Unpopular Culture

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Published by Amsterdam University Press

Pohlmann, Sascha and Martin Luthe.
Unpopular Culture.
Amsterdam University Press, 2016.
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Cultural Studies and the Un/Popular

How the Ass-Kicking Work of Steven Seagal May Wrist-Break Our Paradigms of Culture

Dietmar Meinel

‘Steven Seagal. Action Film. USA 2008.’
—German TV Guide

The first foreigner to run an aikido dojo in Japan, declared the reincarnation of a Buddhist lama, blackmailed by the mob, environmental activist, small-town sheriff, owner of a brand of energy drinks, film producer, writer, musician, and lead in his first film (cf. Vern vii), 1980s martial arts action film star Steven Segal is a fascinating but often contradictory figure. Yet, Seagal is strikingly absent from the contemporary revival of seasoned action-film heroes such as Sylvester Stallone, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Bruce Willis, Jean-Claude Van Damme, Dolph Lundgren, and Chuck Norris in *The Expendables* (2010), *The Expendables 2* (2012), and *The Expendables 3* (2014). In contrast, ‘starring’ in up to four direct-to-video releases each year over the last decade, Seagal has become a successful entrepreneur of B movies. The (very) low production values of these films, however, highlight rather than conceal his physical demise as incongruent, confusing, and Godard-style editing replaces the fast-paced martial arts action of earlier movies. While his bulky body has become a disheartening memento of his glorious past, his uncompromising commitment to spiritual enlightenment and environmental protection arguably elevates him above the mere ridiculousness of his films.

In this essay, I will explore Seagal and his oeuvre as he moved from acclaimed martial arts action star to bizarre media figure in order to devise a framework for un/popular culture. By reading the thirty-year long career of Seagal as consistently unpopular and consistently popular, I appropriate and utilize what James Storey describes as the ‘absent other’ (i). In *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* (2010), Storey draws attention to the dualistic dimension of any attempt to define the popular. Since most conceptualizations juxtapose the popular with an ‘absent other’—whether folk, high, or working-class culture—any analysis will be ‘powerfully affect[ed] by the connotations brought into play when we use the term “popular culture”’ (Storey i).
Indeed, definitions of popular culture and its absent others utilize quantitative and qualitative categories. In his *Keywords* (1983), for example, Raymond Williams describes popular culture as a phenomenon ‘well-liked by many people’ to which ‘well-liked by few people’ functions as its unpopular other. While to be ‘disliked by many people’ constitutes a second other in the example, this notion of a detested, yet widely known phenomenon suggests an additional dimension of the un/popular. Rather than a quantitative assessment, the popular can, as Williams maintains, also designate ‘inferior kinds of work (cf. popular literature, popular press as distinguished from quality press); and work deliberately setting out to win favour (popular journalism as distinguished from democratic journalism, or popular entertainment)’ (237, emphases in original). Although different qualities define the value of a text (independent of its quantitative distribution), often high art serves as this absent other of popular literature or entertainment. In Williams’s example, the notion of a ‘democratic journalism’ also foreshadows a third category of the popular in addition to its quantitative (known vs unknown) and qualitative dimension (inferior culture vs high art). As Williams also deems popular culture to represent ‘the culture actually made by people for themselves’ (237), in this Marxist understanding of popular culture, an authentic culture of the working class or ‘the people’ exists that functions as a space of resistance against capitalist appropriation and commodification.

Similarly, among the six definitions of popular culture James Storey offers, the notion of popular culture as a quantitative measure, an anti-thesis to high art, and as a (authentic) culture of the people figure prominently. Even when Storey lists definitions describing the popular as ‘mass culture’, as part of the ideological apparatuses, or as an essential feature of hegemony (cf. 5–12), these latter notions all delineate a political function as well. In this sense, Storey’s definitions equally underscore the quantitative, the qualitative, and the ideological or conceptual dimension of popular culture that Williams alludes to. Linked to each other even in their absence, thus, the notion of the popular, the unpopular, and high art necessitate a shared conceptual framework I label the un/popular.

