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What Next for the 'Text'? Popular Culture and Literature Today

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Abstract
Literary studies have evolved over the past few decades to include popular culture fields as text. Proponents of this inclusion argue that songs, memes, tweets, local dialects, and slogans say as much about people and cultures as traditional texts – perhaps even more. The opinion is that, by over-relying on traditional text for literary fodder, scholars shut themselves off from current and relevant information about the rapidly evolving literary and cultural landscape. The disregard for popular culture also turns away a younger audience that seems to prefer a more informal approach to art and literature. Thus, the reading of popular cultures as text is forcing the literary field to re-evaluate the fundamental principles that define its work. Literary scholars have to rethink their traditional ideals of writing, reading, and teaching texts. Yet, there remains a reluctance to accept such informal forms of communication as memes and tweets as legitimate literature. Popular culture is not well regarded in literary studies and some stakeholders fear its classification as text could dilute the impact of the field. This paper investigates this trepidation by analyzing how reading popular culture fields as text impacts the identity of text in literary studies. Based on selected tenets of Literary and Cultural Studies (LCS) Research, particularly cultural literacy, this paper examines the legitimacy of different popular culture formats to determine if they hold enough value to warrant literary analysis. The author argues that many forms of popular culture deserve a closer look, especially through a literary lens, because they reveal the cultures, beliefs, and practices of their audience. He suggests that the incorporation of popular culture into literary studies offers many opportunities for growth and discovery but only if implemented diligently. Finally, this paper investigates why the literary field is reluctant to read popular cultures as text and how scholars can navigate this inclusion to create a more cohesive definition of text.

Introduction

The conversation on what constitutes a 'text' has been happening in literary circles for the past half a decade (Höög, et al., 2023). Discourse analysts and text researchers do not seem to agree on what can be read as text and what cannot. Initially, the consensus was that the traditional texts that shape history and society deserve analysis more than non-traditional texts – Think Shakespeare, Chaucer, Jane Austen, and Edgar Allan Poe. As Schudson (1987) puts it, many scholars lauded the superiority of traditional texts over popular culture, considering them more authentic, less commercially driven and aesthetically bland than their "less-inspired" counterparts. This attitude was particularly

pervasive at the start of the 20th century. As Kovala (2002) notes, the 1900s to 1930s were marked by a cold and formal approach to literature. Roman Jakobson, for instance, championed the "science of criticism" to distinctively define literary text, and T.S. Eliot called for poetry to be more impersonal (Kovala, 2002).

The next decade saw a more expanded view of written works. Scholars have moved away from the systematic approach to reading over the last few decades and have begun considering author backgrounds and opuses in their analysis. In the 1960s, the field dropped the textual and philological purity ideal and adopted a more multidisciplinary research approach (Schudson, 1987). This was when literary studies started to borrow influences and ideas from philosophy, linguistics, anthropology, and other related fields.

The last leg of the century saw literary studies take on a more political lilt. Scholars and stakeholders within the field now read texts from different viewpoints, including postcolonial, queer, feminist, and capitalist. This politicisation saw literature evolve beyond books onto other objects (Kovala, 2002) like art, which were now read for meaning alongside traditional text. Scholars renounced close reading at the beginning of the 21st century, claiming it narrowed the literary canon so significantly that only a few books within the field were considered valuable. This opened the field to new perspectives and expanded the data pool to include African literature, protest literature, oral literature, and other previously unanalysed fields.

Lowbrow Text? The Status of Popular Culture in Literary Studies

The idea that popular culture was a "worthless fad" began to be challenged in the late 20th century. Schudson (1987) notes that, contrary to what scholars had believed until then, they began to see that popular culture was a more authentic representation of the ordinary man's life and that traditional literature had more elitist undertones. This discovery ushered in a new way of thinking – if popular culture was more ingratiated into the common man's life, then its components warranted academic analysis. Thus, different forms of popular culture could be considered texts.

