

Popular Culture Theory 2.0

BOB BATCHELOR

Let's take a rather selfless view and say that popular culture studies has won. The macro perspective: while the world might not be awash in popular culture departments, academe is inundated with scholars essentially *doing* popular culture studies, but under a different guise. Scratch just a millimeter below the surface of most cultural studies, critical cultural communications, gender, race, and historical studies and one finds a popular culture project merely under a different name.

Given the universal application of popular culture as a scholarly topic, it is not a stretch to declare victory for the popular culture popularizers that we claim as our forbearers, many in the great academic cradle of the American Midwest: Ray B. Browne, John G. Cawelti, Michael T. Marsden, Russel B. Nye, and Fred E. H. Schroeder. Looking again at *Pioneers in Popular Culture Studies*, edited by Browne and Marsden (1999), [which I never tire doing], I am struck by the how the editors branded themselves and their upstart colleagues as both "change agents" and "pioneers." The former transforms, while the latter discovers. Their final plea still rings true: "Education is too precarious to squander" (3).

Yet, let's also be frank, and say that one still face "challenges" as a popular culture scholar, ranging from the arrogant view that popular culture studies is merely puffed-up "fandom," thus not a serious "line of inquiry," to the walls some have built that delineate between popular culture from other fields. [We won't even go into the absurdity of this skirmish in an era marked by pervasive anti-intellectualism, strident anti-unionism, and massive defunding of the Humanities and Social Sciences.]

The Popular Culture Studies Journal, Vol. 3, No. 1&2
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The point is open for debate, but my thinking is that popular culture scholars expended massive amounts of energy and focus in an attempt to legitimize the field, but while backs were turned, those from related disciplines stepped in and built theory without actually advocating for popular culture. For example, many television and film scholars created their own sub-theories that gained footing, but never created the larger connection between these theories and the macro question of why studying popular culture is critical. An enterprising scholar just needed to swoop in, cut out the center of popular culture studies, apply the latest theories from one's own field, and never acknowledge any debt to scholars like Browne, et al. Thus careers and fields were born.

More importantly, many scholars who do not self-identify as “popular culture scholars” actually actively run to distance themselves from the moniker. While this may help them with the dreaded legitimacy question in their own cases or with obstinate colleagues, it certainly hurts the field when talented minds feel that “popular culture” sullies them.

I have heard from some colleagues that steering clear of “popular culture” is the only way they can exist within their institutions. When I hear these stories, I think back to the anger in Ray Browne's voice and the power in his words as he battled this notion, as well as the legions of scholars that have committed themselves to the field. There is no doubt that the larger question around “career expediency” and popular culture studies is one that should be addressed by senior scholars and other leaders as we look to the future.

About the special issue

When Jimmie Manning approached the editors of *PCSJ* about creating a collection of essays on popular culture and autoethnography, we had these issues of legitimacy and theory building in mind. Here was an opportunity to bring together – under the superb editorial guidance of Manning and co-

editor Tony Adams – a collection of essays that demonstrates the centrality of popular culture as a foundational tenet in the birth of a new field.

As popular culture scholars, we engage with our objects of study, interrogate them from every angle, but then disconnect ourselves from that narrative, because we have been trained to think that this is the only acceptable research practice, as if one can ever disconnect from popular culture, or perhaps as Browne might have asked (a twist on his famous pronouncement): can the fish disengage from the water?

Rather than removing ourselves in some nod to pseudo-scientific methodology (as if scientific method has not been proven to be highly subjective), autoethnographic popular culture demands that we deeply and fully mesh our lives and our work. The benefits are immense, from potentially redefining what it means to be a scholar to a fuller bond with readers based on mutual interest and collapsing the distance between the two.

What we present here is a new field of study that holds immense opportunities, including the prospect of building theory. Rather than *running from*, this issue demonstrates that scholars can profit by *running to* popular culture studies.

Works Cited

Browne, Ray B. and Michael T. Marsden. *Pioneers in Popular Culture Studies*. Bowling Green: BGSU Popular Press, 1999.