
TIME

From Concept to Narrative Construct

Ed. by Jan Christoph Meister, Wilhelm Schernus

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(Narratologia / Contributions to Narrative Theory)

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METALEPSIS IN POPULAR CULTURE

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EDITED BY

Fotis Jannidis

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MICHAEL BUTTER

Caught between Cultural and Literary Studies

Popular Fiction's Double Otherness¹

1. Introduction

Arguably the most controversially discussed text that I write about in my book *The Epitome of Evil*, which analyzes representations of Adolf Hitler in American fiction (cf. Butter 2009), is David B. Charnay's *Operation Lucifer: The Chase, Capture and Trial of Adolf Hitler*. This novel, originally published in summer 2001 and thus before the attacks of 9/11, is an alternate history based on the premise that Hitler is captured by the CIA in Havana in 1952 and abducted to the military base at Guantanamo, where he is extensively questioned and tortured before he is finally tried and executed in the U.S. Significantly, *Operation Lucifer*, by all standards a badly written thriller, does not condemn these acts of violence committed by the American authorities but justifies them as legitimate means in the struggle against the absolute evil that Hitler and his Communist and Islamist allies represent. Charnay, a former adviser to several conservative politicians, received extensive counseling from Pentagon officials and military judges while planning and writing the book. His novel, therefore, hints at how some policy-makers and their advisers perceived the world at the turn of the millennium; it testifies to a cultural climate that existed in the U.S. well before September 11, 2001, and that was strengthened but not created by the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

Surprisingly, however, when I presented a preliminary draft of the chapter dedicated to the novel at a conference on *Rhetoric, Politics, Ethics* in Ghent in 2005, the discussion did not directly focus on the political implications of the novel but on its literary value. The chair of the panel I was on, a distinguished expert on postmodernist literature, chided me for making an argument about cultural values and predispositions by drawing on what he called »a piece of sub-literature«. And a member

¹ This article is an expanded and revised version of a paper I presented at the conference *Improbable Plots? Making Sense of Contemporary Popular Fiction* at the University of Delhi in March 2010. I wish to thank the discussants, especially Shaswati Mazumdar and Dorothee Birke, for their many helpful comments. I am also indebted to Birte Christ, Tilmann Köppe, and *JLT's* anonymous reviewers for equally valuable comments on earlier versions of this article.

of the audience challenged my reading suggesting that what I took at face-value was actually intended to be a parody, that the novel did not confirm essentialist notions of good and evil but rather challenged them by demonstrating that the Americans do not behave any better than their Nazi enemies, that, in short, the novel was critical rather than affirmative.

Diametrically opposed as these arguments appear to be at first sight, they are both informed by what I would like to call the ›modernist bias‹. I will elaborate on this concept and its origins later. For the moment it may suffice to say that I employ the term to characterize and explain the ongoing tendency of literary criticism across the various philologies to more or less unconsciously accept the aesthetics of high modernism as the norm to which literature from all epochs and of all kinds has to live up to in order to be considered an artistic achievement and thus worthy of the attention of literary critics. The panel's chair, rightly, I am convinced, assumed that *Operation Lucifer* was not ›Literature‹ with a capital ›L‹ – to borrow the term Ken Gelder employs in order to refer to the self-consciously artistic texts he distinguishes from popular fictional ones (cf. Gelder 2004).² But he concluded, wrongly, that the novel was therefore not an acceptable object of study. The audience member, by contrast, tried to legitimize my engagement with the text by arguing that *Operation Lucifer* was not popular fiction but ›Literature‹. What she criticized me for was that I had failed to recognize it as a »complex«, »ambiguous«, and »highly ironic« work of art.

While I had somewhat anticipated such comments, I was nevertheless surprised that hardly anybody in the audience jumped to my support. After all, the conference was attended not only by literary critics but by a great number of cultural studies scholars as well. And the way I approached a popular novel corresponded almost exactly to how some of them had tackled the political implications of filmic, graphic, or journalistic representations in previous panels. These scholars did not support me – not because they disagreed with my reading but because they were not there. The panel I was on was entitled »Pulp Politics« and featured three talks exclusively dedicated to fiction. This, as I realized later, was the reason why there were no cultural studies scholars present. They had gone to the panels devoted to film, television, or political rhetoric. That they did not attend a panel on popular fiction is as telling as the reactions of the literary scholars who did: If literary studies either considers popular fiction unworthy of scholarly attention or tries to turn it into high literary fiction, cultural studies tends to ignore popular fiction, because the discipline has always had the objective of moving the scope of cultural artifacts

² Gelder's study is an excellent exploration of the field of popular fiction. However, as his claim that »The two key words for understanding popular fiction are *industry* and *entertainment*« reveals (2004, 1; his emphasis), he nevertheless corroborates rather than challenges the modernist bias against popular fiction that I seek to overcome.

worth studying beyond literature, of extending the notion of ›text‹ to comprise all signifying systems.

As a result, popular fiction is largely neglected by both literary and cultural studies, no matter whether these two different fields are located in separate departments, as they usually are in the United Kingdom and the United States, or live under the roofs of a single philology department, as they frequently do in Germany. Popular fiction, then, I wish to argue here, is characterized by a double otherness: as popular *fiction* it is not what people in cultural studies are chiefly interested in, but what they tend to leave to their colleagues in literary studies; and as *popular* fiction it is not what people in literature departments are particularly interested in, but what they tend to leave to their colleagues in cultural studies. The former, I would like to suggest, is an unconscious form of othering, since most scholars in cultural studies would no doubt agree that popular fiction is important and needs to be investigated. It is simply not what most of them concentrate on, as their absence from a panel exclusively dedicated to fiction suggests. The latter, by contrast, is a conscious form of othering, a means by which scholars of literature continue to define their object of study in a very traditional way.

