TELEVISUAL CULTURE

Martin Lüthe and Sascha Pöhlmann (eds)

Unpopular Culture

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The 'televisual' names a media culture generally in which television's multiple dimensions have shaped and continue to alter the coordinates through which we understand, theorize, intervene, and challenge contemporary media culture. Televisual culture is a culture which both encompasses and crosses all aspects of television from its experiential dimensions to its aesthetic strategies, from its technological developments to its crossmedial consequences. Concepts like liveness, media event, audiences, broadcasting need recasting as problematics around which the televisual will get interrogated within a dynamic media landscape. Rather than accept the narrative of television's obsolescence, the series aims at seriously analyzing both the contemporary specificity of the televisual and the challenges thrown up by new developments in technology and theory in an age where digitalization and convergence are redrawing the boundaries of media.

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Introduction

What is Unpopular Culture?

Martin Lüthe & Sascha Pöhlmann

It all started with Anal Cunt. That is probably neither a sentence you thought you'd ever read in an academic text, nor is it one we thought we'd ever write in one. But it is true anyway, and so this introduction has to start with it, since what it is about started with it, too. One day, over the very unpopular food in the cafeteria at the Amerika-Institut of LMU Munich, we compared notes with some colleagues on what might be the most outrageous and offensive music. No such discussion worth its salt can occur without reference to Anal Cunt, a band who were very strong contenders for the disputed title of 'the most offensive band in the world' until main member Seth Putnam died in 2011. Abbreviating their own name to A.C. on album covers was about the only concession the band ever made to the rules of the music market or good taste. Their first EPs—such as the *88 Song EP* and the *5643 Song EP*—do not feature any song titles or even songs or lyrics that were written before the recording process, and the music fully deserves the 'noisecore' label (a genre that has its roots in what could be considered a classic of unpopular culture, Lou Reed's 1975 album *Metal Machine Music*). When Anal Cunt signed to the Earache record label, they discovered what would become their trademark: while their short songs, usually under a minute in length, never quite reached the musical excellence of grindcore greats such as early Napalm Death or Brutal Truth, their song titles ensured their place in the history of extreme music. Adolescent, nihilistic, ridiculous, and (self-)ironic, Anal Cunt perfected the art of the titular insult, trying to indiscriminately offend everyone, including their own fans, their record label, other bands, any social minority or majority, and even themselves. Their 1994 album *Everyone Should Be Killed* begins with 'Some Songs' and 'Some More Songs', but also already includes gems such as 'I'm Not Allowed to Like A.C. Any More Since They Signed to Earache', 'When I Think of True Punk Rock Bands, I Think of Nirvana and the Melvins' or 'Selling Out by Having Song Titles on This Album'. Their 1997 album *I Like It When You Die* presents their trademark use of the second-person address in song titles such as 'You Keep a Diary'; 'You Are a Food Critic'; 'You Have Goals'; 'You Play On a Softball Team'; 'You Go to Art School'; 'Your Best Friend Is You'; 'Your Favorite Band Is Supertramp'; 'You Live in a Houseboat'; 'You Are an

Interior Decorator'; 'You're Old (Fuck You)', 'You (Fill in the Blank)' and the classic 'Your Kid Is Deformed', which is even a pretty good song. The next album, *Picnic of Love* (1998), did yet another unpopular thing by offering lyrics so sweet they make your teeth hurt just by reading them, with song titles such as 'Saving Ourselves For Marriage'; 'Greed Is Something That We Don't Need'; 'I Couldn't Afford to Buy You a Present (So I Wrote You This Song)'; or, 'In My Heart There's a Star Named After You'. Yet, the album that followed, *It Just Gets Worse* (1999), turned out to have a prophetic title, and with this record the band pushed things too far, for critics and fans alike. Like many underground bands in extreme music scenes, their relative popularity was heavily dependent on their cultivation of unpopularity, with music that was too noisy and lyrics that were too offensive for most people, pleasing those in the know who wish to irritate, if not shock others with their taste in art (a phenomenon not limited to youth cultures, but also found in high culture, perhaps exemplified best by Dadaism).

Yet, Anal Cunt managed to offend even those who enjoyed offending others with their music, since the humor in their song titles became increasingly questionable, going for a wholesale insensitivity toward anyone and everyone by intensifying the homophobic, racist, and misogynist themes that had been present before, and which had been somewhat accepted as conforming to the rules of a transgressive genre by a heteronormative scene that was predominantly white, male, and lower- to middle class. With songs such as 'I Sent a Thank You Card to the Guy Who Raped You', 'I Sent Concentration Camp Footage to America's Funniest Home Videos', or 'Laughing When Leonard Peltier Gets Raped in Jail', the self-irony didn't seem to cut it anymore, and the limits of political correctness kicked in with those who had previously enjoyed their violation with adolescent rebellious glee. While the declaration that 'Everyone in Anal Cunt Is Dumb' might have added sufficient irony to make *I Like It When You Die* a joke many people could laugh at, a similar move of stating that 'Being Ignorant Is Awesome' was no longer enough to sustain the precarious balance, and it was all downhill from there. Media such as the German *Rock Hard* magazine stopped covering the band after main member Seth Putnam made some particularly anti-Semitic statements, and the grindcore scene—which is traditionally rooted in anarchism and still espouses (extreme) left-wing values to a significant extent today—partly turned its back on Anal Cunt, especially as Putnam collaborated with extreme right-wing bands. While the band had always sought to be controversial, it was now controversial in the very scene that has always espoused an aesthetics and politics of provocation and controversy, and it thus uncovered some of the rules of

transgression in a transgressive discourse.[1] True to form, Anal Cunt refused to rescind their provocations and return to the limits of the acceptable on later albums, declaring 'I'm Glad Jazz Faggots Don't Like Us Anymore' while throwing out songs such as 'Ha Ha Holocaust' or 'Even Though Your Culture Oppresses Women, You Still Suck You Fucking Towelhead'. At the same time, the band did not hesitate to offend its potential new audience by informing them that 'The South Won't Rise Again' or that, quite simply, 'All Our Fans Are Gay'. This hard-earned unpopularity with everyone even entered Seth Putnam's obituaries when he died of a drug-related heart attack in 2011, which often declared in one way or another that 'he may not be universally mourned' (MyDeathSpace), though not necessarily in such euphemistic terms.

