What does 'Popular' mean?

The inaugural IIPC Debate, delivered by Bruce Johnson, University of Turku,
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Welcome to the first in the series of the IIPC Debates

I begin by reading from a page I wrote for the IIPC website:

> In academic institutions there is increasing interest in the meaning and place of 'the popular' in the definition of modernity and postmodernity. In particular, in the twenty-first century, it is through popular culture in its various forms that the tensions between the local and the global are acted out most immediately, not only through the content of popular cultural forms, but in their means of production, distribution, and re-appropriation through consumption. Indeed, a study of the evolution of the term 'popular' is an essential analytical key to the understanding of the various confrontations – class, race, gender, place – that define contemporary power relations. The study of popular culture helps us to understand the contradictions in the contemporary sensibility. It gives us a more direct understanding of how we invent ourselves, how we imagine the possibilities of the world we move in, its ethical and moral dimensions and its specific social practices.

I hope that what I have to say today will help to demonstrate why the study of popular culture is a key to understanding the broader history of modernity, and the complexity of a world that has been mediated with growing complexity since the western adoption of the printing press.

Since this event inaugurates the series, I want to begin with a broad brush introduction that challenges three widespread assumptions about what the study of popular culture involves. All three assumptions are implicit in the most common response I receive when I mention that one of my fields of scholarship is popular culture. And it comes

just as frequently from fellow academics as from anyone else. I have heard it here. It is a slightly derisive comment like: 'Oh, so you study comics and pop music and things like that?'

There are three assumptions in here about popular culture, all of which would be depressing if I were not so determined to enjoy life. The first is in the tone of the comment, the slight curl of the lip, which says that popular culture is trivial and simple-minded.

The second is that the study of popular culture is the study of primarily contemporary culture – 'comics and pop music'. To a great extent scholars of popular culture have only themselves to blame for this, for overall the field is dominated by presentism which rarely looks back before the mid-twentieth century. Small wonder that academics who are sceptical of the field point to an apparent lack of historical depth. Yet as the work of scholars such as Peter Burke makes abundantly clear, there has long been something called popular culture, and certainly as far back as the early modern period. Popular culture studies are not a light-weight historically depthless alternative to, say, mediaeval or early modern studies: they are invaluable in enriching and sometimes transforming our understanding of any period.

The third assumption that I want to challenge is equally simplistic, yet pervasive even among academic historians. In talking about 'comics and pop music and things like that', the word 'things' sticks out. It suggests that culture, and popular culture in particular is to be found in certain specific artefacts. Again, some popular cultural scholars have connived at this misconception by their exclusive focus on semiotic approaches that take a specific artefact, say a fairy story or a movie or TV episode, and reveal its ideological substrate. In all forms of studies of culture – history, literature, religion, art - this close analysis of 'text' is useful, but very far short of being sufficient.

I want to challenge all three of these assumptions, and I repeat that they are pervasive in academia itself, and often even implicit in the work of people who imagine they are 'studying the popular'. That is, I want to argue that 'popular culture' is, far from trivial, an essential analytical key to the understanding of 'the various confrontations'

that define power relations in society. Second, it does so not by focusing solely on 'the contemporary', but by enquiring into the past from which the present evolved. And third, 'popular culture' is not a set of artefacts or objects; rather, it is a political term whose history illuminates the ideological and material struggles that have brought us to our present condition.

Well, that seems to be fairly modest ambition for a forty-five minute address. Although I usually present full length courses to make these arguments, let us see how far we can get, leaving a generous amount of time to allow this to become what it is called: a 'debate'.

The fundamental point underpinning this is that the idea of the 'popular' is extremely complex and difficult, and especially in the contemporary world. The journal *Popular Music* was founded about thirty years ago. In the 1990s it was listed by the UK journal *Modern Review* as one of the world's ten most important academic journals. In 2005 it published a forum of its twenty-two International Advisory Editors on the question of what the word 'popular' meant in the phrase 'popular music' (International Advisory Editors, 2005: passim). The answer was basically that there is no agreed answer. If twenty-two international specialists in the field can't agree, why are we academics to whom conceptual rigour is so important, using the word at all?

