Preface

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CALL VOL. II/1: The Cultures of Popular Culture

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Preface

This second issue of CALL Irish Journal for Culture, Arts, Literature and Language makes available a group of papers selected from the considerably larger body of work that was presented at The Cultures of Popular Culture conference, promoted by the Royal Irish Academy’s Committee for Modern Languages, Literary and Cultural Studies and held at Queen’s University Belfast on 13 and 14 December, 2013. The conference was the first one entirely devoted by the RIA to a subject that has become increasingly central in the field of Modern Languages as well in numerous other disciplines. If compared to the countless academic events that have been dedicated to popular culture, the specificity of that conference and this publication lie in its adoption of a cross-cultural perspective. While participants included more than forty scholars coming from Ireland, the UK, France, Germany, Austria, Spain, Turkey, and the US, the subjects addressed in their papers examined a corpus of works and cultural phenomena touching not only on Western and Middle Eastern countries but also Central and South America, Africa and Asia. The variety and scope of the conference responded to the very objective of our initiative, which aimed to reflect the heterogeneity of a field that cannot be apprehended by a single discipline nor an individual cultural tradition.

‘Popular culture’, here broadly intended as a domain including all modern and contemporary creative artefacts and phenomena that are produced outside of the most traditional cultural institutions, is a multifaceted object by definition. While in the last few decades this cultural production has become a legitimate subject of academic enquiry, its characteristics inevitably engender lively interdisciplinary debates in which ambiguities, and even dramatic misunderstandings, seem impossible to avoid. If this is true within an individual national environment, it cannot but be even more so when looking at different cultural and linguistic contexts. The goal of The Cultures of Popular Culture conference, as its title made clear, was not to restrict our discussion to a particular aspect or to impose a specific methodological approach. Quite on the contrary, our intention was to compare and, possibly, combine as many objects and perspectives as possible. Popular culture is inherently not one unified entity but the site of competing, mostly irreconcilable, discourses.
We are confident that the selection of papers collected in the publication, while much more reduced quantitatively, still conveys the richness of this original project. The ten articles presented here examine examples from different countries and different cultural and linguistic areas, namely France, Germany, Austria, Spain, Québec, Russia, and Burkina Faso. They deal with a variety of media and cultural phenomena, from popular fiction to cinema, from comics to typography, from painting to bullfighting. They adopt a range of methodological and disciplinary approaches, including literary theory and history, sociology, art history, cultural studies, psychoanalysis and linguistics. As a result, they offer a good sample of the crucial problems that every scholar of popular culture has to face, no matter their disciplines or language.

A few key threads can thus be seen as running through this collection, connecting different themes in multiple ways. Popular works, of course, highlight the question of cultural hierarchies, but their complex reception is also inextricably linked to the particular media, formats and genres that shape their relationship to specific audiences. These phenomena have constantly provoked large debates among intellectuals, political organisations as well as common citizens about their use for ideological, educational or entertainment purposes. All the texts here included deal with these issues in different historical and cultural contexts and encourage the reader to appreciate differences and similarities between them.

**Popular culture, genre and gender in France**

Given the framework of the conference, it is not surprising that the main axis through which the papers collected here can be put in conversation with one another is by adopting a comparative perspective. The case of popular culture in France, as seen from French as well as international scholars, appeared as the most significant example in this respect. This is not only because four of these articles focus on this specific subject, but because their objects of study and their different theoretical and methodological perspectives display a set of questions that might help to frame this publication as a whole.

In ‘The Way We Read Now: Middlebrow Fiction in Twenty-First Century Europe’, Diana Holmes (University of Leeds) explores the evolving relationship between literary and cultural studies in the French context as a telling example of key phenomena taking place on an international scale. The article addresses a group of interconnected topics, such as persistent but increasingly challenged suspicion of French intellectuals towards popular fiction; the role of readers’ pleasure; the notion of middlebrow literature; and the necessity of adopting the perspective of gender to assess all of these aspects of popular culture production and
reception. After discussing how popular fiction for a long time failed to obtain the attention of academic researchers working in French literary departments and was confined to the field of sociology, Holmes discusses recent works by Tzvetan Todorov, Jean-Marie Schaeffer and Raphael Baroni. Their work particularly stresses the importance of narrative pleasure in the experience of reading, which Holmes examines through the example of middlebrow crime fiction novels written by two women writers (the English Kate Atkinson and the French Fred Vargas).