Conventionally, and despite the strides made in previous years, many academics still consider non-traditional texts a cheap and unsophisticated medium (Pandell, 2016). Formal spaces today, including the Swedish Academy's Nobel Prize in literature, still emphasise the merit of traditional prose like theatre plays, poetry, and novels, which they deem synonymous with "an aura of quality, taste, and advanced intellectual aspirations" (Höög et al., 2023). Smith (2022) notes that many scholars have reservations about teaching and dedicating resources to studying popular culture because of the format's popularity. Scholars wonder what could be so difficult as to require analysis of a medium so appealing to the general masses. This is why you are more likely to study Ken Walibora in a literature class than King Kaka and the political messaging in his hit song "*Wajinga Nyinyi*", even though it carries valid social commentary.

Many conversations around popular culture also frame popular texts as threatening literary studies (Salgaro, 2022). A stance that forces literary critics and other traditional gatekeepers to further alienate themselves from the inspection of styles of dressing, songs, movies, paintings, advertisements, street signs, and anything from which one can draw meaning (Banerjee, 2021). This ideology, however, often only leaves space at the table for books and other paper-based literature. And within a rapidly digitising world, it is becoming obsolete and irrelevant. The sentiment that popular culture holds significant literary value is gaining popularity in literary studies. Smith (2022) notes that many scholars are now subjecting popular culture formats like film and graphic novels to the same theories and analysis as they would traditional text.

At this point, it is important to clarify what the author means by popular culture. Tavinor (2011) defines popular culture as a "set of practices, beliefs, artistic output, and objects" generally accepted by members of a society and prevalent within that population at a given time. To constitute popular

culture, these elements must be widely shared within society (Schudson, 1987). Since the field is vast, Strinati (2004) suggests that popular culture can take on different meanings based on the definer's audience, context, or environment. For this paper, therefore, popular culture refers to forms of entertainment like video games, TV, music, and film; fashion; politics; local languages and slang; news; technology; social media, and other cultural artefacts that may contain information about the people who create and consume them.

As mentioned earlier, there is still some debate about what constitutes a text. Thus, there is a need for this research. For utility, however, a text in the context of this paper is any weaving of concepts, be they theoretical, logical, conceptual, or analytic, brought together through language (Nordquist, 2020). This paper also concurs with the different understandings of the text De Angelis (2020) suggested. De Angelis avers that text, through a restricted lens, means written works. However, text can include written and spoken works when viewed through an extended lens and any visual, gestural, verbal, or written manifestation through an expanded lens.

The latter classification allows us to study popular culture as text by expanding the scope beyond oral and written literature. It thus allows us to ask the following pertinent questions:

- Why are stakeholders in the literary field rejecting popular culture mediums of meaning and distinguishing them from traditional texts? Or is there a rationale for teaching and enshrining only some texts and not others in literary study?
- What would be the impact on the field of reading popular culture fields as text?
- Will ignoring popular culture invalidate literary studies and turn away younger audiences that may want to analyse their bodies of meaning?
- How can academics incorporate aspects of popular culture into their study and instruction without losing the integrity of traditional literary criticism?

Theoretical Grounding and Literature Review

This paper is based on selected tenets of Literary and Cultural Studies research, particularly cultural literacy. Segal (2014) defines cultural literacy as investigating social and cultural issues through a literary lens. It involves finding meaning in the phenomena around us by "looking at the textuality, fictionality, rhetoricity, and historicity of things" (Segal, 2014). This search for meaning is especially important today because of the sheer number of stimuli, both visual and aural, we are bombarded by every day. If we fail to read and find meaning in all this input, we risk missing out on the social and cultural experiences that define our existence. The challenge is to question what the saggy pants say about the Kenyan youth, what the satirical slogans communicate about the matatu man, and what songs like *Wajinga Nyinyi* convey about our political anxieties.

This literacy can be achieved by studying the textuality, fictionality, rhetoricity, and historicity of phenomena around us. Textuality refers to the complexity of all cultural activities and objects. According to textuality ideals, any cultural object can be read as an artefact, be it a process, law, form of art, or piece of communication (Segal, 2014). And, per Höög et al. (2023), this textuality can be tested through different elements, most importantly the cohesion and coherence of an artefact. If we were to consider *Milk and Honey by Rupi Kaur, this collection of Instagram poems fails the traditional test of poetry yet is the most popular poetry book in literary history and has sold over three million copies (Salgad*o, 2022). While not adhering to the rules set by Yates or Edgar Allan Poe, Kaur's body of work is cohesive and coherent to its readers and thus conveys textuality and can be considered a cultural artefact or text. Kaur alternates her texts with images she scribbles herself and uses lowercase letters for traditionally uppercased elements like 'I.' However, millions of fans read her work because it is emotionally relatable, moving, thought-provoking, and sincere (Salgaro, 2022).

