

**Elite, Popular and Mass Literature:
What People Really Read**
Journal of Popular Culture, Volume 16, Summer 1982, No.1

Peter Nagourney

One of the main distinctions between elite and popular conceptions of literature resides in the way in which the term "literature" is defined. Elite literature assumes a hierarchy of "texts" based upon the imposition of distinction, conferring admission to the pantheon of classics, by a relatively small group of critics and teachers. Their judgments shift with time, and the list of acceptable authors changes, especially for recent admissions, but the critical conferring of distinction, usually by specialized studies, admission to curricula and biographies, remains consistent. "Popular" literature is a specialized simplification, a catch-all phrase usually including whatever texts-"best-sellers" -happen to be commercially successful in the culture at any time. Questions of quality and excellence may be raised, but only after the basic popularity of these texts has been registered. Texts which are read most become, by definition, popular literature, and whether or not they incorporate excellence of the sort presumably embodied in officially sanctioned literature is an issue whose outcome has nothing to do with their identity as popular literature.

This shift in the discussion of literature, away from the post hoc definition of certain texts as "literature" to the practical labelling, as literature, of what is read, is a basic and important one in the establishment of Popular Culture as a separate and significant cultural discipline. However, a review of studies of popular literature makes apparent that the shift has been artificially limited, to the extent that most of what is studied as popular literature is closer to elite literature than to what people really read. Understanding the nature of this limitation and the reasons for its existence would give a more genuine approach to popular literature as the literature of everyday life.

Citizens of contemporary society read all the time, and any investigation into popular reading which limits itself-whether to previously established genres like westerns and science fiction, or even to more recently defined genres such as graffiti, advertising and tattoos--is as restricted as an elite definition of literature that selects a few texts read only by relatively few individuals in limited cultural contexts.

In other words, Popular Culture's study of popular literature must include all popular readings, with no limitations imposed by printing format, commercial sales, nature of transmission or manner of appearance.

What people of a culture read is their popular literature. When seen in this perspective popular literature must be recognized as including all the ephemeral, incidental and fragmentary written codes which surround us as inevitable consequences of our culture. In short, any written language which, in any context, is read by large numbers of people should be considered a part of popular literature. Insisting upon printed, bound, commercially distributed texts in traditional formats immediately limits the category of "popular" to book or magazine reading. Subjects which normally have been treated only in isolation, if at all, like graffiti, sky writing and decorated clothes (for example) must all be placed in context. Then they can be discussed in terms of their quantitative appearance in society, their relative powers to define and affect us and their relative importance as language artifacts which share the same potential incantatory powers as traditional magical slogans and take on some of the same imaginative dimensions of so-called traditional and traditionally-treated popular literature.

Within the Popular Culture discussions the concept of literature is almost entirely restricted to individually or serially published texts. Fiction for adult audiences receives much more attention than children's or juvenile literature, and studies of magazine publications occur only occasionally. Within the category of popular fiction, studies are distinguished by subject matter and theme; the first ten volumes of the *Journal of Popular Culture*, 1967-1977, contain essays discussing fiction in the subcategories of detective, science fiction, occult, religion, nature-wilderness, the South, blacks-racism, slavery-anti-slavery, Indians, cowboy-American West, railroad, war, sports-athletics, romance, gothic, women-feminism, children's and juvenile literature, fairy tales and, of course, studies of individual authors.

Reviewing this first decade of the *Journal of Popular Culture* clearly reveals the bias of Popular Culture literary studies toward easily recognized genres and traditional formats. Three trends can be discerned in these ten years of publication: the discussion of Popular Culture themes in popular literature, the discussion of Popular Culture themes in elite literature and the discussion of elite literary themes in popular literature. The remaining category, the discussion of elite literary themes in elite literature, is obviously excluded by definition from the field of Popular Culture and thrives elsewhere as the foundation of traditional literary studies.