Having appeared (and often starred) in over forty films, Steven Seagal experienced the height of Hollywood blockbuster popularity and the lows of direct-to-video unpopularity as he evolved from promising action film performer to blockbuster star to direct-to-video celebrity in the course of his career. This eventful trajectory from box office draw to low-budget entrepreneur serves to designate the intimate connections between the popular and the unpopular—and allows me to assess the quantitative dimension of
the un/popular by looking at the commercial success and failure of his films. Given that the actor developed and maintained a particular Seagal formula inseparable from his public persona in his films, his music, and TV shows, Seagal also mirrors auteur practices and postmodern authorial strategies. Since the martial artist further advocates an environmentalist position in his otherwise sensationalist action films, Seagal also echoes those post-postmodern theories that link postmodern metafictional play with a ‘sincere’ desire for political consciousness (cf. Saldivar, ‘Historical Fantasy’ 593–96). In appropriating auteur theory, postmodern performativity, and notions of the post-postmodern, I analyze the cultural text ‘Steven Seagal’ within the context of high art and investigate the qualitative dimension of the un/popular in order to question the dichotomous construction of inferior popular art versus superior (and unpopular) high art. So instead of attempting to understand the popular, the unpopular, and high art as autonomous, individual phenomena, I explore their numerous links to provide a first understanding of Steven Seagal’s un/popularity.

Yet, when Martin Lüthe and Sascha Pöhlmann characterize the unpopular as ‘that which is not part of a (perceived) mainstream mass culture but not part of a bourgeois high culture either’ (18) in their introduction to this volume, both situate the phenomenon in-between high and popular culture and call attention to the individual quality of the unpopular. Looking at unpopular texts may broaden our prevailing paradigm of culture, particularly because the absence of popularity (as a quantitative measure) and high cultural ascriptions often justify a disregard for these texts. Since scholars refer to either the artistic quality of a text or its widespread reception to legitimize the study of a particular phenomenon, in this logic, texts only possess validity if they are representational—of a particular social formation, period, or idea (cf. Hatt and Klonk 22–25). Due to its (absence of) particular qualities, unpopular culture disrupts this Hegelian notion predominant in literary studies and cultural studies. Indeed, unpopular texts function poorly as representations of their period and their social formations, because hardly anyone reads, watches, or appraises these productions. Unpopular culture such as the later Seagal productions eventually question this representationalist paradigm and necessitate novel approaches to conceptualizing culture.
From Box Office Draw to Home Entertainment Entrepreneur

In his first four films, *Above the Law* (1988), *Hard to Kill* (1990), *Marked for Death* (1990), and *Out for Justice* (1991), Steven Seagal established himself as a promising action film performer. Because all of the films grossed a multiplicity of their production costs at the box office,¹ Seagal’s first four releases must be considered successful genre productions.² His films did not rival the commercial success of the most popular action films of the late 1980s—*Top Gun* (1986) or *Die Hard* (1988)³—but Seagal could compete with the established stars of the genre. Although Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger had paved the way for the action film hype of the 1980s, their films often did not perform better at the box office or match the revenues of the Seagal films.⁴ Judging by the people willing to see his films, Steven Seagal has to be considered popular in the period from 1988 to 1991—particularly within the context of the action film genre. The commercial success of his early films propelled Seagal to star in the high value productions *Under Siege* (1992), *On Deadly Ground* (1994), *Under Siege 2* (1995), and *Executive Decision* (1996). In these films, Seagal was supported by well-established actors such as Michael Caine or Tommy Lee Jones or starred alongside Kurt Russell and Halle Berry. But when the last three of these high-value productions failed at the box office, the commercial fiascos initiated his descent into direct-to-video obscurity.⁵ As his follow-up productions *Glimmer Man* (1996) and *Fire Down Below* (1997) led to even greater box office losses,⁶ his next film, although initially planned for cinematic release, was eventually exclusively distributed in video stores: *The Patriot* (1998) thus ushered in a period of direct-to-video productions. Although Seagal reappeared on the silver screen two additional times with mixed success—in *Exit Wounds* (2001) and *Half Past Dead* (2002)⁷—his box office career ended in 1998 and was supplanted by a long-lasting one in direct-to-video projects. Starring in films exclusively released for the (rental) video, DVD, and Blu-ray market, Seagal maintained a vocation in film with almost no significant commercial success to merit high-value productions again.⁸ Although his following 23 releases in nine years (2001–2010) generated enough revenue to continuously finance his next video endeavor, the martial arts actor Steven Seagal has virtually disappeared from public notice since the late 1990s. While his name may still ring a bell even among people uninitiated to his films, Seagal has become a faint memory of some cult 1980s action films or a synonym for cheap and obscure B movies.⁹

This transformation from blockbuster draw to obscure media figure represents a decisive quality of the Seagal phenomenon. In contrast to
similarly cult and obscure 1980s action stars such as Jean-Claude van Damme or Chuck Norris, Seagal actually became popular starring in high-profile action films. But in contrast to Stallone, Schwarzenegger, or Willis, Seagal eventually disappeared from (big budget) silver screen productions to submerge in the (quantitative) meaninglessness of direct-to-video releases. While other actors build a more popular or a more unpopular career, Steven Seagal functions to exemplify the quantitative aspects of the un/popular. As Seagal also appropriates a variety of high-art strategies throughout the popular and unpopular phases of his career, his oeuvre allows us to similarly explore the ways in which his auteur performance and post-postmodern practices further shape the un/popular. Much as Seagal’s commercial un/popularity, the artistic continuity in his work contests the traditional high art (unpopular) and low culture (popular) divide.

