Why We Talk the Talk We Talk

On the Emptiness of Terms, the Processual Un/Popular, and Benefits of Distinction—Some Auto-Ethnographical Remarks

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 Granted, the term ‘unpopular culture’ adds some spice to the soup of terms we usually stir when we talk the talk we are used to (supposed to?) talk in the study of popular culture. ‘Unpopular culture’, to be precise, sounds somewhat more ‘exotic’, even subversive, compared to the more established repertoire of concepts that usually come in dichotomies—‘mass culture’, ‘low culture’, ‘the mainstream’, as opposed to ‘elite culture’, ‘high culture’, ‘avant-garde’, to mention perhaps the most prominent examples. But what’s in it, one might well ask, despite its challenging prefix ‘un-’, which, indeed, somewhat surprisingly, irritates our set of taken-for-granted terms and concepts? My contribution takes this question as a starting point to explore if, and, if yes, in how far thinking and talking about ‘unpopular’ culture might be a fruitful exercise, not so much with regard to the examination of specific popular cultural practices and forms of expression, but rather with an eye on the ways we talk a talk in which the above-mentioned terms, including the ‘unpopular’, are used as categories of self-positioning, rather than as analytical categories.

The inspiration for this essay sprang from the long-winded discussions with my 18-year-old daughter on what is popular and what is not—discussions that I get involved in quite regularly to learn why it is that I (and the things I am doing) are particularly unpopular. This is perhaps no coincidence, as it is exactly these discussions that made me sensitive toward the contingency of the terms and concepts I regularly employ in scholarly discourse. To be more precise, the very fact that the conversations with my daughter happen in a non-academic context made me realize that the dynamics of the debate about what is popular and what is unpopular are highly dependent on the social environment in which the debate takes place. In other words: the debate as well as the actors’ positioning within that debate are processes that are distinctly context-specific. Consequently, claims of what is popular and what is not are, first, relational acts of creating difference, and second, charged with normative implications both in everyday and in scholarly discourse.
Moreover, after some closer inspection of the situations I had in mind, I also came to the conclusion that in the conversations I have with my daughter we rarely use the term ‘popular’, and I think we hardly, if ever, use the term ‘unpopular’. Instead, we refer to a range of synonyms and alternatives, using a more nuanced vocabulary to navigate within this process of positioning ourselves, which, in fact, added to my curiosity about these situations. To be precise, when my daughter says ‘uncool’, she probably means ‘unpopular’, at least this is what I assume. Based on this assumption, then, I observe myself deliberately contradicting her, using ‘uncool’ as a synonym for what I think she would consider ‘popular’ in the first place, i.e. everything that is hit-listed, everything that is a must-have, everything that you have to acquire to be included and, at the same time, to be able to exclude those who cannot afford it. This is also everything I dislike—at least that’s what I keep on proclaiming in these very conversations.

So—I have been asking myself again and again—am I lured into believing in the somewhat too orthodox voice of Adorno telling me, as a parent, to be skeptical of whatever is termed ‘popular’ by my daughter? Me, who considers himself quite familiar with the Birmingham narrative of subversive appropriation and the emancipatory potential of popular culture? Quite intuitively, and somewhat at odds with my academic socialization, it seems that I try to position myself in a debate that, though at least I should be aware that nobody will prevail, is still fought with passion and stamina. Perhaps this is what I do. And so does my daughter, and as the debate continues, I have the feeling that, somehow, both of us lose: my daughter, who is victimized by the culture industry (at least this is the position I observe myself taking), and me too, since I turn out to be worried after each and every conversation, exactly because I realize that I don’t really think that there is something intrinsically bad in popular culture (yet I keep on arguing along these lines).

In the following, I would like to take these highly anecdotal, autoethnographic observations as a starting point for some reflections on what we do when we talk about popular culture, and what this talk does both to us and to popular culture. I would like to begin my exploration by questioning the benefits of the category of the ‘unpopular’ in the first place. In other words: what is gained once we add to the range of dichotomies that scholars in the field of popular cultural studies have been keen to deconstruct, another term that, once related to these dichotomies, might run the risk of perpetuating rather than questioning them? Sure, a term such as ‘unpopular’ might contribute to irritating established concepts and
might thus complicate matters in a productive way, if we ask, as Lüthe and Pöhlmann do in the introduction to this volume: ‘How does unpopularity relate to popular and high culture? Can there even be such a thing as unpopular culture, or is the unpopular at odds with culture itself? [...] What particular fields of popular and high culture distance themselves from or embrace the unpopular?’ (10) However, as irritating as these questions might be, one might as well argue that they indeed frame the unpopular by sketching (and thus perpetuating) a set of established notions and ideas, of popular culture, of high culture, and of certain ‘fields’ that are said to exist in each domain.

