

MARTIN DE LA IGLESIA (HAMBURG)

The popularity of works of art

Abstract

This text reviews different notions of popularity in scholarly literature through time, and groups them into broader definitions on the one hand, which define popularity as a combination of esteem and fame («well-liked by many people»), and narrower definitions on the other hand, for which certain characteristics (e.g. low quality, or a lower-class audience) are essential. Although broader definitions are more intuitive and less complex, narrower definitions have always been predominant in scholarly literature. However, if popularity is seen as a property of a work of art that can exist in varying degrees, rather than a category to which an object can either belong or not, it can be applied in its broader sense to any work of art.

<1>

»Nobody likes him, which is weird, because he's famous. How can you be famous if nobody likes you?«, says Jess, one of the protagonists of Nick Hornby's 2005 novel *A Long Way Down*, about another character. For Jess, to be famous and to be well-liked seem to be somehow connected with each other. However, Jess's thoughts continue: »but all sorts of people seem to be famous even though they have no fans. Tony Blair is a good example.« So Jess acknowledges that fame and esteem are not inextricably linked. And yet, her initial statement betrays an intuitive notion that, more often than not, there is a connection between the two.

<2>

This is a common notion: things are often found to be both well-liked and well-known. If they are, they are usually called popular. Many encyclopedias and dictionaries support this definition of popularity, e.g. Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary (1913): »Popularity [...] 1. The quality or state of being popular; especially, the state of being esteemed by, or of being in favor with, the people at large; good will or favor proceeding from the people; as, the popularity of a law, statesman, or a book.«¹ Not only do we consider this the most basic and intuitive definition of popularity, but also a quite useful one to operationalize for scholarly ends, as we will show later. This definition, however, is far from uncontested. To defend it, this article was written.

<3>

A second, slightly different definition is also found in most reference works, including Webster's, which goes on: » 2. The quality or state of being adapted or pleasing to common, poor, or vulgar people; hence, cheapness; inferiority; vulgarity.« These are actually two different variants of a definition: one saying that the popular object is actively made popular (»adapted to common people«), and the other that the object simply is passively liked (»pleasing to common people«). Both variants have in common that, in addition to the fame and esteem in the first definition, another quality is introduced: whereas in definition 1 it doesn't matter which kind of people like the popular object, as long as they are many, the recipients in definition 2 are »common, poor, or vulgar«. From the specific qualities of the recipients, specific qualities of the popular object are derived: »cheapness; inferiority; vulgarity«. The exact wording of the qualities of recipients and objects varies from source to source, but the important point is that they are - according to those sources - considered essential to the existence of popularity.

<4>

It is curious that this second definition of popularity, despite its being less intuitive and more complex, dominates most of the scholarly discourse in the arts and humanities. (Notions of popularity in psychology and the social sciences, which mostly deal with persons rather than objects, are not considered in this article.) For reasons of simplicity and clarity, we will call the first definition of popularity the ›broader definition‹ and the second the ›narrower definition‹ in the following course of this text. Both have existed alongside each other for centuries, but the first important theorization of popularity in a scholarly context (or, to be more precise, in literary criticism) didn't happen until the late 18th century, in the debate between the German poets Friedrich von Schiller and Gottfried August Bürger.² Its central question was whether literature could be made to appeal to all readers, regardless of their social class, or if literature inevitably would suffer in quality if it was made to appeal to the allegedly simple taste of the lower classes. Bürger advocated the notion of popularity regardless of class, whereas for Schiller, popularity always meant to cater to the common people. Judging from the scholarly literature that followed from then up to the present, Schiller had won the debate, the narrower definition of popularity had prevailed over the broader, and the concept of the division of art into ›high‹ and ›low‹ had been carved in stone.

<5>

For instance, in an essay from 1912, Brian Hooker even draws a line between »popular fiction« and »culture«.³ Although he admits that »wherever there is admiration, something is admirable«, popular art is linked to inferior quality for him - a »lapse of taste«. Likewise, R. A.

Scott-James, in an essay from 1913, divides the reading public into classes (of taste, not explicitly social classes) and provides the means by which an author can achieve popularity among them: sensationalism, sentimentality, eroticism, humor, and morality, respectively.⁴ »It is useless to name as a sixth class those who are moved by intellectual ideas, for so small a class is not the objective of the popular author.« It is not far-fetched to recognize the »common people« of the narrower definition of popularity in the first five of Scott-James' classes, who form the quantitative majority of the reading public, but whose taste is vulgar.