Anal Cunt were a thorn in the side of a grindcore scene that considers itself a thorn in the side of the mainstream. Indeed, grindcore thrives on provocation and explores extremes to counter what is perceived as a shallow and lukewarm field of mainstream music, and Anal Cunt managed to alienate even a scene that usually has no trouble at all with being highly ironic and dead serious at the same time. Yet, the band also poses a challenge to something larger and more abstract, namely to our conceptions of popular culture and of the 'unpopular/popular divide'. This, then, is how we finally arrive at the larger project introduced by this essay. As we discussed bands such as Anal Cunt among colleagues who all work in one way or another on popular culture, it became increasingly (if only at first intuitively) clear that one would not even label their musical genre of grindcore or noisecore popular culture, not to mention the band itself, which has managed to marginalize itself even further from a marginalized sphere of cultural production. If this is not popular culture, and if we can just as instinctively rule out that other half of the traditional binary opposition, high culture, then the simplest and most obvious answer seems to be that it must be *un*popular culture. This resonated with those of us who consider themselves affiliated with subcultures that embrace and value unpopularity in one way or another, or even make unpopularity one of their defining traits. Yet of course, this simple answer is not simple at all, since it begs the question we would like to begin to address in this introduction, and which the contributors to this volume will tackle in many different ways in their respective essays: what is unpopular culture?

This is the guiding theme of the present essay collection, which is the result of a four-day conference on unpopular culture held at Amerika Haus Munich in fall 2013. In this volume, the authors will explore the possible meanings and uses of the term and concept in various ways, sometimes

more theoretically, sometimes with regard to particular artifacts that can be classified as unpopular culture rather than pop or high culture. The variety of approaches is intentional, as we did not provide a fixed framework of analysis when asking for contributions via our call for papers. While we had our own ideas about the potential of the concept—which we will elaborate below—we simply invited people to take the term and run with it in whatever direction it might take them, to see what results a communal effort of definition and discussion would bring. This openness produced the variety within the present volume, but it did not produce a single dictionary-style definition of unpopular culture. Instead, we were guided by questions such as the following: How does unpopularity come about? How is it constructed and defined, how are such constructions maintained, and by whom? How do the mechanisms of the unpopular change over time? What histories of the unpopular could we tell? How does unpopularity relate to popular and high culture? Can there even be such a thing as unpopular culture, or is the unpopular at odds with culture itself? What are the politics of the unpopular? What is its importance as a category of inclusion and exclusion, for the self-proclaimed 'subcultural underground' and 'the mainstream'? How do particular cultural artifacts represent unpopularity, and to what end? Can we describe an aesthetics of the unpopular? What particular fields of popular and high culture distance themselves from or embrace the unpopular? How do particular cultural artifacts become unpopular, and why? How is the unpopular related to value judgments such as 'offensive', 'controversial', 'cool', 'ugly', '(un)fashionable', or 'bad'?

Evidently, these questions are of the kind that cannot be answered definitively or completely but need to be addressed nonetheless. Like popular culture and high culture, unpopular culture remains—and surely will remain—a concept that is fluid and fuzzy, prone to change and criticism, characterized by family resemblances rather than a fixed set of characteristics that allows for easy characterization and labeling. Like so many concepts in cultural studies, it might be more appropriate to always think of unpopular cultures in the plural, in order to avoid giving the impression of a monolithic, coherent, and homogenous theoretical construct. Therefore, as the following essays show, it is the sum of answers to that definitional question given here that matters, and it is rather the proliferation than the reduction of meanings that testifies to the productivity and usefulness of the concept, and the desirability and even necessity of exploring it beyond what this collection and this introduction can offer.

What we do offer is this. The volume opens with Martin Butler's essay 'Why We Talk the Talk We Talk: On the Emptiness of Terms, the Processual

Un/Popular, and Benefits of Distinction—Some Auto-Ethnographical Remarks', in which he theoretically explores the way in which conceptions of popular and unpopular culture are used as categories of self-positioning and identitarian capital, rather than as analytical categories.

Dominika Ferens then takes the consideration of unpopular culture to the field of literature in 'Big Fish: On the Relative Popularity of Zane Grey and Ernest Hemingway', comparing two authors whose works, careers, and commercial and critical reception raise questions about the criterion of 'popularity' used to classify writers. Ferens argues that Grey and Hemingway consistently traded in the not-yet-popular, used similar strategies of controlling their public image to boost book sales, and were both read by millions, though perhaps not the same millions. She addresses how Hemingway the Modernist was torn between a desire and fear of popular recognition and draws on biographical sources for Grey to show how he dealt with his own waxing and waning popularity.

James Dorson takes this writerly concern with (un)popularity a step further in 'How (Not) to Make People Like You: The Anti-Popular Art of David Foster Wallace', reading his story 'A Radically Condensed History of Postindustrial Life' as well as *The Pale King* as exemplary of a more general desire in Wallace's fiction to oppose what Dorson calls 'popularity culture', or art that primarily seeks approval, not money or distinction, as well as a sociability in which approval is the overriding end. Historicizing and contextualizing Wallace's texts by connecting them to David Riesman's sociology of 'other-direction', Dorson reads Wallace's concern with sincerity and recursivity, as well as his critique of postmodernist literary aesthetics, as part of an engagement with work and life in post-industrial society.

