

The Popular and the Political.

Pt. 1: Questions of Definition (and how to get rid of them)

Thomas Morsch, Freie Universität Berlin

Every research group investigating crime fiction within the context of Europe and questions of cultural identity, like DETECT, will have to form an opinion about the relationship between the popular and the political, about the ways that popular culture (like crime fiction) represents, displays, performs, injects itself into, intervenes in and influences the spheres of the social and the political. This series of essays wants to propose some ways of thinking this relation between the popular and the political and to suggest some tools and ideas to conceptualize this relationship.

One might assume that the proper academic way to tackle the subject would be to start with a thorough definition of the key terms 'the popular' and 'the political'. However, as both are contested terms among scholars, the search for a proper definition, while necessary, might prevent us from getting anywhere with our investigation. We would probably get tangled up in territorial discussions about 'the popular' and 'the political' without ever getting to enquire about the real issue at hand: the relationship between the two.

Instead of starting with the attempt of a proper definition, I side with a suggestion from German sociologist Niklas Luhmann. He advised that the owl of the Minerva (= the quest for knowledge) may start its nightly blind flight (= an investigation of pressing issues without having a clear cut definition of the relevant concepts and terms as a guiding principle) already, because we have the necessary tools and means to control and steer the investigative flight without yet having a proper map of the territory (= a conceptual framework including all the necessary terminology). What Luhmann is suggesting, is to start with our research first and deal with issues of definition and terminology later, while already en route. We will get a clearer picture of our understanding of 'the popular' and 'the political' while dealing with the questions that are our real concern. Indeed, what could Media Studies ever accomplish if we had to first agree on a valid definition of 'media'?

Defining Popular Culture

Other scholars have noted the challenge of defining popular culture (or the popular) as well. See e.g. Carla Frecceros remark in her book *Popular Culture: An Introduction* (1999):

"I am using the concept of 'popular,' with which cultural studies is largely concerned, to talk about the everyday terrain of people without being sure who the people are, that is, without deciding ahead of time and once and for all who is being referred to by the term 'people' (p. 3, quoted from Parker 2011: 147).

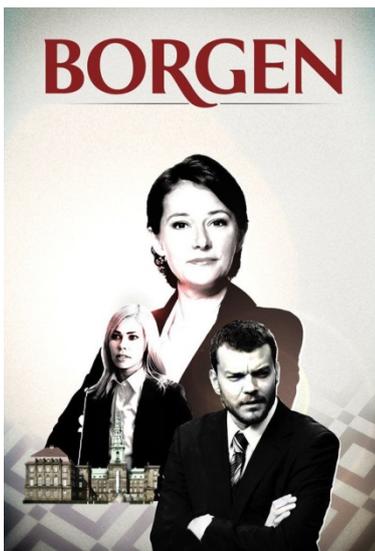
At this point it should suffice to note that I am using the wider term 'the popular' (instead of simply 'popular culture') in accordance with John Storey, one of the eminent contemporary scholars of popular culture, in particular in chapter 12, "The Politics of the Popular" in his seminal book *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture. An Introduction* (first published in 1997), as well as Tony Bennett's article "The Politics of the 'Popular' and Popular Culture"

(1986). The term 'the popular' is meant to cast an even wider net as the term 'popular culture'. It is supposed to signal an understanding of the popular as a distinct realm (even a 'system' maybe, in the sense of Niklas Luhmann's theory of social differentiation and social systems, cf. Luhmann 1995, 2000, 2006) within the social sphere, not tied to particular forms of expression or organization.

More importantly, to speak of 'the *political*' is meant to oppose any understanding of the political within the strict limits of institutionalised *politics* organized around entities like parties, parliament, government, ministries, NGOs etc. This distinction has been put forth already decades ago by Claude Lefort (1986), for whom politics is the site of the interplay of conflicting powers. Politics has the unfortunate tendency, as Jean-Luc Nancy (2000: 47, see also Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe 1997) noted, to retreat either into law and contracts, or into sheer spectacle. Politics exhausts itself in law-making and policy-making on the one hand, or 'show' and public self-representation on the other. In contrast, the political is the much larger realm where the unity (or dissent, we might add) of society is constantly negotiated. Therefore, politics is only a part of the much larger terrain of the political, if the political even is a definable terrain and not the very fabric of society, a ubiquitous force that determines the relations, hierarchies, dependencies, perceptions and positions

On the relation between the popular and the political

How can we understand the relation between the popular and the political? Some possible answers will be given in further installments of this series of essays. Before we ask about the relation of popular political crime fiction like the series *Borgen* (Dk 2010-2013) in the next part of this series, first and foremost it seems important to point out how this relation is *not* adequately understood: the popular is neither just a reflection of political conditions nor is it just an escape from political reality.