<6>

In his text from the 1940s on »Popular Art«, Lyman Bryson only seemingly follows a broader, quantitative definition of popularity when he says, »by popular art we mean creative work that measures success by the size of its audience and the profit it brings to its makers«.⁵ However, not all creative work qualifies as popular art: »we can begin by distinguishing the popular from the other kinds. I would suggest that there are three categories of which popular art is one. The other two are fine art and folk art.« What distinguishes popular art from fine art, according to Bryson, is not its respective audience, but its quality. Popular art cannot be »great or fine«. »Fine art can be made more popular if the right devices can be found,« but »it would remain something different from popular art.« Vice versa, »this is [...] very different from the effort to make popular art into something esthetically fine. That attempt is dangerous; the pseudo-fine is the worst of all the art varieties.«

<7>

In contrast, a perception of class difference is expressed most patronisingly in an essay from 1955 by Norman E. Nelson, who suggests that »we« as »medium highbrows« should spend more time »looking down at what people around us are actually reading«.⁶ Nelson is careful not to overtly condemn popular arts altogether: »the distinction between art and popular art is, in my opinion, a specious one«. However, Nelson expresses his unease of the »captive public« being flooded with »stuff hastily worked up«, with »entertainment aimed at the lowest common denominator«. Popular art, according to Nelson, »appeals to so many people, not merely the hopelessly ›common‹«, but all of them have the same »defect« that »they have not taken time out to cultivate a taste for Joyce, Eliot, Bartok, and Picasso.« So here we have again a narrow, pejorative notion of popularity.

<8>

Another narrow definition is used by James Steel Smith, who uses a slightly different class distinction factor and emphasizes qualitative differences. In an essay from 1957, he focuses on popular poetry, which »shares its principal and unchanging characteristics with popular creations in other arts - popular music, popular art, popular philosophy, movies, mass-

circulation popular fiction.«⁷ Smith describes the audience of popular art as »businessmen, housewives, mechanics, ministers, lawyers, politicians, and other types of people who may be taken as representative of popular, unscholarly taste«, because certain »attitudes cut across economic classes, vocations, educational levels.« Smith goes on more precisely: »The popular poet is read, liked, and used by non-professionals - that is, by persons whose jobs are not directly connected with the making and evaluating of poetry«. So Smith's popular public is not necessarily the »common people«. However, Smith doesn't follow the broad definition of popularity either, because popularity for him is more than a question of quantity and esteem: »the difference is not simply a matter of many readers and few readers or ›poorer poetry‹ and ›better poetry.‹ Certainly one has more readers, and there is probably not much question that there is a difference in quality when the two kinds of poetry cover the same territory, but it also becomes plain that ›popular‹ poetry is a separate sphere, with identifying characteristics of its own.« Smith lists many of these characteristics of popular poetry and other popular arts (e.g. »highly abstract«, »standardized«, »simplified«, »orthodoxy in form and content«, »pleased passiveness and absence of rebellion«, »optimistic mood«), and finds these elements are »not really few and closely linked«.

<9>

Similar points are made in Abraham Kaplan's 1966 essay on »The Aesthetics of the Popular Arts«.⁸ Although Kaplan acknowledges that there is a »straightforward sense« of the word »popular«, in which it means »widely read« (referring to books as an example here), his focus is on popularity in another sense: »the kind of taste that the popular arts satisfy, and not how widespread that taste is, is what distinguishes them. On this basis, I provisionally identify my subject as midbrow art, to be contrasted with what appeals to either highbrow or lowbrow tastes.« So, interestingly, Kaplan doesn't directly associate popular art with »the common people«, but nevertheless it is tied to the presumed taste of a specific demographic, the »middle class«. Like Norman E. Nelson, Kaplan criticizes this taste by his thesis »that popular art is not the degradation of taste but its immaturity«. Like James Steel Smith, Kaplan undertakes a lengthy exploration of the characteristic qualities of popular art, which are largely the same (e.g. »standardized«, »simplified«, »stereotyped«, »intolerance of ambiguity«, »shallow«, »sentimental«).

<10>

In the following years and decades, the discourse on popularity became more scholarly in character, perhaps not unconnected to the emergence of cultural studies as an academic discipline, and the institutionalization of popular culture studies, above all with the founding of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham in 1964. An early example of a ›Birmingham School‹ text is the book *The Popular Arts* by Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel.⁹

In this book, its authors don't offer a straightforward definition of popular art. Like Abraham Kaplan, they see popular art as a category in between fine art and something even lower in quality than popular art - the products of the mass media, which they call »art« only in quotation marks.¹⁰ The distinction between these three kinds of art is based vaguely on quality. However, Hall and Whannel briefly mention some specific intrinsic properties of popular art: a »substructure of the popular« that uses »popular attitudes« and »popular forms«.¹¹ This is a very tentative concept of popularity, though, and the authors emphasize that the borders between their three kinds of art are permeable - popular art may evolve towards high art or decline into mass art¹² -, and that it becomes increasingly hard to draw the lines between them.¹³

<11>

In his influential entry on popularity in his book *Keywords*, first published in 1976, Raymond Williams interestingly acknowledges that »the predominant modern meaning« of popularity is »widely favoured« or »well-liked«.¹⁴ However, according to Williams, this meaning »contains a strong element of setting out to gain favor, with a sense of calculation that has not quite disappeared but that is evident in a reinforced phrase like deliberately popular«. Furthermore, it still carries the older sense of »inferior kinds of work«. »In many cases, the earlier senses overlap« with »the more modern sense of well-liked by many people«. From this perspective, both the broader and the narrower definition of popularity exist side by side. Neither is more correct or better than the other, and scholars may choose which meaning they prefer to work with. And yet, as I have already said earlier in this article, most scholars reject the broader meaning of »well-liked by many people«.