Elizabeth Kovach closes this section with her essay 'Dissenting Commodities: Negotiations of (Un)popularity in Publications Critical of Post-9/11 U.S.-America', in which she discusses three generically diverse pieces of writing that are critical of U.S.-American foreign policy and society since 9/11: Jane Mayer's *The Dark Side*, Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom*, and Juliana Spahr's *thisconnectionofeveryonewithlungs*. She argues that these texts have been mostly read as dissenting, critical, and counter-hegemonic depictions of the direction that the US has taken since 9/11, but little attention has been paid to the commodified nature of such writerly dissent. In her own analysis—drawing particularly on the work of Jacques Rancière—she explores the tensions and ambivalences regarding issues of unpopularity and popularity that affect writers who strive for political impact while they participate in a market logic that inevitably dampens the blow.

The volume moves from literary to televisual culture with Dan Udy's essay 'Secrets, Lies and *The Real Housewives*: The Death of an (Un)Popular Genre'. Conceiving of the un/popular as that which splits viewers into two opposing factions, where ardent fans clash with critics and wider audiences, Udy presents the reality TV or docusoap show *The Real Housewives* and the wider media network it is part of as an example of how audiences that embrace such productions simultaneously reject them, based on a normative notion that they *should* reject them by certain cultural standards. Thus, Udy identifies the unpopular as both closely related to camp and as the productive force behind the complex cultural notion of the guilty pleasure.

Jeroen de Kloet and Jaap Kooijman consider a similarly un/popular media phenomenon in 'Karaoke Americanism Gangnam Style: K-pop, Wonder Girls, and the Asian Unpopular', highlighting particularly how unpopular culture helps describe issues of cultural transfer, translatability, and, indeed, marketability in a globalized world. They analyze why K-pop remains globally unpopular and propose the notion of 'karaoke Americanism' to understand global cultural flows and disjunctures. They examine the pop act Wonder Girls as an example of this, describing not only their (un) popularity in different cultures, but also their appropriation in different contexts that attest to the political potential of karaoke Americanism. While they acknowledge that this speaks of the continuous power of the United States when it comes to the production of popular culture, they also describe recent developments in terms of geopolitics, fragmentation, and the digitization of culture that may help challenge this hegemony.

Florian Zappe continues this intermedial approach in a different way in his essay '"When order is lost, time spits": The Abject Unpopular Art of Genesis (Breyer) P-Orridge'. Zappe draws on the work of Julia Kristeva to theorize an abject unpopular culture at the radical fringes of popular culture, which rejects its empty gestures of rebellion by dwelling on the threshold of the unsettling and intangible qualities of the abject. He does so by analyzing the work of performance artist Genesis (Breyer) P-Orridge, whose use of abjection as an aesthetic principle on all levels of his life and work—particularly in the context of projects such as COUM Transmissions and Throbbing Gristle—locates him not only in the excluded middle between the two poles of bourgeois 'high' and popular 'low', but in the intangible center of a triangle consisting of 'high', 'low', and 'pop' culture.

Christian Schmidt then shifts the focus of the collection more firmly towards music in his essay '"Famous in a Small Town": The Authenticity of Unpopularity in Contemporary Country Music'. He explores the ways in which popularity and unpopularity are part and parcel of contemporary

country music, a genre that is both commercially successful and, at the same time, aspires to self-consciously distance itself from the perceived artificiality of popular culture and thereby become regarded as the true music of the common American folk. Schmidt shows how country music simultaneously taps into a discourse of American popular culture and styles itself as this popular culture's unpopular other by staging a notion of authentic Southern and Dixie identity in and through the music and its visual representation in music videos. Drawing on Judith Halberstam's notion of metronormativity, he argues that country music *is* popular culture, yet at the same time pinpoints the particular strategies used by the country music industry, its artists, and its audiences to mark their distance to it and construct an image of country music as the more authentic counterpart to supposedly artificial *popular* culture.

Bärbel Harju addresses similar issues from a very different perspective in 'Making Christianity Cool: Christian Pop Music's Quest for Popularity', as she analyzes Christian pop music's shifting engagement with 'secular' society and mainstream pop culture since the late 1960s. She examines the genre's unique situation between religion, commerce, and music, along with its (self-)perception as unpopular and its continuous struggle with the mechanisms, values, and demands of pop culture, arguing that this also sheds light on American evangelicalism as well as American culture at large. Harju reads the genre's attempts to join the mainstream as part of the broader evangelical movement and its strategic embrace of popular culture.

C. Richard King then scrutinizes an even more unpopular field of musical production in 'Listening to Bad Music: White Power and (Un)Popular Culture', finding in white power music a form of expressive culture that breaks with social convention as its overt racism, advocacy of violence, and palpable rage transgress accepted limits of speech and sentiment. Yet, King offers a more complex interpretation that complicates prevailing accounts of white power, musical expression, and popular culture. He argues that white power music may be unpopular but is not isolated or idiosyncratic, since it actively engages with and appropriates musical styles to communicate its message, build audiences, create community, recruit members, and to crossover to more mainstream spaces. He also shows how, in the course of the twentieth century, white supremacist music has moved from pervading popular culture and public life to its margins, as it draws upon and deploys popular stylings but has little claim beyond a bounded social field on audience, desire, or fashion.

Paola Ferrero focuses on the importance of a perceived unpopularity for a genre's self-conception in her essay 'Hipster Black Metal?

Deafheaven's *Sunbather* and the Evolution of an (Un)popular Genre'. Ferrero examines how the genre of Black Metal has shifted from the realm of the unpopular to that of the 'cool', effectively making a transition into indie music as its style evolved from its early Norwegian roots. To this end, she analyzes the receptive strategies of indie webzines reviewers of Black Metal records by using Deafheaven's album *Sunbather* as a case study, arguing that the growing popularity of the genre in indie webzine is a result of the reification of this particular album as a paradigmatic shift in the history of genre, a reading counteracted by the fans' own ideas concerning the nature of the genre as a historically unpopular one. The tension arising from this controversy reveals the way a music subculture as carefully protected as Black Metal polices its own boundaries and how processes of cultural appropriation threaten the very identity of the genre.