One of the answers I gave in my own contribution was 'because it is there'. The word is used countless times every day especially in connection with culture. It is used in conversation, press reviews, books and, of course, university courses. Not to help students address the term because it is problematic would be like refusing to let your children know about the internet. One of the obligations of any educational institution, is to equip students to engage with the major discourses of their era. The word popular is central to those discourses. But there is a further reason to use the word: it is precisely the chameleon-like quality of the term popular culture that makes it such a valuable tool for the analysis of culture and its history. The changes in its meaning from time to time and place to place are indicators of profound tensions in the history of modernity. Paradoxically, it is because the meaning of word is so evasive that it is so instructive to explore it.

If I were allowed to take one book with me when marooned on the fabled desert island, it would be the *Complete Oxford English Dictionary*, because it records the history of the changes in meanings, the semiosis, of every word. Through such changes, we can map the deeper forces at work in social history. And I now want to suggest that if we turn to the history of the term 'popular', we shall be richly instructed about the larger field of cultural history. I must preface this by noting that I approach this account as an anglophone scholar, and that the general patterns and perspectives in what follows are inevitably anglo-centric.

The term 'popular culture' first of all implies a distinction, doesn't it. It implies some other normative culture that is not 'popular'. But there were times and places that did not make that distinction. Because of my own disciplinary background (my research dissertations were in sixteenth and seventeenth century literature), I will use the example of the theatre in Elizabethan England.

The most famous theatre precinct, though not the only one, was Southwark, site of the Globe Theatre, now reconstructed close to the original location. Think about where theatres are usually located today, as we recall that the Globe Theatre, which presented the first performances of what are now regarded as some of the greatest literary works in English, lay in one what we would regard as one of the most unsavoury parts of London, surrounded by low taverns, bear-baiting pits and brothels. Yet it was attended without embarrassment by all classes of society. Descriptions of the audiences mention the heavy waft of ale and the wearing of working clothes like leather aprons that smelled of the wearer's trade, yet also the ostentatious display of sumptuous fashions worn by some of the aristocratic fops who took their seats on the stage. The only distinctions of rank were made in terms of admission costs and seating privileges. And far from attracting an audience reverentially silent before 'high culture', the audience was highly vocal in its approval or disapproval, frequently engaging in abusive dialogue with the actors. Cake and fruit vendors and prostitutes noisily circulated among the galleries, and a general air of irreverence and lasciviousness was never far beneath the surface. In at least one sense of the word, the Elizabethan theatre was a site of popular culture: all people attended.

Then all this changed. Shakespeare, that pre-eminent stage writer who showed so little

interest in printed texts of his work, is by the late seventeenth century a 'literary genius of all time' (Lee, 2000: 118). By the early twentieth century, his status as a 'man of letters' has so engulfed him that, astonishingly, his best worked was declared to be unsuitable for the stage (Hawkes, 1986: 59). His vigorously and noisily embodied creations had now been reconfigured as silent and static writing on a page: as 'literature'. Shakespeare had now become enshrined as the apotheosis of high culture, and not even as a playwright.

What happened? Clearly a new understanding of cultural hierarchies was emerging, and would ultimately become the division between high and popular culture. But what caused it to happen just at that time?

Whenever I ask that question in a study of cultural history, I start with what I call the 'smoking gun' approach. We hear what sounds like a shot from a closed room. We enter. A man lies on the floor, blood oozes from a hole in his head. He is apparently dead. Hmm. What else is in here at the same time? Another man stands holding a pistol. Smoke is coming from the barrel. Could these two things be connected? So, what 'smoking guns' were there over the period I am looking at? What else was happening over that same period that might be connected?

Well, most obviously connected were increasing debates about culture and aesthetics themselves. We could date the modern discussion of aesthetics from Alexander Baumgarten's, *Aesthetica*, 1750. But it was his protegé, Immanuel Kant whose *Critique of Judgement* (1790) laid the platform for aesthetic debate until at least the late twentieth century. He distinguished between the expression of an admiration for some object, and actually attributing beauty to it. The first was subjective opinion, but to declare something to be inherently beautiful was to talk in a 'universal voice'. Kant developed an aesthetics that privileged the mind, in the sense that beauty went beyond mere physicality, taking us to the transcendental, spiritual realm of universals.