<12>

Let us consider, for example, another text by the aforementioned Stuart Hall, in which he first reproduces what we have called the broader definition of popularity: »Next, I want to say something about ›popular‹. The term can have a number of different meanings: not all of them useful. Take the most common-sense meaning: the things which are said to be ›popular‹ because masses of people listen to them, buy them, read them, consume them, and seem to enjoy them to the full.«¹⁵ To this definition, however, Hall adds a pejorative twist: »this is the ›market‹ or commercial definition of the term: the one which brings socialists out in spots. It is quite rightly associated with the manipulation and debasement of the culture of the people.« Hall introduces a second, supposedly superior definition: »The second definition of ›popular‹ is easier to live with. This is the descriptive one. Popular culture is all those things that ›the people‹ do or have done. This is close to an ›anthropological‹ definition of the term: the culture, mores, customs and folkways of ›the people‹.« This definition comes close to the narrower definition that associates popularity with the ›common people‹, although Hall,

using »the people« only in quotes, does not qualify them as common or otherwise. Anyway, Hall rejects his second definition too, because of the difficulty of drawing the line between what counts as popular culture and what doesn't, and between »the people« and »not of the people«. He then takes the latter issue and makes it the center of a third definition, which he approves of:

<13>

»So I settle for a third definition of ›popular‹, though it is a rather uneasy one. This looks, in any particular period, at those forms and activities which have their roots in the social and material conditions of particular classes; which have been embodied in popular traditions and practices. [...] what is essential to the definition of popular culture is the relations which define ›popular culture‹ in a continuing tension (relationship, influence and antagonism) to the dominant culture. [...] Its main focus of attention is the relation between culture and questions of hegemony.«

<14>

Like the popularity definition that we have termed narrow, Hall's definition is class-specific, but this class-specificity is not negative (»vulgar«, »inferior« etc.), but rather neutral or, from Hall's Marxist perspective, even positive (anti-hegemonic). This definition is certainly of interest for any scholar working with the political or social aspects of popular culture. However, from a more general perspective, the question is whether this definition really defines what the ›popularity‹ of popular culture is (Hall uses the term »the popular« instead of »popularity«), or if it deals with other aspects of what could also be called ›mainstream culture‹ or ›mass culture‹.

<15>

Stuart Hall's political definition of popularity was taken up and put more pointedly by Tony Bennett, who rejects the broader definition of »well-liked by many people«, because it is necessary to define what »people« means here.¹⁶ »In one sense, ›the people‹ consists of everyone,« says Bennett. »After all, we're all people, aren't we? In another sense, [...] ›the people‹ may be equated with the working class.« Bennett explains his notion of »the people« like this: »The point is not to define ›the people‹ but to make them, to make that construction of ›the people‹ which unites a broad alliance of social forces in opposition to the power bloc count politically by winning for it a cultural weight and influence which prevails above others.« If we equate Bennett's »power bloc« with Hall's »dominant culture«, their notions of popularity are quite similar. At around the same time, however, another, thought-provoking definition of popularity was proposed by Roger Chartier. According to Chartier, the popularity of objects comes from neither their intrinsic properties nor from the audience who perceives

them, but from the way in which they are perceived.¹⁷ Popular reading is a kind of appropriation which differs from »learned reading« in that, for example, the popular reader segments the text into autonomous units that take on an independent meaning, radicalizes the meanings of the text, takes metaphors literally etc. It is a kind of perception that lacks distance to its object, that isn't aware of the artificiality of its object, whereas the learned reader recognizes literary techniques as such and uses his literary knowledge to assess the object in terms of genre and status. Any object may be perceived in a popular and a learned way, which makes this definition seem broad and liberal. However, although Chartier characterizes popular reading as »original«, one cannot help but find Chartier's popular reader a rather negatively portrayed figure, who only adopts an original way of reading because lack of knowledge prevents him or her to choose another way. Thus, implicitly, Chartier presents another narrow definition, in which popularity is assigned to the common people. In any case, it is curious that his approach does not seem to have been received by many other scholarly texts on popularity.

<16>

An article from 1991 by Achim Barsch, for instance, presents a similar reception-based definition of popularity, albeit apparently independently from Roger Chartier.¹⁸ The difference is that Barsch suggests to classify readers and to examine their attitudes towards literature as a group, in contrast to the analysis of the individual reader in Chartier's text. In a more recent example, Rudolf Helmstetter deals with Chartier's definition directly, but adds to that characteristic properties of the production of popular objects (»product of industry- and media-based poetics«) and their content (»fun«, following Lawrence Grossberg and Urs Stäheli, both of which will be dealt with later in this text).¹⁹ Apart from that, content-based popularity definitions in the vein of James Steel Smith and Abraham Kaplan continue to be published in the following years and decades, e.g. in an article by Hans-Jürgen Ketzer from 1987, who, discussing Gottfried August Bürger's notion of popularity, decidedly rejects the broad (»quantitative«) definition of popularity and names intrinsic characteristics like stereotyping and the »stimulation of social well-being«.²⁰

<17>

Definitions of popularity with a political emphasis, like the ones by Stuart Hall and Tony Bennett, also continue to be offered. Morag Shiach, for example, examines the dynamic history of the term »popular«, and expresses her concern with the term »common people« shifting towards more neutral terms like »the general public« or »the audience«.²¹ Shiach comments the results of this process as »untheorized« and only »seemingly egalitarian«, and advocates the consideration of the negative meaning of »popular« with its implications of