Holmes’s essay serves as an ideal introduction to this entire collection. The relationship of French academia towards popular fiction is in fact analysed through the lenses of an English scholar trained in the methods of British cultural studies as well as French literature studies: this double perspective enables Holmes to foreground the tensions between different cultural perspectives, both on a diachronic and synchronic level. The traditionally disparaged category of ‘middlebrow’ fiction is then reassessed through the less prejudiced and, therefore, more instructive theoretical frame elaborated by contemporary francophone narratologists. Moreover, crucial issues of genre and gender are considered in connection to this wider context as well as to their mutual relationship. The significance of the ‘feminization’ of popular culture and its centrality in contemporary cultural studies thus becomes a symptom of the increasingly untenable prejudices in literary scholarship towards a thorough analysis of widely-read works of fiction.

Many of these themes are also at the core of Andrea Hynynen’s ‘Queer, Gender and Crime fiction in French studies: a Hazardous Scientific Endeavour.’ Hynynen (Turku University) is a Finnish scholar working on French crime fiction. Her article, however, looks at this specific national context with an international perspective with a strong comparative perspective. In particular, Hynynen explores how issues of gender and the adoption of the theoretical frame provided by anglophone queer studies have been neglected by French literary and cultural scholars approaching the genre. The scarcity of works on crime fiction in French academia is explained by Hynynen in relation to the primacy granted to the universalist ideals of Républicanisme, which also contributed to delay the spreading of new approaches to gender issues in France. Hynynen’s essay provides a useful assessment of the development of popular cultural studies in France, as well as a stimulating comparative analysis of different critical traditions.

While still focusing on French popular culture, the contribution by Sylvain Aquatias (University of Limoges) moves from popular fiction to comics (or, bande dessinée). It also introduces a crucial aspect not explicitly considered by Holmes and Hynynen: the
relationship between cultural distinction and the social backgrounds of different audiences. This move is the result of the author’s disciplinary background, since Aquatias’s background, unlike most other authorss included in this collection is not in Modern Languages Studies but in Sociology. ‘When Popular Cultures Are Not So Popular: The Case of Comics in France’ shows the methods of quantitative sociological research at work by analysing the results of a large survey conducted among a population of young comic readers in the Limousin region. Revisiting, and sometime questioning, the theoretical framework provided by Bourdieu’s theory of distinction, the paper shows how social and cultural differences not only caused to differentiate between ‘low-‘ and ‘high-‘ brow media but also contribute to establish a variety of uses of the same ‘popular’ medium. Differently from other countries, France seems more and more to include (a certain type of) comics in what it is considered ‘culture légitime’ (‘official culture’). Aquatias’s article examines how this phenomenon is not only the desired outcome of strategies of publications and critical recognition but also the consequence of the particular – i.e. socially and culturally privileged – context in which many comics readers grow up. Through the lens of his research, the appreciation of comics in France is shown to be less an issue of mass consumption than the result of the increasing cultural and social selection of its readership.

The last article focused on the role of popular culture in France looks back at the crucial period of the 1930s and the way in which a quintessentially popular medium such as cinema represented a–literal as much as metaphorical–vehicle of the modern, urban life: the bicycle. In particular, Barry Nevin’s ‘Projecting le temps des loisirs: Cycling and Working-class Identity in French Cinema of the 1930s’ engages with critical debates around Jean Renoir’s Le Crime de Monsieur Lange (1935) and Marcel Carné’s Le Jour se lève (1939). The two films are analysed not only in relation to their approach to cycling as an aspect of working-class culture, but also with reference to the symbolic connection between this sport and the dramatic history of working-class politics in this period. Both Renoir’s and Carné’s work (both based on a screenplay written by Jacques Prévert) was influenced by fate of the short-lived government of the leftist Popular Front that delivered an alliance between Socialists, Radicals and Communists between 1936 and 1938. The Popular Front’s promotion of cycling as a mean for the liberation of the working class is visible in its enthusiastic celebration in La Crime de Monsieur Lange, whereas Le Jour se lève – released after the disintegration of the leftist coalition and only few months before the outbreak of WWII – unsurprisingly offers a much more pessimistic perspective on the future of the country.
**Popular genres, politics and national identity**

A second group of papers focuses on the relationship between popular culture, its political uses and competing discourses around national identity in Germany, Soviet Russia, Spain and Québec.