The relatively small number of studies isolating nonconventional categories of texts people read -studies of newspapers, chapbooks, posters, diaries, railroad timetables, comics and cartoons, advertising, graffiti and slogans-emphasizes the tradition-bound nature of most popular culture

studies of popular reading. "Reading" is still assumed to be the traditional leisure-time, voluntary activity it always has been in reflective literary studies; thematic and subject-matter categories have been expanded to include popular and minority topics but qualitative questions of literary and aesthetic particularity or excellence have been largely avoided. The student of popular literature still approaches his subject much as his colleagues in traditional departments of literature always have done. By considering "reading" to be that operation performed by a segmented (even if expanded) audience upon recognizable published texts (however deviant their subject matter) contemporary students of Popular Culture are less innovative in their study of popular reading habits than they would like to believe. An article surveying the same texts I have considered, by Gregory H. Singleton, criticizes "subtle elitist predilections" and the dominance of "methods of literary criticism."

There are two concepts which must be examined more carefully if we are to resolve the difficulties surrounding this limitation in Popular Culture studies. One concerns our use of the term "literature," the other our notions about the act of reading. The dictionary definitions of "literature" range from the elite notion of belles-lettres to the popular one of printed material of any kind. If we expand upon the significant shift in perspective I mentioned earlier, in which we consider literature to be that which masses of people read, rather than that which has been uncritically and traditionally prescribed as literature in its received forms, we can assume that our definition of popular literature must be clearly weighted in favor of the popular notion of literature as printed material of any kind. But in fact if we consider our focus to be the act of reading by a popular audience, we can see that the limitation of literature to "printed" material is still too restricting. Reading requires only written language, of any sort, and whether scribbler, scribe, typewriter or printing press has formed the letters should be considered merely an accident of history, economics and technology.

In relation to the act of reading and its importance to this redefinition of popular literature, a basic assumption of all literary studies, both elite and popular, has been that reading is a voluntary activity. This assumption enables social and literary critics to make judgments about popular taste by measuring quantitative success in book and magazine sales, assuming free markets and reader choice. However, one of the most distinctive features of reading, as an intellectual act, is that it is anything but a voluntary activity. The airport newsstand browser, choosing between detective and adventure pulps for a long plane ride, is of course exercising voluntary choice, but our browser's eyes, confronted by the racks of printed titles, have no choice but to read the words catching his/her attention.

Once a reader has learned the relatively easy key to our phonetic alphabet, the decipherment of all written texts possible with different combinations of our 26 letters and punctuation symbols is potentially within his grasp. Furthermore, once the rules of phonetic decipherment have been mastered, the essentially linear nature of our written language and the sequential left-right order in most written formats thereafter become the conventions within which all written texts are perceived. With these few skills, all the potential magic of reading is available. The process is made especially clear in an African novel Marshall McLuhan quoted from:

I gradually came to understand that the marks on the pages were trapped words. Anyone could learn to decipher the symbols and turn the trapped words loose again into speech. The ink of the paper trapped the thoughts; they could no more get away than a doom boo could get out of a pit. When the full realization of what this meant flooded over me, I experienced the same thrill and amazement as when I had my first glimpse of the bright lights of Konakry. I shivered with the intensity of my desire to learn to do this wondrous thing myself.²

Our culture's social interdependency and economic complexity requires a fully-literate constituency and provides every citizen, through mandatory public schooling, with this tool of reading. That our reading programs have been less than one hundred percent successful has become a topic for serious concern, so basic is the assumption about the need for and importance of literacy among our citizens. Of course every literate citizen, provided with skills sufficient to unlock the symbols and release the trapped words of the world's great literature, does not take advantage of this opportunity. Many perversely choose to read only pulp literature or restrict their voluntary reading to sports or comics or romance accounts. And many more claim to read nothing at all, or at least nothing that fits in traditional categories of either elite or popular literature. Yet all literate citizens nonetheless do read, although not necessarily voluntarily, or in their leisure time, or among the products of our magazine and trade publishers: all literate individuals read thousands of words daily as a necessary and unavoidable part of their movement and participation in contemporary culture.