»social hierarchy«, »differential power«, »calculated manipulation« and »the relations between social power, political democracy and cultural production«.²²

<18>

In the same tradition, I would place John Fiske. However, Fiske's notion of popular culture combines elements from all four narrower popularity definitions I have presented so far - the political, the content-based, the audience-based, and even Roger Chartier's reception-based approach - and is therefore of particular interest here. In his book *Understanding Popular Culture*, Fiske claims that »popular culture always has a progressive potential«, although »the politics of popular culture are full of contradictions, and [...] some of them, under some historical and social conditions, may be reactionary«.²³ Fiske emphasizes that »popular culture is progressive, not revolutionary. Radical art forms that oppose or ignore the structures of domination can never be popular [...]«.²⁴ Still, the pleasures and meanings derived from popular culture are »resistant« and in opposition to »hegemonic ones«.²⁵ This clearly shows Fiske's interest in the political dimension of popular culture that he shares with Stuart Hall and others, but also a parallel to Roger Chartier, in that Fiske allows one and the same object to be perceived in different ways, a popular/resistant way and a hegemonic way that is »preferred by the text«. The prerequisite for this ability to be read in multiple ways is a certain characteristic property of popular culture: »semiotic richness«, or »semiotic productivity« - popular culture is »polysemic«.²⁶ Additionally, a popular object has to »offer points of pertinence through which the experience of everyday life can be made to resonate with it« in order to have »relevance«, and it has to have »flexibility of the mode of consumption«. Finally, Fiske's approach is also class-specific: he assigns popular art (or popular readings) to the »working class«, and distinguishes it from the »art forms and cultural tastes« of the »bourgeoisie«.²⁷

<19>

John Fiske's notion of popular culture and popular art is perhaps the most comprehensive within what we have called the narrower definitions of popularity. From this point in time (the late 1980s) onwards, there haven't been many innovative approaches to define popularity. Four exceptions shall be mentioned briefly, because they don't fit into either the broader popularity definition (»well-liked by many people«) nor into one of the presented narrower ones. In 1988, Dick Hebdige suggested »a set of generally available artefacts« as a definition of popular culture.²⁸ This definition is persuasively simple, but it is also somewhat counter-intuitive: just because, for example, a television show is made generally available by being aired on a nationwide channel at prime time, it is not necessarily popular with the audience (although its chances to become popular are better than on a regional channel late at night). Another approach is presented in a book on children's literature from 1995, in which

John Elwall Foster, Ern J. Finnis and Maureen Nimon introduce a distinction between »true ›popular literature‹« with few literary qualities, and »literature that is popular« with more literary qualities.²⁹ However, »literature that is popular« is only a category in between »popular literature« and »better quality literature«. »Literature that is popular« still shares with »popular literature« characteristics like »dependence upon formula«, »commercialization« and »evidence of actual popularity«. Thus, the introduction of a category of »literature that is popular« isn't really a useful contribution to a theory of popularity. A quite different approach is used by Manuel Braun, who, at least within the context of his text, uses a concept of popularity without implications of esteem or appreciation.³⁰ His example is the reception of Martin Luther, who was »popular« also with his enemies in the sense that they discussed his ideas. This is a quite counter-intuitive perspective, and it seems as if Braun, like Jess in Nick Hornby's novel, confuses popularity with simple fame or notoriety. Finally, Urs Stäheli advocates a two-fold definition of popularity that is context-specific: if the attribute »popular« is attached to a person (i.e. in a »system of interaction«), the meaning of »well-liked« becomes the decisive one and the term »popular« is perceived as positive.³¹ In a »functional system« however, e.g. in science or in the arts, the term »popular« is perceived as negative, or at least ambivalent.

<20>

Apart from these exceptional examples, a lot more texts have been published since the end of the 1980s that deal with popularity or popular culture, but most of them adopt one of the already existing narrower definitions. For instance, a definition based on characteristic qualities, or quality in general, is used (partially) in a dissertation by Monika Bloß from 1989,³² an essay by Jens Ruchatz from 2005,³³ and a book by Hans-Otto Hügel from 2007,³⁴ among others. An example for a discussion of a class-based definition is Sabine Haupt's essay from 1999.³⁵ The political tradition is continued (and discussed critically) in a book by John Frow from 2005,³⁶ for instance. There are fewer examples for definitions based on individual reception, like the one by Roger Chartier, but Lawrence Grossberg's approach to popularity and popular culture might be one of them. Grossberg identifies taste as the driving force behind the creation of popularity,³⁷ and describes »fandom« as a popularity-specific kind of reception, which is characterized by affective relations such as »volitional power«, »mood«, »investment« and »energization«.³⁸