In what follows I elaborate on these biases and discuss some of the reasons for their existence. I begin with cultural studies (2.) and then move on to literary studies (3.). Since the biases against popular fiction mean that a significant and important part of both fiction and culture in general remains unstudied, I conclude by suggesting a way out of the conundrum (4.). In order to overcome the liminality of popular fiction, I contend, we need to get rid of the concept as such. In fact, I wish to propose that we should stop talking about ›popular culture‹ in general. We must move beyond compartmentalizing the cultural field and begin to pay more attention to the multifarious processes of exchange, influence, and transformation between all kinds of cultural artifacts.

Before I begin, however, two caveats are in order. First, I am obviously overstating my point here. Clearly, popular fiction is far more frequently and intelligently studied today than fifty years ago, and much valuable work on the subject has been done by scholars from both literary and cultural studies and by scholars from other disciplines.³ Hence I am sure that whenever I mention such a study in this essay my readers can think of a few more similar ones. I doubt, however, that they could name a dozen or more such examples, as we all easily can for other areas studied by the two disciplines that I am interested in here. My point, then, is simply that popular fiction is still not yet studied as extensively and intensively as its importance for con-

³ Work done in book studies, a field that emerged during the 1990s, for example, is often concerned with popular fiction. However, what book studies scholars usually focus on are less the actual texts and how they are read but more the general modes of book production, distribution, and reception. Cf. Radway 1997, and Stark 2007 for outstanding examples of such scholarship. In addition, the social sciences sometimes draw on popular fiction in order to examine how fiction impacts on peoples' beliefs and value systems. Cf. Yanarella/Sigelman 1988 for an interesting example.

temporary and past cultures would merit. I may be guilty of painting a somewhat distorted picture here, but I do so because this throws the issues at stake into sharper relief. Second, I argue here as an Americanist trained and now teaching at an English department at a German university. Although I suspect that my claims hold true for other philologies as well, I am only speaking here about American and British cultural and literary studies, as they are institutionalized in North America, Germany, and other parts of Europe.

2. Beyond Literature: Cultural Studies

John Storey's seminal textbook *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*, undoubtedly the most important and successful introduction to the vast field of popular culture and the ways cultural studies scholars approach it, contains a revealing passage in which Storey discusses the work of Marxist theorist Louis Althusser and his concept of the ›problematic‹. As Storey explains, »a problematic consists of the assumptions, motivations, underlying ideas, etc., from which a text [...] is made. In this way, it is argued, a text is structured as much by what is absent (what is not said) as by what is present (what is said)« (2009, 72). According to Storey, Pierre Macherey's *A Theory of Literary Production* (1978) is »the most sustained attempt to apply the technique of the Althusserian [...] reading to cultural texts. Although, as the book's title implies, Macherey's main focus is on literary production, the approach developed in the book is of great interest to the student of popular culture« (ibid., 74). This last sentence is a curious one indeed, as it positions all kinds of literature, and thus also popular fiction, which is the subject of Macherey's book, in opposition to popular culture. Storey, after all, does *not* say that Macherey's book is of interest to the students of popular culture *in general*. By phrasing the sentence as he does, he unwittingly implies that popular fiction is not a part of popular culture and thus not what cultural studies should be concerned with. And indeed, if one applies the Althusserian concept of the problematic to Storey's own text – looking for, as Storey puts it, »the assumptions which inform it (and which may not appear in the text itself in any straightforward way but exist only in the text's problematic)« (ibid., 72) – one finds that, except for a very few pages dedicated to the genre of the romance (ibid., 140–147), popular fiction is strangely absent from his text.

Significantly, Storey's textbook is not an exception in this respect, as popular fiction is mostly absent from many other publications devoted to popular culture as well. John Fiske, for example, a scholar with whom Storey does not have that much in common and whose uncritical celebration of popular culture he rejects, also hardly ever mentions literary texts in his *Understanding Popular Culture* (1989), and none of his more elaborate interpretations in this book is dedicated to a literary text. Instead, Fiske analyzes jeans, tabloid newspapers, shopping malls, television game shows, and movies, everything imaginable »from the beach to Madonna,

from TV news to Sears Tower«, as he programmatically declares in the opening paragraph of the book (1989, ix). What is more, even in a publication such as Tony Bennett's *Popular Fiction: Technology, Ideology, Production, Reading* (1990), whose title promises an exclusive engagement with literature, more than two-thirds of the collected essays focus on film and television and not on literary fiction. And while, for example, *The Journal of Popular Culture* and *The Journal for the Critical Study of Popular Narratives* at least occasionally feature essays on fiction, there is no academic journal that specializes in popular literary forms and their meanings. There is a *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, and there is a *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, but there is no equivalent for popular forms of literature.⁴

