

EDITORIAL

I'm So Bored with the Canon: Removing the Qualifier "Popular" from Our Cultures

SCOTT M. BRUNER

"The enemy of art is the absence of limitations."
– Orson Welles

Two weeks ago, I was running a panel at a gaming convention about the literary inspirations for *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*). After it was over the panelists and I discussed how the early 20th century fantasy pulp novels which inspired *D&D* were receiving academic attention for the first time. One of the panelists in the conversation, Jason Ray Carney from Christopher Newport University, is about to release his first book, *Weird Tales of Modernity*, which explores ephemerality within the works of Robert E. Howard, Clark Ashton Smith, and H.P. Lovecraft. He claimed that works which had previously been written off as lurid avenues of escape were finally receiving the critical attention they deserved. I concurred and trotted out my favorite Orson Welles quotation (above), which I do often, and made the off-hand remark that there was no aesthetic alterity, or difference in value, between the pulps of the weird tales and our "great" works of literature. I argued that much of the commercial limitations placed on pulp writers led to works of uncanny fiction which would never have been possible with more freedom. Pulp writers were forced into writing within narrow genre conventions to meet draconian deadlines while often living on meager salaries. The work is distinctly a product of those contexts. I implied in the conversation that those pulp fictions were as worthwhile as our canonical works of literature.

SCOTT M. BRUNER is a second year PhD student at the University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee in the Media, Cinema and Digital Studies program. He received a Master's degree in English Literature from San Diego State University. His research focus is on games, play, ludic narratology, and the creation of alternate worlds in ergodic playspaces. Currently, he is exploring tabletop roleplaying games and the alterity of their played experience from the mediated experiences of their literary and cinematic inspirations. He can be reached at smbruner@uwm.edu.

The Popular Culture Studies Journal, Vol. 7, No. 1
Copyright © 2019

Another panelist, the historian Jon Peterson, took slight umbrage to this remark.¹ He brought up Michael Moorcock, the scribe of the Elric fantasy cycle, who is infamous for completing novels about his sorcerous albino swordsman in three days. Peterson's response was that Moorcock's writing is awful because of the limitations he was working under. Forced to labor under absurd deadlines, Moorcock's capacity to edit and revise his prose was virtually non-existent. Peterson's point is well-taken: even the most charitable critic will recognize Moorcock's prose as relentlessly turgid.

I am not entirely convinced, however, that these limitations made Moorcock's product "worse" but rather that they created something different and singular. The limitations placed on Moorcock, including his own personal limitations of talent and experience, led to something that could not have been produced otherwise. No matter how poor we might think of the prose, the Elric saga is undeniably compelling, interesting—and popular. The books have now been in continuous print for forty years. I would argue that limitations—whether it's the strict syllabic count of a Zen haiku or the realities of Hollywood production—are more responsible for great art than unfettered opportunity.

We have languished within the idea that great works of art come from artists set free to do whatever they would like. While great art does come from pushing boundaries, those boundaries are absolutely essential to the realization of great art. Nearly every one of our species' great works of art, from the plays of William Shakespeare to the great pyramids of Egypt to the Pirates of the Caribbean ride at Disneyland—even Moorcock's own mythologies—is a transcendence of its medium that is catalyzed only through the limitations of its artist, the exigencies of society (and capitalism), or the medium itself. These limitations include the abundance or paucity of an artist's talent, her need to produce capital to exist, interference from publishers and studios, and how individual mediums constrain our ambition for true, mediated intersubjectivity (such as novels force us to interpret our experiences through language, films through incomplete visual modalities). The art of our "popular" culture merely represents art which endures greater limitations than the elitist art of a privileged culture who can afford to ignore them.

When I was recently asked to explain why popular culture was important, I became slightly incensed. With all respect to the title of this journal, the use of the term "popular" culture by those who study art made for (and usually produced by) wider audiences only reinforces the idea that there are two different cultures. It implies that there is a culture without an adjective, a canon of works which represent the best of our civilization, are a credit to our species, and should be the

¹ Jon Peterson is responsible for the most comprehensive and compelling treatise on the history of roleplaying games, *Playing at the World*. The opportunity to meet him was an honor. The fact that we had a minor disagreement shows a pitfall of meeting your heroes.

rightful representatives of humanity if we ever needed to justify ourselves to a conquering alien race. When we launched the space probe Voyager among the stars, for instance, no one complained that we had selections from Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven, while the inclusion of Chuck Berry's "Johnny B. Goode" was almost heretical². An "adolescent" art form, rock and roll belonged to the juvenile canon of popular culture. By making this distinction, we imply that popular culture is the culture we should be slightly ashamed of. We need it and it's worthy of study, but only to understand the reasons why a species would ever have been obsessed with the Cardi B and Nicki Minaj feud. If (when?) the aliens invade, it is presumed we should hide our Cheap Trick vinyl collection.