Performing the Post-Postmodern Auteur

French auteur theory considers directors to be authors who express their aesthetic and political visions through film. With its inception in the Cahier du Cinema in the 1950s, auteur theory—or la politique des auteurs, as Francois Truffaut first named the approach in his article ‘A Certain Tendency in the French Cinema’ (1954)—attempted to alter the status of films and directors. ‘[A] director must exhibit certain recurrent characteristics of style, which serve as his signature’ (132), asserts Andrew Sarris when introducing auteur theory to the Anglophone world in ‘Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962’. In connecting the feel, the look, and the meaning of a film to the thoughts and ideas of its author-director, auteur theory ascribes a ‘distinguishable personality’ to directors and defines these men and women to be the ‘criterion of value’ (Sarris 132). Since motion pictures had not been considered a valid form of art well into the 1950s and cinematic texts were consigned to the realm of mass culture [...] commonly dismissed with terms such as “entertainment” and “escapism” (Wexman 3), the rationale behind appropriating literary theory for film analysis thus attempted to elevate the works of a small number of directors to the status of high art. In acknowledging the limits set by the demands of the commercial Hollywood production system, auteur theory furthermore locates the artistic quality of a director in privileged moments of a film, which urges critics ‘to master the entire body of a director’s output (or oeuvre) so that a pattern of these privileged moments of personal vision could be discerned’ (Wexman 3). Because of its emphasis on the entire corpus of an auteur-director, its appreciation of the
necessities of commercial production modes, and its desire to define film as high art, auteur theory offers a valuable frame within which to situate the work of Steven Seagal.

But since no one considers Seagal a particularly artistic director and he has only directed one film in his entire career, auteur theory may appear impracticable and inadequate for his work. By starring in most of his 42 films, however, Steven Seagal is an apt example of what pop critic Vern labels the ‘Badass Auteur Theory’ in his *Seagology: A Study of the Ass-Kicking Films of Steven Seagal* (2012). In this theory, the ‘badass (or star) [...] carries through themes from one picture to the next [...] it is the star that connects the body of work more than the director’ (Vern v). This augmented version of auteur theory acknowledges and privileges the coherence stars create over the course of their films.

In many respects, the characters played by Seagal encourage such a comparative approach. From his early performances in the 1980s on, Seagal established a narrow set of character traits his later roles continuously rehearse:

- enlightened men with shadowy CIA pasts, westerners with expertise in Asian ways (aikido, swords, herbology, Buddhism), various types of mafia (Italian-American, European, Asian), music (blues, bluegrass, reggae, much of it performed by or written by Seagal himself), the protection of animals or the environment. (Vern vi)

As Seagal films ‘always end up featuring some of his obsessions’ (Vern vi), the identity of the film artist spills into the films just as character traits transcend the cultural text. Already the very first shots of his first film, *Above the Law* (1988), exhibit this entanglement of artist persona and film character. Opening with childhood memories of protagonist Nico Toscani, his voice-over tells the story of a teenage adolescent fascinated by martial arts who eventually journeys to Japan to become a highly respected aikido master. While the film score softly plays classical music to further embellish this narrative of individual success, the cinematography shows childhood pictures and newspaper clippings of Steven Seagal during his time in Japan when the actor-to-be trained to become an aikido master. By using the childhood photos of the artist Steven Seagal and his biographical experiences to introduce its protagonist, *Above the Law* questions their clear-cut distinction.11 As virtually all Seagal characters share these traits, his films establish a pattern in which the biography of the actor is almost synonymous with his roles and vice versa. Intimately involved in writing
and producing many of his films, Seagal can bring, as Vern summarizes, ‘a certain personality, formula and set of motifs to pretty much every picture he ever does’ (vi). Even when not immediately part of the creative process, this Seagal formula functioned as an artistic and commercial strategy, as the actor explains: “I haven’t always been dealt scripts that were palatable and movies that I thought were even makeable, and I think one of the secrets of my success is that I changed them into something that was almost watchable” (Vern vi, emphasis in original).