Why, then, do Storey, Fiske, and Bennett, as well as the editors of and contributors to the journals just mentioned, most of them without doubt careful and meticulous scholars, marginalize and even exclude popular fiction from the realm of cultural studies? It is important to note here that this is not a conscious othering, but an unwitting one that is indicative of the underlying motivations that drive cultural studies. Storey, Fiske, Bennett, and the others do after all talk about literary texts, albeit only occasionally, and they would no doubt willingly acknowledge that popular fiction is a key area of popular culture and thus an important object of study for cultural studies.⁵ But the wide-spread marginalization of popular fiction, I would like to suggest, occurs in these and other studies because of the reason I have already hinted at in the introduction: since its inception cultural studies has been driven by the desire to expand the range of ›texts‹, of objects worth studying beyond literary texts. Storey, Fiske, and the contributors to Bennett's volume and the *Journal of Popular Culture* all constantly talk of ›texts‹ and ›readings‹, but they hardly ever have that in mind what a scholar from literary studies would refer to as a text. Instead, they think of phenomena as diverse as comics, films, commercials, fashion, architecture, sports, or gardens as texts whose meanings they can decipher and present in a reading. And their neglect of popular fictional texts, lamentable as it might be, should come as no surprise. Many cultural studies scholars, it seems safe to assume, have become what they are in order to escape the narrow confines of departments forcing them to study ›literary‹ texts alone. They want to study everything that belongs to a given culture, from sexuality in

⁴ Since its inception in 1967, *The Journal of Popular Culture*, for example, the official organ of the Popular Culture Association, has published only 118 articles whose titles contain the word ›fiction‹. Since the journal featured about 2,500 essays during that time, this is obviously not a lot. Moreover, one has to take into account that some of these essays are not concerned with literary fiction but with film or television instead and that others investigate authors such as Kurt Vonnegut, Philip Roth, or Gabriel García Márquez, whose texts intertextually relate to but clearly do not belong to the field of popular fiction.

⁵ Bennett has even co-authored a monograph on the James Bond phenomenon that treats both the novels and the films (cf. Bennett/Woolcott 1987).

soap operas to selling strategies for soft soap – and along the way they have lost sight of popular fiction.

Cultural studies, however, has not only expanded the notion of text to comprise all signifying systems. In addition, the discipline has also put a high emphasis on cultural practices. On the one hand, this means that cultural studies is interested in what people do when they go shopping, holidaying, or dating, attend football matches, or work in their gardens. On the other hand, it means that basically all theories of popular culture hold that the audience does not consist of passive recipients, but that people play an active part in constructing the meanings of the films they are watching, the music they are listening to, or the sites they are attending.⁶ In other words, cultural studies is frequently less interested in actual texts and more in what people do with these texts, in the practices of their use and appropriation.

As a result, one branch of cultural studies scholars interviews and/or distributes questionnaires to real audiences in order to understand which meanings people ascribe to the cultural artifacts they consume and to the practices they engage in. Significantly, though, even scholars working in this fashion hardly ever investigate the practices of reading different kinds of popular fiction. This cannot be due to practical reasons alone. It is of course easier to get in touch with film audiences who one can simply approach when they leave the cinema, as Shakuntala Banaji has done in order to compare what Bollywood movies signify to young audiences in Delhi and in London (cf. Banaji 2006), but this is hardly the whole story. For her by now classic study *Watching Dallas* Ien Ang, for instance, simply placed an advertisement in a women's magazine, inviting watchers to write to her about their reactions to the show (cf. Ang 1985). In similar fashion, Joke Hermes recruited interviewees for her study on the meanings of women's magazines for their readers (cf. Hermes 1995). Scholars interested in how the readers of the *Harry Potter* or the *Twilight* novels consume and appropriate these texts could easily do the same. Especially in times of online chat rooms and discussion forums every researcher is only a few mouse clicks away from the readers s/he is interested in. And even before the advent of the internet, scholars willing to take the trouble could get in contact with real readers, as the example of Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* (1991) shows, a groundbreaking study situated at the crossroads of literary and cultural studies.⁷ The only conclusion that remains, then, is that cultural studies scholars

are not only not that interested in popular fictional texts, they are also generally not very interested in the practices of reading such texts.

Closely related to the desire to study real and not only implied audiences is another factor that also seems to obstruct a more sustained engagement with popular fiction under a cultural studies paradigm: the discipline's tendency to focus on contemporary culture. Cultural studies is hardly ever concerned with the early twentieth or even the nineteenth century. Instead, as any quick survey of published work and examples used in textbooks reveals, the discipline is preoccupied almost exclusively with the past fifty years, and most scholars actually work about the present. Scholars interested in practices of reception obviously have no other choice. Today's audiences are the only ones they can reasonably hope to get in touch with, whereas researching how contemporary audiences reacted to, say, the 1950s TV series *I Love Lucy* would come close to searching for the proverbial needle in the haystack. Scholars interested in production processes and the texts as such, however, could turn to the past – and thus to times when written fiction was far more important for shaping peoples' minds and values than it is today in a media landscape dominated by images. To fully explore why these scholars do not more frequently engage earlier decades and centuries would take another essay.⁸ One reason might be that cultural studies has not yet overcome the exclusive focus on synchronic analysis demanded by Saussurean linguistics, which still is the basis for most of the field's important theories. However, the more important reason for the presentist bias of cultural studies scholars seems to be that these academics conceive of their analytical work as a political practice in itself.⁹ Convinced that their work can and should make a difference in the present, they focus on present-day culture and usually do not try to analyze the past and then transfer the insights won there to the here and now. Thus, the cycle closes again, since, for the reasons discussed in this section, cultural studies scholars focusing on the present also tend to focus almost exclusively on non-literary ›texts‹.¹⁰

⁶ In fact, for Fiske, the audience's active reception is constitutive of popular culture as such, since, for him, it is this appropriation that transforms the capitalist mass culture offered to them into popular culture (cf. 1989, 23–25).