Fictionality, conversely, caters to the difference between what is real and unreal, which many cultural artefacts suggest through their referentiality. Although fictional objects are fashioned by first assuming the rules of artifice, they are not subject to natural laws. This means you cannot test the truth of fictional texts because they are formulated as fiction. Yet, they are not lies. You can study the fictional quality of an artefact by testing how it artfully achieves the truth effect (Hartman et al., 2021). In his book *Memes in Digital Culture*, Limor Shifman defined memes as "content units that generate user-created derivatives in the form of remakes, parodies, or imitations" (Limor, 2013). Hartman et. al. (2021) interpret this to mean that memes, as a type of text, encourage the creation of other texts that copy, continue, or parody the original. This distinction is important, considering most memes do not represent reality – cats don't complain about the weather. Yet, in their delivery, they communicate a truth about society that is so potent and relatable that they have become the most shared form of text. It can be argued that memes artfully achieve the truth effect and thus exhibit fictionality.

Rhetoricity posits that all texts have a probable effect or purpose (Somani, 2020). Derived from the concept of rhetoric, this concept focuses on how speech can be used to manipulate or persuade. The assumption is that the language of the text is never innocent – it has an intended purpose. We can achieve cultural literacy by assuming that all forms of communication today have rhetoricity. For instance, are matatu slogans simply decorations meant to enliven a matatu's interior? Or, as Kayi (2016) and Mutongi (2017) suggest, do they contain language intended to persuade or manipulate matatu passengers? When the matatu man says "*punda amechoka*", {the donkey is tired. Is he making idle chatter or trying to persuade us of his economic difficulties? And when the youth in Kenya use Sheng, should we disregard it as simply a new form of communication or study its language for intent? Is the young person trying to challenge the status quo by adopting a language that those outside his world cannot understand, or is he simply speaking a language that comes easily to him? (Ference, 2013). Rhetoricity allows us to study cultural phenomena for meaning.

Finally, historicity deals with the historical quality of artefacts, including the period in which they are formed and their evolution over time (Somani, 2020). Historicity affirms that the history of an artefact is central to its meaning and that all cultural artefacts have an "extension in time" even when they don't have one in space (Somani, 2020). Shakespeare's work, which we value today, has historicity. Its historical context tells us about Shakespeare's time's beliefs, practices, laws, and cultures. However, his work would have easily been considered popular culture when it was made because it contained messages relatable to the common man. In his argument about why popular culture merits literary analysis, Smith (2022) argues that today's popular culture is the traditional text of tomorrow. Over time, its history and development will inform its literary value and need for analysis. Smith (2022) elaborates that cultural artefacts "preserve in a capsule" the truths of their time. A music video from today may provide scholars fifty years from now with information about our languages, dressing styles, prevalent anxieties, and more.

However, while cultural literacy concepts help us identify cultural artefacts, they fail to differentiate text from common utterances. Here, Xiaolu & Xiao (2006) suggest an objective approach to cultural objects that identifies texts as the byproducts of a people's culture. Music, the musician, and the people who consume the music are informed by their social conditions, values, and conceptions. As such, they inject these aspects into the text, in this case, the music, lending it cultural value. When the Nobel community awarded Bob Dylan the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2016, they proved this (Elmusa, 2016). There was no reason Bob Dylan's music should have been considered literature unless the committee agreed that his lyrics carried within them and communicated the values, realities, and conceptions of the community at the point in history in which they were written. His and the music of others can be said to use the rhyme and measure of poetry and the figurative language of fiction to communicate meaning. The committee awarded Dylan "for creating new poetic expressions within the great American song tradition (BBC, 2016).