Barry Shank's essay 'Unpopular Culture and the American Reception of Tinariwen' ends the section on music in this volume by arguing that the spread of popular music across significant geographic and political boundaries implicates new populations in enhanced and enlarged conceptions of the polis, the political form of the people. Shank asks whether it is possible for a shared aesthetic to change to the shape of the political in a meaningful way. He does so by discussing the case of Tinariwen, a band of Tuareg musicians who have been among the leading groups developing a particular style of what the West has come to call 'desert blues'. As the Western popularity of Tinariwen's music has increased, political chaos has descended upon Mali, the nation state that claims sovereignty over the territories from which Tinariwen and Tuareg music emerged. This forms the backdrop for Shank's inquiry into the potential political force of music in the face of war's destruction.

Dietmar Meinel then explores the dichotomy of the un/popular in reference to film in his essay 'Cultural Studies and the Un/Popular. How the Ass-Kicking Work of Steven Seagal May Wrist-Break Our Paradigms of Culture'. Tracing the Seagal oeuvre as he moved from acclaimed martial arts action star to bizarre media figure, while remaining both consistently unpopular and consistently popular, Meinel challenges a particular representational logic in cultural studies by drawing attention to unpopular texts that function only poorly as representations of their period and their social formations. He argues that the artifacts of unpopular culture, such as the later Seagal productions, question the representationalist paradigm in literary and cultural studies and necessitate novel approaches to conceptualizing culture.

Karsten Senkbeil utilizes the prism of the unpopular to examine sports in his essay 'Unpopular Sport Teams and the Social Psychology of "Anti-Fans"'. Considering the apparent paradox that major sports teams across the world are simultaneously highly popular and unpopular, Senkbeil asks why fans unite in their overt contempt for a specific team, what the psychological setup and the sociocultural rationale of the 'hater fan' may be, and particularly why people so fervently and outspokenly assign to themselves the role of a *non*-member of a certain fan group. Engaging critically with the theories of Pierre Bourdieu, John Fiske, and Michel Maffesoli, Senkbeil argues that many typical characteristics of fans of any type of pop culture can indeed be applied to anti-fans as well, and that economic reasons (symbolic class struggle, traditionalism, and jealousy toward the nouveau riche) combine with the dynamics of gender identities in bringing these characteristics about.

Catherine Bouko combines the perspectives of media and museum studies in her essay 'Popular, Unpopular: When First World War Museums Meet Facebook' to explore how the differences between popular and unpopular media practices have shifted in the digital age. She considers the historical museum as the traditionally 'sacred space' of high culture and its attempts to integrate the codes of popular culture to make the younger generations sensitive to themes they are likely to consider unattractive. In doing so, she analyzes the story of the fictional WWI infantryman Léon Vivien that was disseminated on Facebook in 2013 on behalf of the Meaux Museum of the Great War, creating a media object that seeks to fuse History as presented in museums with a popular contemporary media culture as two paradigms of intimacy and connectivity intersect.

Susanne Leikam addresses a different kind of memorial culture with an American focus in 'Unpopular American Natural Calamities and the Selectivity of Disaster Memory', in which she presents selected 'forgotten' natural disasters and the (failed) processes of their memorialization that, at the time, prevented them from becoming productive parts of public discourses and to be visible in 'high' and 'low' cultural spheres. In reference to two case studies, Leikam argues that the unpopularity of natural calamities is not an inherent condition or arises arbitrarily, but rather is the result of economic, cultural, and political endeavors struggling for hegemony in American cultures and, as such, is also often directly related to the popularity of other historical moments.

Sebastian M. Herrmann closes the volume with an essay that takes the notion of unpopular culture to yet another abstract level by applying it to the field that comprises all the contributions collected here, the humanities.

In 'The Unpopular Profession? Graduate Studies in the Humanities and the Genre of the "Thesis Hatement"', Herrmann analyzes a polemic and conflicted genre that originates from within the humanities and warns against pursuing a career in its disciplines. This is indicative of the role the humanities and the academy play in contemporary U.S., if not Western society. Herrmann describes these texts' precarious form of (mis)communication as being marked by irony, hyperbole, and a particular set of tropes and metaphors. He also carves out their contradictory politics of labor, class, income, and academia. Finally, Herrmann discusses how these texts undermine their own presumed project.

While these considerations of unpopular culture are certainly original in their respective explorations of the concept's potential, they are not without precedent in cultural studies, although explicit mention of the unpopular is scarce. For example, Andrew Ross makes an important gesture toward the unpopular within the study of popular and high culture in his 1989 monograph *No Respect: Intellectuals & Popular Culture*, when he emphasizes that,

> [w]hile it speaks enthusiastically to the feelings, desires, aspirations, and pleasures of ordinary people, popular culture is far from being a straightforward or unified expression of popular interests. It contains elements of disrespect, and even opposition to structures of authority, but it also contains 'explanations' [...] for the maintenance of respect for those structures of authority. (3)

One could say that this dialectic of popular culture is driven by the unpopular; that is, the counternarrative within popular culture itself that prevents it from becoming what Ross dismisses as the 'conspiratorial view of 'mass culture' as imposed upon a passive populace like so much standardized fodder, doled out to quell unrest and to fuel massive profits' (4). Ross argues not only that the histories of high and popular cultures must be told together to make sense, but also that they need a history of intellectuals, or those

> experts in culture whose traditional business is to define what is popular and what is legitimate, who patrol the ever shifting borders of popular and legitimate taste, who supervise the passports, the temporary visas, the cultural identities, the threatening 'alien' elements, and the deportation orders, and who occasionally make their own adventurist forays across the border. (5)

Unpopular culture, then, can be imagined as the disputed territory between high and popular culture, a place that both lay claim to, but that none can ever own completely; it is a perpetual no man's-land that presents a challenge to the very notion of permanent territorial inscription itself. Without using the term, Ross identifies unpopular culture as a residue within two internally heterogeneous systems of culture that prevents and resists their respective attempts at homogenization and stabilization; not an outside force to disturb their internal coherence but always already an internal element of incoherence and disruption that must be continually managed, supervised, and controlled.