Given the etymology of the word 'popular', it is also noteworthy that there was a developing discourse about 'the people', especially in the context of nation. Von Herder's influential work relates to the idea of the popular and how it is conceived and identified. Peter Burke cites his distinction between the 'Volk' and 'the mob of

the streets and identified the latter by the fact that they never sing and compose, but shriek and mutilate' (Burke 1978: 22). The word 'shriek' exemplifies the way in which the sonic order of the urban underclasses was discursively situated. They do not fill public spaces with speech or music, they just make noise. Von Herder's distinction reflects a changing demographic, that was even more apparent in England, where the industrial revolution was more advanced. The dispersed bucolic 'folk' were changing into the concentrated urban 'masses'. These demographic disruptions produced rising levels of alarm among those sections of society whose power and privilege depended on maintaining the existing hegemony.

Here are two smoking guns: an emerging discourse in which a hierarchy of aesthetics is being differentiated, and a fear of the growth of the noisy and unintelligible masses. But as someone with a healthy respect for the power of material culture, I then ask what else was happening that might have encouraged these intellectual discussions. A philosopher doesn't wake up one morning and start to think about the masses in the abstract for no particular reason. The rural folk can yodel their heads off with their picturesque folksongs out in the forest without him much caring, but what happens if they are doing it outside the door of his city address, interrupting his privileged speculations about beauty? And this takes us to a number of social and technological changes throughout the eighteenth century that could help us to understand this growing debate about both culture and the popular. Let's identify three of these, in particular as they apply to England:

1. The growing economic presence and power of the middle classes
2. The increasingly rapid growth in urbanisation
3. The rise of industrialisation

How might these be connected with the emergence of the distinction between high and low culture, debates about aesthetics and beauty, and the transformation of 'the people' into the feared 'masses'?

What is now referred to as the middle classes was a relatively recent social formation in the eighteenth century, in the sense that it was still trying to define its identity, its place in society and appropriate forms of social conduct. In fact one of the chief

means by which it sought to do this in England was through a relatively new literary form, called, appropriately, the novel. The cast of the eighteenth century English novel was dominated by what was then referred to as this new 'middling sort', a term that located them somewhere below the aristocracy but well above the labouring underclasses, and novels such as Richardson's *Clarissa* are in effect lengthy guides to appropriate middling class conduct and etiquette in the contemporary world. In terms of self-definition, the novel is to the eighteenth century middle class what rock'n'roll was to the mid-twentieth century teenager: a guide to identity and conduct. Like all identity formations, self-identification means self-differentiation: how can we demonstrate our difference and distinctiveness? In particular, for a class lacking any pre-existing validating mythologies – unlike the clergy, aristocracy or peasantry – it was essential to distinguish itself, especially from its inferiors, the growing industrial and urban proletariat, and particularly as they enter the historical picture at about the same time.

But because of other factors I have referred to, just as it becomes imperative to make this differentiation, it also becomes more difficult to do so for several reasons. The increasing congestion of growing cities brought people into closer physical contact across class divisions, especially before English cities became segmented by class in the nineteenth century. As industrial production increased, so did the availability of material goods such as clothing (and at a time when sumptuary laws were falling into desuetude), although this would become more evident in the nineteenth century. Both of these factors led to a growing sense of anonymity, of being an undifferentiated part of an anonymous mass. This becomes a growing theme in the literature of the nineteenth century: Book Seven of Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, Poe's *Man of the Crowd*, Gaskell's *Mary Barton*, Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener*, and later Conrad's *The Secret Agent* as well as the whole urban detective genre - all express bewilderment or fear about the unknowable faces in the city (see further Johnson, 2006: passim; Johnson, forthcoming: passim). The city became a place of disorder, of chaos, of what was often regarded as noise rather than something in which meaningful order was encoded.

