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Mapping American Popular Culture

Any student or scholar of the literature, arts, politics, history, economy, or law of the United States is inevitably confronted with the deeply pervasive and extraordinarily adaptable nature of American popular culture, whether in the form of books, movies, music, television shows, comics, sports, brand names, video games, or social networks. LeRoy Ashby's assessment of American popular culture's role by the end of the twentieth century as not only "a vital component of the national economy but also … America's leading export" (ix) continues to hold true. Pop is the language through which most people are alphabetized about the life and culture of the United States. Indeed, it is the language through which the *American language* or, to be more precise, the variety of English spoken in the United States, has spread far and wide (Bolton 125). It is the principal tool for the dissemination of American values, and its influence on the collective imagination, not to mention people's lifestyles across the globe, cannot be overestimated.

Whether its influence is perceived as negative, corrupting, imperialist or, at the other extreme, positive, beneficial, liberating, American popular culture is nowadays widely regarded as worthy of attention and study. This was not always the case. It took a long time for American popular culture to be taken seriously, especially within the academic world. As Paul Buhle has noted (xvi-xvii), over thirty years passed between the publication of Gilbert Seldes's seminal *The Seven Lively Arts* (1924), and the next significant contribution to the study of American popular culture, *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America* (1957), edited by Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White. It would take a few more years for scholars and critics to begin to approach this field without any condescension towards the material they examined, or a half-apologetic tone for their supposedly frivolous choice of topic. It is no accident that this new era coincided with

the emergence of the civil rights movement and feminism and, more generally, with the challenge that was launched in various forms against long-standing hierarchies and barriers (including the one between "high" and "low" culture). Nor is it less relevant that the current widespread presence of American popular culture in higher education and academic publications owes a great deal to "victories by women and racial minorities in winning access to university positions and their consequent interest in those voices silenced in 'high' culture but predominant within some realms of popular culture" (Lipsitz 630).

Anti-elitist by definition, popular culture in the United States is inextricably interwoven with the democratic and republican identity of the nation. In a country which, before its emergence as a major player on the international stage in the late nineteenth century, was often at pains to distinguish itself from the Old World, popular culture seemed more authentically homegrown, more American in its very crudity and egalitarianism, than what was touted as art in upper-class circles. Significantly enough, in one of the most crucial phases of self-definition in American history – the mid-nineteenth century – the opposition between popular taste/Americanness, on the one hand, and elitism/Europhilia, on the other, took center stage, quite literally, when working-class patrons championed American actor Edwin Forrest against his British rival, William Charles Macready. Rarely was class antagonism so closely intertwined with national feeling and cultural taste, as in the attacks against Macready which degenerated into the notorious 1849 Astor Place Riot in New York City (Ashby 48-49; Berthold 429-61).

Far less violently, but nevertheless relentlessly, various forms of popular entertainment, including the penny press, minstrel shows, boxing, Barnum's exhibits, Wild West shows, burlesque, and vaudeville, defied the elite's allegedly foreign-aping norms of decorum, respectability, and taste, throughout the nineteenth century. And by implication, they called into question the authority and privileges of those who dictated, and identified with, those norms. For all its unsavory aspects (racism, sexism, crassness, to name just a few), nineteenth-century popular culture served as a powerful reminder of the republican roots of the United States. And because of its remarkable flexibility and fluidity, it could accommodate seemingly

irreconcilable elements. Thus, for example, the repulsively racist framework of minstrel shows could give white male performers the opportunity to express, via black-face parodies of African-American behavior (in particular, a supposedly ingrained propensity to laziness), their own anxieties about responsibility and duty in an increasingly industrialized and regulated economy. Protected by their burnt-cork makeup, they could project their hidden desires for untrammelled, carefree behavior onto caricatures of society's subalterns. At the same time, African Americans themselves, once they started to take part in minstrel shows, found a rare outlet for their talents in the very genre that dehumanized them for the sake of laughter. And to some extent, through nuances of speech, or deportment, they also found in this "disreputable" form of popular entertainment a way to affect, and perhaps even assume some control over, the demeaning racial stereotypes on which it was so largely based. A similarly complex dynamic characterized the interaction of whites and Native Americans in Wild West shows, as Rosemarie K. Bank has convincingly argued in her analysis of Native American participation in William F. Cody's show at the Columbian Exposition of 1893.