In the now canonized field of cultural studies, (popular) culture famously 'is the struggle over meaning, a struggle that takes place over and within the sign' (Grossberg 157). This struggle over meaning and articulation, which critics like Stuart Hall, Lawrence Grossberg, and Dick Hebdidge have tackled, could be complicated through a serious analysis of practices of unpopular cultural articulation and appropriation and the way they might open up a space of socio-cultural criticism beyond and/or within the ironic. Accordingly, the politics of unpopularity and their relationship with hegemonic cultural articulation are what is at stake when we take cultural studies as a point of departure for assessing the unpopular. Unpopular culture invites us to question the rules of popular culture and high culture as a whole, and it offers us other options and not just a third, as for example validating high-quality segments of popular culture as *popular arts* does and has done, to evaluate and interpret cultural artifacts in their aesthetic and political significance. One cannot overestimate the fact that today popularity is most often measured in commercial terms, that this has been the case for a long time, and that, furthermore, our understanding of high culture relies heavily on commercial *un*popularity.

These are a number of approaches to unpopular culture *avant la lettre*, but the term itself has also been used in different contexts by different people. That said, it has been employed in such specific ways that a more general inquiry into its meanings is in order, and its prior uses can already be considered part of this inquiry. For example, Bart Beaty used the term in the title of his monograph *Unpopular Culture: Transforming the European Comic Book in the 1990s*, to describe an area of cultural production that was often used as an epitome of popular culture while at the same time being unpopular—both part of mass culture and not part of it. In 2008, the artist Grayson Perry published his selection of works from the British Arts Council Collection under the title of *Unpopular Culture*, in which he seeks to provide an 'alternative view' of postwar British art that 'moves away from facts,

dates and movements and towards a more subtle investigation of the mood, pace and preoccupations that underline British art of this period.' This anti-mainstream attitude characterizes many considerations of unpopular culture. Moreover, it already points toward one of the most useful understandings of the term as a third concept that breaks open the dichotomy of high and pop culture, denoting that which is not part of a (perceived) mainstream mass culture but not part of a bourgeois high culture either. This was the mission of *SCRAM* magazine, 'a journal of unpopular culture', which chronicled 'the neglected, the odd, the nifty and the nuts' (*SCRAM*), or the now-defunct *Tangents* magazine. Similarly, the annual Festival of Unpopular Culture in Adelaide or the Institute for Unpopular Culture in San Francisco (IFUC) celebrate and support non-mainstream art. In its mission statement, the latter declares its determination to help 'alleviate artists' needs to cater to public taste and opinion in order to survive' (IFUC).

The normativity behind such contrasts and distinctions is obvious: here, art is supposed to be absolutely autonomous, independent of commercial considerations and critical or public reception. Popularity is understood as something that should not even have to cross the artist's mind in the process of creation since it is a potential source of corruption of the art itself, a view of art and artist that is rooted in Western Romanticism and especially Modernism. Unpopularity is therefore desirable for the 'true' artist, and maybe even a measure of the cultural value of his work. At the same time, the statement draws attention to the standards by which cultural popularity is most often measured today, and it defines *ex negativo* standards of unpopularity. The following aspects of un/popularity seem the most crucial to us:

1) Popularity is commercial popularity, i.e. measured according to sales. A cultural product is popular if it sells well, and it is unpopular if it is a commercial failure.
2) Popularity is critical popularity, i.e. measured according to a discourse between experts who declare a cultural product valuable. A cultural product is popular if a sufficient number of critics consume and value it, and it is unpopular if critics ignore it or do not value it.
3) Popularity is mass popularity, i.e. measured according to the number of consumers (though not necessarily in terms of sales). A cultural product is popular if a sufficient number of people consume it, and it is unpopular if the number is insufficient.
4) Popularity is aesthetic popularity, i.e. a means of describing and quantifying pleasure in consuming a cultural product. A cultural

product is popular if a sufficient number of people *like* it, and it is unpopular if the number is insufficient. (This is obviously related to but not identical with the previous point.)

5) Popularity is original popularity, i.e. something that originates from the people, i.e. measured according to its producers and its context of production. A cultural product is popular if it comes from the people, and it is unpopular if it is imposed on the many by the few. This is especially relevant in constructions of popularity with regard to imagined communities such as nations, where, for example, a 'popular' culture of traditions, folk songs, or fairytales was invented in Romanticism to *construct* a people in the first place and an invention of an unpopular culture might have always already functioned as said *construction's* inherent Other.

Other categories of popularity and unpopularity can, of course, be found, and the essays in this collection certainly provide a few; yet, these strike us as the most relevant for the purpose at hand of conceptualizing unpopular culture as a third term that complicates and enriches the opposition between high and pop culture and that offers an entirely different perspective. We will return to these aspects later; for the moment, it is sufficient to note that the study of unpopular culture is interested in exploring, analyzing, and challenging the mechanisms and ideologies of (un)popularity mentioned above.

Stephen Redhead has done this from a combined perspective of law, sociology, and cultural studies in his 1995 *Unpopular Cultures: The Birth of Law and Popular Culture*, which provides a useful framework for thinking about unpopular culture at large, even though he does not really pursue the implications of the unpopular as far as possible. Redhead emphasizes from the start that his is not simply 'a study of outlawed cultures,' and that to 'decide what, and who, is 'deviant' these days [...] is not an easy, or straightforward task' (3). In doing so, he draws attention to the problematic dichotomies of the normal, the mainstream, and the popular and the abnormal, the marginalized, and the unpopular. This differentiation is highly important to unpopular culture, but its rules and regulations are far from straightforward or unitary, and they are certainly subject to change over time and in different contexts. In this understanding of the term, unpopular culture distinguishes itself from popular culture rather than high culture, since it opposes a certain mainstream, and it assumes its meanings in opposition to popular culture as *mass* culture. Yet, unpopular culture is not simply a synonym for high culture that maintains the old dichotomy