But then again, how else should we approach the unpopular, if not through the creation of difference, through the search and identification of the ‘absent’ other, as has been the case with the established definitions of popular culture that all work on the basis of a logic of distinction? Yet, once we accept that ‘popular’ is a relational category and arrive at John Storey’s conclusion that ‘popular culture is in effect an empty conceptual category, one which can be filled in a wide variety of often conflicting ways depending on the context of use’ (1), I think we need to acknowledge that the ‘unpopular’ might be equally empty. If this is the case, then how do we determine the ‘absent other’ of a conceptual category that itself is but an ‘empty category’?

What adds to this epistemological dilemma that results from the double contingency of two ‘empty conceptual category[ies]’ is the highly normative history of the term ‘popular’, which comes with a lot of ideological underpinnings and is charged with a range of connotations, depending, of course, on the specific ‘context of use’, as Storey would argue. Consequently, a concept such as the ‘unpopular’, through its built-in reference to the ‘popular’ as its point of departure, is not only difficult to grasp, but also highly contaminated.

Where, then, do we go from here, if we do not want to abandon the term and still believe that—despite its inherent problems as an analytical category—it might be worth exploring? One way of turning its contingency and its normative dimension from a bug into a feature might be to conceive (in the sense of Storey) of the ‘unpopular’ (e.g. as in ‘unpopular culture’) not as an ontological category, but as a discursive ascription. That is, not as an ‘organic’ or essential characteristic of specific cultural practices or artifacts, but as a highly precarious, momentous, and discursively assigned quality, which is constituted (and vanishes?) within processes of reception, appropriation, and commodification, framed by specific discursive settings which, in turn, operate according to a set of context-dependent
rules and regulations. Acknowledging this processual quality (i.e. the discursive constitution and the 'situatedness' of both categories) may help conceive of 'popular' and 'unpopular' not as a terminological or conceptual dichotomy, but as different moments in the 'appropriation trajectories' of cultural practices and artifacts.

Such a notion of the processual un/popular, then, may indeed unfold analytical potential, as it allows us to describe and understand the politics of positioning in a debate I regularly have with my daughter—a debate that could thus be conceived of as a process of drafting specific subject positions for both of us, subject positions that we accept or not, that we may conform to, but also struggle with or work against. Against this backdrop, the discourse on the popular and the unpopular, in which both terms are continuously redefined, turns into a site for identity formation and transformation, in which different actors, non-academic as well as academic, continuously set out to situate and re-situate themselves, more or less successfully.

What might be helpful for a more precise conceptualization of what is at stake in these situational formations and arrangements is the notion of 'identitarian capital' introduced by Sebastian Thies and Olaf Kaltmeier. Though they specifically look at transcultural processes of identity formation in their theoretical outline of identitarian capital, the concept might serve well to add precision to the description of what is going in the discourse on the 'unpopular'. With reference to Bourdieu, Thies and Kaltmeier argue that identitarian capital is negotiated on what they call 'the field of identity politics' (25 et passim), in which 'all positions are informed by situational components and the interrelation with other actors in the field and can thus be seen as part of complex constellations' (37).

Their notion of identitarian capital, then, is based on the idea that one can 'use' his or her cultural identity as capital in processes of strategic positioning in that field, while these acts of positioning, in turn, may increase or diminish one's 'amount' of identitarian capital, so to speak. For instance, in academic contexts, the identitarian capital accumulated through talks, publications, acquired funding, etc., is a resource scholars may rely upon to strategically position themselves and to draw attention to what they write. The same capital would perhaps affect things negatively in a different context, for instance, in a family argument about what is popular and what is not, where the subject position 'scholar' would not be acknowledged in the same way (if at all). In more abstract terms, 'a person's individual constellation of subject positions may in certain constellations facilitate
intervention [...] or hinder it, while in other constellations the roles might be inversed’ (Thies and Kaltmeier 30).

