Why So Hostile?:
The Relationships among Popularity,
"Masses," and Rhetorical Commonplaces

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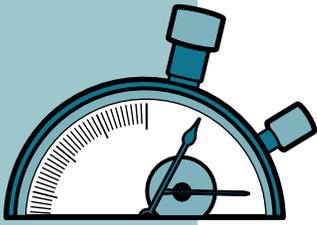
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The Curious Contradictions of Popularity

Popularity is a curious phenomenon. Some authors desperately court it for the texts they create. Others seek an audience while purposefully avoiding the kind of attention that might get them associated with too much popularity. Popularity might inspire worship, jealousy, or even, outright disgust ("I'd rather be tarred and feathered than watch an episode of *Everybody Loves Raymond*"). Sometimes popularity is accompanied by a specter of inauthenticity (the boy bands of the late 1990s) or a sense of something blanched to the lowest common denominator (the oft-criticized writing of popular books by authors like Dan Brown or Stephenie Meyer). Popularity can be gained through a meteoric rise

(the dawn of pogs) and just as easily disappear in an instant (the fall of pogs). Never guaranteed and always contested, discussing popularity usually becomes a tricky mix of contradictions.

I'm interested in the ways both cultural theorists and everyday people talk about popular texts (and the crossover between them), especially when both evoke longstanding arguments filled with hostility and suspicion toward popularity. Perhaps without even knowing the cultural theories of the late nineteenth century and the later prevailing schools of thought, everyday people constantly evoke their general premises as they discuss popular culture. When people make arguments that one text is somehow intrinsically better than another, they evoke Matthew Arnold's famous definition of culture: "the best that has been thought and said in the world" (7). When someone complains about his or her favorite band "selling out," the argument evokes a Frankfurt School position, which laments a culture of conformity that produces homogeneity in the name of capitalistic domination. When subcultural texts are elevated over popular ones, people evoke a Birmingham School notion that culture is a site of ideological struggle where everyday people battle the hegemonic dominance of media outlets.[1] Though each school has legitimate reasons for its hostility toward
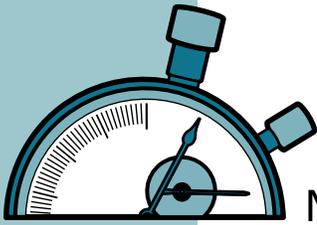
popularity, the fact that these positions have seeped into the conversations of non-scholar fans and critics of popular culture creates a curious contradiction. Namely, if popularity elicits suspicion, then why do these arguments against popularity seem so popular?

Commonplace Arguments

The hostility often expressed toward popularity may be best thought of in relation to the commonplaces of classical rhetoric. The Latin phrase for commonplaces, *locis communis*, bears etymological similarity to both our English "common" and "community." This similarity is appropriate, for the commonplaces were, in the words of Sharon Crowley and Debra Hawhee, "available to anyone who spoke or wrote the language in which they were couched and who was reasonably familiar with the ethical and political discussions taking place in the community. No experts need apply" (76). Because they were based in common sense and belonged to the community, commonplaces ensured that not exclusively experts could make arguments in the public sphere. Now, commonplaces are built by a process of perceived community consensus and can change over time. As Crowley and Hawhee explained, a rhetor has little interest in evaluating them as true or false; the commonplaces represent what the community believes to be true (84).[2]

An exhaustive list of commonplaces is found in Aristotle's *On Rhetoric*. Aristotle links commonplaces to the artistic modes of persuasion and considers them a part of logos along with deduction and the enthymeme. He further divides them into two kinds: the common (or *koina*) and the special

(or *eide*). The *koina* do not focus on any particular subject and may be employed toward any argument subject. The *eide* focus on specific subject matters. These classifications easily map onto the ways popularity has been (and still is) discussed. People argue from conjecture (a *koina* tactic) when they evoke a mythical past in which popular culture was not debased by corporate ownership and monopoly interests. The case for highbrow versus lowbrow interests depends on the *koina* of the greater/lesser, as does the argument that a text is more authentic if fewer people seem to like it. Additionally, popular culture itself has become such a topic of debate that it has become an argumentative *eide*. The go-to arguments about popularity are so prevalent that it's almost impossible to talk about popular texts without wandering through them.