So, just as an emerging class is seeking to differentiate itself, one that was based on the projection of individual identity, initiative and enterprise, so simultaneously

urbanisation, bureaucracy, crowded streets and endlessly duplicated commodities threaten to submerge its members in the urban masses. The middle or 'middling' classes, still lacking a traditionally established place in society, thus instinctively and often consciously developed strategies by which they could distinguish themselves from the masses. Let us consider these under two overlapping categories.

1. Discursively: by creating a way of talking about 'culture', so that they take ownership of it as 'Culture' – that is, something special, superior, something separate from everyday urban life. We see this in the transition from Kant's definition of beauty as something metaphysical, to Matthew Arnold's 1869 definition of culture in *Culture and Anarchy*, as 'a pursuit of our total perfection by … getting to know … the best which has ever been thought and said in the world'

But having created this idea of what was later called cultural capital, how do the middle classes then be sure that they are able to prevent their inferiors from gaining access to this Culture? It is after all their exclusive possession of it that achieves the 'distinction' they are seeking (the echoes of Bourdieu are deliberate). One way is by defining cultural competence, and one of the most effective of these is to, so to speak, lock it away in literacy. The growth of literacy through the eighteenth century was overwhelmingly among the middle classes, while the underclasses were predominantly illiterate. Alvin Kernan dates the arrival of the 'generally accepted view that what is printed is true, or at least truer than any other type of record' to some time in the eighteenth century, relating it to the pervasiveness of print in the form of posters, bills, receipts, newspapers – part of the fabric of everyday life (Kernan, 1989: 49).

If all cultural capital could thus be gathered into print form, then the differentiation between those who could read and those who could not could become a significant class marker. I give two examples of this process. One I have already referred to: it is no accident that the playwright Shakespeare was, by the late seventeenth century, transformed into a 'man of letters', accessible only to the literate as 'literature'. The connection between literacy and legitimate membership of the English nation was also consolidated in Samuel Johnson's monumental *Dictionary of the English Language*. The *Dictionary* confirmed the triumph of print as a form of cultural

authorization, the creation of the community of the 'common reader' (see Kerman, 1989: 240). He may be said to have created the English proletariat by creating the 'proletariat' in English. The word had appeared in the 1660s, but the meaning given to the word in Johnson's *Dictionary* formally located the category at the lowest level of society: 'mean, wretched, vile or vulgar'.

It is also notable that Johnson announced in his prefatory comments that he deliberately excluded from his dictionary of English the diction and cant of the underclasses as 'unworthy of preservation'. He included only words which had appeared in print – and cited all his sources. The spoken language – the cant - of the illiterate proletariat was excluded and increasingly regarded as in itself evidence of an illicit culture (see further Johnson and Cloonan, 2009: chapter two). They cannot read, they can only make noise, and in doing so manifest themselves as a threat to a hegemonic textuality.

2. Spatially. Confining the culture of refinement to books links discursive differentiation to the other category, which is spatial. Having identified Culture as the sign of refinement and superiority, the dominant classes then constructed physical spaces, texts and images to which they could control access. This control could be exercised geographically (where that space was located in a city), and economically (admission prices and dress protocols). 'True' Culture was thus only to be found in those spaces quarantined from everyday urban life. Anything outside those spaces was either not part of the national culture, or at best, low or popular culture: the culture of the unauthorised Other. It was not meaningful. It was unintelligible. It was Noise.

Obviously these ways of differentiating people of refinement from the masses was effective as long as the objects and texts which signified culture could be owned and enjoyed exclusively by the privileged classes:
Economically, by the prices of books, concerts, artworks;
Spatially, by being enclosed in buildings from which the masses could be excluded – galleries, libraries, concert halls and of course private houses;
Educationally, through literacy and other forms of learned cultural competence unavailable to the poor;

Temporally, through having the leisure time to enjoy them. Even if he could read, what factory worker had the time to read the elephantine novels of the eighteenth century? One of the things which these massive novels proclaimed was that those who could afford these books also had the leisure to read them.