of high and low, since it is often located in very different contexts and is opposed to, if not even hostile to, the bourgeois environment that defines high culture. At the same time, works of unpopular culture do not buy into a simple dichotomy of class that would oppose a bourgeois elite (defined by capital, education, etc.) to the masses of a homogeneous working class and their respective separate cultural spheres. Unpopular culture can be so elitist that even T.S. Eliot might want to tell its devotees to loosen up and live a little; try discussing the sufficient criteria of what makes for true Black Metal or Underground Rap, or the rules of selling out in any field of cultural production that opposes the mainstream, and you will find out soon enough that only very little is popular about these alleged fields of popular culture. A conceptualization of unpopular culture may show that such strict conventions of inclusion and exclusion are similar but obviously not identical to those of high culture, which also demarcates its territory by carving out a particular sphere of the unpopular from mass culture; but, while it also justifies its unpopularity aesthetically, it does so in reference to a very different notion of cultural value. Unpopular culture thus can be considered the disruptive element that resists and complicates the simplifications of binary oppositions such as elite versus masses or highbrow versus lowbrow. Both high and pop culture can be unpopular culture, but neither defines the term, nor do both concepts taken together do so.

What unpopular culture does is draw attention to the aesthetic and political value judgments that are at the heart of the high/pop culture divide, and it shows that, while Postmodernist theory has taught us to shy away from such judgments, we still make them every time we consider, appreciate, consume, and reflect upon a cultural artifact, as cultural critics and as fans. It highlights the fact that both high and pop culture are always loaded terms that can never be used neutrally, innocently, or merely descriptively; if cultural studies has shown anything, then it is that such a thing as 'mere description' is impossible. Unpopular culture thus intervenes in the alleged neutrality of this discourse, drawing attention to considerations of aesthetics—'good' music, a 'really bad' novel, a video game that 'sucks' but 'is fun', a 'camp' performance, a 'B' movie, a 'cult' classic, 'offensive' lyrics, and so on—that have supposedly vanished from critical considerations of culture as they opened up toward the popular, but which, in fact, have only become implicit where one may as well make them explicit. Therefore, unpopular culture simultaneously highlights the normativity of high and pop culture and embraces its own normative position instead of pretending not to have one. Rather, it inquires into the rules of that very normativity

by considering what is deviant, abject, offensive, and marginalized, but also set aside as special, underground, visible or accessible only to a certain elite, a niche cultivated by its own caste of priests and devotees who are very particular about inclusion and exclusion (and this means Joyceans deciphering *Finnegans Wake* as much as avid readers of fan fiction speaking in their own code).

For this reason, as well as for its recognition of the intrinsic connection between the aesthetic and the political, the study of unpopular culture must necessarily follow Fredric Jameson's famous slogan to 'Always historicize!' (ix). Just like any artifact might transition from high to pop culture or vice versa over time, it might also become part of unpopular culture, or stop being part of it, a process that may be connected to a categorization as high or pop, but does not necessarily have to be. This means that not only can something be high culture and unpopular culture but also popular culture *and* unpopular culture at the same time, even though the latter seems to be a contradiction in terms. However, it is only oxymoronic if one buys into the high/pop culture dichotomy in the first place and understands mass culture in an all too homogeneous way. Unpopular culture instead draws attention to the heterogeneities that characterize both high and pop culture, and to those spheres of cultural production and reception that are not adequately described in reference either to a certain cultural elite or a certain large group of people who are all too often cast as passive recipients rather than active critics of the works they consume. Evidently, this arcs back to the complex of cultural encoding and decoding that holds a prominent place in post-cultural studies inquiries of cultural forms and practices. Unpopularity and intentionality enter a meaningful relationship in this context, insofar as the 'intentionally unpopular' and the 'accidentally unpopular' illuminate the complexities inherent in meaning-making and cultural agency. After all, being purposefully 'unpopular', as in avant-garde or underground cultural production, is different from becoming or being made unpopular in the process of audience reception, re-articulation, and appropriation—especially in our times of digital media communication and its instantaneous, and instantaneously serial, aesthetics of unpopularity.

It was probably the elitist strands of Modernism that first cultivated the aesthetics of the unpopular and unpopularity as aesthetics, valuing art only if it was *not* for the people but rather for a selected few initiates. However, it is also true that quite a few Modernists were not at all averse to financial and, indeed, popular success, and so were cultivating aesthetic unpopularity while at the same time seeking commercial popularity. It is worth remembering that the first publication of *Ulysses* as a single book

was printed in different editions to suit different tastes and wallets,[2] while Joyce sought just the right kind of unpopularity, and by 'resisting the critical appropriation of his writing into Culture, Joyce refused both the affable handshake of the *biens culturels* and remained aloof from ordinary readers' (Nash 98). These complex rules of unpopularity as a measure of aesthetic quality that have been set in and by Modernism are still with us today, having, for example, seeped into musical subcultures in which 'selling out' is the worst an artist can do, thus winning and losing an audience at the same time. Postmodernism—in academia as well as in the larger cultural sphere—ultimately did not succeed in exorcising the specters of this high-cultural prejudice, nor did it manage to really 'cross the border, close the gap' (in Leslie Fiedler's famous words) between high and popular culture, partial and significant successes notwithstanding. A conceptualization of unpopular culture can be considered part of this ongoing attempt to do so, using different tactics in an already established strategy of assaulting one of the most entrenched fortifications of Western cultural tradition.