Coleen Becker’s ‘*Kunst fürs Volk: Genre Painting as Mass Culture in Nineteenth-Century Germany*’ takes us to the early period of modern popular culture as well as the German national state. As in the case of Aquatias, even if necessarily with radically different methods, the researcher questions the traditional association of a specific type of popular art with a certain social-cultural group, that is, the conservative middle class. Becker’s study of the reception and political uses of genre painting in Germany highlights how this neglected and often decried production was not only the most popular across all social groups, but was also embraced by the organizations of the labour movement. Having first emerged in the early nineteenth century, this imagery contributed to the creation of a shared visual heritage for a Germany aspiring to its democratic reunification and later became part of the new mass-produced visual culture. By the end of the century the Social Democratic Party looked at this idyllic representation of the past as an optimistic image of the future for which they were working. In her analysis Becker thus points out how the modernist condemnation of the genre’s conventional and sentimental representation of everyday life in the German countryside prevented a more in-depth analysis of the uses of this form of popular art. In the case of the Socialist Democratic Party, the adoption of ‘middle-class art’ and the national cultural tradition of *Bildung* was seen as a means to reconnect its political discourse to the hopes activated by the French revolution and the earliest labour movements before the defeat of 1848.

Duccio Colombo’s ‘Nikolai Shpanov and the Evolution of the Soviet Spy Thriller’ deals with similar issues concerning the uses of popular culture for class and nationalist politics in the entirely different context of post-WWII Communist Russia. Colombo opens his essay by stressing how, during the Soviet era, the very concept of mass culture had been discarded by the Party intellectuals, who officially rejected the notion of cultural hierarchy and favored the idea of a homogenized, middlebrow literature. Colombos’s analysis of the work of the largely forgotten Nikholai Shpanov, however, proves that the official version didn’t correspond to the real situation. Influenced by Western popular fiction, Shpanov wrote novels belonging to various genres, including adventure and detective fiction. His biggest success was a short cycle of two thrillers that appeared between the late 1940s and the mid-1950s. Serialised in periodicals with no literary credentials, lacking any stylistic ambition and passionately
supportive of Stalinist propaganda, *The Arsonists* and *Professor Burago’s Secret* were addressed to the same type of audience that had avidly consumed the American and European dime novels circulating in Russia before the Revolution. Moreover, these two works have many similarities with the spy novels that appeared also on the other side of the Iron Curtain at the same time. By referring to Michael Denning’s and Umberto Eco’s studies on Western genre literature, Colombo shows how some of their main features (the geographical imagination, the pseudo-documentary aspect, the ideological discourse) echo the characteristics of popular fiction in other contexts, despite their different political orientation and their fundamental lack of irony. Also in this case, the official discourse covered up the intense political uses of mass-produced cultural products.

An even more contradictory relationship between intellectuals and popular culture is analyzed by Katrine Helene Andersen (University of Copenhagen) in ‘A Revolt of the Masses: Culture and Modernity in Early 20th century Spain: From Bullfights to Football Games.’ As in Becker’s and Colombo’s studies, the main preoccupation of the Spanish intellectuals involved in the debate was to understand how the socio-cultural phenomena under scrutiny could be used to shape the nation’s cultural identity. Unlike the previous contributors, however, Andersen focuses on popular spectacles and sport rather than fiction. This is significant, Andersen argues, in so far that these practices had never been considered cultural ‘proper’, and their emergence as a heated topic of debate was the result of a specific historical context. Andersen’s paper focuses on a period when Spain was facing the challenge of entering modernity. In the intellectual debate, the crucial issue appeared to be the seemingly necessary alternative between preserving the country’s traditional identity and embracing an idea of ‘modernization’ based on models coming from the rest of Europe. To some thinkers, the already controversial spectacle of the *corrida* became the symbol of an identity to defend from the external pressure to conform; to others, it represented the ultimate proof of Spain’s belatedness in comparison to the rest of the continent. Either way, intellectuals implicitly acknowledged that popular culture could not be simply ignored and denigrated to privilege higher forms of art or spectacle: its undeniable role in defining the national identity became an inescapable subject of discussion and the origin of intense cultural tension.