Accordingly, Thies and Kaltmeier describe identitarian capital as a form of capital that merges together aspects of Bourdieu’s concepts of cultural, social and symbolic capital. Cultural identities comprise habitualized manners, language, education, and emotional belonging, all related to cultural capital as an incorporated form of knowledge about social distinction. Social capital bears on social networks, institutional belonging and political organization. (29–30)

‘Contrary to economic capital,’ they eventually conclude, ‘identitarian capital does not obey a logic of scarcity, but serves as a sort of credit by means of which a certain actor receives recognition and power from his social environment. In this way, it resembles the characteristics of symbolic capital’ (30). As already hinted at above, this credit is, of course, not so easily transferable from one social or discursive environment to another, nor do social or discursive environments automatically acknowledge the capital I bring—to be sure, this is exactly where the trouble starts, as when we talk the talk we talk, the credits associated with this talk is highly dependent on the specific context in which we talk this talk (cf. also Maase).

What’s in it, now, that would further our understanding of the tricky business of talking about the popular and the unpopular? I think the answer could be at least twofold: first, to label something or somebody as ‘popular’ or ‘unpopular’ becomes part of a ‘narration of identitarian positionings and positions’ (Thies and Kaltmeier 39), i.e. whenever I call something ‘popular’ or ‘unpopular’, it may actually tell you more about who I am than about what I have been trying to describe. Moreover, it definitely matters when and where I call something or somebody ‘popular’ or ‘unpopular’, as my authority to say so heavily depends on my identitarian capital, which, in turn, is determined and eventually affected—i.e. diminished, increased, transformed—by the very situational parameters that frame my discursive intervention.

And, to be sure, such narrations of identitarian positionings and positions that draw upon the ‘popular’ and the ‘unpopular’ are manifold and can be found in different contexts: there is, for instance, an Institute for Unpopular Culture, the IFUC, which is—and I quote from the website—‘a San Francisco-based organization that supports emerging artists and promotes artistic attempts to challenge the status quo. By sponsoring subversive or ‘unpopular’ artistic visions, IFUC helps to alleviate artists’
needs to cater to public taste and opinion in order to survive’ (IFUC). Thus, clearly aligning the unpopular with the subversive, ascribing a distinctly political momentum to it, the Institute presents and positions itself as a supporter of cultural ‘dissenters’ and marginalized voices. And, as a more historical part of this narrative of positioning suggests, the Institute seems to have been quite successful in this regard:

The founder of the IFUC, David Ferguson, produced, managed, and directed the careers of musicians like Johnny Rotten (Public Image, Ltd.), Billy Bragg, The Avengers, Lydia Lunch, and Henry Rollins. David also operated a lecture agency in the 1970s which represented the Black Panther Party, Paul Krassner (founder of the Yippie Party), Stewart Brand (founder of the Whole Earth catalogue), and poet Michael McClure. (IFUC)

The Festival of Unpopular Culture, which took place in October 2013, set out to ‘blur the lines between high-art and pop culture,’ thus implying quite a different notion of the ‘unpopular’ (‘Festival’). SCRAM magazine, which calls itself ‘a journal of unpopular cultures,’ has been chronicling ‘the neglected, the odd, the nifty and the nuts’ (SCRAM), whereas a past exhibition at the Southbank Centre in London called ‘Unpopular Culture’ featured a selection from the Arts Council Collection consisting of ‘modern British paintings, sculpture and photographs’, thereby associating with the unpopular a notion of avant-garde, or vice versa (‘Unpopular Culture: Grayson Perry’).

In all of these examples, the ‘unpopular’ implies something slightly different. What these narratives have in common, though, is that all of them use the term ‘unpopular’ not only as a descriptive category, but also, and more significantly so, as a normative category that serves the purpose of symbolic distinction. The term and concept of the ‘unpopular’, then, indeed becomes a signifier that is used to draw lines of demarcation and to position oneself. The discourse that draws on these terms and concepts is therefore ‘primarily a political discourse’ (Tragaki 8). ‘The politics of who says what is ‘popular’ [or ‘unpopular’, M.B.],’ writes Dafni Tragaki, ‘what it means, and against what it is defined, and of course, when, where, and for whom, reproduce ‘the popular’ [as well as the ‘unpopular’, M.B.] as an ideologically pregnant category’ (8). And though we all know, we sometimes forget that this discourse not only ‘happens’ in the field of cultural production, but also among those who observe this very field, i.e. us.

