture studies thus far affordable almost exclusively in the West.” Likewise, scholars writing from/about Latin America and Africa have also offered invaluable contributions on popular culture and media studies, underscoring perspectives and experiences that are too often ignored or marginalized in North American and Western European contexts ([Kantaris and O’Byrne, 2013](#); [Willems, 2012, 2014](#)). India is another example of a context that has given rise to a rich tradition of scholarship about popular culture that has questioned the Western origins of the high/low divide and whether the term popular culture has significance “in the context of global modernity” ([Pinney, 2001](#), p. 6). Anglophone scholars, especially those based in the US, Britain, Canada, and Australia should recognize that popular culture has the potential to carry a different cultural valence and suggest different relationships between texts, industries, technologies, and audiences. In this way, the global itself is a critique of “popular culture”: a way to see how Western/American/Anglo ideas of popular culture do not encompass all the ways in which populations relate to cultural output.

Conclusion

To conclude, let me share a personal but I think telling anecdote. Beginning in 2016, I spent four years in the leadership of the Popular Communication division of ICA. When the division began in 1987, it stood in stark contrast to the Mass Communication division in terms of both object and method and it became a clearinghouse for a wide variety of approaches ([Zelizer, 2000](#), p. 297). Yet over time, the division’s identity became cloudier. This is not only because other divisions became more amenable to popular culture or arose to address adjacent though distinct problems, such as Media Industries or Ethnicity and Race in Communication. It is also because popular communication felt less like a call to arms and more like big tent. Like most big tents, it is welcoming but ambiguous.

That experience inspired me to try to think through what popular culture means. My conclusion is that it is not so much that “pop culture” has been pushed from its dominant position by some other type of culture, although this is true within certain domains (see [Cunningham and Craig, 2019](#)). It is more accurate to say that the “popular” of popular culture has been asked to do too much work—stretched over an ever-widening and complexifying cultural situation that it was never intended to fit. We have asked “popular” not only to be whatever we love the best, but to be the kernel of our politics and the tether to the people, applicable in any and all contexts. The problem is not only that popular culture cannot be all it is expected to be. It is that it no longer needs to do the work it was conceptualized to do.

Most of the time when the term “popular culture” gets used, the “popular” is unclear. Though the Anglophone contexts I have mostly focused on here have different histories, politics, and policies, all of them have seen formerly debased cultural forms come into their own, receive accolades and respect, and achieve widespread acceptance. The work is not yet done; there will always be political conflicts around what is considered good, respectable, or prestigious. But, for the most part, it is safe to say that these days, a movie, a TikTok video, a tweet, and a song are as much “culture” as a novel or a painting. Cultural forms may be widely loved or reviled,

expensive or not. We can still comment on them as culture without needing “popularity” as a justification or crutch.

What does “popular” mean, then? I have argued that popular culture should be reserved for instances of popularizing practices. That means meaning, community, and connection. This can be how people operate around cultural forms, or the overtures that cultural forms make. But what it should no longer be is a vestige of an outdated ideology drawn from the assumptions, criticisms, and dreams about mass culture. This, I believe, is the next critical frontier for critical research.

Data availability statement

The data underlying this article will be shared on reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Notes

- 1 In later work, Storey (2016) does problematize popular culture, arguing that “popular culture is not a self-evident category and any analysis of popular culture must first begin with the concept itself” (2016, p. 25). His discussion concerns itself primarily with enduring debates rather than considering the continued relevance of popular itself, as I do here.
- 2 Here, I am referring to numerous attempts to acknowledge forms of popular culture that may be marginalized or undertheorized under the general term “popular culture.” This includes but is not limited to Black popular culture (Gray, 2005; Neal, 2002) Latinx popular culture (Habell-Pallán and Romero, 2002; Molina-Guzmán, 2018); Asian popular culture (Fitzsimmons and Lent, 2013; Kim and Choe, 2014), feminist popular culture (Banet-Weiser, 2018), and much more.
- 3 One example of this is the idea of “crossover” common in popular music, where Black musicians had to prove their worth on the R&B charts before “crossing over” into the mainstream chart. See Brackett (1994).
- 4 As Chakravartty and Roy (2017) note, Western scholars have tended to focus on populism as a problem or aberration only when it manifests in the West, and have too often focused on it as the result of a particular election rather than something with institutional, structural, and historically grounded. While attending to that vast literature is beyond the scope of this piece, I acknowledge that the naivete that links popularity and resistance derives from the Anglophone, Western context I am drawing from.

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