To establish a commonplace, it first must be rigorously thought out. Nobody could accuse British cultural studies of not thinking through their objections and criticisms (one of the many reasons their insights are still written about today).[3] The problem is that, over time, a commonplace idea threatens to become a rote and routine utterance that lacks exploration of the argument's premises and awareness of why it's made.[4] Past arguments and theories so permeate US cultural studies (and the minds of pop culture consumers) that they offer easy inroads into talking about popular texts. Of course, this may be part of their appeal. As Crowley and Hawhee explained, commonplaces are intimately related to ideologies. They become a body of belief that helps us make sense of the world while simultaneously suggesting that others have made sense of the world in the same way. They
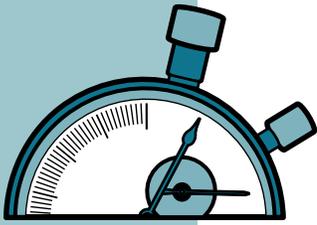
may be experienced as an individual given that we encounter and adapt them through personal experience. However, "they are not entirely private; experiences, and our memories of them, are influenced by prevailing cultural attitudes" (77). They circulate through discussion and provide entry points to check one's beliefs against another's.

**The Big Scary Commonplace of the "Mass"**

Commonplace arguments against popularity are built upon an even more nefarious commonplace that fuels their seductive appeal. Namely, they revolve around commonplace arguments against the "mass." The idea of the mass grew quickly with intellectuals and thinkers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Henrik Ibsen's 1882 play, *An Enemy of the People*, highlighted "the isolated, righteous individual as victim of a corrupt mass" (Carey 5). The founding of the Eugenics Education Society in the 1880s posited scientific grounds for eliminating the inferior breeds that flocked together into the base masses. In *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche argued that "a declaration of war on the masses by higher men is needed" (77); however, John Carey noted

> what this intellectual effort failed to acknowledge was that the masses do not exist. The mass, that is to say, is a metaphor for the unknowable and invisible. We cannot see the mass. Crowds can be seen; but the mass is the crowd in its metaphysical aspect—the sum of all possible crowds—and that can take on conceptual form only as a metaphor. (21)

A metaphor, yes, but one that proved

useful as intellectuals dealt with fears of capitalist production and ideological influence. For example, the Frankfurt and Birmingham Schools both employed the commonplace of the mass (albeit in different ways). For the Frankfurt School, the masses are subjected to texts that deal solely in standardization and mass production. The text that becomes popular within the culture industry has no aesthetic value. As Horkheimer and Adorno wrote, "Everything has value only in so far as it can be exchanged, not in so far as it is something in itself" (128). Further, "texts and radio no longer need to present themselves as art. The truth that they are nothing but business is used as an ideology to legitimize the trash they intentionally produce" (95). In short, according to the Frankfurt School, the culture industry ensures that the people remain a mass of consumers so it can structure their work and leisure time in its best interest. For the Birmingham School, people do not have to be passive absorbers of discourse. They can negotiate meaning with the text—a meaning possibly at odds with the producer's intention; however, certain codes may be "so widely distributed in a specific language community or culture . . . that they appear not to be constructed . . . but to be naturally given" (Hall 132). Due to the naturalization of problematic codes that breed inequality or subordination, mass thought and interpretation are easily perpetuated.

Even though both schools make valid points, when talking about popular culture, it's important to separate out academic thought on the subject from the fluid practices of everyday publics. I'd suggest most people aren't concerned with the ideological manipulation hidden deep in their textual entertainment (people are
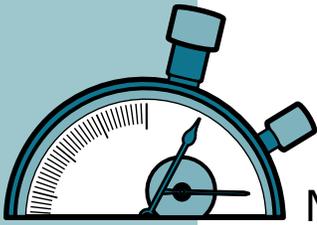
also smarter than given credit for in noticing when it's present). Further, in a criticism of theories that argue for the duped or manipulated consumer, Slavoj Žižek has reformulated Marx's maxim "They do not know it, but they are doing it" into "They know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it" (25). Žižek's statement comes out of Peter Sloterdijk's notion of cynical ideology. Both authors suggest that nonacademic fans and critics of popular culture know that the commonplace of the mass is problematic; however, it still proves useful in different ways. Whereas modern elites found one general mass of uncultured people sufficient for their purposes, in popular usage, conceptions of the mass are more differentiated. Now, people construct masses on the fly: a mass of "Justin Bieber Fans" to express fears about the cookie-cutter production of art, a mass of "Avril Lavigne Fans" to express fears about the co-opting of punk *ethos*, or a mass of "Grand Theft Auto Fans" to argue that violent texts create violent users. People construct different conceptions of a mass based on their personal and contextual needs.