This interrelation of artist persona and film character is a common phenomenon in the Hollywood film industry; producers, film-makers, and actors have always employed biographical information to enlarge and embroider a star persona in order to promote a film (cf. Harris 42–43). Most famously, Marilyn Monroe has (been) exploited (by) the assumed similarities between her roles, her personal experiences, and her private persona as her symbolic meanings ‘far outrun what actually happens in her films’ (Dyer 3) —the star system as such ‘is based on the premise that a star is accepted by the public in terms of a certain set of personality traits which permeate all of his or her film roles’ (Harris 41). As a consequence, Christine Gledhill encourages intertextual readings and interdisciplinary analysis of stars and their roles as one coherent phenomenon (cf. xii).

Instead of an individual film, then, star studies define the actor or performer as the principal analytical category and encourage to explore the entire body of his or her work—which includes a broad variety of material beyond the cinematic text. This concentration on individual artists, the concentration on the entire work of a performer, and the notion of a coherent personal vision resemble the analytical approach of auteur theory. Since the celebrity status of film auteurs also helps ‘produce and promote texts that invariably exceed the movie itself, both before and after its release’ (Corrigan 101), star studies and auteur theory allow us to understand the Seagal phenomenon as part of mass culture (the star) and high art (the auteur).

By the time of Seagal’s first blockbuster production Under Siege (1992), his character Casey Ryback did not need an intimate introduction anymore as audiences already knew in advance about the superior close-combat abilities of Ryback/Seagal. Neither an average street cop nor a lowly cook, Nico Toscani and Casey Ryback—and Mason Storm and John Hatcher and Gino Felino and Forest Taft—are all highly decorated elite experts in martial arts, weaponry, and military tactics of some sort. These characters also share a clandestine past as well-trained combat men who work some uneventful job after their dishonorable discharge from the army—usually due to their
insubordination to a corrupt or immoral superior. And while no similar military records of Seagal exist, his ambition to raise, in his words, “political conscientiousness” (Vern vi) echoes the motivation of his characters to act by a general moral code and ‘do what’s right’ (*On Deadly Ground*)—even if this includes the disobedience of the chain of command and leads to a dishonorable discharge. These shared political ambitions are particularly highlighted in films addressing ecological devastation. Condemning the commercial exploitation of nature, Forest Taft, Jack Taggart, or Dr. Wesley McClaren express an “environmental conscientiousness” (Vern vi) in *On Deadly Ground* (1994), *Fire Down Below* (1997), or *The Patriot* (1998) that is also dear to Seagal.

In addition to the martial arts expertise, a potpourri of imagined Asian cultures, political and environmental concerns, and an affinity for Buddhism, Seagal characters also often possess talents the actor indulges in. As a musician, guitar player, and lead of his blues band Thunderbox, Steven Seagal is not only credited with composing and co-composing soundtracks; in *Fire Down Below* (1997), protagonist Jack Taggart also picks up a guitar.

Finally, the reality TV show *Steven Seagal: Lawman* (2009-2010) further blurs easy distinctions between artist persona and film character. The show follows police reserve deputy ‘Steven Seagal’ of Jefferson Parish, Louisiana—something the artist Steven Seagal has been supposedly doing for the past twenty years. Although the reality TV format asserts to portray ‘Steven Seagal [...] as a real-life cop in Louisiana’ and maintains to be ‘No Act’ (as the tagline for *Lawman* asserts), the scripted, filmed, and edited nature of the reality TV format undermines any claim to authenticity. Throughout the show, people on the streets also recognize protagonist ‘Steven Seagal’ as a film star rather than as an officer of the law. Being asked for autographs, people assure Deputy Sheriff ‘Seagal’ that he could beat Jean-Claude van Damme but would lose to Chuck Norris in a fight, or apologetically state that “this is my first time going to jail, Mr. Stallone” (Vern 382). *Steven Seagal: Lawman* further underscores the performativity of identity, since the artist Steven Seagal stars as Reserve Deputy Sheriff ‘Steven Seagal’, a ‘martial artist, movie star, blues musician, herbalist, acupuncturist, dog owner, philanthropist and swordsman turned Deputy Sheriff’ (Vern 371) who became a film star by playing police officers with martial art skills, Buddhist beliefs, blues music affinities, and philanthropic world views. Because the show eventually reveals the clandestine past of star-auteur Steven Seagal working for a law enforcement agency, *Lawman* further authenticates his film characters and fictionalizes his biography.
Although this interplay of public persona and film role(s) is a common phenomenon for Hollywood’s star system, in contrast to his action film colleagues Stallone, Schwarzenegger, or van Damme, Seagal never ventured beyond the action film genre to shoot romances, comedies, or science fiction—no out-of-character performance challenged the linkage between artist persona and film figure. While in the work of Stallone, Schwarzenegger or van Damme biographical information also spills into their films, starring as a police officer of the twenty-second century, as a cyborg sent from the future to wipe out humanity, or as a video-game character distinguished these performers from their roles.\textsuperscript{14} Not surprisingly, the very first works in Seagal’s career already announce the amalgamation of artist persona and character when film posters and video covers declare that ‘Steven Seagal is Hard to Kill’ (\textit{Hard To Kill}), ‘Steven Seagal is Marked for Death’ (\textit{Marked for Death}), and ‘Steven Seagal is Out for Justice’ (\textit{Out for Justice}).

