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Caught between Cultural and Literary Studies Popular Fiction's Double Otherness

The article explores why, despite various laudable exceptions, popular fiction still has not received as much attention as its importance would merit. The answer I propose is that popular fiction is caught in the middle between cultural and literary studies. Popular fiction, I argue here, is characterized by a double otherness: as popular *fiction* it is not what people in cultural studies are chiefly interested in, but what they tend to leave to their colleagues in literary studies; and as *popular* fiction it is not what people in literature departments are particularly interested in, but what they tend to leave to their colleagues in cultural studies. The former, I argue, is an unconscious form of othering, since most scholars in cultural studies would no doubt agree that popular fiction is important and needs to be investigated. It is simply not what most of them concentrate on. The latter, by contrast, is a conscious form of othering, a means by which scholars of literature continue to define their object of study in a very traditional way.

After a short introduction the first part of this essay focuses on cultural studies. It sets out by establishing that many publications in the field implicitly position popular fiction as an other and then goes on to discuss the reasons for this othering. Cultural studies, I argue, has since its inception been driven by the desire to move beyond literature and to expand the notion of ›text‹ to comprise all signifying systems. As a result, cultural studies scholars ›read‹ films, television, magazines, newspapers, advertisements, or football matches, but they hardly ever engage literary texts. This widespread neglect, I suggest, affects not only those scholars who are interested in cultural production and in the texts as such, but also those who study acts of reception and the construction of meaning as cultural practices.

The next section investigates why popular fiction is not studied more frequently within literary studies, and suggests that literary studies still suffers from what I call the ›modernist bias‹. The philologies continue to embrace modernism's normative understanding of what constitutes a valuable work of art. They are interested in texts that are subversive in terms of content and innovative in terms of form, texts that are anti-mimetic, ambivalent, and complex – and thus possess qualities that popular fictional texts are said to lack. I demonstrate how this modernist bias entered literary criticism through the close association between the modernist writers and the proponents of the New Criticism, and how it survived into the age of poststructuralism, affecting the practice of criticism, impacting on the construction of literary histories, and leading scholars of literature to ignore, vilify, or recast popular fictional texts in modernist terms.

By way of conclusion I argue that we should get rid of the label ›popular‹ altogether – both with regard to popular fiction and to popular culture in general. Not only are there countless differences between many individual texts which are usually included within this category that tend to be obscured when we employ the same label for all of them; what is more, getting rid of the label ›popular‹ seems a promising way to counter the ongoing compartmentalization and marginalization of popular fiction that even those scholars who study popular fiction often unwittingly corroborate. This does not mean that we should stop talking about differences between texts. But ›popular vs. literary‹ is only one possible binary to structure the literary field, a powerful but hardly the most useful one. There are other binaries available – ›subversive vs. affirmative‹, ›conservative vs. progressive‹, ›influential vs. negligible‹, etc. – that fit better the effort to understand literary artifacts in relation to the cultural, social, political, and historical context that produced these texts and that these texts, in turn, also shape.

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