Scholars have long investigated texts on semiotic bases and within different situational and cultural contexts (Berge, 2007; Melander & Olsson, 2001). These studies have analysed the understanding of texts within institutions and society and the influence texts have on history and culture. Scholars have looked into the evolving literary landscape (Schudson, 1987; Somani, 2020; Verbais, 2002; Kostadinovska-Stojchevska & Shalevska, 2018). Schudson (1987) captured the rising interest in popular culture in American universities during the latter part of the 20th century. He explained that, slowly but surely, scholars were adopting a more tolerant attitude toward popular culture. In his case, however, popular cultures extended to forms we now consider traditional texts but were not at the time, including romance novels, detective fiction, and science fiction.

This paper expands the scope to include popular culture formats that have arisen since Schudson's investigation. It looks at, for instance, Twitterature, a form of poetic and narrative writing that has emerged on Twitter (now *X*). Al Sharaqi & Abbasi (2016) study this phenomenon in their paper and note that critics dismiss it as "stunting story development and strangulating creativity." This paper investigates this and similar claims that reading popular culture as text threatens creativity and the English language. It also explores the place of traditional reading and text in a digitised world. Drawing on Salgaro's (2022) work on digital social reading, this paper suggests that authors and audiences are moving online and that scholars must follow them there to retain relevance. Salgaro (2022) has studied Rupi Kaur's work at length and argues that the popularity of her work threatens the position of traditional literary critics and reviewers. This paper extends this assessment to publishers, academicians, and other literary studies stakeholders.

Building on the work of Somani (2020) on current literature trends, this paper assesses the reader-to-author connection digital reading allows. Somani (2020) discusses popular reading trends like hypertext, blogs, and the 6-word novel and their strong and positive social influence. For comparison, this paper takes a contrary stance and investigates how formats like blogs can harm the quality of literature. Verbais (2002) finds that while the informal interaction with literary works can provide a deeper understanding of culture, it sets the stage for a "more informal form of discourse." Lastly, on the evolution of the literary landscape, this paper considers the work of Wang (2022) on the impact of digitisation on the humanities. Wang discusses what she calls the "digital humanities," postulating that digitisation has revolutionised research and academic teaching within the field. Wang believes the new paradigm created by technology in different humanity fields, and specifically literary studies, could bring the field close to science and technology. This aligns with the panic that has caught hold in the humanities as authorities push more students toward STEM courses.

Amid growing interest in popular culture, some scholars have studied independent formats to determine whether they warrant literary analysis. Somani (2020), mentioned earlier, has looked into Twitterature and the 6-word novel. Salgaro (2022) focused on Instagram poetry and digital reading, and Kostadinovska-Stojchevska & Shalevska (2018) looked into internet memes. Locally, researchers like Kayi (2016) and Khayesi, Nafukho, and Kemuma (2015) have investigated the validity of matatu slogans as literary tools and new orature genres. In all these instances, scholars have found that the different popular culture formats hold enough structure and meaning to warrant analysis.

Branching wider into the subject of text and textuality, this paper also considers the work of Höög et al. (2023) on Nordic *sakprosa* texts. The authors review the ever-changing nature of genres and try to formulate a text theory to study the textuality of informal Nordic texts. Höög et al. (2023) argue that the most effective way to analyse popular texts that don't fall within the purview of traditional literature is through a multidisciplinary approach involving the fields of ethnology, communication, education, etc. This author borrows from Nanquil & Santos (2023) and their work on how literature teachers can integrate popular culture into their lessons. Agreeing with their assessment, this author argues that popular culture formats are more palatable to a young audience and can open up new channels of understanding for literary students. Nanquil & Santos (2023) formulate a teaching model

that combines different popular culture formats and references, effectively triggering 'artistic responses' in students.

Finally, this author considers the problems that may arise from combining popular culture with literary studies and looks to the work of Kovala (2002). Kovala notes that the cultural studies field has been in turmoil for decades, with some factions advocating for textual analysis and other scholars preferring to study the context of cultural phenomena. Kovala explains that some scholars in the cultural fields feel textual analysis fails to capture the nuances of cultural media by focusing solely on text and ignoring context. Drawing on Fairclough (2003), he argues that to maintain efficacy, textual analysis should expand its conception of text and context, the definitions of which are always changing, and study how the two intertwine. Kovala believes that textual analysis should capture different levels of discourse, starting with text and including social and discursive practices. Like Höög et al. (2023), Kovala (2002) advocates for a multi-tiered and nuanced approach to reading cultural artefacts as text – a suggestion the author conquers with completely.