Questions of popularity have been haunting artists for more than a century since Modernism became, somewhat paradoxically, both the epitome of high culture and at the same time a paradigm for what culture is in general, a standard of the exceptional that was met with resistance from Postmodernists as soon as it had completed its transition from subversion to establishment. One fine pre-Modernist example is Henry David Thoreau, who reported in his diary on 28 October 1853 that he had received the brutally material proof of his commercial failure as a writer:

> For a year or two past, my *publisher*, falsely so called, has been writing from time to time to ask what disposition should be made of the copies of 'A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers' still on hand, and at last suggesting that he had use for the room they occupied in his cellar. So I had them all sent to me here, and they have arrived to-day by express, filling the man's wagon,—706 copies out of an edition of 1000 which I bought of Munroe four years ago and have ever since been paying for, and have not quite paid for yet. The wares are sent to me at last, and I have an opportunity to examine my purchase. They are something more substantial than fame, as my back knows, which has borne them up two flights of stairs to a place similar to that to which they trace their origin. Of the remaining two hundred and ninety and odd, seventy-five were given away, the rest sold. I have now a library of nearly nine hundred volumes, over seven hundred of which I wrote myself. (*Journal* 459)

As Thoreau was reminded of his unpopularity as a writer, he reinscribes commercial failure as artistic and, indeed, personal liberation, declaring that it is precisely his lack of popularity that makes him a better writer, as he is now free from any intended or imagined audience in his writing process:

> Nevertheless, in spite of this result, sitting beside the inert mass of my works, I take up my pen to-night to record what thought or experience I may have had, with as much satisfaction as ever. Indeed, I believe that this result is more inspiring and better for me than if a thousand had bought my wares. It affects my privacy less and leaves me freer. (*Journal* 460)

Thoreau's example indicates that unpopular culture is always related to failure in one way or another—failure to sell, failure to please the critics, failure to meet one's own artistic standards, failure to save the world or at least change humanity, and so on—and therefore both exposes and challenges the very criteria that define success. As such, the queer art of unpopular culture can be considered part of Judith Halberstam's 'queer art of failure' that can show potential among an oppressive actuality:

> Under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may [...] offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world. [...] The queer art of failure turns on the impossible, the improbable, the unlikely, and the unremarkable. It quietly loses, and in losing it imagines other goals for life, for love, for art, and for being. (2–3)

The study of unpopular culture, then, is a critical inquiry into these 'certain circumstances' as well as these 'other goals', and Halberstam's work shows that it should not take itself too seriously if it wants to challenge what is all too serious, and that it must retain a questioning perspective on its own ideologies, as the case of Thoreau shows. After all, for him, as for the contemporary indie band, it is always easier to celebrate and romanticize one's own commercial failure as true artistic integrity if one simply cannot get the damn public to buy one's stuff. Many critics agree that it was this unpopularity that made Thoreau rewrite *Walden* so that it might be more popular and marketable: as Robert F. Sayre has it, the book 'was advertised in *A Week* as soon to be published. But the commercial failure of his first book discouraged the publisher from undertaking a second, and throughout the early 1850s Thoreau reworked *Walden* into the form in which we know it' (Thoreau, *Walden* 1052).

As a contemporary countermodel to the Thoreau that professed to embrace unpopularity while seeking popularity, Walt Whitman tried very hard to become popular and sell his self-published book *Leaves of Grass* in 1855, not only reviewing it himself—very favorably as well as anonymously—but also famously using a letter from Emerson as a blurb for the second edition without seeking permission. Furthermore, he also 'created a book that he hoped would "go into any reasonable pocket", something the first edition clearly would not do' (Folsom), so that it could truly be the people's poetry he envisioned as his '*Great Construction* of the *New Bible*' (Whitman, *Notebooks* 353, emphasis in original). Yet, Whitman was clearly never as popular as he wanted to be, and his declaration that ends the preface of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* that the 'proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it' (25) remained wishful thinking, at least while he was alive. The number of artists who suffered similar fates of unpopularity that were then transformed into popularity—as high culture and pop culture, respectively or simultaneously—is legion; just think of Melville[3] or Dickinson in the nineteenth century or David Markson, who ironically chronicled the unpopularity of artists in the vignettes of his later novels, in the twentieth. Some writers were too popular in their time to be considered high culture later on, with highbrow critics for a long time operating under the a priori assumption that popularity must equal aesthetic impoverishment. Edgar Allan Poe and William Shakespeare are probably the most striking examples of this high-cultural prejudice against popularity. Yet, their cases are obviously no warning to proponents of high culture that today's pop culture might be tomorrow's high culture (and vice versa), and that critics should not be deterred by the popularity of a work of art. Thus, Harold Bloom hoped in a *Wall Street Journal* article in 2000 that 'my discontent is not merely a highbrow snobbery' but nevertheless went on to answer his own rhetorical question in such a way as to indicate as much: 'Can more than 35 million book buyers, and their offspring, be wrong? Yes, they have been, and will continue to be for as long as they persevere with Potter.' And as if just to make sure that we make no mistake about his highbrow snobbery, he wrote in 2003 that the 'decision to give the National Book Foundation's annual award for "distinguished contribution" to Stephen King is extraordinary, another low in the shocking process of dumbing down our cultural life' ('Dumbing Down'). Bloom is not just an obvious straw man here, an old conservative critic who rants in a jeremiad against the youth of today and their ridiculous reading habits that will one day surely ruin us all (although he is, and he does), but he is a powerful figure in the discourse of literature and culture, and he is not in any way

exceptional when it comes to prejudice against the popular. (Just think of Adorno on jazz, a genre that probably has moved from pop to high culture like no other in music, but certainly not because of him.)

Instead, Bloom's example draws attention to the aspect of power that marks the discourse of unpopular culture as much as any other discourse. Popularity and unpopularity do not just occur, they are *produced*, not (or only rarely) by a single person, but rather by complex cultural mechanisms. For example, one might frame the canon wars that started as early as the 1960s and reached their culmination in the 80s and 90s in terms of unpopular culture, and as a consequence see that popularity and unpopularity are discursive tools and, indeed, weapons to construct and control meaning, significance, and ultimately ideology. For the canon, it is not important if a text is popular or unpopular; it has to be popular and unpopular *with the right people* to make it into 'literature'. The standards of unpopularity are closely connected to the standards of literature and of the bourgeois conception of art itself. At the same time, unpopularity can be precisely what subverts these standards. Unpopular culture is not a unified field; the answers to the question 'unpopular with *who*, and *why*?' will always indicate as much, and they are therefore central to the study of unpopular culture, and central to its political and aesthetic outlook.

