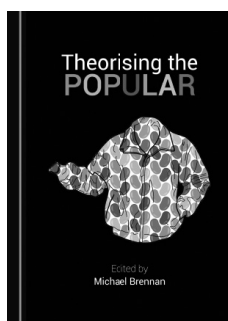


Theorising the Popular

Reviewed by Indrani Das Gupta



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Since the 1960s popular culture has become enormously significant, with Leslie Fiedler and Susan Sontag's path breaking analysis of a "new sensibility". Set against the backdrop of this "new sensibility" and understood as a kind of anti-authoritarian, illegitimate and subversive strain within popular culture, Michael Brennan's new edited book titled *Theorising the Popular* emerges from the conference of the same name, hosted annually by Liverpool Hope University. Drawn from humanities, social sciences, cultural studies, creative industries and the performing arts, this book provides a theoretical reflection on popular culture through the prism of gender, class, race, war, history, new communication technologies, and interventionist politics. In Brennan's words, popular culture is an example of "creative bricoleurs" (2017, p. 2); a fascinating read on how meanings are contested, affirmed and resisted.

The essays in this book are arranged thematically, whereby the first three chapters traverse the disciplinary borders between high and low art to explore the immersive and interactive forms of new theatre particularly popular in Europe. In chapter 1, Russell Anderson in his essay explores the interactive forms of theatre adapted from Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre and Paul Auslander's notion of "dominant media epistemology" to represent a shifting terrain of theatrical art forms and styles influenced by new genres such as ICT, hypertext, gaming,

“renaissance fairs”, role-play evenings, and re-enactment weekends. Chapter 2, by Catriona Craig addresses the issues of gender and race through the improvisation wrought in the genre of comedy by focusing on the long-term improvisation troupe “Austentatious”. Laurie Slegtenhorst, in Chapter 3, focuses on the Dutch musical, *Soldier of Orange* (*Soldaat van Oranje*) about the Dutch resistance to Nazi occupied Holland during the Second World War. These three chapters focus on destabilizing the notion of tradition and authenticity by examining writing as a feminine gesture that escapes the stranglehold of phallogentric culture, popular culture’s role in politics in terms of wider participation, and the idea of “staged authenticity” to “engag[e] post-war generations about war” (Slegtenhorst, 2017).

In the next three chapters, the author discusses the issues generated within the realm of television, as situated in the shifting terrains of post-television landscape, where cultures/sites and meanings are constantly in a flux. Chapter 4, Michael Brennan’s essay, deals with what Geoffrey Gorer describes as the “pornography of death” (Terceir, 2013). Using the figure of Christopher Hitchens, Brennan explores how the public spectacle of one’s imminent death has reformulated the public sphere. In Chapter 5, Ann Boleyn’s representation on television through the popular primetime television show *The Tudors* has been discussed by Alison Offe as history itself being transformed through these cultural fabrications of historical and political imagination. Chapter 6 by Pavao Parunov discusses the representation of the trope of anti-hero in the critically acclaimed series *Breaking Bad*. Parunov discusses how satellite television networks have shaped the debates surrounding masculinity and gender issues. These three chapters, while reflecting on the fluidity, multiplicity, and heterogeneity of identity, explore how history, gender and even death is more a matter of interpretation and performance rather than being a study governed by fact and evidence.

In the last four chapters, the author examines popular culture within the domain of literature. In Chapter 7, Eric Saldberg discusses the value and significance of a popular literary form such as crime fiction by Dorothy L. Sayers against the charges levelled at her work by Q.D. Leavis. Eric reads Leavis’ dismissal of Sayer’s work as being more a handiwork of academic dons to “contain” a said popular work, rather than being an attestation of literary merit. Estelle Vallas, in Chapter 8, reads Arthurian legends as refracted through Bernard Cornwell’s historical *Warlord Chronicles*. The representation of Guinevere by Cornwell is read by Vallas as traversing both the Celtic past and the discourses surrounding gender debates during the 20th century. In Chapter 9, Zlato Bukac and Jelena Kupsjak, similar to Offe’s essay in Chapter 5, address the standalone representation of super heroines of comic books genre such as Ms Marvel within the changing

gender equations of our society, including as Michael Brennan suggests, “the hypersexualisation of female protagonists” (2017, p. 6). Kasandra-Louis Paterson, in the final chapter, examines the problematic issue of identity within the fabric of social activism and social engagement in two very popular young adult novels, Suzanne Collins’ *Hunger Games* and Veronica Roth’s *Divergent*.

The collection of ten essays in this volume offers a unique insight into the terrain of popular culture in these global times of intense digitalization. Imbricated within the terrain of agency and re-production, popular culture as understood in these essays is a site of “insurgency” (Brennan 2017, p. 2); a dynamic site of revision and co-narration; and an exploration of the intersections of history, memory and education to debunk the demarcations between disparate genres, styles, forms and registers.

This book is a must read for students and scholars alike on the intersections and interfaces of literature and social fabric, history and memory, and democratic politics and audience response to aesthetic representations.

REFERENCES

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