The signs, names, instructions, labels, advertisements, tickets and numbers which constitute this reading are necessary for the individual's successful navigation of transportation, marketing, manufacturing, communication and commercial systems within which the culture requires daily participation. They are far from our traditional idea of what constitutes the text of our reading, but nonetheless these lowest common denominators of literacy are the readings of all our culture's participants, and as such are the true literature of everyday life. Their ubiquity in

contemporary culture makes them the most common of everyday reading matter. And our nonvoluntary compulsion to decipher all recognizable reading material which passes before our eyes makes them the actual content of our constant reading habits.

Once the mind is educated and trained in the decipherment of letters into words and words into meaning--that "wondrous thing" the African novelist desired -the literature reader is thereafter at the mercy of every meaningful language fragment the culture throws before him. Surrounded by a constant bombardment of print, he has the option of being able to select the relevant or important messages, but only because he has had to briefly scan and read all the messages, selecting only those of importance and ignoring the rest. This is not necessarily an advantage; in fact, the stimulus overload accompanying exposure to any commercial environment, such as Times Square in Manhattan, or, for that matter, the shelves of any modern supermarket, can be traced in large part to the victim's unsatisfiable compulsion to read all the densely-packed written and printed messages confronting her. Substitute for Times Square a pastoral farm scene, and for the supermarket shelves piles of fruit and vegetables in a produce market, and the eye is then freed, by the lack of print, to scan and confront the visual landscape in whatever order seems most pleasing. But paint "CHEW MAIL POUCH" upon our pastoral barn, and introduce price tickets into our produce market, and immediately the viewer must first confront and decipher, and only then perhaps reject and attempt to ignore, these printed messages.

Small children who have recently mastered reading skills clearly demonstrate the indiscriminate attraction printed messages contain. The children read anything and everything, irrespective of context and value, merely for the pleasures of demonstrating their newest skill. Concerned parents attempt to provide graded reading materials of appropriate context to exploit this new interest and develop the talent. But without this guidance children might happily exercise their reading skills upon junk food labels, junk mail and sex and violence headlines in the newspapers. As more experienced readers we demonstrate prior discrimination, but only after a quick reading of all available materials has enabled us to select items of more immediate interest. In moments when our attention wanders and interest floats free, we are all capable of reverting to indiscriminate reading, or, in more relevant terms, to reading as involuntary activity. That this sort of reading act constitutes a significant part of our cultural experience and helps define contemporary consciousness cannot be stated too strongly.

Moby Dick may be the great American novel, but there would be no comparison between the mutual experience of the relatively few readers of

Melville's classic and the almost universally shared experience of American children, rolling about in their parents' living rooms, who have trembled with fear and apprehension upon discovering the label attached to the couch or easy chair which read: "DO NOT UNDER PENALTY OF THE LAW REMOVE THIS LABEL." Who among us has not found himself reading the front, sides, top and bottom panels of breakfast cereal packages, the writing on toothpaste tubes, fine print on bubble-gum wrappers and the graffiti on rest room and telephone booth walls? If we wish to talk about popular literature, and mean by popular that which is most read, and by literature, that which is actually read, it is clear that speaking merely of science fiction or romance novels, as is currently done, is an unacceptable elite restriction.

Reading, more accurately, refers to any comprehensible interaction between a viewer and words, and, as we have just seen, is not necessarily intentional, voluntary or concerned with traditional printed sources. Were reading the truly optional and voluntary activity traditional discussions of literature consider it to be, fewer would object to the presence of billboards on our rural highways. But because the language on the billboard requires our attention, first for decipherment, then for possible response or rejection, we lobby to remove the temptation entirely.

When we shift perspective, as I have just done, we soon discover we are adrift in an ocean of written communication of one sort or another, which all of us find ourselves reading constantly. Even someone who claims not to read any "books" takes in a quantity of words amounting to the equivalent of several novels a year.