<21>

By and large, many of these different positions are summed up quite accurately in a reference work entry by John Hartley from 1994, in which he says, »it [the term ›popular‹] still retains sufficient traces of its history to be a multi-accentual term: the popularity of something may be taken either as an indication of its positive or of its negative value, depending on your

alignment to ›the people‹. Thus the concept is not exempt from politics [...].³⁹ Hartley doesn't fail to mention the distinction between popular and high culture, the question of quality, and the role of popular culture within the class struggle either. So is it safe to say that there is a consensus on the definition of popularity in the scholarly discourse, or at least on a certain range of definitions that we call the narrower ones? Not quite. The broader definition of popularity, ›well-liked by many people‹, has always been in use. An early example is a text by George Henry Lewes from 1865, which is particularly interesting because it stresses the emotional aspect (›well-liked‹) of the definition, which is often neglected, and the broad definition thus often rejected as ›merely quantitative‹ by others. According to Lewes,

<22>

›the reward [of the writer] is not always measurable by the number of copies sold; that simply measures the extent of his public. [...] The real reward of Literature is in the sympathy of congenial minds, and is precious in proportion to the elevation of those minds, and the gravity with which such sympathy moves [...]. The novel and the drama, by reason of their commanding influence over a large audience, often seduce writers to forsake the path on which they could labor with some success, but on which they know that only a small audience can be found; as if it were quantity more than quality, noise rather than appreciation, which their mistaken desires sought.«⁴⁰

<23>

Granted, Lewes does not explicitly say anything about ›popularity‹. But his ›success‹, which is the topic of his essay, can be equated with popularity in the broad sense. Lewes says, ›we must always ask, What is the nature of the applause, and from what circles does it rise?‹, but by that he means we have to determine whether a work of art really enjoys popularity in the sense of honest and lasting appreciation.⁴¹ He doesn't divide the audience according to social classes, and rejects the opinion ›that the public taste is degraded and prefers trash‹. Neither does he distinguish between works of high quality and works that are widely read and appreciated. He always writes about ›Literature‹ with a capital L, and his theory is that the success of a book is determined by the qualities of ›Vision‹, ›Sincerity‹ and ›Beauty‹.⁴² A more recent example of a broad definition of popularity is the proposition of Alan B. Farmer and Zachary Lesser to derive measures of popularity (or, to be more precise and to use their term, different ›structures of popularity‹) of books from ›both total number of editions and frequency of reprinting, as well as market share and profitability.«⁴³

<24>

However, scholarly texts using the broad popularity definition are not only rare, but they also rarely reflect upon their use of the term or theorize it. An exception is Harold E. Hinds, Jr.,

who believes popularity to be measurable, and in fact says, »if attention to popularity may be necessary for building theories and methodologies unique to popular culture studies, then popular culture scholarship should incorporate estimates of popularity«. ⁴⁴ Popular culture scholarship as a discipline is of no concern for us here, but it is interesting to see that Hinds rejects all theories that claim that different aesthetic traits separate »elite« from »popular« works of art, and that he advocates the use of »empirical research« to determine »degrees of popularity«. On the other hand, the broad definition of popularity is often attacked by advocates of a narrow one. For instance, Jim McGuigan »discards« the definition »well-liked by many people« »easily enough«, because it is »merely a quantitative observation, not a concept«. ⁴⁵ Another reason to discard the broad definition is that »forms which would not usually be considered popular have large numbers of admirers, such as grand opera.« Similar statements have been made by David Novitz (»The philosopher who thinks of a Mark Rothko painting as an instance of popular art, and who theorizes accordingly, will not be taken seriously.«) ⁴⁶ and Theodore Gracyk (»Andy Warhol's pop art, Monet's paintings of his garden at Giverny, and Puccini's operas are accessible art, too. Yet we do not classify them as popular art.«) ⁴⁷ A third argument against the broad definition is that it is »too broad and inclusive« (Gracyk). »Where do you draw the line?«, asks McGuigan, and Novitz even says, »we are forced to draw the distinction because of the different roles that popular and high art play in our lives.«

<25>

I reject all three of these arguments against the broad definition of popularity as insubstantial and invalid, and I will now explain why. When Jim McGuigan says, »well-liked by many people« is a »quantitative observation« and therefore »not a concept«, I wonder what his concept of a »concept« is. Why can't a concept be quantifiable? There are indeed concepts that may be hard to quantify, like the concept of beauty, for instance. But what about the concept of value, or the concept of age? They, as well as a lot of other properties of works of art, ⁴⁸ can be measured. So can popularity be measured, too? I believe that at least relative statements about the popularity of a work of art can be made (»object A is more popular than object B«). If that disqualifies popularity in the broader sense as a »concept«, I do not care much, but in any case it is a term theorized through texts like this one and others. That qualifies it for use within a scholarly context. To discard a concept as quantitative tells probably more about a certain unease of many arts and humanities scholars towards working with numbers, than about its scholarly validity. Besides, the observation »well-liked by many people« is not »merely quantitative« - at least it is not directly quantifiable. We can (though usually not without difficulties) quantify the people that have perceived a certain object, that is, the »by many people« part of the definition. But what about the »well-liked« part? Surely, to read a book and to like it is often enough two different things. Whether someone likes a

work of art, and how much he or she does, could be determined only indirectly, e.g. by questionnaire surveys, and thus quantified. But ultimately, the measurement of emotions can only be a rough approximation. (For most scholars, though, the act of reception is proof enough that the object is liked, and they equal higher television ratings or a higher number of copies sold with a higher degree of popularity, etc.) This shows that the broad definition can only partially be called »quantitative«.