⁷ Radway's study is situated at the crossroads of literary and cultural studies because of her interest in both implied and real readers, in the meaning of the texts and the practice of reading them. Significantly, she eventually concludes that these two dimensions can be at odds with each other: »Therefore, while the act of romance reading is used by the women as a means of partial protest against the role prescribed for them by the culture, the discourse itself actively insists on the

desirability, naturalness, and the benefits of that role by portraying it not as the imposed necessity that it is but as a freely designed, personally controlled, individual choice« (1991, 208).

⁸ For a rare, and also brilliant, historical analysis of the production side of popular fiction, cf. Denning 1987.

⁹ The title of one recent collection of essays – *Cultural Studies: From Theory to Action* – makes the field's politicalness particularly obvious (cf. Leistyna 2005).

¹⁰ To give the neglect of popular fiction a positive twist, one might argue that cultural studies scholars focus on those representations that reach and influence more people than most written ones, such as film, television, and big magazines. To my mind, though, such a position underestimates the influence of contemporary literary texts, while furthering the overall neglect of popular fiction in cultural studies.

3. The Modernist Bias: Literary Studies

Cultural studies' tendency to neglect popular fiction would not constitute that much of a problem if literary studies engaged such texts more frequently. In fact, one could well argue that popular forms of literature should be studied alongside less popular forms, that is, together with the ›difficult‹ and ›high‹ literary texts that have traditionally been what literature departments and the scholars affiliated with them focus on. However, I would contend that, despite paying frequent lip-service to the necessity of revising the canon and in fact extending it in various other directions, academics who think of themselves as scholars of literature hardly ever engage popular fiction. The countless journals devoted to various dimensions of German, English, French, American, Russian, or comparative literature (to name just a few of the relevant fields) feature articles on popular fiction even rarer than those serving the cultural studies community. Moreover, surprising as it may seem in times where academic presses with a strong interest in literature seem to have series for every topic imaginable, no major American university press that I am aware of has a series dedicated to popular fiction. And while most scholars would no doubt readily acknowledge the necessity to study popular fiction, there are not that many who actually do.¹¹ The reason for this, I will suggest in this section, is literary studies' ongoing modernist bias.

In order to explain what this modernist bias is, I need to refer back to the beginning of this article where I described two very different reactions to my reading of a popular thriller and suggested that these reactions are actually two sides of the same coin and that they both originate from this ›modernist bias‹. The chair of the panel I was on dismissed the text and hence my reading of it, because he followed my argument that the novel was a realist text with a conservative agenda – and thus the very opposite of what one would expect from a text written in the modernist tradition. A member of the audience, however, argued that the novel was ›complex‹, ›ironic‹, and ›ambiguous‹ – and thus far more modernist than my reading acknowledged. Her choice of words is especially revealing in this context, as it points directly to the origins of the modernist bias in literary studies, to the intricate relationship between modernist literature and the theoretical school of the New Criticism.¹²

¹¹ To stress this once again: popular fiction is obviously studied far more often today than in the past. However, as an MLA search conducted on October 14, 2010, revealed, between 1980 and 2010, 24,500 articles or books on ›Shakespeare‹, 9,103 on ›Joyce‹, 1,057 on ›detective fiction‹ and 259 on ›horror fiction‹ were published. Compared to more canonical topics, popular fiction is still largely neglected.

¹² For reasons of space, I restrict myself to the New Criticism here and do not consider the role of Leavisism, which also contributed to the creation of a modernist bias on both sides of the Atlantic. I believe, though, that my observations are not only valid for the Anglo-American world where the New Criticism and Leavisism were theorized and practised or English departments across the world

As various scholars have convincingly argued, the emergence of the New Criticism and its method of interpretation during the first half of the twentieth century was not only a reaction to the problems that modernist literature posed to its readers but also a conscious embrace of modernism's normative understanding of what constitutes a valuable work of art (cf. Graff 1987; Asher 1993; Spurlin/Fischer 1995).¹³ The New Critics perpetuated and institutionalized what Andreas Huyssen has called ›The Great Divide‹ (cf. Huyssen 1986) between valuable high or elite culture and worthless mass or popular culture to such a degree that one could also speak of a ›new critical bias‹ instead of a modernist one.¹⁴ Like the modernist authors to whom they were closely tied through the figure of T.S. Eliot, the New Critics held that literature should be both subversive in terms of content and innovative in terms of form; it should be anti-mimetic, ambivalent, and complex – and therefore difficult to understand. In particular, the New Critics valued texts characterized by an internal disparity, and they proposed concepts such as ›irony‹ (I.A. Richards), ›ambiguity‹ (William Empson), ›tension‹ (Allen Tate), or ›paradox‹ (Cleon Brooks) in order to describe this disparity – exactly the terms, that is, that my audience member employed.¹⁵ What is more, they held that only texts that could be meaningfully described by these concepts – i. e. modernist literature, or literature that, for them, shared at least some of its characteristics such as Metaphysical poetry – were worthy of scholarly attention, and of the application of the famous method of close reading. Other forms of literature, such as, for example, the realist novel, were dismissed by the New Critics, as they had been dismissed earlier by the modernists, as too easily accessible and too overly didactic and sentimental. And since modernists and New Critics alike sought to situate art in a sphere completely separate from economic constraints and interests, they were especially suspicious

influenced by these schools. Just as modernism is a transnational phenomenon, so is the modernist bias. In Germany it is particularly palpable in the Frankfurt School's aversion to mass culture and its simultaneous celebration of modernist art. In other, less Marxist-influenced branches of German studies it might not be the modernist but ›the classic-romantic concept of literature‹ (Barsch 1996, 690) that is hailed as a timeless ideal. This ideal, though, is very similar to the Anglo-American modernist one, and it also functions as the marker of high vs. low literature. Moreover, the methodology of the New Criticism, at least when put into practice, is very similar to the *werkimmanente Interpretation* dominant in German philology departments after World War II.