There is a similar popular bias against so-called high culture, which is notoriously unpopular, and often simply because it is *framed* as unpopular (difficult, inaccessible, elitist, boring, intellectual, irrelevant, and so on). Unpopularity is thus connected to a certain set of expectations rather than aesthetic qualities. We are surprised when these expectations are not met and, for example, a text labeled as highbrow turns out to be entertaining and funny instead of boring and outdated, and it turns out to fulfill our criteria of popularity but remains within the unpopular sphere of high culture because of its designation as such. Every reader will have their own examples of such revelations, just like we might be unable to explain the popularity of a cultural artifact even if our lives depended on it, or why it has become popular or unpopular as its historical context changed. This applies to critical honors as much as to bestseller lists: why is *Peyton Place* no longer read by just about everyone, as it used to be in the 1950s; how did Philip K. Dick's stories move from pulp magazines to the Library of America; and why on earth did Rudyard Kipling ever get the Nobel Prize? And why has [insert name of your favorite author] not been given one?

Quite a few of the texts students of literature have thrust upon them in introductory classes are unpopular with them; perhaps they are unpopular with them precisely because they are thrust upon them. You might hate

having to read Franklin's *Autobiography* when you have to, but enjoy it when you do it because you want to; or you might hate reading *Pride and Prejudice* no matter how free you were in choosing to do so, as Mark Twain kept saying, for example, when insisting in *Following the Equator* that '[j]ust that one omission [of Jane Austen's books] alone would make a fairly good library out of a library that hadn't a book in it' (312). Unpopularity always has a context, and by definition there is no unpopularity *without* context; the concept itself presumes a certain audience (even if it does not contain a single member), and it does not describe a property intrinsic to the cultural artifact itself, but one that is always somehow inscribed upon it. Twain does such inscribing on Austen's texts in the quotation above, questioning her popularity by demanding her radical unpopularity; more often than not, however, such power lies not with individuals but with groups of people who exert sufficient influence over the discourse to attest or deny (un) popularity. The study of unpopular culture, then, is also the study of audiences, and it tends to be concerned more with the reception of cultural artifacts than with their production, since unpopularity presupposes an audience. At the same time, considerations and aspects of unpopularity are certainly part of production of the work as well as the work itself, and it would be reductive and misguided to consider the study of unpopular culture as a kind of reader-response criticism in which all popularity is produced solely in the recipient.

There are many different aesthetics of the unpopular, never fixed but ever-changing in different times and cultural contexts, but present nonetheless, and they can be described in relation to their historical moment of production and reception. Unpopularity can be sought, produced, and used for different purposes; it can be a source of aesthetic liberation from the constraints of popular taste or from those of critical esteem. Yet, at the same time, popularity and unpopularity are always somewhat beyond control, even though manufacturing consent has been part of the capitalist cultural industry for a long time. This may be one of the strongest subversive potentials of the unpopular in a society that defines popularity in terms of commerce, and this is where the aesthetics and the politics of unpopular culture become indistinguishable: its irreducible ability to surprise the cultural market, to deny popularity where it should be granted, to create something that cannot be used, to find the niches and loopholes and blind spots in a system of commerce that should not have any. At the same time, the unpopular is always in danger of being made popular, of being bought and sold, and any subversive potential can always be integrated within the very system it seeks to undermine. If 'any System which cannot tolerate

heresy [is] a system which, by its nature, must sooner or later fall' (Pynchon 747), then capitalism has avoided its downfall by being exceptionally good at tolerating (i.e. incorporating) heresy against it. You can always offer the underground anarchist punk band a million-dollar record contract and ask them to become Blink 182; in fact, the Sex Pistols have always been a product of the very industry they allegedly attacked. (Then again, we can only imagine what would have happened if someone had offered Anal Cunt a similar contract.)

Nevertheless, unpopular culture can potentially subvert the very foundation of the popular and offers ways of rethinking even the most dominant of ideologies. If popular culture—just as much as high culture—is being used to create the people in the first place, not as a culture for the people but a culture constructing the people as a people by giving them a history and an identity, then unpopular culture is the disruptive element in this construction, resisting its homogenizations and omissions, opposing the complete smoothing of a striated cultural space. In *Empire*, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri first pose the crucial question 'what is a people and how is it made?' and then go on to argue that this construct is the result, and not the foundation, of the national and its Modern homogenizations: 'Although "the people" is posed as the originary basis of the nation, *the modern conception of the people is in fact a product of the nation-state*, and survives only within its specific ideological context" (102, emphasis in original). Both high culture and popular culture have participated in this homogenizing process of identity formation, and one will find sites of resistance to this power of the national with the global unpopular cultures that offer a multitudinous Other to the Empire of high and low, pop, or mass cultures, although they also pervade and partake of them, and they both support and resist their mechanisms. Within this national and global cultural industry, it may well be unpopular culture that is still able to tell the stories and histories nobody wants to hear, sing the songs nobody else wants to sing, show the world what it does not want to see, and ultimately give the people what they *don't* want because what they want was never what they really needed.

Notes

1. For a solid overview and brief history of grindcore and its political outlooks, see Salmhofer.
2. For an excellent study of Modernism and commercialism, see Catherine Turner's *Marketing Modernism between the Two World Wars*, in which she

argues that, 'without embracing consumer culture wholeheartedly, the modernists saw that they had much to gain by reaching a détente with commerce. Their art remained sacred products of their own inspiration, but they also saw that if they really wanted to 'make it new'—in the broad sense of changing human perception and experience in the world—they would have to reach an audience' (4), or in other words: become popular.

3. For an excellent discussion of Melville's (un)popularity and his relevance for popular culture, see Richard Hardack's essay '"Or, the Whale": Unpopular Melville in the Popular Imagination, or a Theory of Unusability', in which he answers his question of 'why most of Melville's works remain unknown or unpopular, not just resistant to interpretation, but almost invisible and 'unreadable' in popular media' (8) by usefully exploring the unpopular as the unutilizable.

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