In spite of this continuous play of references, Steven Seagal does not merely exhibit (or appropriate) postmodern authorial strategies, since the performer also consistently articulates political or ethical positions. Indeed, his work can be considered what Ramon Saldivar has labeled ‘post-postmodern’, since the Seagal oeuvre attempts to give ‘a sincere explanation for murder, cruelty, and evil, without resorting to postmodern irony or metafictional play’ (‘Imagining Cultures’ 12). Condemning corporate power, denouncing the primacy of profit, decrying a propagandistic media culture, demanding increased environmental fines, and advocating people’s rights,\textsuperscript{15} the earnest, sincere, and passionate ending of an otherwise ludicrous and over the top action film such as \textit{On Deadly Ground} (1994) fashions ‘links between the fantasy of the imaginary and the real of history’ (Saldivar, ‘Imagining Cultures’ 13, emphasis in original). These intersections of postmodern play and ‘political and environmental conscientiousness’ is a defining quality of Seagal’s work and the post-postmodern.

\textbf{Unpopular Popularity}

The different quantitative (known vs unknown) and qualitative (inferior mass culture vs high art) frames of reading Seagal provide a preliminary summary of what may constitute the un/popular. First, I deemed Seagal highly popular during the first decade of his career as his films succeeded at the box office; and although his big-budget productions mostly failed, the willingness of the studios to spend large budgets on a Seagal film further signals his initial popularity. Additionally, I appropriated auteur theory,
explored the conjunction of artist persona and film character, and hinted at the post-postmodern qualities of the Seagal oeuvre to explore its links to different high art discourses. Since Seagal’s commercially successful films exemplify these practices and strategies, the early phase of his career combines the quantitative feature of the popular and the qualitative elements of high art.

Second, after his commercial peak in the mid-1990s, Seagal descended into the realm of direct-to-video productions and, thus, became quantitatively unpopular. The B movie obscurity of his productions, however, does not conceal their postmodern and post-postmodern quality as numerous aesthetic features of his early work define Seagal’s later releases—particularly his career as a musician and his TV show further encourage to situate the complete ‘Steven Seagal archive’ within high art authorial strategies. The direct-to-video films additionally exhibit a cinematic quality fundamentally different from the commercially popular Seagal films. Due to the poor acting, the cheap mise-en-scene, the incoherent fight choreographies, and the chaotic editing, the former often mirror the discontinuous filming pioneered by Jean-Luc Godard, while the inconsistencies in the plot further deconstruct the immersion aimed for by Hollywood cinema. In this sense, Seagal’s direct-to-video releases (and maybe B movies in general) share numerous cinematic elements with the French New Wave, whose directors utilized these strategies to challenge the established codes and boundaries of Hollywood cinema. As an artist engaged with questions of authorship, the direct-to-video-Seagal continues to epitomize contemporary high art practices, but the marginal audience interest in his DVD premiere releases speaks to his increasing quantitative unpopularity.

Third, despite the numerous high art practices in his oeuvre, Seagal achieved his commercial success in a highly conventional genre by starring in predominantly generic productions. Although I have not analyzed their politics of representation, films such as Marked for Death (1990) or Under Siege (1992) exhibit highly normative narratives and imagery in the decidedly Hollywood fashion of mainstream film. As his highest grossing film Under Siege (1992) also apes the prominent Die Hard (1988) formula, critics deemed the film an inferior copy of the Bruce Willis vehicle upon release. Due to this absence of narrative originality, cinematic innovation, or ideological transgression, Seagal’s commercially successful theatrical releases represent the popular in its derogatory sense of inferior ‘mass’ culture.