¹³ My subsequent analysis of how the legacy of the New Criticism still excludes many texts from being studied is also indebted to Birte Christ's unpublished paper ›Kampf der Geschlechter im Gewand der Methode: Formierung und Folgen des *New Criticism*‹.

¹⁴ What Huyssen describes for a specific historical formation is, according to Bourdieu (1993; 1996), constitutive of the structure of the cultural field at all times.

¹⁵ Cf. Richards 1929, Empson 1930, Tate 1936, and Brooks 1947. Of course, what the New Critics eventually wanted to bring to the fore, though, was how this disparity, indicative, for them, of the fragmentation of modern life, was contained at a higher level by the eventual unity of the work of art. As Eliot programmatically put it in his review of Joyce's *Ulysses*, the formal and thematic unity of a poem or novel was ›a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history‹ (1975, 178).

of texts and genres that were commercially successful. Put bluntly, they abhorred the popular.

It is very unlikely of course that my audience member would describe herself as a New Critic. Much rather, she would claim allegiance with one of the poststructuralist schools of thought that, alongside and following structuralism, effectively challenged the New Criticism's dominance in literary studies during the 1970s. But her recourse to concepts coined by the New Critics brings to the fore how the paradigms of this school still affect the practice of criticism today. In fact, since many scholars conceive of the insights of the New Critics as the foundation for all further theory-building (cf. Fischer 1995), Michael J. Medici has a point when he speaks of the »Restless Ghost of the New Criticism« that is still haunting literary studies today (cf. Medici 1997).¹⁶ The New Criticism as such may be dead, but many of its basic assumptions, shaped by the modernist bias, survive until today, and impact negatively on the study of popular fiction within literary studies, because they make scholars either dismiss popular fictional texts right away, or tempt them to misread such texts as works written in the modernist tradition.¹⁷

This is particularly obvious with regard to the New Critics' cherished practice of close reading. What seems to be wrong with popular fiction to the minds of many scholars today is that such texts allegedly do not lend themselves to close readings, as they are commonly understood to be not complex enough. Tellingly, this notion is so widely-spread that even scholars who have turned to popular fiction perpetuate it. In her groundbreaking study *Woman's Fiction*, Nina Baym, for example, writes: »A reexamination of this fiction may well show it to lack the esthetic [sic], intellectual, and moral complexity and artistry we demand of great literature« (1978, 14). And thirty years later, with a nod to William Empson, Gordon Hutner declares in similar fashion in his magisterial *What America Read* that the popular literature he writes about »never needed an expert class of critics to interpret it or scholars to list its seven types of ambiguity« (2009, 5), but requires a treatment different to that of modernist texts. Other critics have even gone as far as to suggest that the formulaic nature of popular fiction, its predictable plots and artless language require and justify quantitative approaches to its forms and contents.¹⁸

Personally, I believe that this is a misconception, and I take sides with Jane Tompkins, who has, to my mind convincingly, argued that popular fictional texts are not necessarily less complex than modernist or postmodernist ones, but

¹⁶ For another study that stresses the continued importance of the New Criticism, cf. Wenzel 1987.

¹⁷ The persistence of the modernist bias in literary studies is somewhat ironic, as scholars interested in modernism as a historical phenomenon have begun to consider the movement's foundational involvement with the popular in recent years. Cf., for example, Armstrong 2005 and Mao/Walkowitz 2008.

¹⁸ For an introduction to such approaches, cf. Palmer 1991, 18–24.

that their complexity is of a different kind.¹⁹ While this is not the place to argue this point in detail, I am convinced that popular fictional texts are just as suited for the close reading of small passages, but they require us to look out for different formal features, to ask different questions, and to investigate other aspects than with »high literary« texts. A close reading could focus on how a given passage dramatizes and naturalizes the abstract norms and values that much of popular fiction – no use denying it – tends to perpetuate. Or a close reading could center on the question how a passage that seems rather straightforward and simplistic at first glance allows for a variety of readings that are at odds with each other – and thus help to explain what most audience studies emphasize, namely that all products of popular culture are highly complex in functional terms because they allow for a variety of reading positions. For the time being, however, the prejudice that popular fiction is unsuited for close readings prevails, and texts that belong into this category therefore have a hard time with scholars on the lookout for possible close readings.