This presumption has a number of problems. First: it's historically inaccurate. The majority of our most important works of art were created for a wide audience with the countless aesthetic limitations placed on their construction by their societies, artists, and media. Second, this presumption only reinforces perspectives of aesthetic subjugation based on elitism. By separating certain forms of culture from the entire corpus of artistic achievement, we brand certain texts, no matter what they might mean to their audiences, as less valuable. We situate their audiences' subjectivities and attractions as banal, mundane, and shameful (while also creating a need for an elite aesthetic caste to help us know the difference). Finally, the very concept of aesthetic worth is so subjective as to be utterly impossible to determine. We have spent centuries attempting to establish the canons of Western civilization, only to realize how Quixotic a dream it was in the first place. Until true intersubjective mediation actually exists, we will have to make do understanding that we all experience every text in our own way—through our own specific set of limitations, capacity, and talents.

It is terrific that we are finally studying pro wrestling and video games; however, if their scholars continue to situate these texts as cultural curiosities—as embarrassing little displays of imperfect, dirty, little cultures—we perpetuate the idea that they are not as valuable as our other art forms. We buy into the notion that true art is not meant for everybody and must be defined, and those definitions belong to a select class of academics and intellectuals. By adding any limiting signifier before culture, we erase art from its primary position as liberatory, and place it into one of subjugation.

Unnecessary Hierarchies of Mediation

The move that we have made from dividing true art from popular kitsch is recent and unwelcome. Most of our civilization's greatest works of art were created under similar limitations as our works of contemporary pop culture. Leonardo

² Smithsonian.com.

DaVinci did not paint Francesco del Giocondo's wife to ensure his immortality through the existential analysis of mysterious smiles, but rather so that Leonardo could eat. William Shakespeare, who has become (for better and worse) the model for transcendent and immortal literature, wrote all his plays for the squalid rabble which filled the Globe Theater. His plays were funded by aristocratic patrons not interested in art, but rather the filthy lucre the masses placed into their pocket for admission to the bard's lurid productions. Beethoven's performance and compositions were vehicles which allowed him to make rent. The art we consider part of the Western canon of great work has always been identified as transcendent only in hindsight. Great art has rarely—if ever—been premeditated. We have often placed historical texts within our canons because of their initial popularity; we justify their inductions because they were so important to their contemporary audiences—a recognition we strangely do not provide to modern “popular” works.

Nothing is more deadly to the importance of a work of art than creating it with the pretension that it will be immortal. The limitations placed on George Lucas, both budgetary and based on his paltry 1970s cinematic ethos, were responsible for the triumph of his first three *Star Wars* films. The lack of limitations, based on studio's willingness to bankroll any of his ideas because of his 1990s hyper-inflated cinematic ethos, led to the disaster of the *Star Wars* prequels. Even *Citizen Kane* would not have been possible without checks to Orson Welles' oversized imagination. Many of the films he would direct later suffered less from studio interference and more from Welles' own inability to reign himself in (largely based on his own frustration to understand his contemporary audiences' capacity). In order to dismiss the idea that there are two forms of art—the transcendent and the disposable—we need to recognize that we are unable to judge “great art” in the present moment.

The only art movement that I can think of it which was successful and artistically pretentious is the modernist novel (possibly owing to literature's long reign as our undisputed champion of media). From that movement, we consider James Joyce's *Ulysses* the finest literary work in the English language. However, one of the foundational arguments of Joyce's book is a critique against the elitism of valorizing particular experiences. The grand title of his book evokes our grand tradition of great works of art, while the book's story contextualizes the hero's journey through the wonderfully intimate level of the everyman. *Ulysses'* hero Leopold Bloom is a man who loves eating offal, moving his bowels, and living in the past. His wife is cheating on him, his business acquaintances view him as trivial, and he wanders around Dublin in a vain attempt to fit in. Leopold, whose banal experiences reflect all of our lives, is a hero precisely because the act of wandering aimlessly through this world of insanity, magic, and loss makes us all heroes. I would like to extend this argument to art. The fearless act of creation

itself is an act of heroism. It should be enough that we encourage its creation, support its creators, and continue to be appreciative and critical of it. It is not just impossible to determine which creations will become immortal; it is condescending and patronizing to view any creation as disposable. We denigrate our own subjectivities and experiences in the process. Life is hard enough without ridiculing how people share their lives and experiences through media. Mediation is simply the only currently available vehicle we have for sharing our perspectives, and it is ultimately an imperfect one.