There are, of course, questions about the significance of this constant exposure. Joseph J. Arpad argues against their importance in his essay "Immediate Experience and the Historical Method." Although he admits that "Each of us, in our day-to-day lives, experience hundreds of facts and artifacts..," he asserts that they "leave no lasting impression on us.. Many such facts are forgotten almost the moment after they are experienced; not even hypnosis can bring them back for us. In other words, our experience of them is immediate. It is as though they never existed. They form no part of our history."³ His claims about the limits of hypnosis I leave for specialists to dispute, but his dismissal of the effect of such artifacts as billboards and junk mail, two examples he uses, may be more relevant to any single experience than to the cumulative effect constant exposure to these artifacts has upon us. The advertising industry's continually increasing investment, designed to repeat our exposure to their artifacts, may be the escalating ante of failure or the expanding confidence of success. But in either case the result is an increased exposure for us and an undeniable awareness and

expectation of, plus an inclination to see, media-produced messages.

Ubiquitous and unselected fragmentary reading matter, requiring neither finances for their purchase nor leisure time for their appreciation, probably provide a more common cultural denominator than any texts of the sort studied in the pages of Popular Culture journals. These areas of cultural homogeneity, signs, labels, numbers and words on gauges, appliances and the like enter the area of critical study only rarely. My final remarks will be directed to the probable reasons for this exclusion, and some arguments in favor of a contrary trend.

Most scholars, critics and teachers of Popular Culture, however enlightened in their perspective and liberated in their reading, are still trained academics, functioning within the conservative structure of a curriculum embodying their assumptions. These two constrictions combine to explain a good deal of the limitations of the new discipline of Popular Culture. Individuals and institutions differ, of course; I suggest only general principles operating to preserve traditional categories and approaches without specifying which may be relevant in individual cases (although the case of Popular Culture is unique only in its specifics in the history of changing curricula in higher education).

An expanding focus for popular reading studies is constrained by unstated agreements about what the curriculum and field of study for literature in general, and Popular Culture in particular, now is and eventually should be. This is no hidden conspiracy but rather the operating assumptions behind current teaching and publishing practices in the field. Unless specific attempts are made to redefine and expand the nature of reading, there will be little initiative to change these operating agreements from within the field of literary studies. However, as more historians, sociologists and students from non-literary disciplines turn their attention to Popular Culture, awareness of theoretical and methodological limitations will grow, and pressures for change will increase.*

Curricular changes, when they do take place, tend to occur gradually, one step at a time. The shift in perspective proposed here is quite radical, and threatens to destroy familiar conventions about appropriate subject matter within the discipline. If reading no longer refers to hard-bound or soft-bound books, and if pulps and comics are no longer the lower limits. then where shall we draw the line to define our area of inquiry? If all printed matter is appropriate reading matter, should we still ask evaluative questions about different materials? Can graduate programs assimilate dissertations on the very reading habits and texts they have stigmatized or expelled in favor of a "canon"? Can they anticipate dissertations about

bubblegum wrappers? And if the treatment remains serious, and the conclusions useful, should they not welcome such studies?

Is inherent seriousness of subject matter as important as seriousness in approach? Even if the subgenres satisfying popular taste contain no permanent merit, do they not possess generic quantities worthy of description and cultural analysis? Are we prepared to consider these questions yet, or must the new discipline proceed down established paths until it is secure enough to raise these further issues?

The suggested shift to incorporate what may be named "literary ephemera" is not just a radical departure from almost everyone's idea of what constitutes literature. It raises the question of qualifications for students of these new studies. When everyone in the culture is, by definition, equally exposed to the phenomena, and almost no one with the possible exception of obsessive compulsives, trivia buffs, and perhaps a handful of serious students of Popular Culture has investigated the matter as a whole, the question of evaluating studies in this field, quite apart from prior decisions about their ultimate relevance, remains difficult and at present, without reference to established academic models and assumptions. Except for a few areas such as graffiti and advertising, most of the potential topics for study being proposed are as yet undefined genres. So without a classification and identification of the area, subsequent studies will lack definition and context in accepted criteria, even when they are attempted.

The traditional academic training of most students of popular literature results in a tendency to use familiar skills of literary criticism and analysis in examining new texts, and the limits of these skills has meant they are best suited to new texts which differ from traditional ones merely in subject matter and/or quality.⁵ The most appropriate and satisfactory approaches and methodologies for the study of literary ephemera may not yet be identified, and whether current students of literature will be comfortable and familiar with the required skills is a different question entirely. It seems far easier-and safer-to perform familiar tasks of analysis upon conventionally described popular texts than to have to explore new approaches in undefined territory.