Finally, thanks to the dearth of any artistic, aesthetic, or narrative sophistication viewers often resent the action film genre in general and the Seagal films in particular as low forms of art or entertainment. Actually, this is not
an inaccurate assessment with regard to direct-to-video productions and Seagal. Neither watched by a noteworthy audience, nor attributable with considerable cultural relevance, *The Foreigner* (2003), *Submerged* (2005), *Today You Die* (2005), or *Pistol Whipped* (2008) could very well be considered completely unpopular. Since these video releases do not appear to follow any artistic aspirations but merely the necessities of low budget productions, one may find my assertion of auteur theory, postmodern performativity, and the post-postmodern stretching the boundaries of these concepts. As Seagal never indicated any kind of ambition or desire to utilize these theories in his films, a fourth conclusion may simply deem his later work (quantitative) unpopular and (qualitative) irrelevant.

These different readings of Steven Seagal, as I have suggested in the beginning, should function to expose the interdependence of the popular, high art, and the unpopular—and complicate a coherent definition of the un/popular. These categories, characterized whichever way, cannot be thought separately. And while the career of Steven Seagal has enabled me to explore the intricate conjunctions of the quantitative and qualitative features of the un/popular, the commercial insignificance (unpopular culture) and cultural irrelevance (popular culture) of his direct-to-video releases—his unpopular popularity—fosters questions about the necessity to study this and similar phenomena. What are, in other words, worthwhile avenues of thought opened up by the un/popular?

One inquiry could, for example, explore the normative and subversive functions of the direct-to-video sphere. In analogy to the early star system, which emphasized the morality of its protagonists to portray the cinema as ‘a healthy phenomenon’ (De Cordova 29), questions about the (re)production of social norms through the un/popular become prominent. Richard de Cordova, for example, situates the attempts of the film industry to convey a proper, wholesome image of its protagonists within cinema’s (commercial) competition with a theater scene that the public often perceived as scandalous and frivolous in the 1910s. Following highly aesthetic and narrative conventions, the Seagal films exemplify a set of social norms and can similarly help to analyze hegemonic ideological formations in the present. Due to its commercial irrelevance, however, the un/popular can also function as a marginal space where subversive, aesthetically daring, and unruly practices find a realm for expression and open up novel perspectives about the direct-to-video market, its stars, and their roles within the broader cultural industry.

Yet, in assessing the subversive and normative potentials of the un/popular, the financial limitations of these projects particularly (and
involuntarily) impact the ‘healthiness’ or unruliness of un/popular texts: as the poor cinematic quality of B movies often challenges or undermines the seamless immersion pursued by Hollywood films, novel conceptualizations of the film apparatus and its interpellatory possibilities become necessary. This (unwilling) instability of the un/popular may thus help to expand our understanding of the subversive and normative features of cultural texts in general.

A different approach to the un/popular could investigate the limitations posed by the star persona. By developing a household name or brand identity, stars and auteurs successfully compete in a highly volatile commercial market, but they are simultaneously tied to their public persona and, consequentially, to audience expectations. These may become inhibiting when stars aim to (or have to) alter their persona, yet hope to maintain their popularity (cf. Harris 45). While successful child actors encounter this challenge most prominently, the un/popularity of Steven Seagal encourages us to explore whether his public persona and his roles are particularly suited for a B movie career. In what ways, for example, is the Seagal formula bound to fail in large box office productions but especially prone to success in the direct-to-video context? In this sense, un/popularity offers a frame of analysis for different authorial strategies.

Finally, in his seminal _Heavenly Bodies_ (1987), Richard Dyer describes stars as texts through which contemporary society negotiates ‘what it is to be a human being […] [or] the particular notion we hold of the person, of the “individual”’ (8). Seen from this perspective, the un/popularity of Seagal may offer insights, for example, into popular forms of male individuality in the early 1990s (cf. Malin 31-37) and its altered notions in the present. The revived popularity of aging action stars such as Stallone, Schwarzenegger, Willis, van Damme, and Norris as well as the continued unpopularity of Seagal could help to chart contemporary conceptions of male individuality through the un/popularity of particular star personalities.