Here is how things were in London in 1741 as seen by William Hogarth. But as I hope to show, it is also a sign of things to come. The musician with the refined sensibility has been able to create the spatial barriers – a solid fenced off residence. He sustains the educational barriers – that is the competence to read a musical score. He has the time to indulge his musical sensibility, unlike those in the street who are going about various necessary low-paid menial tasks. He has the money to buy a good instrument, the music score and a music room in his house. This graphic representation of the difference between elite and low plebeian culture is clear and uncomplicated.

But there is a leakage, because of the physical nature of the modern city. There is no extensive rural estate and gardens to keep the vulgar at a distance. The 'enraged musician' could prevent them from seeing each other, by closing blinds, prevent them from entering by locking his doors. But because of propinquity, he cannot prevent them from hearing each other. His music leaks out to them, and their music – let us call it noise – leaks into his space. It is an argument I have developed elsewhere, but I want to make the point that here is one mode of cultural practice that violates class-based barriers: the acoustic. And this would become even more so, given that one of the most important distinguishing features of modernity is the enormous increase in constructed, as opposed to natural, sound, and in increasingly densely populated cities. Think about this in relation to the fact that the form of so-called popular culture that attracts one of the highest levels of (often unsuccessful) regulation, is music, and its frequent characterisation as noise. In this engraving from 1741 we hear the shape of things to come

This acoustic trespassing of class-based boundaries would extend into other cultural modalities, such as the visual, from the nineteenth century, when the relatively stable cultural model of high and plebeian culture that we see in Hogarth's engraving was profoundly disrupted. I want to show that this is why the notion of the popular has become both so complex and instructive.

The middle classes set up a number of barriers to differentiate themselves from the proletariat. What if those barriers collapsed, so that 'the masses' gained access to what had formerly been unavailable to them? What then happens to the stable distinction between High and Popular culture? Over the nineteenth century, they did collapse. Let us consider some of the reasons.

First, some **demography**. In Europe, in the 1300 years between 500 AD and 1800, the population grew slowly to about 180 million. In only 114 years from 1800 to 1914, the population of Europe grew to 460 million (Carey, 1992: 3). Where did all these people go? Many of course migrated to colonies, sometimes unwillingly as in the case of colonial Australia (and one of my own ancestors). But there was also massive internal migration to the cities, especially as the capitalist rationalisation of land use led to community displacements such as the enclosures and the Highland clearances.

Displaced rural 'volk' turned into the industrialised urban masses. Through both this and the rising birth rate in England, by the end of the nineteenth century the urban population in England and Wales had grown from 33.8% of the total in 1801 to 78.9% by 1911, with the biggest growth rates between 1821 and 1881 (Williams, 1973: 217; Morris and Rodger, 1993: 3).

In 1801 only London contained more than one million people – still well over eleven times the size of its nearest rival, Liverpool. By 1861 there were sixteen conurbations already in the 100,000-plus category, and by 1911, there were forty-two (Morris and Rodger, 1993: 2). Reflecting the connection between urbanization and industrialization, the greatest rate of urban expansion was to be found in manufacturing towns, particularly those in the north including Manchester, Leeds, Bradford, Birmingham, and Liverpool, increasing in size by up to 40% in a decade (Williams, 1973: 220). These converging forces in nineteenth-century urbanization clearly suggest a connection between class divisions associated with capitalism: the confrontations between a dominant bourgeoisie and the working class. The growing cities were therefore also 'a site of class formation' (Morris and Rodger, 1993: 26).

By the mid nineteenth century England became the first country to be demographically urban. The extension of its cities into suburban precincts was aided by developments in public and private transport, improved street lighting, sewerage, power and other service infrastructures. The number of houses in suburban west London was fewer than 3000 in 1851, but more than 33,000 by 1911 (Carey, 1992: 46). In short, the urban masses are now bigger, closer, becoming more affluent and … less different from the middle classes of an earlier century.