One of the internationally most successful Danish series, a political crime drama: BORGEN (2010-2013)

As far as the allegation of escapism is concerned, one might at least challenge the common understanding of escapism as a flight from the realities of the political and social life into a commodified fantasy world in which we take shelter. Richard Maltby, while not completely abandoning the idea of escapism, qualifies it in the following manner: in his view, popular media and folklore provide an “escapism that is *not an escape from or to anywhere*, but an escape of our utopian selves” (Maltby 1989: 14, my emphasis). For Maltby, there is certainly something problematic, even insidious about the commodity form that our collective dreams take within popular culture, but it does retain an utopian spark, that might incite society at any time.

“If it is the crime of popular culture that it has taken our dreams and packaged them and sold them back to us, it is also the achievement of popular culture that it has brought us more and more varied dreams than we could otherwise ever have known”

(Richard Maltby 1989: 14)

Following not only Maltby’s position, but also the underlying perspective of Siegfried Kracauer in his works on popular culture, his essays of the 1920’s in particular (cf. Kracauer 1995), John Storey (2018: 9) points out that the popular, then, serves as a site where society’s collective (but often repressed) dreams and wishes are articulated in a disguised and all too consumable manner. This line of thought, granting an utopian and even emancipatory potential to the popular, will ultimately have to face not only the question of commodification, but also the question of the relation between the popular and populism, that has become an eminent threat, within the contemporary political sphere, of democracy, liberalism and even rule of law.

While the question of populism will have to be approached in a later essay, I conclude this installment by preliminarily suggesting an alternative to popular culture as a *representation of* or an *escape from* politics. Reverting to a theoretical approach that is well established in American and Literary Studies, I want to point to the *cultural work* done by all forms of popular culture. Series, films, books, etc. are neither just representations nor just elusive escapist phantasies; actually our concern should not be so much about what they *are* (and what they *mean*), but what they *do*.

All of the entities and instances of the popular perform a cultural work, which is a work not limited to the realm of (popular) aesthetics, but that extends to society as a whole and to the sphere of the political. Works of popular culture are not so much representing or embodying political issues, but they are actively redefining social and cultural identities which they are shaping and challenging at the same time. By orchestrating various cultural and political forces, works of popular culture become a cultural and political force themselves, framing and modeling society as much as real politics (on the paradigm of *cultural work* cf. Rohr et al 2000).

Stressing the cultural work done by works of high art as well as works of popular culture, and taking popular culture into account as an active force shaping politics, the relation between the popular and the political becomes one of reciprocal exchange, instead of reducing the popular to either a mirror (the paradigm of representation) or phantasy

(the paradigm of escapism). It remains to be seen what we win by this perspective for our understanding of popular culture.

To be continued...

References

- Bennett, Tony. 1986. The Politics of the 'Popular' and Popular Culture. In: *Popular Culture and Social Relations*, ed. Tony Bennett, Colin Mercer and Janet Woollacott. Milton Keynes, Philadelphia: Open University Press: 6-21.
- Freccero, Carla. 1999. *Popular Culture: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press).
- Kracauer, Siegfried. 1995. *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, ed. Thomas Y. Levin. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Lefort, Claude. 1986. *Essais sur le politique : XIXe et XXe siècles*. Paris: Seuil.
- Luhmann, Niklas. 1995. *Social Systems*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Luhmann, Niklas. 2000. *The Reality of the Mass Media*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Luhmann, Niklas. 2006. System as Difference. *Organization* 13 (1): 37-57.
- Maltby, Richard (ed.). 1989. *Dreams for Sale: Popular Culture in the 20th Century*. London: Harrap.
- Nancy, Jean-Luc. 2000. *Being Singular Plural*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Nancy, Jean-Luc and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe. 1997. *Retreating the Political*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Parker, Holt N. 2011. Toward a Definition of Popular Culture. *History and Theory* 50 (2): 147-170.
- Rohr, Susanne, Peter Schneck, Sabine Sielke (Eds.). 2000. *Making America: The Cultural Work of Literature*. Heidelberg: Winter.
- Storey, John. 2018. *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*. An Introduction. 8th ed. London, New York: Routledge.