<26>

As a second argument, McGuigan, Novitz and Gracyk list works of art that »would not usually be considered popular«. Here, it becomes important to look at the precise wording. So far, I have treated »popularity«, »popular«, »the popular«, »popular culture«, »popular art«, »popular literature« etc. all as largely equivalent. This was valid when discussing the different definitions, but it is important to note now that McGuigan, Novitz and Gracyk do not say, ›no statements can be made about the popularity of grand opera or Mark Rothko paintings‹. Instead, what I think that these three authors want to say is most clearly expressed in the wording of Gracyk: »[...] do not classify as popular art«. For Gracyk, and, I believe, also the other two authors, and many of the other advocates of a narrow popularity definition as well, popularity is a matter of classification. For them, an object either belongs to the class of popular culture, or to high culture/fine art. There's (usually) nothing in between, and an object cannot belong to both spheres. So, to call an object ›popular‹ is to assign it to the sphere of popularity, and to withdraw it from the other sphere. This, however, is not how I would like the term ›popular‹ to be used. I see ›popular‹ as an adjective that can express popularity in a variety of degrees (including lack thereof with its antonym, ›unpopular‹). In this sense, to call an object ›popular‹ doesn't say much unless it is further specified, e.g. used relatively to compare the degree of popularity of several objects. Can a painting be called ›popular‹? Novitz and Gracyk would probably say no, whereas Fritz Novotny, who wrote an article on »the popularity of van Gogh«,⁴⁹ would probably say yes. But the statement that a certain painting is popular wouldn't have much meaning in itself. It would make more sense to say, for instance, »van Gogh's *Starry Night* is more popular than Rothko's *Red, White and Brown*«, or »the popularity of van Gogh's paintings has increased after his death«. I believe that all works of art have a popularity. This can also be a very low one, or even a negative one. A negative popularity can either mean ›well-liked by few‹, or ›disliked by many‹, or even ›disliked by few and unknown to others‹. A recent example for an object that is well-known, but not generally liked, is the film *Meet the Spartans* from 2008 by Jason Friedberg and Aaron Seltzer. The film was seen by millions of people, and can be considered a commercial success.⁵⁰ However, it received overwhelmingly negative reviews from both professional critics and normal filmgoers: according to the meta-review website Rotten Tomatoes, only 2% of the reviews were positive,⁵¹ and in The Internet Movie Database, it was ranked one of

the 100 worst films of all time through the votes of more than 47,000 users.⁵² It is hard to compare the degree of popularity of *Meet the Spartans* to a film that was received positively, but only by a small audience, although it would be perfectly valid to compare it to that of other high-grossing films, or of films that were received similarly negatively.

<27>

The third argument against the broad definition of popularity is that, according to Gracyk, it is »too inclusive« if it allows both Old Master paintings and Hollywood films to be called »popular art«. This argument, again, stems from the notion of »popular« as a category. Within a classification system, it would indeed be desirable to design classes of similar sizes. If »popular art«/»popular culture« on one hand and »fine art«/»high culture« on the other are considered two classes within the same hierarchical level of a classification, then they should contain roughly the same number of elements, and there shouldn't be any overlap between the two. This would be a problem, as Gracyk and others fear, because the »popular art« class would contain so many elements that it would largely absorb the »fine art« class. However, we do not think of »popular« as a sensible category within a classification.⁵³ There are several other terms, such as »art« or »culture«, whose common definitions are also broad, and overlap with each other and other concepts. Should they be disregarded as concepts too, because they are too inclusive? Wouldn't it make more sense to use these terms as properties that all can exist in one and the same work of art simultaneously, to a greater or lesser extent?⁵⁴ Using the terms in this way, van Gogh's *Starry Night* can be described both as »popular« and as »fine art« in a high degree, whereas *Meet the Spartans* can also be validly described as popular and as art, but in a low degree. David Novitz says that »we are forced to draw the distinction because of the different roles that popular and high art play in our lives.« Are we really? Certainly it is dangerous to confuse the status of different objects. For example, it would not be wise, financially, to think that the (average) value of a painting by van Gogh would be equal to that of a painting by Norman Rockwell. There might be several reasons why a van Gogh painting is valued more than a Rockwell painting, but the reason is not that the van Gogh is fine art and the Rockwell isn't. Van Gogh's paintings are more typical of fine art, because they were conceived as autonomous products, whereas Rockwell's paintings were usually used as advertisement illustrations. So van Gogh may be an artist in a higher degree than Rockwell, but that doesn't mean we have to place them in two completely separate categories. Novitz may even be right when he says that it's important to be able to tell a great, unique work of art apart from a shoddy mass-produced object in everyday life. But I believe he is wrong if he says the difference is in the popularity, and that only one of the two may be called »popular«.

<28>

It may now seem as if, because I advocate the use of the broader definition of popularity, I reject all narrower perspectives I have presented in this article. But that is not the case. I do want other scholars to engage with the popularity of works of art in the way I suggested: to apply the concept of popularity to any work of art whenever it seems worthwhile. But I do also acknowledge that it is interesting, useful and important to study the reception behavior of different social classes. It is important to study differences in quality among different kinds of objects. It is important to identify characteristic intrinsic properties of different kinds of art. It is important to examine the role of cultural objects and their reception in social conflicts. And it is important to analyze the different ways in which an object can be perceived. The only thing I reject is the attitude that there is but one single correct way to study the phenomenon of popularity.