Positive Impacts of Reading Popular Culture as Text

If popular culture contains cultural artefacts that reveal meaning about society, reading them as text offers many opportunities for cultural discovery. Thus, some of the merits of classifying popular culture formats as text may include:

New Styles of Writing

Somani (2020) identifies new forms of short-form writing that allow writers to challenge their writing abilities. Formats like X fiction and the 6-word novel charge the writer with a near-impossible task—to communicate their entire message in a few characters (X). While these writings may seem too short to warrant analysis, their popularity suggests otherwise.

Succinct literature is arguably more palatable to today's generation – one plagued with an attention span so short it would shock a goldfish – than traditional text. The X-fiction literary trend is based on the same principle (Al Sharaqi & Abbasi, 2016). Modern audiences, especially young audiences, are always in a rush. They dash through online platforms, where these texts are found, and it is the writer's job to capture their attention and communicate what they need to in the few minutes it will take to lose it again. As a literary style, this short-form writing builds on the concepts of the short story. Its defining elements are, as Somani (2020) puts it, "stylistic word economy, compactness, symbolic structure, and implied narrative." The fact that there is a structure and formula means there is a basis for analysis. Other forms of popular culture writing worth investigating include Instagram poetry (Salgaro, 2022), Texting (Reinecke, 2017), listicles, and even status updates (Pandell, 2016).

Elmusa (2016) suggests a literary look at music lyrics separate from poetry. While both formats use rhyme, rhythm, and measure to share messages, Elmusa (2016) suggests that the fact that lyrics must be written in a way that they "work with" musical notes makes them different. She maintains that music lyrics are composed to follow the rules set by the music, an attribute poetry lacks. But what benefits would analysing these forms of writing yield for the field? Smith (2022) interviews English Professor Jamie Horrocks, who affirms that all forms of literature "began as pop culture." Horrocks looks back at how novels were considered "trashy" when they were first conceived but are now a traditional and respected text. Studying these new forms of writing could open new literary horizons for communication, instruction, and analysis.

More Opportunities for Academic Study

The new horizons would encompass more than new writing styles. The basis of post-modern literature is that it is ever-changing (Höög et al., 2023). As the world evolves, so do the genres and text types previously established in the literary world. Some genres merge with others, other sub-genres grow significant enough to become their own, and some genres disappear altogether. Including popular culture would add to the already rich genre repertoire of literary studies. Popular culture

formats contain genres not available in traditional texts. Video games, for instance, feature genres like First-Person Shooter (FPS) and Multi-Player modes. Music is divided into rock and roll, hip hop, Afrobeat, and other distinctive categories. Each of these "text types" has elements that can be studied to add to the rich treasury of knowledge in literary studies.

Schudson (1987) also notes that opening literary studies to popular culture could set the stage for more nuanced multidisciplinary literary research. Analysing the language and imagery of video games, for instance, could open a line of questioning on the psychology of gamers. This would lend the research to input and use from the psychological field. The same can be said for other popular culture formats and their connections to politics, social analysis, linguistics, sociology, history, and anthropology.

Direct Author-Reader Contact

Reading popular culture as text could also open up more lines of communication between authors, literary critics, and audiences. Contact between these actors before the internet was often one-way (Salgaro, 2022). As a result, the reader was often considered second to the writer, who was second to the literary critic. This may explain the allegations of elitism levelled against scholars. Salgaro (2022) sees popular culture texts built for association and involvement. Instagram poems are made short to attract more readers and are posted using hashtags to invite like-minded audiences to the conversations they open. Part of the popularity of Instagram poets is born of the interaction they cultivate with their readers or, more aptly, their fan base.

