Introduction

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Popular culture has always been an elusive concept to define, not least because, as John Storey has argued, it derives its meaning contrastively from a comparison with another term which is either explicitly named or implicitly invoked, for example high culture, dominant culture, mass culture or folk culture (2009: 1). Depending on the "absent other" to which it is contrasted, popular culture thus takes on different connotations. In his groundbreaking interrogation of some key cultural and political concepts, Raymond Williams specifically identified four different meanings of the term "popular", which can shed light on the various attitudes toward popular culture in society: "well liked by many people", "inferior kinds of work", "works deliberately setting out to win favour with the people" and "culture actually made by the people for themselves" (quoted in Storey 2009: 5). The first meaning can be read rather neutrally, based upon a quantitative definition of the popular as something garnering support from, or enjoyed by, a significant number of people. The second and third meanings have perhaps been the most common ways in which "popular", when affixed to "culture", has been understood, not least within academia. Popular culture in this case derives its meaning from its failure to meet the standards of high, or highbrow, culture, which is alone seen as worthy of critical attention. Popular culture can alternatively take on connotations of being demagogic, manipulative, mediocre (lacking both aesthetic and intellectual complexity) or passivity-inducing—or all of the above. The last meaning, however, inscribes popular culture with a more progressive and even subversive potential, both at the level of production—democratizing the cultural—and at the level of reception, promoting a more active stance from its audience, rather than mere passive acquiescence.

Another difficulty involved in defining popular culture lies in the fact that "culture", the other term in the pair, also presents us with significant difficulties since, if we are to trust Williams once again, "it is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language"

(1976: 76). In different contexts and used by different people, culture can for example alternately denote a very restricted body of intellectual and artistic work—in which case "high culture" becomes synonymous with culture as a whole—or it can much more inclusively stand for "the actual ground terrain of practices, representations, languages, and customs of any specific historical society" (Freccero 1999: 13).

What the development of cultural and popular cultural studies in the 1950s and 1960s made apparent was the privileging of a very restricted meaning of culture that was advanced and reproduced within academia. The resistance to engaging seriously with popular culture that has long characterized academia, as well as its insistence on the maintenance of clear analytical boundaries delineating popular and high culture, have also been shown as symptomatic of widespread exclusionary practices and as deeply revealing both of an ahistorical perspective[1] and of a none too subtle class bias (Storey 2009: 6-8).

It is interesting to note in this respect the concomitant development of cultural studies as a field of enquiry and the arrival of "a new class of student (the scholarship boy or gifted working-class pupil)" entering the walls of academia (Halberstam 68). Through the different questions posed by these students, new methods and theoretical approaches emerged and helped both to demystify culture and knowledge and to democratize academic research. Importantly, this also helped to break down the artificial boundaries between different academic disciplines, which were shown not to be given but historically specific. Thus, the interdisciplinary nature of popular culture led to a much more holistic approach within the field. Popular cultural studies did not become interdisciplinary for its own sake, however, as a case of "playing with

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[1] The characterisation of writers such as Shakespeare and Dickens as Canonical shows the tenuous and historically specific nature of the boundary between popular and high culture, since their work certainly represented the popular culture of their day. In his article on the language of popular culture in this issue, Joe Trotta also points to the contradiction in the arguments of prescriptive linguists who lament the lowering of linguistic standards through popular culture, while ignoring, for instance, Shakespeare's highly playful and unorthodox use of language.

categories", but because new questions demanded new ways of approach that went beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries (Halberstam 68-69).

In the U.S. context, Ray Browne (1922-2009) played a pioneering role in developing the field of popular culture studies, founding for example the *Journal of Popular Culture* in 1967 and the Popular Culture Association in 1970—two institutions that helped rally and organize scholars in the field, as well as give the study of popular culture academic legitimacy. In his defense of popular culture, Browne made large claims for its significance, both in our private lives, but also in relation to society as a whole:

> Popular culture is the way of life in which and by which most people in any society live. […] It is the everyday world around us: the mass media, entertainments, and diversions; it is our heroes, icons, rituals, everyday actions, psychology, and religion—our total life pictures. It is the way of life we inherit, practice, modify as we please and then pass on to our descendants. It is what we do while we are awake and how we do it; it is the dreams we dream while asleep… (Browne 2001: 1-2)

Although somewhat rhetorical, Browne's definition nevertheless points to the way popular culture structures and organizes the everyday experience of people. In this respect what appears most urgent is not to extricate the essence of popular culture—which for some might be too inclusive to really be useful (Storey 2009: 1)—but to investigate the ways in which it is lived and in which it functions. It is in Raymond Williams' phrase the "structures of feelings" that form the ideological cement of any given society, the ways in which thoughts and feelings intimately intermingle ("thought as felt and feeling as thought" (Williams 1977: 132)). Far from being just a marginal or superficial cultural phenomenon, popular culture remains in fact at the very heart of how we live our lives and how we perceive society around us, how we think and feel about it. As Hall argues, it is a site where "collective social understandings are created" (quoted in Storey 2009: 4) and—as a consequence—a particularly salient locus for a critical struggle over signification.