Author's profile:

Martin de la Iglesia studied Art History and Library and Information Science at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. In 2007 he wrote his Master's Thesis in London on the reception of US comics in the United Kingdom, and in the same year published an article titled »Geographical Classification in Comics« in International Journal of Comic Art. Currently he works as a librarian in Hamburg. His fields of interest in research include comics, art geography, reception history, and art historical methodology.

Postal address: Martin de la Iglesia, Wichelkamp 4, 22179 Hamburg, Germany

E-mail: martin.delaiglesia@gmail.com

¹ Popularity, in: Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary, ed. Noah Porter, Springfield, Mass. 1913, <<http://machaut.uchicago.edu/?resource=Webster%27s&word=popularity&use1913=on>>.

² Michael Gamper: »Die Massen haben wir preisgegeben«. Eine Problemskizze als Einleitung, in: Popularität. Zum Problem von Esoterik und Exoterik in Literatur und Philosophie. Ulrich Stadler zum 60. Geburtstag, ed. Hans-Georg von Arburg/Michael Gamper/Dominik Müller, Würzburg 1999, pp. 1-13.

³ Brian Hooker: Reputation and Popularity, in: The North American Review 195, 1912, pp. 404-413.

⁴ R. A. Scott-James: Popularity in Literature, in: The North American Review 197, 1913, pp. 677-691.

⁵ Lyman Bryson: Popular Art, in: The Communication of Ideas. A Series of Addresses, ed. Lyman Bryson, New York 1964 [1948], pp. 277-286.

⁶ Norman E. Nelson: Popular Arts and the Humanities, in: College English 16, 1955, pp. 479-485.

- ⁷ James Steel Smith: Some Poetry Is Popular - But Why?, in: *The English Journal* 46, 1957, pp. 129-139.
- ⁸ Abraham Kaplan: The Aesthetics of the Popular Arts, in: *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 24, 1966, pp. 351-364.
- ⁹ Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel: *The Popular Arts*, London 1964.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 67.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 83.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 76.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 27, 84.
- ¹⁴ Raymond Williams: *Keywords. A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, London 1988 [1976], pp. 236-237.
- ¹⁵ Stuart Hall: Notes on Deconstructing »the Popular«, in: *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture. A Reader*, ed. John Storey, Harlow 1998 [1981], pp. 442-453.
- ¹⁶ Tony Bennett: The Politics of »the Popular« and Popular Culture, in: *Popular Culture and Social Relations*, ed. Tony Bennett/Colin Mercer/Jane Woollacott, Milton Keynes 1986, pp. 6-21.
- ¹⁷ Roger Chartier: Volkskultur und Gelehrtenkultur. Überprüfung einer Zweiteilung und einer Periodisierung, in: *Epochenschwellen und Epochenstrukturen im Diskurs der Literatur- und Sprachgeschichte*, ed. Hans-Ulrich Gumbrecht/Ursula Link-Heer, Frankfurt am Main 1985, pp. 376-388.
- ¹⁸ Achim Barsch: »Populäre Literatur« als Forschungsproblem einer empirischen Literaturwissenschaft, in: *Wirkendes Wort. Deutsche Sprache und Literatur in Forschung und Lehre* 41, 1991, pp. 101-119.
- ¹⁹ Rudolf Helmstetter: Der Geschmack der Gesellschaft. Die Massenmedien als Apriori des Populären, in: *Das Populäre der Gesellschaft. Systemtheorie und Populärkultur*, ed. Christian Huck/Carsten Zorn, Wiesbaden 2007, pp. 44-72.
- ²⁰ Hans-Jürgen Ketzer: »Ihr letztes Ziel ist es, daß sie Vergnügen verursachen sollen.« Zu einer ästhetischen Theorie der populären Künste und ihren Anfängen bei Gottfried August Bürger, in: *Weimarer Beiträge. Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft, Ästhetik und Kulturtheorie* 33, 1987, pp. 1145-1158.
- ²¹ Morag Shiach: *Discourse on Popular Culture. Class, Gender and History in Cultural Analysis, 1730 to the Present*, Cambridge 1989, pp. 28-34.
- ²² *Ibid.*, pp. 33-34, 173.
- ²³ John Fiske: *Understanding Popular Culture*, London 1990 [1989], p. 177.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