These eclectic suggestions indicate the possibilities of the un/popular within studies of culture. To explore the normative and subversive potential the un/popular holds, to investigate the limitations of an un/popular star persona, or to read the un/popular within the context of individuality, however, confines the un/popular and the unpopular to the representational paradigm of cultural studies. Quantitatively negligible and artistically irrelevant, however, the unpopular challenges our conceptualizations of culture as these texts seemingly fail to offer any insight into a broader understanding of the world.
In analyzing the transnational dimensions of American exceptionalism, Winfried Fluck identifies a shared premise in national as well as transnational approaches to American studies. The defining hypothesis in the study of culture, he asserts in his essay ‘Men In Boats and Flaming Skies’, is the assumption that ‘art can reveal deeper truths about an age or a society, because it is the result of a drive towards self-consciousness of the universal spirit’ (142). Although the Hegelian presupposition of a universal or ‘metaphysical’ spirit, as Fluck is quick to add, does not represent the principles of cultural studies today, ‘the assumption that the study of art is important because it provides something like a privileged form of self-recognition of a culture, nation, or group is alive and well, even in such seemingly far removed approaches like race and gender studies or postcolonial studies’ (142). Whether referring to its cultural significance or its wide distribution, scholars often invoke one of the two to justify the analysis of a particular archive (cf. Fluck 143)—actually, literary studies and cultural studies would not be imaginable without this presupposition.

Seen from this perspective, the un/popular sustains this concept of culture. By exploring unpopularity in the context of the popular, the approach maintains the primacy of the latter and the supposition about art and culture as privileged sites of knowledge. Instead of using the unpopular merely as another puzzle piece within our established frame of culture, however, to position the unpopular at the heart of our conceptualization of culture would shared fundamentally transform our understanding of culture. In exposing the shared Hegelian premises of national and transnational approaches to American studies, Fluck asks whether we can imagine any alternatives to our established approaches to culture. After all, in order to question nationalist assumptions about culture, transnationalism cannot merely be satisfied with envisioning borderlands and contact zone or exposing intricate Atlantic and Pacific networks while continuing to employ a Hegelian understanding of culture. If we do not conceptualize cultural texts as representing nations, societies, or groups, however, the question arises ‘on what grounds cultural and aesthetic objects can still carry cultural and political meanings’ (Fluck 158).

Although I have highlighted the intersections of the unpopular, the popular, and high art throughout my essay, the particular features of unpopular culture—the absence of any artistic quality and the highly limited distribution of the text—offer yet untraversed paths in developing a novel paradigm of cultural studies. After all, the increasing democratization
of the technological means to produce cultural texts (literature, music, film) and publish them on the internet demands to engage with questions concerning the quantity, the politics, and the aesthetics of unpopular material. Beneath these novel archives of unpopular texts lurk deeper issues about the legitimation of cultural studies. So far, any study of culture has rationalized and validated its significance by asserting to offer ‘a privileged form of self-recognition’ (Fluck 142) not available to the natural sciences—particularly in, although not limited to, the continuous competition for financial funding and social legitimation. While the engagement with unpopular culture may further foster stereotypes about the arbitrariness and irrelevance of the humanities, thinking about these texts may also expand the democratizing potential the study of culture possesses. Neither of particular artistic value nor widely distributed, the utterly insignificant films, music, and performances of Steven Seagal in the past fifteen years eventually present us with an opportunity to question the Hegelian premise of literary and cultural studies.

Notes

2. It is worth mentioning that Steven Seagal began his career by starring in his first film (with Sharon Stone and Pam Grier in supporting roles).
tion budget: 55 millions). Although all these films roughly earned the same amount of money at international box offices (not to mention the rental and video market), these films were considered flops by the studios.


8. Since information about direct-to-video releases (or rental revenues) for individual films is hard to acquire or often not available, a direct comparison between the DVD premiere movies and theatrical releases remains challenging. In general, home entertainment revenues of all VHS, DVDs, Blue-Rays, and online distributions (sales and rentals) reached some 18 billion dollars in 2013 (cf. Fritz http://www.wsj.com), while studio investments in direct-to-video productions reached some three billion dollars in 2005 (cf. Hettrick and Lerman). These numbers indicate the value of the video entertainment market in general and the value of DVD premiere movies in particular. Yet, blockbuster Hollywood production, successful box office releases, and popular TV shows dominate the home entertainment market nonetheless—the annual list of the 100 top selling DVDs in the United States (since 2006), for example, contains no single Seagal film (cf. www.the-numbers.com). As direct-to-video productions do not necessarily aim for a wider audience and often struggle to compete with the high-value theatrical releases repackaged for home entertainment, this absence of Seagal films does not come as a surprise.