There is a general conceptual barrier for academics in thinking about "reading" as any way different from the self-conscious act of gathering intellectual and imaginative stimulation from familiar materials and in specific contexts. Reading as an act involving conscious decision and deliberate dedication of large blocks of time remains the norm. Challenging this definition invites ridicule and hardens the commitment to traditional, elite literary studies. "Books," as tangible, palpable objects, still exercise

special attractions for readers, even though the technological capabilities exist for us to store our entire libraries in a single shoebox of microfiche cards. Not just the bibliophile maintains special feelings about books as objects. We all like to "pick up a good book," and the idea of receiving our quota of printed stimulation on the run, in the random collection of words we come across in our clothes closets, junk mail and street signs, challenges not only our self-image but the foundations of what we have always considered our culture.

Underlying these issues is a prejudice about the potentials for intellectual and imaginative stimulation and interaction available with elite, popular and ephemeral reading material. The critical position of institutional literary scholars has been to examine appropriate and intended responses to a fully-realized idiosyncratic text, usually one taking recognizable form within a conventional genre. This "fully-realized idiosyncratic text," of course, is a critical construction based on a repertory of various critical procedures or reductions (thematic, psychological historical, "great writers" and influence, etcetera), themselves the result of a self-perpetuating isolation of both literary texts and cultural assumptions from the realities of what and how people read in daily life. Consequently, both elite and mass literature are assumed by a prior classification which then allows for these analyses.

However, current trends in literary criticism, specifically reader-oriented approaches to literary analysis, raise the possibility of valorizing individual and even eccentric responses to either idiosyncratic or conventional (i.e., not intentionally imaginative) texts. As the theoretical base of Popular Culture studies is broadened to consider ideas and influences from related disciplines, will suggestions sympathetic to this reorientation be advanced? As Singleton, a historian, explained this point recently, "For a proper understanding of the culture of the populace, an internal criticism of the evidence is often irrelevant. The real question is, how have these items been perceived by their recipients? Put another way, what is presented through the media is not nearly as important as what is received, and the two are by no means identical."

It could be argued that just because of repetition and familiarity, and directly deriving from the limits in length and complexity of most ephemeral reading materials, there will be more options for reader creativity and imaginative response than can be allowed in the fully worked out determinate presentations governing literary perception. What referred to before as the potential incantatory powers of traditional magical slogans, as just one example, are probably more relevant in our reading of familiar literary ephemera than the methodological inferences upon which

studies of reader response to traditional literature have been based. And when we consider the total cultural field producing these ephemera, and relate criticism directly to cultural inquiry, then we will most likely have to redefine "complexity." If studying reading habits in the field of Popular Culture is important as an approach to one facet of mass culture, we must consider what is actually read and not just what an elite critic considers to be of value. The study of how language influences our imaginative and creative faculties depends upon no specific criterion for texts, neither in length, subject, medium or quality. The study of one's own culture is a difficult task. To attempt it while arbitrarily limiting the available data makes the difficult task an impossible one.

Notes

'Gregory H. Singleton, "Popular Culture or the Culture of the Populace,?" *Journal of Popular Culture*, XI(1), Summer 1977, 254-266, p. 254.

*Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York, 1964), p. 84.

*Joseph J. Arpad, "Immediate Experience and the Historical Method," *Journal of Popular Culture*, XI(1), 1977, 140-154, 143.

The "In-Depth" section "History and Popular Culture," in the Summer, 1977 issue of *Journal of Popular Culture* (XI,i) is a step in this direction.

"See Singleton: "The applications of methods of literary criticism (which seems to be the dominant mode of Popular Culture studies) to comic books, popular songs and literature, movies

and television programs implies the assumption that those who consume these products either perceive these items as a single-minded mass or that they mindlessly absorb the messages presented to them by the media elites." p. 254.

"Singleton, p. 254.

Peter Nagourney has published articles on popular culture and literary and biographical theory. He now lives in Detroit, Michigan.