In the twentieth century, through new theatrical forms (particularly the musical) and new media (such as records, radio, motion pictures, and television), popular culture continued to provide a platform for society's outsiders (by reason of their social background, ethnicity, religion, gender or sexual orientation) even while official institutions failed to recognize their basic rights (one need only think of the major role that Jewish immigrants were able to play in the American film industry in the first half of the twentieth century, the same period in which they were denied access to many cities' residential areas, clubs, schools, and universities). As Jim Cullen aptly puts it, "far more than in the labor market, government or (especially) residential patterns, there has long been a sense of openness about popular culture sorely lacking in other areas of American life." In the sphere of popular culture, the impact of minorities "is disproportionally great, not only in offering solace and inspiration to others, but in providing some of the only glimpses others might have about what it means to be an outsider in America" (7-8). The history of American popular culture is thus very much a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural narrative, and one

every bit as complex and fraught with contradictions as the nation's greater history.

To a large extent, popular culture in the United States has been and continues to be unabashedly commercial, and this is surely one of the reasons why it has often been regarded with a measure of contempt, or at least suspicion, by many scholars and intellectuals. If its accessibility and unpretentiousness may be aligned with the essence of American democracy, one cannot ignore the fact that it operates in a capitalistic system where the search for profit seems to come before every other consideration, including the right to freedom of expression and dissent. As in the case of the role of minorities, however, the question is far from being clear-cut. If we take popular music as an example, we cannot fail to acknowledge that in the 1950s youthful rebellion against stifling adult conformity and prudishness found an extraordinary outlet in rock 'n' roll; similarly, it can be argued that, more recently, African American protest against, among other things, racism, urban decay, and inequality in the United States, has resonated loud and clear to the beat of hip-hop. It is also true, however, that the music industry, firmly in the hands of a very wealthy and powerful few, has proved in these and similar cases exceptionally quick to absorb, and somewhat tame, genres originally born out of generational, social, and racial conflict.

The same tension between apparently opposing impulses can be seen at work in other forms of popular culture such as movies, television, comics, and fashion. In the case of movies, the commercial vocation of the American film industry generically referred to as "Hollywood" (even after the demise of the studio system) has often been seen as inimical to artistic aspirations and integrity. The unhappy, sometimes disastrous, Hollywood experiences of a number of American writers, including William Faulkner, Francis Scott Fitzgerald, and Nathaniel West, provide damning evidence in support of this argument, as do the fierce battles against producers and studio executives that many independent-minded moviemakers had to wage through most of their careers. The conditions under which American directors and writers worked, especially in the first half of the twentieth century, have often been compared unfavorably with those of their foreign, particularly European, counterparts, who are believed to enjoy greater

freedom from commercial demands. Significantly enough, in the United States the term "art house," which identifies a movie theater specializing in low-budget, independent films, is sometimes used as synonymous with foreign fare (even though art houses also program independent American movies). The use of the movie's provenance as an indicator of *artistic*, as opposed to *popular*, quality is telling because it shows that to distinguish between high and low with regard to cultural artifacts – always a highly volatile proposition – is particularly arduous in the case of the film industry. It is, no doubt, an industry, but a very hybrid one in which creativity and commerce are profoundly interconnected. Well ahead of her time, maverick movie critic Pauline Kael ruffled more than a few feathers when she contested, in the introduction to her 1965 book *I Lost it at the Movies*, the superiority of *foreign* (almost by definition "artistic") over *American* movies:

> There is more energy, more originality, more excitement, more *art* in American kitsch like *Gunga Din*, *Easy Living*, the Rogers and Astaire pictures like *Swingtime* and *Top Hat*, in *Strangers on a Train*, *His Girl Friday*, *The Crimson Pirate*, *Citizen Kane*, *The Lady Eve*, *To Have and Have Not*, *The African Queen*, *Singin' in the Rain*, *Sweet Smell of Success*, or more recently, *The Hustler*, *Lolita*, *The Manchurian Candidate*, *Hud*, *Charade*, than in the presumed "High Culture" of *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, *Marienbad*, *La Notte*, *The Eclipse*, and the Torre Nilsson pictures. As Nabokov remarked, "Nothing is more exhilarating than Philistine vulgarity." (24)

To Kael, the best American movies were examples of a truly accessible, popular, democratic art, and cinematic works seemingly miles apart in terms of scope and ambition, such as *Top Hat* and *Citizen Kane*, were equally representative of that spirit.