At the same time, the home entertainment and the direct-to-video market present the entrepreneur Seagal with profitable business opportunities. The martial arts performer earns up to four million dollars ‘for his work in a DVD premiere movie’ (Hettrick and Lerman). Indeed, many of his productions are shot on a ten-million-dollar budget and ‘[t]he top titles in the DVD premiere movie segment, including Seagal’s Belly of the Beast released last year [2004] and The Foreigner in 2003, each covered their budgets with the $14.3 million and $16.7 million generated from home video in the U.S. alone’ (Hettrick and Lerman). While these direct-to-video budgets correspond to the production costs of the early Seagal films in the 1980s (without factoring in inflation and changed production costs), the present-day direct-to-video releases compete in a highly enlarged and diversified market and profit from a dedicated base of supporters as ‘Seagal’s audience […] remains the same whether it is a movie in theaters or a DVD premiere’ (Hettrick and Lerman). For Steven Seagal, then, his films continue to provide a source of income and considerable wealth, but since the home entertainment and the direct-to-video market profoundly expanded and diversified in the last thirty years, his profits are not necessarily a sign of wide-spread popularity. In addition,
when ‘live-action DVD premiere actors, particularly in the action genre, still suffer professional snubs for being a “direct-to-video star”’ (Lerman and Hettrick) in 2005 and when ‘[t]he biggest taboo in American cinema may be the direct-to-video (DTV) market’ (Erickson) even in 2013, these attitudes capture the unpopularity of this segment of the film industry.

9. Seagal maintained a degree of renown and visibility not just through his direct-to-video releases. Rather, his extra-diegetic endeavors allowed the martial arts experts to continue his career as a celebrity. Beyond his films, TV shows and music Seagal also remained visible through tabloids and yellow press stories (particularly surrounding his divorce). With time, his early films earned Seagal a cult following making the martial arts expert known to people who may have never seen his films. In this paper, however, I will not focus on these and similar strategies of forming a public (or celebrity) persona.

10. Norris and van Damme had their breakthrough as leading stars at U.S. box offices with Missing In Action (1984) which earned 23 million dollars (production budget: 2.5 millions) and Bloodsport (1988) which 12 million dollars (production budget: 1.1 million) respectively. Until their appearance in The Expendables II (2012) both did not appear in any high value production, and in the 2012 film both play supporting roles with Stallone, Schwarzenegger, Willis, and (Jason) Statham playing key characters in the film.

11. In his Seagalogy, Vern writes that Seagal ‘really did go to Japan as a young man, he may have really hung around in the general vicinity of the founder of aikido, and later he definitely did run an aikido school, unheard of for a white man in Japan […] However, Seagal’s claims and innuendo about working for the CIA are at best unverifiable’ (5).

12. Hollywood developed, systemized, and subsequently exploited this star phenomenon from its inception in the 1910s. Whether during the tightly managed studio system period until the 1950s or in the less regulated Hollywood era afterwards, stars were often considered to transcend their films and, thus, manufactured a coherence among a set of otherwise diverse films (cf. Barker 1–22).

13. At Seagal concerts, audiences similarly conflate the different personas when people chant ‘Ryback, Ryback’ (cf. Vern 482).


15. The following quote is an excerpt (!) from a longer speech Forrest Taft, the protagonist of On Deadly Ground (1994), gives at the very end of the film: ‘The concept of the internal combustion engine has been obsolete for over fifty years. But because of the Oil Cartels and corrupt government regulation, we and the rest of the world have been forced to use gasoline for over a hundred years. Big Business is primarily responsible for destroying the water we drink, the air we breathe and the food we eat. They have no care for the world they destroy, only for the money they make in the process […]’
these people broker toxic waste all over the world. They basically control the legislation, and, in fact, they control the Law. The Law says, ‘no company can be fined over $25,000 a day’. For companies making $10,000,000 dollars a day by dumping lethal toxic wastes into the ocean, it’s only good business to continue doing this. They influence the media so that they can control our minds. They have made it a crime to speak out for ourselves, and if we do so we’re called ‘conspiracy nuts’ and we’re laughed at. We’re angry because we’re all being chemically and genetically damaged, and we don’t even realize it [...] Our most common and God-given rights have been taken away from us. Unfortunately, the reality of our lives is so grim that nobody wants to hear it. Now, I’ve been asked what we can do? I think we need a responsible body of people that can actually represent us rather than Big Business. This body of people must not allow the introduction of anything into our environment that is not absolutely biodegradable or able to be chemically neutralized upon production. And finally, as long as there is profit to be made from polluting the Earth, companies and individuals will continue to do what they want. We have to force these companies to operate safely and responsibly, and with all our best interests in mind. So that when they don’t, we can take back our resources and our hearts and our minds and do what’s right’ (On Deadly Ground).


Works Cited

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