As a result, it is the signifying practices of popular cultural texts and their import in the everyday that has more and more become the concern of researchers. Not, as Browne puts it, so that such knowledge "be learned, canonized and worshipped as the end in itself" but "in order better to develop the present and the future" (1989: 1). In other words,

the possibilities for social change have always constituted a significant aspect of cultural studies (Freccero 1999: 13).[2]

Methodologically, much of the work of popular culture analysts revolves around issues of cultural representation since, in the words of Storey, "it is only in practices of representation that the world can be made to mean". Representational practices thus matter to the cultural studies critic because, contrary to common belief, representations do not describe but in fact actively *construct* reality (Storey 2003: x). What reality (in all its possible contradictions) specific popular cultural texts construct becomes therefore the prime focus of critical attention.

This present issue of the *Nordic Journal of English Studies*, dedicated to the theme of popular culture, hopefully reflects this broad spectrum of approaches within the field. The issue is also deliberately eclectic in subject-matter in order to convey the inclusive meaning of "culture" within popular culture. The type of material covered by the different articles ranges for instance from literary works, advertising, film and television to charity concerts and campaigns. Also, alongside more Canonical fiction, other written sources, not usually critically explored, such as cookbooks, are examined in the collection. Thus, the main ambition of this special issue has been both to highlight the rich scope of popular cultural studies within academia and to make this field of research more readily available to readers of the journal.

Recurrent in most of the articles are questions about the link between popular culture, power and social change. This is of course characteristic of the field of cultural studies itself. It is also partly due to one of the practical starting points for this issue, which grew out of the Popular Culture and Activism Panels at the Mid-Atlantic Popular and American Culture Association Conference held in Boston in 2009.[3] The contributions articulate therefore what Stuart Hall has called the "double stake in popular culture, the double-movement of *containment* and *resistance*" (2006: 478, my emphasis). While highlighting practices of

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[2] See Freccero for a discussion of the background to and significance of the field of cultural studies and popular culture (13-23).

[3] Some of the contributors to this issue—Louise Davis, Amy Reddinger, Laurie Selleck, Michelle Stack and Carolyn Veldstra—originally presented their research in the panels I chaired at that conference.

exclusion and power within their specific areas of focus, the authors also explore the possibilities cultural studies open up for resistance, subversion and resignification.

This potential ideological impact is something that demands our critical attention. Moreover, support for this popular cultural strategy has sometimes come from unexpected corners; T.S. Eliot argued, for example, albeit reluctantly:

> But what people commonly assume, I suspect, is that we gain this experience of other men's views of life only by "improving reading." This, it is supposed, is a reward we get by applying ourselves to Shakespeare, and Dante, and Goethe, and Emerson, and Carlyle, and dozens of other respectable writers. The rest of our reading for amusement is merely killing time. But I incline to come to the alarming conclusion that it is just the literature that we read for "amusement" or "purely for pleasure" that *may have the greatest and least suspected influence upon us*. It is the literature that we read with the least effort that can have the easiest and most insidious influence upon us. Hence it is that the influence of popular novelists, and of popular plays of contemporary life, *requires to be scrutinized most closely*.
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> (quoted in Sheridan 1937: 172-173, my emphasis)

In her article, "Robert Louis Stevenson and Popular Culture", Linda Dryden heeds this call to "scrutinize" popular literature, but with more enthusiasm and respect for the value of what is defined as popular. Dryden chooses to focus her analysis on Stevenson precisely because of the liminal position he occupies as an author, who both has been Canonized for his literary talent and has enjoyed tremendous popularity (i.e, is "well-liked by many people"). Dryden tries to elucidate the reason for his success and in so doing also interrogates the barrier between so-called highbrow and lowbrow culture, a division usually considered airtight, despite much evidence to the contrary.

In "Beyond the Abyss: Jack London and the Working Class", Ronald Paul similarly focuses on an author whose work crosses the boundaries between popular readership and academic recognition. Not only London's writing, but also London himself, inhabited an uneasy social position, not least due to his troubled personal experience of class migration. With this background in mind, Paul looks at the most famous of London's journalistic exposés, *The People of the Abyss*, in order to explore the contradictory attitudes to the working class pervading it. Thus, questions of genre become central, as Paul argues that while London certainly replicates some of the sensationalist clichés prevalent in such journalistic texts at the time, another, competing, and largely

critically unexplored, reality emerges from the narrative, where it allows for the voice of individual working-class people to be heard.

Starting with the language controversy involving Winston's 1954 advertising campaign—"Winston tastes good *like* a cigarette should"—Joe Trotta's article "Whose Rules Rule?: Grammar Controversies, Popular Culture and the Fear of English from Below" looks into the underlying issues behind purist attitudes to language. The moral panic about what is seen to be the incorrect use of either comparatives or conjunctions reveals, Trotta argues, deeper concerns pertaining to the maintenance and subversion of social hierarchies. By examining several such controversies sparked by popular cultural texts, Trotta makes a case both for a positive re-evaluation of the language of popular culture and for the need for academia to seriously engage with it.