Consider changes in **cultural competency**. I emphasised the importance of the literacy differential in the eighteenth century. Until 1870 in England, the pleasures of literacy were enjoyed most commonly among the middle classes. They had the money to buy education, the leisure and the light to read books (candles adequate for night reading were in fact a considerable budget item). In 1871 the Education Act guaranteed a universal elementary education, which included literacy. As its beneficiaries grew to adulthood, this transformed the reading market. There was a rise in what might be called popular novels such as those by R.L. Stevenson). 'Railway

novels' emerged for the growing population of suburban commuters. The tabloid or popular press began to flourish: the *Daily Mail* commenced in 1896, the *Daily Mirror* in 1903; and niche journals like *Forget-Me-Not* for women (1891). Circulation libraries proliferated, and also cheap paperbacks, ultimately including the classics – High Culture that had once been beyond the reach of the lower classes.

Consider also new information technologies and the arrival of the mass media (by which I do not refer to content, but to circulation on a mass scale). A list would include new print and photographic-reproduction technologies in the popular press, but also, information technologies that did not even require various forms of cultural competence such as literacy or the ability to read a score. They represented radically new ways of circulating information that gave the hitherto disenfranchised direct access to knowledge and the circulation of information.

The typewriter was an example. You didn't need a good writing hand to use a typewriter, so the erratic literacy of the enormous female labour pool was not an issue. In 1870, only 4.5% of stenographers and typists in the U.S. were women. By 1930, the figure was 95.6% (Kittler, 1999: 184). The gendering of this technology was so powerful that the word 'typewriter referred interchangeably to the woman and to the machine (see further Johnson, forthcoming). From 1878 the telephone provided an increasingly widespread means of direct oral communication over long distances. No letter-writing skills were needed, no long delays. Again this technology created enormous new labour opportunities for women, so much so that switchboard operators were known as the 'Hello Girls'. The sound recording was patented in 1877, and public juke boxes were being installed in public spaces in the US by 1889. Mass produced hand cameras were manufactured by Kodak from 1888, cinema was providing public entertainment as the century turned, radio by the 1920s … and so on to today's information technologies.

I want to make two points about these technologies. The first relates to a sub-theme in this whole lecture. I talked about the importance of literacy in constructing a distinction between high and plebeian culture. Literacy is, in the modern era, primarily a silent and visual practice. One thread throughout this discussion has been the situation of aurality – of sonic information networks – in the cultural politics of

emerging modernity. Note then, that most of the technologies I have listed and which broke down the dominance of print and threatened middleclass control, are acoustic technologies. The other point carries our discussion of popular culture forward. That is, that the changes in urban demography, cultural competencies and information technologies threatened to destroy the barriers between people of refinement and the urban industrial masses. The images, information and knowledge 'spaces' that had been owned exclusively by genteel folk were becoming available to the proletariat. The old way of differentiating their sensibilities from the plebeian, through control of culture was collapsing because the old idea of 'popular' culture was now eating all cultural forms.

Hence, it became more difficult to set up that neat (but already threatened) distinction we saw in Hogarth's engraving of 1741. Although used more than ever before, the meaning of 'popular culture' has been completely destabilised, now that in a digitised age, anyone can gain access to any cultural artefact, and indeed create a new meaning for it

Consider briefly some opinions of what is 'popular' which remain active in the public consciousness:

1. 'Popular' means 'of the people.
But we no longer live in finite and bounded geographical spaces where 'the people' was as straightforward a notion as it was for, say von Herder. In urbanised societies with highly mobile and heterogeneous populations, what does the word 'the people' include? Is it just 'ordinary people' – does that mean men, women, children, the disabled, the unemployed, the destitute, the immigrant factory worker, the permanent transient? Is there anyone in this room, or do we know anyone, who is not a 'people'?

2. 'Popular' culture means 'people's culture – but what does that mean?
   - Liked by many people? Do we therefore call Pavarotti, *Carmina Burana*, Van Gogh, popular culture? They are liked by 'many people'.
   - Made by just ordinary people? Where would that leave Michael Jackson or Madonna recordings, or the films *Titanic*, *Avatar*, *Pirates of the Caribbean*.

None of these could reasonably be described as being made by just 'ordinary' people.

- Made for the people? For example pop music … but 80% of pop recordings do not recoup their production costs. That is, they are rejected by 'the people'. Does that mean that the majority of pop records are therefore not popular culture?