This feeling of involvement can encourage more people to engage with text. Popular culture audiences can comment on, critique, and build on authors' works. And while this seems like it threatens the position of literary critics, it adds more nuance and flavour to the analysis. Critics can do more than analyse a piece of work – they can also assess the public's response to it (Bhagat, 2024). The direct contact between audiences, creators, and critics can also foster renewed interest in traditional text. Follow any audience-creator conversation online, and you will see that most audiences want to know the inspiration behind their favourite creators' works. If the creator points to a traditional literary figure like Jane Austen, it is common to see Austen's book sales increase. This is how many young people get introduced to traditional text.

Shedding the Gatekeeper Role

This is not to say that popular culture and the internet have not or will not affect the position of literary scholars. The availability of text online and the close contact between creators and audiences undermines the position of traditional gatekeepers in the literary world, like publishing houses and critics (Salgaro, 2022). For instance, when Milk and Honey were released, *the backlash against the literary community was almost immediate (Salgad*o, 2022). Readers were incensed that a book they enjoyed so much was deemed "not real art" by literary critics. The running sentiment was that scholars are arrogant, elitist, and detached from reality – a sentiment that is causing many to disregard or ignore the literary community.

This seems odd to present as a merit, but it offers a unique opportunity for the literary field. Literary theorists, scholars, critics, and academicians have always been considered "highbrow" and elitist (Schudson, 1987). Before the internet, books rose and fell by literary stakeholders, and their dismissal of a piece of work meant death to the creator's career. This situation created an atmosphere of fear and animosity that stunted collaboration and interest in the field. Including popular culture in the field offers an opportunity to remedy that. By expanding their views and opening themselves up to studying new text forms, literary stakeholders can maintain their air of authority while attracting a young and modern audience. There is an opportunity to engage with the common man, as it were, and discover his anxieties and realities through the cultural artefacts he creates and consumes every day. As Schudson (1987) puts it, the scholar must lose the identity of the "expert with complete knowledge" and adopt that of the researcher willing to seek out and interact with new information.

Improving Learning

If the scholar can change how he learns, he can change how he teaches, too. The realities of digitisation and online media constantly bombard teachers in the literary study fields. As Nanquil & Santos (2023) explain, adopting new technology is not a question of conforming but of accepting that digitisation impacts fundamental aspects of literary work, including language and research. Adopting popular culture and incorporating it into literary study can open new avenues for teaching and better message retention. If a classroom relates more with Rupi Kaur than Edgar Allan Poe, a teacher can use Kaur as an entry point to the world of Poe. As Steinberg (2009) puts it, the goal is to equip students with an understanding and "personal power over" popular culture. Popular culture inspection could also improve the ability of students to understand and extract meaning from traditional texts. Hartman et al. (2021) conducted a study that found that invoking an artistic response in students helps them "form meaningful relationships with texts." The study used memes to invoke representative responses in students and help them more easily explore, connect with, and enjoy traditional texts and characters (Hartman et al., 2021).

Possible Dangers of Expanding the Scope of Literary Studies

The flip side is that, implemented haphazardly, the inclusion of popular culture in literary studies could undermine the integrity of the field. For instance, Schudson (1987) notes that accepting everything as text could cause literary scholars to miss out on the "special features of written text." However, it is important to note that most of these drawbacks would arise out of poor implementation and that they can be mitigated through proper planning and research.

Corrupting 'Formal' Language?

The trends in modern literature are innovative – there is no question about that. However, they tend to employ grammar variations that could threaten the English language (Somani, 2020). Popular culture formats like Instagram poetry, music, and memes are characterised by the widespread use of slang and an often-complete disregard for grammar and spelling rules. These superficialities in literature are evident in the use of stunted vocabulary. Memes, for instance, have popularised LOLspeak, a form of writing and speaking characterised by purposeful misspellings (Kostadinovska-Stojchevska & Shalevska 2018). LOL, cats may 'say' something like, "I am crying cuz I am out of focus," (I am crying because I am out of focus). This construction is representative of the jargon, shortenings, puns, and neologisms common in popular culture formats.

Some argue that this linguistic creativity and freedom illustrates a linguistic revolution and could produce fresh literature formats (Crystal, 2011). With her poetry books, Rupi Kaur has established the lowercase-text writing style, where every word in a text is written in lowercase. The question then becomes how much literary language should be allowed to deviate from Standard English and how this disregard for the rules impacts learning and formal expression (Kern, 2006).