The experience of mediation through art is so dynamically subjective that any attempt to parse standard, shared experiences of a text is equally impossible. Too often critical approaches to art are based on the idea that, even if there is not one perfectly static experience of a work of art, there is a range of experiences within a work that defines its value. In *How to Talk About Books You Haven't Read*, Pierre Bayard brilliantly dissuades us from this notion, by examining how a multitude of different readers, and non-readers, can experience the same narrative. For instance, to an 1884 reader of Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, it might be a simple adventure tale; to a 2019 academic, it's an evisceration of class inequality; for my two-year-old son, it is a paper artifact full of meaningless glyphs that has as much artistic value as Ivan Van Norman's *The ABCs of D&D*. Roland Barthes admonished us that the mediation of a text does not happen at its origin point (the author) but rather its interpretation through its audience (reader). As long as the communion of our thoughts, emotions, and perspective requires their translation and inscription into incomplete and imperfect languages and modalities which are interpreted by completely disparate consciousnesses, authentic intersubjectivity will always elude us. Until we can break down the barriers imposed on us by semiotic and physical inscriptions, sharing our interpretations is beyond our artistic capacities.

And it might get worse. We currently live in a world where assumptions about our shared reality are becoming increasingly fractured. With the advent of #fakenews and the proliferation of social media echo chambers, our engagement with the world is only becoming increasingly subjective, solitary, and isolated. The separation of art into popular culture and valuable art fuels that isolation. Artistic sub-cultures, such as the video game community, have become intensely defensive of their communities because they have labored for so long under larger sociocultural assumptions that their expressions are worthless. We should not be entirely surprised when they lash out at critical approaches. We have spent years denigrating their community. It is insulting for a community's work to be acknowledged only when it reaches a level of cultural popularity that it can no longer be ignored. I am reminded of the bumper sticker which reads, "No one is free while others are oppressed." I would argue that no form of art is free, if we continue to oppress artistic creation through the elitism of classification.

The genesis for this distinction between popular art and the transcendent comes from an attempt to justify cultural classes who claim that they have the capacity for identifying great art. If we separate art into popular and culturally valued, it stands to reason that would need people who can tell the difference. This ability, historically, has proved impossible: *Citizen Kane* was not nominated for a single Academy Award. In an attempt to correct that mistake, the MPAA attempted to convince us that the passable, and interesting, *The Magnificent Ambersons* is one of the greatest films of all-time. We are terrible at recognizing great art when it is created. Mozart died a pauper and is buried in an unmarked grave while Antonio Salieri's grave resides in the second largest cemetery in Europe. We are not able to determine which pieces of art are truly transcendent until enough time has passed to judge how important they are.

Our bodies impose a great number of limitations on us, including how we construct an illusion of linear time. We are unable to forecast which modern works of art will transcend their current moment because we continue to be unable to see how today will impact tomorrow. Contemporary cultural scholarship, which attempts to make those judgments, bases their criteria on historical assumptions. Canonization is always a work of revisionism and compulsory construction. To paraphrase Voltaire, if great art did not exist, it would be necessary to invent it. The limitations of our experiences, constrained by time and physicality, should be acknowledged. To claim we can transcend their limitations by ignoring them is to miss the opportunity that comes from recognizing the space between them.

However, the people and institutions which rely on cultural capital justify their existence by making the claim that they can identify great art. Worse still, they believe their own hype. As an academic, it is easy to point the finger at our higher learning institutions. Much of the work done in research and the classroom is based on creating taxonomies of art. What works belong to 20th century modernism? What films can we classify as post-colonial? Which authors belong to which wave of feminism? Many of these taxonomies are useful. They allow us to be able to share a critical lexicon and they identify common ideas and philosophies which unite movements throughout the history of art. However, when those classifications are used to create distinctions between subjective experiences of mediation, when we decide which specific subjective experiences are more valuable than others, we construct social stratifications, based on cultural value, we reify the power hierarchies Marxist theorists find so abhorrent in economics.

The Problem with Popular

We run into another final problem here: the word “popular.” The word simply means appealing to a large audience. When we populated our great canons of art, this was exactly the definition used to determine which works we considered worthy of critical study. Shakespeare was transcendent because his characters, narratives, themes became embedded within society and because he presciently chose to present characters, themes, and narratives which were already embedded. The popularity of *Paradise Lost*’s story within popular society made John Milton’s poem as canonical as the biblical fable which inspired it. The pyramids are considered wonders of the world because the Egyptians made them so big everyone wanted to visit them. These works were created to entertain, seduce, mollify, inspire, and mesmerize as many people as possible. They were not created specifically for a class of elites fit to recognize their immortality; they were all created to be seen, read, and experienced. To antagonize Indiana Jones, they were never intended to “belong in a museum.”