In other words, ‘observers are considered actors in the field which, just as all other actors, necessarily take the role of observers’, employing a
‘hermeneutics of the other’ (high culture, popular culture) to continuously position and re-position themselves and, as Thies and Kaltmeier explain further, ‘in relation to identity politics the field cannot be observed from a neutral perspective without the observer’s transforming the field by his power of vision and division’ (44). Starting from here, then, one may ask what or in how far this present volume contributes to the discourse on the popular and the unpopular respectively; or, to put it into a more Bourdieusian diction, to: ‘transforming the field by […] vision and division’ (Thies and Kaltmeyer 44)? What narrations of identitarian positions and positionings does it foster, and who or what is positioned where through these very narrations?

Perhaps I am writing about processes that we are all aware of anyway. And perhaps this sounds all too didactic. Still, I consider these issues worth remembering, because, I must admit, I sometimes forget about them; for instance, when I’m arguing with my daughter, i.e. when I am subjected to another discourse in a familiar and at the same time unfamiliar environment, in which my capital as a scholar does not facilitate, but, somewhat paradoxically, hinders discursive intervention in a debate that I think I am familiar with.

So what I would like to emphasize is the necessity of acknowledging that the descriptive and normative dimensions (and usages) of the terms ‘popular’ and ‘unpopular’, as both categories of analytical differentiation and categories of social distinction are intertwined, at times even conflated, both in public and scholarly debates. In other words, the discussion on the difference between popular and unpopular is, more often than not, a discussion on the difference between you and me, or us and them, or X and Y, discussing the difference between popular and unpopular. And it is here, one might argue, where the double contingency mentioned above, i.e. the difficulties in defining the unpopular because of the difficulties in defining its other, turns out to be highly fruitful and productive, as it allows for a great diversity of narratives that serve the purpose of strategic positioning.

I believe that a critical awareness of both conflation and contingency is all the more important, as (most of the) scholars in the field of popular culture studies, I assume, take part in public and scholarly as well as private debates on the popular and the unpopular. At least I do. Consequently, the set of ideas and stories I produce about what is popular and what is not, in order to act according to the various subject positions ascribed to me—which, by the way, constitutes what Thies and Kaltmeier call the ‘microphysics of identity politics’ (31)—is always, and necessarily, framed by ‘multi-sited contextuality’ (38). This contextuality, then, should make us conceive of actors in the
field, such as me and my daughter, as 'networks of dispositions' rather than 'homogenous, coherent, and entirely self-determined subjects' (Thies and Kaltmeier 38). No wonder, then, that in our everyday life—negotiation of the identitarian capital we invest for strategic purposes—my daughter and I are not really talking to each other about what is unpopular and what is not. We are, in fact talking, about each other (and our relationship) without talking about each other (and our relationship) explicitly. If I told her that, she would not believe me. No way. Considering the aforesaid, however, this does not come as a surprise. It turns out to be part of the game.

Notes

1. Whenever I use ‘we’ in this essay, I refer to an implied readership that I assume works in the field of popular cultural studies and, thus, has become aware of the problems attached to the term ‘popular’. The ‘we’ is not at all meant to suggest any generally agreed upon consensus on terms, concepts, or normative implications, but—in accordance with the auto-ethnographical approach that this essay pursues—is supposed to denote a particularly self-reflexive dimension of the practice of talking about un/popular culture, which is central to my argument. Of course, this is not to imply either that ‘we’ share the same or similar experiences with this practice and the ways of reflecting on it. In addition, the use of the first person pronoun both in the singular and plural form is also a deliberate attempt at self-positioning in a debate—why else should I write such a piece?

2. As already hinted at, Thies and Kaltmeier conceptualize identitarian capital in and for a different context, thus its applicability to what I describe here might be limited. Nevertheless, I allow myself to refer to their term and concept as it nicely captures the processes of negotiating and positioning that become visible in the debates on the ‘un/popular’.

Works Cited

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