A similar vindication of the popular could be made (and, indeed, is being increasingly made) for television, comics, and graphic novels. For example, there is a growing consensus, not only among television experts but also literary critics and scholars, that recent television series such as *The West Wing*, *The Wire*, *Six Feet Under*, *The Sopranos*, *Mad Men*, and *Breaking Bad* have provided some of the most insightful narratives of the American experience available in any medium, books included. Quite simply, these

forms of storytelling can no longer be ignored or dismissed by anyone who is deeply invested in American culture, who wishes to gain a better understanding of its many forms and idioms. In 1987 David Marc argued that a "modern-day Whitman would have to watch television or else be forced to give up his connection to the masses of people who find their wishes, dreams, and role models therein" (4). What back then could still sound to some as a provocation, if not a profanation, now appears to be just a sensible cultural assessment.

Since the 1980s the residual walls of resistance against the academic investigation of American popular culture have been falling down at a rapid pace. Indeed, creative works such as the *The Wire* or *The Sopranos* that come to us through the once-despised (or at least underrated) medium of television, now seem almost traditional, if not "classic," when compared to newer forms of expression such as online video games or web series. The following four essays recognize and salute, as it were, the well-nigh infinite variety of American popular culture and its enormous relevance to all those who feel the need to gain a better understanding of the country across the Atlantic. From different angles, and with different approaches, the four contributors to this discussion show how popular culture can offer invaluable insights into the fabric and workings of American society.

In his piece, Valerio Massimo De Angelis traces the origins, evolution, and recent developments of superhero comic books, surely one of the most representative and ubiquitous expressions of American popular culture. Focusing on the issue of responsibility, both as an existential dilemma for the exceptionally powerful protagonists of this fictional world, and as a question with which their creators have been inevitably confronted (given their enormous readership), De Angelis illuminates the significance of such icons as Superman, Spiderman, and Captain America, by placing them in their proper historical, cultural, and social contexts. In addition, he highlights the tension between conformity (and sometimes even complicity) with the status quo, and dissent, which has often characterized this supposedly frivolous, consumer-driven narrative-pictorial form.

Simone Caroti devotes his attention to science fiction, a literary genre that has traditionally been very closely identified with popular culture or, to use Lawrence Levine's apt definition, "the folklore of industrial society."

Though (thankfully) no longer condescending as it sometimes was in the past, that identification has endured. In his close reading of Richard Paul Russo's 2001 novel *Ship of Fools*, Caroti examines the author's innovative use of the familiar allegory evoked by the title, and his handling of the literary, philosophical, and pictorial heritage that accompanies it. In his opinion the *Ship of Fools*' rich intertextuality, as well as its provocative political and religious themes, make it one of the most interesting examples of the science fiction subgenre known as the "starship generation novel."

Daniela Daniele delves into the multi-layered, experimental work of Pulitzer prize-winning dramatist Suzan-Lori Parks who, in *The America Play* (1992) and *Topdog/Underdog* (2002), stunned audiences with what might be described as "white minstrelsy" or a reversal of traditional black minstrelsy, by which black actors in whiteface impersonate none other than the champion of black emancipation, as well as historical and cultural icon, President Abraham Lincoln. Daniele shows how Parks uses this reconfiguration of one of the staples of nineteenth-century American popular culture to its fullest effect. Through this politically-charged device, and a language that resonates with the rhythms of blues and hip-hop music, often turning slangy, profanity-laced speeches into poetry, Parks offers a compelling rereading of American history and a profound reflection on the African American experience.

Gianna Fusco examines the growing and constantly evolving role of the internet and web-related forms of communication in the U.S. democratic process. Using the 2012 Presidential Campaign as an illuminating case study, she focuses on the impact and cultural significance of the so-called "memes," which can be loosely described as verbal/visual messages, often of a satirical character, that spread virally through the internet and are shared, discussed, and often modified by an immense audience of potential voters. Fusco shows how the clever handling of, or quick response to, some of these messages on the part of the Obama electoral machine (much more conversant with the new media than that of Republican candidate Mitt Romney) proved to be a very important factor in the Presidential Campaign. Finally, she also places this new form of popular language in the context of America's democratic discourse and its glorious tradition of humor, satire, and irreverence.

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