The modernist bias, or, more neutrally put, the »perplexing stability of modernist categories of literary analysis in the late twentieth century« (Ardis 2002, 6) also affects the construction of literary histories until today. As Winfried Fluck observes, in the wake of the New Critics, »literary history was quite automatically interpreted as a genealogy of modernist aesthetics: as a history of successful, luke-warm or failed breaks from convention« (1997, 7; Birte Christ's translation). While Fluck's own history of the American novel offers an alternative – and more convincing – trajectory, the take on literary history he criticizes is still the dominant one today. In fact, I would go even further than Fluck and claim that most narratives of literary history still more or less teleologically move toward modernism as the epoch where Literature – note the capital »L! – reaches its bloom, where it cuts ties with other social spheres, and becomes self-referential and self-reflexive. In fact, this seems to be the reason why literary histories habitually have problems to deal with everything that comes after modernism, and why we have the terms »postmodernism« and, more recently, the rather awkward »post-postmodernism«.²⁰ And this is why popular texts, which tend to adhere to established conventions and various forms of realist

¹⁹ One of the examples that Tompkins provides to back up her claim are stereotypes. Stereotypes, she writes, »convey enormous amounts of cultural information in an extremely condensed form« (1985, xvi). Her re-evaluation of stereotypes is particularly interesting, because, alongside formulaic plots and simple language, stereotypes are among those features of popular fiction that tend to convince critics that those texts are not worthy of close readings. From a completely different vantage point, analyses of fan fiction have also demonstrated how complex and ambiguous popular texts such as the *Harry Potter* or *Twilight* novels are, as it is exactly ambivalent events and character constellations that fans tend to take as the points of departure for their own re-writings (cf. Hills 2002, and Hellekson/Busse 2006). While such studies thus emphasize the complexity of popular fiction, one could also turn the argument around and contend that modernist literature is much less original and far more formulaic than is generally acknowledged. Surely, reading one's tenth Kafka parable or the fifth Virginia Woolf novel is as predictable an experience as reading the tenth Agatha Christie novel.

²⁰ Cf. Amian 2008, 10–11, for a discussion of the inevitability of this awkward term.

aesthetics, hardly ever figure in these accounts obsessed with ruptures and innovations. They are either ignored completely, vilified in passing – or, as the audience member did with *Operation Lucifer*, recast in modernist terms.

This later tendency, though, affects not only popular realist texts that distort the neat trajectory from realism to modernism and from there to postmodernism presented in numerous literary histories because they were written *after* modernism;²¹ it also affects texts written *before* the advent of modernism. This, too, should come as no surprise. While the canon of texts considered worthy of scholarly attention has been considerably expanded across all philologies in recent decades, at least in British and American literary studies this expansion has more often than not perpetuated rather than challenged the modernist bias. Again, one example must suffice here. The canon of nineteenth-century American literature, for instance, was defined in F.O. Matthiessen's *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (1941), arguably the most important contribution to American studies ever. Evaluating nineteenth-century literature from the perspective of a modernist aesthetics, Matthiessen identified Hawthorne, Melville, Whitman, Emerson, and Thoreau as representatives of American literature around 1850 and completely ignored the authors of domestic and sensationalist fiction such as Harriet Beecher Stowe or George Lippard, who were far more successful and important at the time. Since then, and particularly after 1970, scholars have revised Matthiessen's canon, but most of them have argued for the significance of a great variety of nineteenth-century writers by reading their texts as anticipating or at the very least leading toward modernism – and they have rather continued to ignore those that do not yield themselves to being presented as forerunners of modernism.²²

Significantly, even scholars who explicitly identify ›their‹ texts as popular fiction frequently cannot resist the tendency to claim importance for them by aligning them with modernism. For example, in his introduction to a new edition of George Lippard's *The Quaker City; or, The Monks of Monk Hall* (1845), David S. Reynolds begins by stressing that the text ›is one of the most popular novels in American

²¹ Of course, this linear trajectory has been challenged by various scholars, albeit to no great effect so far. Cf., for the American context, Rebein 2001.

²² Cf., for instance, the many studies on the ›New Woman's Fiction‹ of the late nineteenth century which Sally Ledger aptly sums up in her own book: ›Ann Ardis's important book on the New Woman [...] emphasises the nascent modernism of *fin-de-siècle* women's writing [...]; Gerd Bjorhovde's *Rebellious Structures* has a chapter on Olive Schreiner's embryonic modernism; both of Lynn Pykett's books which concern themselves with the New Woman fiction detect the glimmering of a modernist aesthetic therein; and Elaine Showalter's collection of short stories, *The Daughters of Decadence*, favours that body of work which most suggestively aligns itself with a modernist aesthetic‹ (1997, 193). One of the laudable exceptions to this tendency are Ledger's own study, and, with regard to earlier texts, the aforementioned study by Tompkins (1985), where the author emphasizes repeatedly that the nineteenth-century texts she examines must not be judged by the standards of twentieth-century modernism but need to be evaluated on their own terms.

history« (1995, vii), but then goes on to justify its resurrection by arguing that ›Lippard arrived at the threshold of modern surrealism‹ and ›a stylistic level of pre-modern distortion and oddity‹ (ibid., viii, xxvii). Even for a revisionist scholar like Reynolds, then, the fact that Lippard's novel was read by many thousands does not on its own validate a sustained engagement with the text. A scholar who has repeatedly insisted on the importance of nineteenth-century American popular fiction, Reynolds is surely less affected by the modernist bias than my panel chair and audience member. And yet, for him, too, popular fiction remains to a certain degree the other. He encounters this kind of literature with modernist notions of ›good‹ literature in mind, and popular fiction interests him primarily because he wishes to demonstrate that it is either, as in the case of Lippard, more modernist than previously assumed, or, as in the case of the texts he discusses in *Beneath the American Renaissance*, an important influence on writers such as Hawthorne or Melville, who take up and transform its themes, motives, and devices in a fashion that testifies to their proto-modernist aesthetics (cf. Reynolds 1988).²³

Since even many of those scholars who turn to popular fiction have a hard time overcoming the modernist bias passed on to them during their training as literary critics, it is hardly surprising that the study of popular fiction is not yet more popular with literary critics. In fact, it seems to be even less popular now than it was thirty years ago when structuralist critics like Tzvetan Todorov turned from the minute analysis of individual texts to an investigation of the over-arching structures of whole genres (cf. Todorov 1977). Quite naturally, they thus engaged popular fictional genres such as the detective novel or the thriller. With the turn to poststructuralism, however, and its focus on the texture of individual works, this interest has considerably decreased again. There are of course still studies conducted on the thriller, the detective novel, or the romance, but works interested in generic rules and their diachronic transformations are no longer at the center of literary studies.