- ²⁵ Ibid., pp. 49, 57-58.
- ²⁶ Ibid., pp. 5, 129, 141.
- ²⁷ Ibid., pp. 130, 139.
- ²⁸ Dick Hebdige: *Hiding in the Light: On Images and Things*, London 1988, p. 47, as cited in Dominic Strinati: *An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture*, London 1995, p. xvii.
- ²⁹ John Elwall Foster/Ern J. Finnis/Maureen Nimon: *Australian Children's Literature. An Exploration of Genre and Theme*, Wagga Wagga 1995, pp. 177-189.
- ³⁰ Manuel Braun: »Wir sehens, das Luther by aller Welt berympt ist« - Popularisierung und Popularität im Kontext von Buchdruck und Religionsstreit, in: *Popularisierung und Popularität*, ed. Gereon Blaseio/Hedwig Pompe/Jens Ruchatz, Köln 2005, pp. 21-42.
- ³¹ Urs Stäheli: *Das Populäre als Unterscheidung - eine theoretische Skizze*, in: *Popularisierung und Popularität*, ed. Gereon Blaseio/Hedwig Pompe/Jens Ruchatz, Köln 2005, pp. 146-167.
- ³² Monika Bloß: *Popularität - Aspekte zum Funktions- und Wirkungszusammenhang populärer Musik* (PhD diss., Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin), Berlin 1989, pp. 120-130.
- ³³ Jens Ruchatz: *Der Ort des Populären*, in: *Popularisierung und Popularität*, ed. Gereon Blaseio/Hedwig Pompe/Jens Ruchatz, Köln 2005, pp. 139-145.
- ³⁴ Hans-Otto Hügel: *Lob des Mainstreams. Zu Begriff und Geschichte von Unterhaltung und Populärer Kultur*, Köln 2007, pp. 109, 146, 335.
- ³⁵ Sabine Haupt: *Populäre Exklusivität - exklusive Popularität. Literatursoziologische Beobachtungen am Beispiel von Peter Handke, Botho Strauß, Adolph Freiherr v. Knigge und anderen*, in: *Popularität. Zum Problem von Esoterik und Exoterik in Literatur und Philosophie. Ulrich Stadler zum 60. Geburtstag*, ed. Hans-Georg von Arburg/Michael Gamper/Dominik Müller, Würzburg 1999, pp. 165-202.
- ³⁶ John Frow: *Cultural Studies and Cultural Value*, Oxford 1995, pp. 71-83.
- ³⁷ Lawrence Grossberg: *Zur Verortung der Populärkultur [Mapping Popular Culture]*, in: *Cultural Studies. Grundlagentexte zur Einführung*, ed. Roger Bromley/Udo Göttlich/Carsten Winter, Lüneburg 1999 [1992], pp. 215-236.
- ³⁸ Lawrence Grossberg: *Neuverortung des Populären [Re-placing the Popular]*, in: Lawrence Grossberg: *What's going on? Cultural Studies und Populärkultur*, Wien 2000 [1997], pp. 50-77.
- ³⁹ John Hartley: *Popular/Populär Culture*, in: Tim O'Sullivan et al.: *Key Concepts in Communication and Cultural Studies*, London 1994, pp. 231-233.
- ⁴⁰ George Henry Lewes: *The Principles of Success in Literature*, Farnborough 1969 [1865], pp. 8-9.
- ⁴¹ Ibid., p. 5.
- ⁴² Ibid., pp. 10-11.

- ⁴³ Alan B. Farmer/Zachary Lesser: Structures of Popularity in the Early Modern Book-Trade, in: Shakespeare Quarterly 56, 2005, pp. 206-213.
- ⁴⁴ Harold E. Hinds, Jr.: Popularity: How to Make a Key Concept Count in Building a Theory of Popular Culture, in: Eye on the Future: Popular Culture Scholarship into the Twenty-First Century. In Honor of Ray B. Browne, ed. Marilyn F. Motz et al., Bowling Green, Ohio 1994, pp. 43-53.
- ⁴⁵ Jim McGuigan: Cultural Populism, London 1992, p. 65.
- ⁴⁶ David Novitz: Aesthetics of Popular Art, in: The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics, ed. Jerrold Levinson, Oxford 2005 [2003], pp. 733-747.
- ⁴⁷ Theodore Gracyk: Searching for the »Popular« and the »Art« of Popular Art, in: Philosophy Compass 2/3, 2007, pp. 380-395.
- ⁴⁸ I use the term »work of art« in this article instead of a broader term like »cultural object«, because objects with none or few artistic properties become »popular« primarily because they are useful (e.g. most tools), not because there is a choice to like or dislike them. This would be a different notion of popularity that neither I, nor the other scholars discussed in this article, are concerned with.
- ⁴⁹ Fritz Novotny: Die Popularität Van Goghs, in: Alte und neue Kunst 2, 1953, pp. 46-54.
- ⁵⁰ Wikipedia contributors: Meet the Spartans, in: Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Meet_the_Spartans&oldid=390352367> (accessed October 13, 2010).
- ⁵¹ Meet the Spartans, in: Rotten Tomatoes, <http://uk.rottentomatoes.com/m/meet_the_spartans/> (accessed October 13, 2010).
- ⁵² Meet the Spartans (2008), in: The Internet Movie Database, <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1073498/>> (accessed October 13, 2010).
- ⁵³ It is helpful, though, to think of the broader and the narrower definition of popularity as two classes within a classification: the broader definition is the superordinate class that encompasses the narrower definition as a subordinate class. In other words, the narrower definition doesn't contradict the broader definition, but it particularises it.
- ⁵⁴ This resembles the idea of prototype theory and the criticism of the traditional category concept, as represented primarily by Eleanor Rosch and Ludwig Wittgenstein. See David Weinberger: Everything is Miscellaneous (talk given at Google Tech Talks, May 10, 2007), <<http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=2159021324062223592>> (accessed October 13, 2010).