We haven't found a simple definition of popular culture. But we have learned some very useful things about it:

• That a study of the history of the term is very instructive when we try to understand the history of power relations in society
• That the course of that intellectual and material cultural history itself helps us to understand why popular culture is so difficult to lay hands on
• Perhaps most importantly, we should understand that we can no longer identify popular culture just by pointing to objects, texts, images, like a painting, a film, a comic, a piece of music. The reason is that everyone in the developed world has access to these texts, and can reconstruct them physically and semiotically.

Where do we situate *Carmina Burana* when it is used to sell coffee, as a sound track for a movie about King Arthur, or as the theme for the 2000 Sydney Olympics, or in personalised videos on Youtube? What is the cultural status of Beethoven's 'Für Elise' when it is selling MacDonalds (Yang, 2006: passim). Where do we situate a visually perfect replica of a precious artefact like the bust of Nefertiti or Michelangelo's David when it is used as paperweight. What is the image of the Mona Lisa when it is on a tee-shirt? I have such an example. It is a white tee-shirt, with a full-colour reproduction of Leonardo's Mona Lisa. The caption is 'In 30 minutes, I'm laughing'. It is one of those publicity gifts presented by pharmaceutical representatives to physicians. This one came from an analgesic company that produces headache pills. Of course, the image still carries its 'high' cultural baggage – that's exactly the joke. It hasn't been emptied of its 'meaning'; it doesn't mean less than it did in terms of semiotic density. Arguably it means more, because added to that pre-existing semiotic load is a set of meanings relating to commodity capitalism, medicalisation, lifestyle. The Mona Lisa has been made more complex by being

incorporated into something as banal as a tee-shirt advertising a pharmaceutical product.

Once there were 'sacred places' where high culture was protected. The image of Mona Lisa stayed in the art gallery. The music of Beethoven stayed in the concert hall or salon. The 'literature' of Shakespeare stayed in expensive books and theatres. By their immobility, these artefacts stabilised power relations between classes, and we could in fact point to a text and say 'that is high culture'. Everything outside these sacred spaces could be called popular, or low, or mass culture. But now 'texts' move so freely back and forth across the two categories that the fence between them has been trampled. The popular can become sacralised elite art (Lichtenstein, Warhol). The elite can sneak out to consort with popular culture: Plácido Domingo, José Carreras and Luciano Pavarotti are regarded as the greatest operatic tenors of their time. When they debuted as The Three Tenors at the 1990 World Cup, where would we locate their performance in terms of elite and popular culture? What is Beethoven in the film *A Clockwork Orange*, or Mozart in the Film *Green Card*. It is not just the image or the text that is appropriated, but its meanings are changed.

We can no longer point to a text and simply say: that is popular culture. We can no longer point to popular culture and say: oh, isn't that about comics? We have to consider both the terms popular and culture not as objects, but as processes and practices, we have to consider not just texts, but contexts, not just 'What is this painting?' but how is it being used, who is using it and for what purpose, how is it stored and circulated? Where is it?

A final illustration of the importance of all these questions. Many of you will know the musician Joshua Bell, considered one of the great violin virtuosi of today. On 12 January 2007, he gave one of the most interesting performances of his career. On his 1713 Stradivarius, he played a 43 minute programme starting with the Chaconne from Bach's *Partita* No 2. The repertoire was entirely taken from the very well-known canon of high art music, such as and including Schubert's *Ave Maria*. The performance was filmed from beginning to end, showing an audience of over 1000 people, many of whom later revealed that they had attended concert performances by Bell which had included some of the pieces he performed on this occasion, and had

been enraptured by his ravishing interpretations. He has been paid up to $US1000 per minute for his performances. On this occasion he received $32.17.

This reminds us of the importance of context rather than just text in the way cultural status is judged. This musical 'text' is as 'high art' as you could get. The problem was context. As an experiment, Joshua Bell played outside of the privileged space in Hogarth's engraving. He played as a busker, outside the Washington Metro station, standing against a wall and next to a garbage bin (Weingarten 2007: passim). Today text is incomprehensible without context.

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