With the construction of different kinds of masses, there exist subsets of masses that people don't mind feeling connected to if they are the "right" ones. Or, more accurately, we don't feel like we're part of a mass when we're surrounded by (or feel related to) people who agree with us on the value of a text. When there is perceived agreement, the mass is conceptually turned into a community (or what Herbert Gans refers to as a "taste public"). Other members of this community may be just as technically unknown as the mass, but we are more likely to give them the benefit of the doubt and to assert their personhood. We want to stand out from

a bland mass; we want to be associated with the perceived benefits of the community.

The Personal Relationship to Commonplaces

If standing out from the mass is so appealing, then why do consumers perpetuate commonplaces that have been constructed by the agreement of so many other faceless people? Perhaps, just as we perceive those in agreement with us as a "community," buying into the commonplace doesn't feel like we are sacrificing our individuality. Although constructed socially, its power lies in how we come to it on—what feels like—individual terms. With the argument-ness of the argument obscured through entrenched use, the commonplace gets treated like an essentialized given that is just out there. Likewise, the commonplace either affirms or creates dissonance with our personal experiences, but the choice to use it or not feels individually made. This is especially true with the negative commonplaces about popularity since they encourage people to argue against the experiences, values, and practices of others. They are commonplaces that value a very modernist notion of the individual (one that is autonomous, immune to influence, and attentive to hierarchies), and all of them assert this individuality at the expense of others.

But we always have a perceived notion of the kinds of people who like a text. When these masses co-opt your favorite underground indie band, your relationship to the band hasn't changed; the problem is the now perceived connection to a mass of people with whom you don't want to be associated. Strangely, since people usually flock to
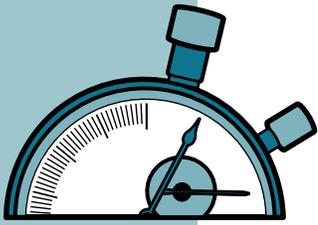
and connect with others who possess similar interests, it's most likely that someone making arguments against popular texts knows very little about the actual people or actual texts he or she is critiquing (how many people mock *Twilight* without having ever read a single word?).

Likewise, when fans think about people with similar interests, unless they know them from personal experience, the process of generalization is similar. Without access to a fleshed-out image of whom they are, people elevate what little information they know about the others' tastes (They like *Mad Men*) and fill-in related conclusions (I like them because people who like *Mad Men* are smart enough to appreciate strong writing and characterization). To think about popularity is to always be thinking about other people. Whether an individual mentally turns them into a "mass" or a "community" tells us a lot about how one thinks about the benefits or harms of the text associated with the grouping.

The Rational Appeal of the Commonplaces

I suspect that most people don't want to think their value judgments and assessments of others are fueled by gross generalizations, simple categorization, and (questionably) causal links. We fancy ourselves rational, nuanced, and critically thinking animals, and commonplaces help perpetuate this fantasy. Commonplaces operate through deduction, induction, and enthymematic reasoning. They utilize common examples that can be dissected as evidence. They have the appeal of beliefs supported by a firm system of logic. The commonplaces do a fine job of applying rationality to our

thinking about both people and texts because they locate essential qualities in the texts themselves and assume predictable effects on masses of people.
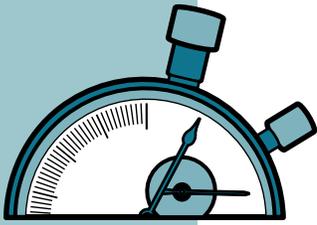
Perhaps the greatest draw of commonplace arguments against popularity is how this focus on textual effects provides a gloss of rationality and causality over irrational and unconscious behaviors found in both ourselves and others. If thinking about popularity were not glossed over with convenient commonplace arguments about textual effects and predictable behaviors, then the perpetuation of our many personal fictions would be threatened. We want to think that we can resist what we think needs resisting. We want to think that we can do it consciously and with purpose. We want to think that we are in relative control of the tastes and values that we hold to be so personal and intimate. Finally, we sometimes want to ignore that other people influence and affect the tastes and pleasures that we enjoy.[5]