Only in our contemporary era have we decided that popularity is no longer the best measuring stick for great art.³ We laud Odysseus and Achilles’ bloody battles with the Trojans, but we denigrate Thor and Captain America’s combat against the alien Chitauri in *The Avengers* (2012) or the “Macho Man” Randy Savage’s conflicts with WCW’s New World Order. *Paradise Lost*’s take on Lucifer is brilliant but the *Left Behind* novels are banal and witless evangelizing. We revere the tragic love story of two underage Italians in *Romeo and Juliet* but vilify a similarly tragic love story in *Twilight*. The affective grandeur of the pyramids is breathtaking, but Michael Bay’s Transformers movies are mindless spectacle.⁴ Why are our contemporary works not considered as important?

We fetishize the great works of our past because they were written in languages or styles that seem extraordinary now. *As You Like It* is written in iambic pentameter, the *Odyssey* in dactylic hexameter. These decisions were not originally artistic decisions but choices made to enrapture their audience. The power of those works comes not only from their narrative arcs and universal themes, but also from the spectacle of their material construction; what captivated us then was different, but our desire for Debordian spectacle has remained constant. Homer’s dactylic hexameters are the antiquarian equivalent of Bay’s CGI special effects. The texts that have endured were texts that people remember, and they will always love a great show.

³ This argument requires us to accept the curious perspective that the audiences of antiquity were more discerning judges of artistic expression, which interestingly conflicts with common conceptions of ancient audiences’ lack of education and capacity for complex perspectives.

⁴ Bay’s second Transformer’s movie, *Revenge of the Fallen*, has its climactic battle take place among the pyramids. The spectacle of antiquity meets the spectacle of the contemporary!

What we ascribe to the genius of Shakespeare or Homer were simply their responses to the limitations of their time; their audiences expected—and desired—poetry for the spectacle to emerge, and they gave it to them. They gave the masses what they wanted (and perhaps, snuck in a little of what they needed) because they wanted to be heard, read, and shared. Only the conventions of epic poetry were available to Homer to do so. Such poetry was the only lexicon his audience would understand for his tales made about mythic heroes. It was the language he knew well enough to create his narrative. Shakespeare never had the option to choose between blank verse or imagist symbolism. While both poets certainly possessed tremendous talents, they also worked under the social mores and conventions of their time. We understand, only today, that they were brilliant because what they created within their contemporary contexts and limitations seems to transcend those restrictions.

The other problem is that like art itself, the term popularity is subjective. When I mentioned my argument in this essay to my advisor, Stuart Moulthrop, his response was to ask me, “popular to whom?” Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* is a wildly “popular” book among my academic peers. Outside of academia, I do not know anyone who has read it. Do we consider *House of Leaves* a work of popular culture? Keith Sanborn, my film professor at SUNY-Buffalo, assigned all of Ed Wood’s films to our analysis class. He considered them works of genius (and convinced me). We could say Ed Wood’s films are popular, non-ironically, to Sanborn and myself. As I understand it, we use the term “popular” to refer to texts that are attractive to people outside of the institutions we have allowed to define our artistic canons. That audience is so large as to also be intellectually unsuitable. I am opposed to all distinctions on the valorization of art, but if we want to make taxonomies based on artistic modalities of production and their audiences, we need smaller categories than simply the billions of people who do not belong to the artistic elite, such as finding differences between fans of *Harry Potter* and *Twilight*, which both fall under the useless “popular” genus.

It is also inherently problematic, for any reason, to stereotype people as masses. When we contextualize people simply as the consumers of an intrinsically worthless spectacle, we begin to erase people as the dynamic, individual subjectivities (and heroes) they are. Our creation of hierarchies of artistic value have exalted many works of art but also deprecated others. By debasing an enormous catalog of human media by dismissing it as “popular,” we dismiss an entire range of human perspective, experience, and affect. We are not fit to judge the importance of media because we are not fit to judge the importance of anyone’s personal experience. As the WOPR taught us in *War Games* (1983), when it comes to making distinctions or definitions to valorize aesthetic subjectivity, “the only way to win is not to play.”