Cookbooks form the focus of Amy Reddinger's analysis of postwar Hawaiian politics, "Eating 'Local': The Politics of Post-Statehood Hawaiian Cookbooks". While for most of us cookbooks are often appreciated mainly for their instrumental function, Reddinger shows how embedded such texts are within their social context and explores what cultural and political work they perform. Using Mary Louise Pratt's concept of *autoethnography*, Reddinger argues that the two cookbooks at the core of her discussion—*Hawaiian Cuisine* (1963) published by the Hawai'i State Society, and *The Hawaii Cookbook and Backyard Luau* (1964) by Elizabeth Ahn Toupin—actively contest the often simplistic and sometimes exploitative representations of Hawai'i and of the Hawaiian people ubiquitous in mainstream (and mainland) U.S. culture of the 1960s. Reddinger demonstrates how the weaving of food recipes and history in the two cookbooks construct and promote alternative understandings of Hawaiian society.

The two following articles, Louise Davis' "Feeding the World a Line?: Celebrity Activism and Ethical Consumer Practices From Live Aid to Product Red" and Laurie Selleck's "Pretty in Pink: The Susan G. Komen Network and the Branding of the Breast Cancer Cause", both examine the phenomenon of charity and highlight in particular the uneasy relationship between form and content in charity campaigns. While most people would agree about the aims advanced by those organizations Davis and Selleck analyze—the goal to make poverty history, successively promoted by Band Aid, Live Aid, Live 8 and Product RED, and the fight against breast cancer taken up by the Komen

network respectively—the strategies these groups utilize raise serious questions regarding the relationship between ends and means. In the case of the campaigns to end poverty and hunger in Africa, sparked by images of the 1980s famine in Ethiopia, Davis interrogates for example the notion of one-worldism promoted by the "texts" produced through the campaigns and how this relates to the re-inscription of the West's central role both in representing and saving a helpless Africa. In her discussion of the Susan G. Komen network and their remarkably successful pink ribbon campaigns, Selleck also problematizes the network's alliance with and reliance on corporate sponsors who derive profits from people's charitable inclination. In this context, Selleck investigates accusations against the network for engaging in "slacktivist" tactics and "pinkwashing". Both Davis and Selleck do not, however, oversimplify their analysis, but open up for different readings and possibilities within these charity discourses.

Carolyn Veldstra's article, "Patron Saint of Lost Causes, Live on the BBC: The Yes Men, Humour and the Possibility of Politics" inquires into the role humor can claim in politics. Veldstra focuses her analysis on the hoax—or hijink as they themselves prefer to refer to it—carried out by the Yes Men, a British activist group, on the twentieth anniversary of the Bhopal disaster. Using theorists such as Slavoj Žižek and Peter Sloterdijk—in particular the latter's concept of kynicism—Veldstra dissects the Yes Men's political intervention in order to evaluate the potential for social change that strategies involving humor may carry in a mediatic world such as ours already so saturated with satire.

Imelda Whelehan's "Remaking Feminism: Or Why Is Postfeminism So Boring?" voices the ennui felt by a feminist critic faced with the flood of so-called postfeminist productions pervading both our cinema and television screens. Looking more specifically at recent film adaptations of feministic texts—*The Women*, *The Stepford Wives* and *Sex and the City: The Movie*—Whelehan explores how the concomitant invocation and erasure of a feminist discourse manifests itself through endless repetition and how collective feminist politics is further and further deferred through multiple adaptation. Instead of countering with a similarly predictable feminist critique of these texts, Whelehan provides an unexpected and much more challenging reading of such popular narratives through their relation to the politics of feminism.

My own article focuses on the representation of designated adoption and what this signifies in terms of class and gender in three television series—*Sex and the City*, *Friends* and *Desperate Housewives*. I look more specifically at the ways in which the plots narratively and visually construct a division between two categories of women defined by their class background and ask what ideological implications this has for the reproduction of social hierarchies. The title of my article, “More for the Fit: Gender and Class in the Representation of Designated Adoption in a Selection of U.S. Television Series” in particular suggests a dark parallel between these modern representations of adoption and the eugenics movement of the early twentieth century.

The final article of this issue, Michelle Stack’s “‘In movies, someone always has to be the bad guy’: Mediatized Subjectivities and Youth Media Production”, brings the theoretical question of the tensions between popular culture and politics to the practical field of pedagogics and media education. Through an analysis of student media production and interviews, Stack’s ethnographic study of a Canadian high school probes into the issue of how Canadian youth come to construct their subjectivities in dialogue with popular culture and what subject positions seem to be available to them. Stack also ponders over the role of media educators and the possibilities of moving away from the reproduction of stereotypes and towards more critical awareness.

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