In the end, I'm not calling for a simple reversal in which popularity is uncritically embraced as an essential good. I'm suggesting that cultural theorists need to revisit the commonplace arguments about popularity's perils and not uncritically accept premises that stall potential developments in the study of popular culture. In the most straightforward of terms, I'm arguing that theorists look closer at the complexity of popularity itself. As Lawrence Grossberg aptly summarized, "When it is at all considered, popular culture is treated as if it were either high art—amenable to the same kinds of critical concerns and practices as the more institutionally sanctioned
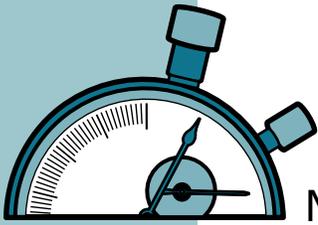
forms of culture—or documentary evidence—as if its status as popular were insignificant to its active insertion into the lives of people" ("Putting" 177). That "status" is not as simple as a textual quality or predictable ideology. Popularity itself is often complex, irrational, and unconscious. Textual and ideological analysis, though useful at times, are not the only tools at our theoretical disposal.[6] Recognizing and exploring how irrational drives and desires shape conceptions of popular culture offers a more productive direction for scholarly work than recycling commonplace and rote objections—no matter how seductive they may be.

Endnotes

1. These are not entirely satisfactory summations of the various schools' complex positions. There are many books that go into detail regarding their history and theories. For the thoughts of early mass culture anxieties, see Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* (1960). For an excellent history of the Frankfurt School, see Martin Jay's *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research* (1973). For the Birmingham School, see Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe, and Paul Willis's edited collection *Culture, Media, Language* (1996).

2. I don't fully agree that a rhetor has no interest in evaluating whether commonplaces are true or false. Though, in this essay, I'm adopting that view— somewhat. I'm interested in exploring why people like using them and, simultaneously, how they can encumber new directions of inquiry.

3. Although it's easy to dismiss the Frankfurt School for their palatable elitism, it's important to consider the contexts in which they wrote. Based on the failure of the proletariat and the tragic rise of Nazism through public propaganda, their fears were historically situated and critical of the Marxist thinking that considered itself out of time. Further, their move to America and the witnessing of further proliferation of propaganda techniques and capitalist entrenchment fueled a desire for "authentic" art and expression. Likewise, the Birmingham School rigorously engaged the polysemous possibilities of semiotics and Antonio Gramsci's earlier writing that reworked the concept of hegemony. Their willingness to give popular culture serious attention

(and to give audiences interpretive agency through Stuart Hall's encoding/ decoding model) was a fundamental development in pop culture studies. In short, neither school can be accused of intellectual laziness.

4. Lawrence Grossberg explains how these familiar arguments have led to a dead end and a general lack of surprise in cultural studies discussions: "You always find domination just where you expected it (e.g., the capitalist media produce sexist, racist, homophobic, Eurocentric, etc., messages), and there is little you can do except stand outside such messages and rally against them; you always find resistance just where you expected it; the only response is to turn the means of cultural production over to the dominated (e.g., as if it were guaranteed that the form and content of cultural productions from the margins would embody a different and correct politics since, presumably, marginal populations are always resisting)" (*Dancing* 275).

5. Regarding my liberal use of "we," I side with Lawrence Grossberg who wrote, "My use of 'we' is neither referential nor singular. It is intended to be slippery and multifunctional . . . . It is an invitation to belong within the space opened up by my discourse . . . . It is an invitation to care" (*Dancing* 26).

6. The claim that scholars don't look at "popularity" might seem ridiculous considering the existence of journals like *The Journal of Popular Culture*; however, a close look at most of its content reveals the continued pursuit of textual analysis, and the pop culture texts under consideration are usually not ones that have a staggering degree of popularity (theorists seem to prefer "cult" hits like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* or narratively
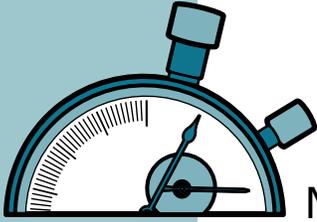
complex texts like *Lost*). When massively popular texts are looked at, the approach is often based in pointing out their shortcomings as pieces of narrative or ideology. Popular texts might be getting examined, but their actual popularity often remains untouched.

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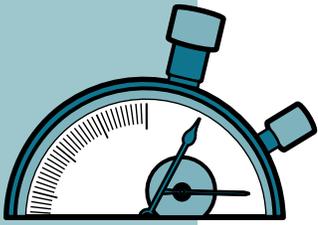
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