Sophie Boyer’s ‘Patricide or Mourning the Nation-State in Francis Leclerc’s *Looking for Alexander*’ deals with the opposite situation, that of a repression of the unsolved issue of Québec’s national identity. Leclerc’s 2004 crime film, originally titled *Mémoires affectives*, is thus attentively analysed by Boyer through a psychoanalytical lens. On the one hand,
Leclerc’s work frustrates the expectations of the audience by not offering any rational explanations for two crimes that are apparently at the core of the narrative. On the other hand, the themes of the protagonist’s amnesia and his quest to understand his own identity lead the viewer to the film’s final revelation of the patricide committed by the main character during his childhood, which he had entirely repressed. Boyer interprets this narrative through Freud’s theory of the genesis of a community in Totem and Taboo, and links it to two studies of Québec’s problematic relationship with its own identity: Ferdinand Dumont’s Genèse de la société québécoise (1993) and François Ouellet’s Passer au rang de père (2002). The son of a popular singer-songwriter and political activist for Québec’s independence, Leclerc shows how to use one of the most popular genres and its topoi to create a film which mirrors these intellectuals’ suggestions about the country’s necessity to face its repressed past and thus be able to access ‘maturity.’

Social uses and utopias of the image

The last two contributions look at two very different types of, and approaches to, popular media. In this case, the papers investigate how (audio)visual languages are adopted by social workers and avant-garde artists as the most appropriate tool to reach practical or, conversely, utterly utopian goals.

In ‘Cinomade and the fight against HIV/AIDS pandemic in Burkina Faso’, Vincent Bouchard (Indiana University, Bloomington) examines the adoptions of video technology to increase awareness about sexually transmitted diseases in West Africa. The project Cinomade was first developed by Bernie Goldblat and Daphné Serelle in the 1990s as an educational initiative organising an itinerant series of film screenings around Burkina Faso, with the specific mission of spreading education and information to counter the pandemic. The traditional educational films, however, didn’t seem to have the desired results. As a consequence, the organisation decided to adopt a more dynamic approach called Cinéma Débat Interactif (CDI: ‘Interactive film discussion’). This method consists in conducting interviews with members of a specific community, which then becomes the participating audience of the screening event. CDI aims to replace the imposition of a top-down, external point of view, typical of conventional educational films, with the strong engagement of the audience in an active reflection on their own sexual practices and the risks that they involve.

Considering the number of spectators, the level of participations and the impact of the education message, Bouchard argues, the project can be seen as a rather successful application of what he calls the ‘mirror effect’: the audio-visual production is neither
conceived by its ‘producers’, nor perceived by its ‘consumers’ as something separate, but as a tool to understand better oneself and one’s own social environment. ‘Popular culture,’ in this case, can be seen here in the more traditional way of a community-based social form; however, the crucial role of digital technologies and the challenges and opportunities offered by contemporary social dynamics makes of Cinomade a telling example of the variety of forms that popular media assume in different cultural, social and geographical contexts. The last contribution looks at how modern techniques such as photography and typography, at the core of the practices of mass media, have been regarded by both the linguists of the Vienna circle and the artists the Bauhaus as an opportunity to overcome the (alleged) limitations of the natural languages. In ‘Writing in the Language of Reality: interwar experiments in language,’ Robin Fuller (Trinity College) examines the connection between the two movements, and their common aspiration to give shape to a means of communication that would be universally intelligible without requiring any cultural training. In particular, Fuller analyses three examples that demonstrate this ‘suspicion of language’ and the attempt to avoid its problems: C.K. Ogden’s invention of a simplified form of English (called ‘Basic English’), which used only 850 words and involved strict rules on word order; Otto Neurath’s creation of a picture language named Isotype, based on the principle of iconism; and Mohology-Nagy’s ‘Typofoto’, a combination of typography and photography embodying its author’s belief that this latter could vehicle reality and its ‘optical unambiguity’. Ins his analysis, Fuller convincingly argues that these examples show an approach to language closer to engineering rather than history or biology, as in traditional linguistic approach. The 1920s modernist utopias of a universal, unambiguous visual language stemming from mass media technologies offer an eloquent counter-perspective to the multilingual, contradictory and politically loaded popular culture examined in the other papers collected here. And yet, also in the last couple of decades, many theorists, artists and activists in many different countries had expressed a strong enthusiasm and great expectations for the liberating potential of more recent new media and their application to popular culture. Now that it seems clear that the impact of the ‘digital revolution’, although enormous, might not align with those hopes, the echo of these older ideas reminds us how popular culture does not equal either absolute domination or total freedom, but necessarily includes conflicts and contradictions.