Finally, we need to acknowledge that the persistent modernist bias in literary studies is likely to deter even scholars who do not share it and who would like to study popular fiction from doing so for pragmatic and strategic reasons. Currently, writing about popular texts is hardly the best way to be recognized by your colleagues and peers as a dedicated and skilled scholar. You work in a field, then, that many of them still do not take seriously, you work on texts that allegedly do not allow you to show that you command the crucial skill of close reading, and you are likely to be working on texts that nobody has ever analyzed before. As a tenured American colleague once told me, if you write a book with new ideas about John Milton or James Joyce, your colleagues, and especially hiring commit-

²³ A laudable exception to this tendency is a number of studies that investigate the role of Victorian popular fiction in shaping public attitude toward British colonialism. Cf. Brantlinger 1989, and Dixon 1998.

tees, will know that you are a great scholar because you can handle a ›difficult‹ text and have noticed things that others have missed. By contrast, if you are the first to publish a monograph on Dan Brown's *The Lost Symbol*, you ›only‹ analyze a text that is purportedly easy to decipher anyway, and hardly anybody can judge if your reading is any good, as not many of your peers will have read the novel and as there are no other readings to compare yours to. As a consequence, especially younger scholars who have not got tenured yet might shrink away from popular fiction.

4. Conclusion: Let's Get Rid of the ›Popular‹

I hope to have shown that popular fiction is not studied more often because it is caught in the middle between literary and cultural studies. Suffering from a modernist bias, literary studies is in large parts still too conservative to engage it, and cultural studies is, in a way, too progressive, as it has moved away from literature and focuses almost exclusively on other kinds of cultural ›texts‹. There are, then, rather obvious remedies for this double neglect. Literary studies must finally overcome its modernist bias and acknowledge the historicity of literary and aesthetic norms and the complexity and relevance of popular texts. Cultural studies, too, needs to recognize the importance of popular fiction. Even today, in an image-saturated world, the impact of reading on the lives, values, and worldviews of people might be bigger than commonly acknowledged. Moreover, increased attention to pre-twentieth-century popular fiction might correct the presentist bias of cultural studies and strengthen the diachronic dimension of work in this field.

However, in conclusion, I would like to suggest a solution that goes beyond these rather evident ones. We should, I contend, get rid of the label ›popular‹ altogether, both with regard to ›popular fiction‹ and – although I will not explore this larger dimension further here – ›popular culture‹. Throughout I have employed the term ›popular fiction‹ without ever specifying if I mean texts that are commercially successful, texts that are written in order to be commercially successful but aren't necessarily, texts produced and consumed in a specific fashion, a combination of all this, or something else entirely. I have done so on purpose because it seems to me that the concept ›popular fiction‹ is, as Tony Bennett has observed with regard to ›popular culture‹ in general, »virtually useless, a melting pot of confused and contradictory meanings capable of misdirecting inquiry« (1980, 18). There is, to give just one example, a world of difference between David Charnay's *Operation Lucifer* and Dan Brown's *The Lost Symbol*. These novels differ in terms of production, marketing, reception, impact, ideology, aesthetics, and many others. Labeling them both ›popular fiction‹ obscures these differences and suggests a questionable common ground.

Far more importantly, though, and here I am speaking from the perspective of literary rather than that of cultural studies, getting rid of the label ›popular‹ seems to

me the best way to counter the ongoing compartmentalization and marginalization of popular fiction that even those scholars who study popular fiction often unwittingly corroborate. The Delhi conference I referred to earlier is a good example of this tendency. The conference marked the end of a year-long module on popular fiction all undergraduate students across the philologies had to take. While this module constitutes a laudable effort to acknowledge the significance of popular fiction, it does not impact in any way on the make-up of the other modules. Rather, since there is now a class devoted to popular fiction, this means that the other modules do not need to be revised but continue to be devoted to canonical texts alone.²⁴ Let me be perfectly clear: I do not mean that we should stop teaching canonical literature. But teaching only or almost exclusively the canon is not how I envision the literary studies of the future.