Undoing the Hierarchy

Throughout this essay, I have referred to the importance of limitations during the creation of art. Those limitations could refer to literally any obstacle which might impede the mechanics of artistic creation. The necessity to build economic capital is one limitation on artists but there are countless others: studio interference, limited access to materials, an adherence to a specific genre, and so forth. Some are chosen, some are elements of a text's rhetorical situation, others are based on the specific artist: The boundaries of an artist's capacity and talent limits her. The capacity of an audience's capacity to parse texts limits an artist (perhaps 2001's *Freddy Got Fingered* was simply beyond our ability to grasp it?). Like Orson Welles, I believe it is these limitations—and an artist's ability to navigate between (and sometimes beyond) them—that is the catalyst for true art.

“Popular” culture simply refers to art forms which exist under different limitations, and usually a much larger number of them than the texts which we consider “great” art. Popular texts attempt to reach larger audiences, are created by artists with less formal training (and in Bay's case, a considerably smaller pool of talent), and are created with a more immediate concern for acquiring capital. I posit that those limitations, however, often lead to greater works of art (which simply cannot be predicted) than forms of art which labor under none. *Citizen Kane* and *Touch of Evil* are better films than *Mr. Arkadin* and *F is for Fake* because of the limitations that the studio placed on them and Welles' capacity to acknowledge that. When it comes to the creation of art, freedom is simply too oppressive.

I propose a punk rock solution to the dilemma of cultural distinctions for artistic expression: Let's burn our canons down.

The study of pop culture, from video games to professional wrestling to eSport, is important because the study of our culture is important. We have spent thousands of years creating manuscripts, scrolls, symphonies, novels, films, television shows, blogs, and tweets in a vain attempt to bridge the material gaps which separate our subjectivities. The study of our failure to connect may be the most important field of all to explore; we might find a solution by studying all our failed experiments rather than trying to convince ourselves that we have ever succeeded (we haven't). The distinctions we have placed upon our cultural artifacts—by separating them into useless categories of genre, modality, and value—have only perpetuated the failures of our media to unite us.

The canonization of certain texts is abhorrent because the price of admission ensures the exclusion of equally worthy texts. No form of media should be considered worth more than any other. I will never be fit to judge what experience is revelatory, transcendent, or sublime for you; I expect that you will not be able to do the same for me. As long as we are unable to share our experiences and

perspectives through an authentic communion of intersubjectivity, our approach to every form of art and expression should be one of curiosity and wonder. We are fascinating creatures, let us sing in any key we like.

Works Cited

Carney, Jason Ray. *Weird Tales of Modernity: The Ephemerality of the Ordinary in the Stories of Robert E. Howard, Clark Ashton Smith and H.P. Lovecraft*. McFarland, 2019.

Barthes, Roland. *S/Z*. Translated by Richard Miller. Hill & Wang, 1974.

Bayard, Pierre. *How to Talk About Books You Haven't Read*. Translated by Jeffrey Mehlman. Bloomsbury, 2007.

Citizen Kane. Directed by Orson Welles. Mercury Productions, 1941.

Debord, Guy. *Society of the Spectacle*. Revised. ed., Black & Red, 1983.

F is for Fake. Directed by Orson Welles. Plan Film, 1973.

Gambino, Megan. "What Is on Voyager's Golden Record?" *Smithsonian.com*. 12 April 2012. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/what-is-on-voyagers-golden-record-73063839/?no-ist=&page=4>.

Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade. Directed by Steven Spielberg. Paramount Pictures, 1989.

Joyce, James. *Ulysses*. Lerner Publishing Group, 2016.

Kaufman, Anthony. "'The enemy of art is the absence of limitations': Henry Jaglom feels 'Déjà vu.'" *IndieWire*. 24 April 1998. <https://www.indiewire.com/1998/04/the-enemy-of-art-is-the-absence-of-limitations-henry-jaglom-feels-deja-vu-82907>.

Moorcock, Michael. *Elric of Melniboné: Book One of the Elric Saga*. The Berkeley Publishing Group, 1987.

Mr. Arkadin. Directed by Orson Welles. Filmorsa/Cervantes, 1955.

Peterson, Jon. *Playing at the World: A History of Simulating Wars, People, and Fantastic Adventure from Chess to Role-Playing Games*. Unreason Press, 2012.

The Magnificent Ambersons. Directed by Orson Welles. RKO Radio Pictures, 1942.

Touch of Evil. Directed by Orson Welles. Universal International, 1958.

Norman, Ivan Van and Caleb Cleveland. *The ABCs of D&D*. Wizards of the Coast, 2018.

Twain, Mark. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Folio Society, 1993.

War Games. Directed by John Badham. United Artists, 1983.