The Myth of the Homogenous Audience

When approaching popular cultures, stakeholders make the mistake of picturing a homogenous audience. Literary experts understand the need for objectivity within their fields. They know that audiences are made up of individuals and that they rarely, if ever, respond to a text the same way. However, because of the us-vs-them dynamic that has previously existed between traditional literature and popular culture proponents, it is easy for scholars to assume that "them" is a monolith audience.

The truth is more nuanced than that. Some people enjoy spoken word poetry casually but can provide a detailed critique of an entire Kanye West album. Some people know the histories of all the pre-historic sites in Africa but cannot name one contemporary artist. However, the fact that popular culture is so "popular" can trick scholars into believing audiences respond enthusiastically and with expertise to all popular culture formats. The trap then becomes overlooking the wide variety of text

consumption in popular culture, treating all cultural forms equally and all feedback as valid and beyond reproach.

Meaning versus Utility

Scholars also run the risk of assigning meaning where there is none. When books are published, we know they carry a message that can be analysed, compared, and consumed because that is why they are written. However, the intent is not always clear with cultural artefacts. Do the Maasai attach cultural meaning to their headdress, or is it a regular piece of clothing that never sees the light of day in conversation? This ambiguity can even lend itself to semiotic exaggeration. Geertz studied cockfighting among the Balinese, presenting it as a text worth analysing. However, as Crapanzano (1986) points out, there is no evidence that the Balinese consider the activity a cultural artefact worthy of analysis. And if an artefact is not considered text by its people, should anyone else analyse it as such? Is there any meaning at all to be drawn from it?

In reading popular culture as a text, scholars must be careful not to confuse meaning with utility. A TV advert, for instance, can be read for rhythm, symbolism, and imagery. We can derive hidden meanings and connections that provide rich fodder for analysis. But did the creator intend these meanings? Or did they just want to sell soap? As Schudson (1987) sees it, the fact that university departments teach Shakespeare and not sports jingles "is not just an accident nor a prejudice of people who disdain mass culture." Traditional texts have a clear connection to meaning. With popular culture, especially with capitalist-driven formats, the goal could be utility and not cultural commentary.

Commercialising Literature and Romanticizing the Semiotic Process

This concern also extends to the commercial nature of popular culture formats. Blogs, for instance, provide a platform through which anyone, regardless of experience or expertise, can create and disseminate text (Friedman, 2020). Blogs can be monetised so that the number of people interacting with that text is proportional to the revenue from the site. This financial motivation can corrupt the quality and intention of literary work. Information shared for this purpose, which is not subject to literary criticism, can present biased, inaccurate, plagiarised, or incomplete views, all of which can undermine the responsibility of the message delivery of literature (Somani, 2020).

Reading all popular culture as text could also fool the literary community into romanticising the semiotic process or even the audience (Schudson, 1987). If a photographer is famous for his pictures of war-torn areas depicting people in different states of suffering, appreciating his work and enshrining it as text could cause audiences to romanticise the inhumane conditions of the subjects of the pictures. This could undermine the ability of literature to initiate and drive political and cultural change.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that popular culture is not just everywhere – it contains messages about societies, beliefs, cultures, people, and practices. Popular culture formats talk about gender relations, religion, politics, history, psychology, and every other aspect of the common man's daily life (Nielsen, 2019; Ibe, 2019; Dickie & Shucker, 2014; and Baxter, 2019). While popular culture has been previously disregarded as trivial and shallow (Pugliatti, 2013), it is gaining acceptance in the literary field as a valuable source of insights into pedagogy and analysis. Despite that, this paper has also demonstrated that the literary world is still grappling with incorporating popular culture formats into formal study (Pandell, 2016). However, because futuristic analysis shows that popular culture and modern technology will continue to impact literature creation, consumption, and dissemination (Jay, 2020), stakeholders must figure out this quickly.

The situation can thus be summed up as follows: There is no way to ignore the growing influence of popular culture on literary studies. Nor is there a valid reason to. However, any rushed or uninspired

incorporation attempts could undermine the integrity of the literary field. The challenge is thus to research and find effective ways to read more artefacts as text without undermining the legacy of traditional text and its impact on language, society, and culture.

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