While we surely cannot get rid of binaries altogether when structuring the literary field, ›popular vs. literary‹ (or ›high vs. low‹) is hardly the most useful one. For once, as Storey and others have pointed out, the notion of the ›popular‹ is a particularly fuzzy one. Moreover, this particular binary carries a lot of historical baggage, as the term ›popular‹ has for a long time served the purpose of structuring the literary field in a hierarchical fashion. Finally, more than other dichotomies one might think of, the binary ›popular vs. literary‹ seems to imply a neat, almost natural distinction between the two sides: At some point, texts are perceived to stop being popular and become literary. Thus, if a ›literary‹ text contains ›popular‹ elements, it is usually said to subvert or parody these forms.²⁵ Consequently, there are other binaries available – for example, ›subversive vs. affirmative‹, ›conservative vs. progressive‹, ›influential vs. negligible‹, etc. – that fit better the effort to understand literary artifacts in relation to the cultural, social, political, and historical contexts that produced these texts and that these texts, in turn, also shape. None of these binaries would structure the literary field as hierarchical as the set ›popular vs. literary‹ does. In addition, each of the new sets would allow for more overlap and more mixed cases than the ›popular vs. literary‹ binary. Most importantly, though, as Richard Rorty has convincingly argued, shifting the terms of the debate and introducing a new »language game« not only denaturalizes the categories earlier and currently employed, highlighting their provisional and constructed status. What is more, such a »redescription« will bring to the fore hitherto overlooked aspects and associations, making us aware of both differences and commonalities between individual texts and all kinds of groups of texts that the previously employed terms obscured (cf. Rorty 1989).

²⁴ And I suspect that devoting one issue of *JLT* to popular culture might serve the same function.

²⁵ This is not to deny that terms such as ›popular‹, ›literary‹, ›highbrow‹, ›lowbrow‹, or ›middle-brow‹ are very real factors in the economy of print culture, that they play a major role in structuring the literary field, and often determine how audiences receive a particular text. But acknowledging these terms' power does not mean that we must employ them as our analytical concepts. They should be an object of analysis, not a tool of inquiry.

What literary studies needs, then, is research projects that put ›popular‹ and ›literary‹ texts next to each other and that pay attention to the multifarious ways in which these texts interact with and shape each other. When we investigate, for example, how Germany and the Germans have been projected by American literature since World War II, we should not only pay attention to canonical authors such as John Hawkes, Kurt Vonnegut, Walter Abish, and Thomas Pynchon, and then devote three pages to film and television, as Walter Zacharasiewicz does in his otherwise excellent study (cf. Zacharasiewicz 2007). Instead we need to place these undoubtedly important texts in relation to William G. Smith's *The Last of the Conquerors* (1948) and various other novels that dramatize how African American soldiers experienced Germany as a utopian space, in relation to the many alternate histories that imagine the world after a Nazi victory, and in relation to the countless spy thrillers revolving around escaped Nazis. Ideally, we would then move from literature to the culture as a whole and take into account how the literary texts relate to other cultural texts such as films, television documentaries, etc. Only then will we arrive at a thorough understanding of the meanings of Germany for postwar American literature and culture. Such an analysis would not neglect the differences between individual texts and various kinds of texts, but it would generate new insights and new differences that we are likely to miss as long as we continue to neglect popular fiction or to approach it from the vantage point of that highly problematic and often derogatory term, the ›popular‹.

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THOMAS HECKEN

Populäre Kultur, populäre Literatur und Literaturwissenschaft

Theorie als Begriffspolitik

Seit einigen Jahren ist eine deutliche Zunahme an Untersuchungen zu Gegenständen und Phänomenen zu verzeichnen, die der populären Kultur (bzw. der Populärkultur) zugerechnet werden. Bücher und Artikel zu Horrorfilmen, Stars, Jahrmärkten, Videospiele, zur Rezeption von Soaps, Liebesromanen etc. erscheinen vereinzelt, manchmal bildet sich sogar ein Forschungszusammenhang heraus (vgl. Davis 1976; Mukerji/Schudson 1986; Mukerji/Schudson 1991; Storey 1996; Hinz 1998; Storey [1993] 2009). Dennoch bleiben die Forschungslücken insgesamt gesehen sehr groß. Zu vielen Bereichen – etwa zu Illustrierten, Bestsellern, Fernsehsendungen, Internetseiten – liegen kaum Arbeiten vor. Woran es jedoch keineswegs mangelt, sind Definitionen der populären Kultur. Es wäre eine Lebensaufgabe, sie zu zählen; grob geschätzt, dürfte es im englisch- und deutschsprachigen Raum tausend bis zweitausend Wissenschaftler geben, die sich bereits einmal an einer solchen Definition versucht haben. Wenn auch die genaue, ausdauernde Beschäftigung mit Werken der populären Kultur eine Ausnahme darstellt – die abstrakte Reflexion über die populäre Kultur schlechthin ist es offenkundig nicht.

Zu Beginn seien einige solcher Angaben und Versuche kurz vorgestellt. Ein deutscher Autor führt etwa aus, dass er die Kategorie »Populärkultur« gleichbedeutend mit »Massenkultur« verwende. Um »den Gegenstand« seiner Abhandlung zu bezeichnen, eigne sich im Deutschen dieser zweite Begriff »noch immer am ehesten«; dennoch spricht er in der Abhandlung weiterhin auch synonym von »Populärkultur«, wobei »populär« »breite Beliebtheit quer durch die Klassen« meine. Die »moderne Populärkultur« habe den überlegenen Rang der »bürgerlichen Kultur« im letzten Jahrhundert erfolgreich angegriffen: »Die Massenkultur ist inzwischen zur Normalkultur, in gewissem Sinn zur herrschenden Kultur geworden« (Maase 1997, 26, 23, 16, 25).

Ein anderer deutscher Autor scheint dem zu widersprechen. Weil es sich bei »Massenkultur« »vor allem um ein normatives Konzept« handle und nicht allein um eine »quantifizierende« Bestimmung, sei sie nicht identisch mit »Populärkultur«. Als »Modell der Populärkultur« werden im Folgenden Aussagen der anglo-