New Perspectives on Pop Culture

Edited by
Daniel Stein and Niels Werber

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About the Editors

Daniel Stein

Daniel Stein is Professor of North American Literary and Cultural Studies at the University of Siegen. He has authored two monographs—*Music Is My Life: Louis Armstrong, Autobiography, and American Jazz* (University of Michigan Press, 2012) and *Authorizing Superhero Comics: On the Evolution of a Popular Serial Genre* (Ohio State University Press, 2021)—and co-edited volumes on topics ranging from comics and videogames to diasporic narratives and discourses of disease and displacement. He is an editor of *Anglia: Journal of English Philology* and the *Anglia Book Series*, PI of the DFG-funded project "Serial Circulation: The German-American City Mystery Novel and the Beginnings of Transatlantic Modernity (1850–1855)" (since 2022) and PI in the Collaborative Research Center/SFB 1472 "Transformations of the Popular" (since 2021). He has recently co-edited a Special Issue of the journal *Arts* (New Perspectives on Pop Culture, 2023) and is currently finishing a monograph entitled *Strange Fruit and Bitter Roots: Black History in Contemporary Graphic Narrative*.

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Editorial

Reassessing the Gap: Transformations of the High/Low Difference

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1. Theorizing and Historicizing the High/Low Difference

Popular culture is a relational term that denotes the other side of the high culture coin (Hügel 2003, p. 9). The presumed difference between high culture and popular culture speaks to an element of modern society that could be understood as a unity as late as the 19th century: culture. One had culture or one did not. Culture designated difference from barbarism (Luhmann 1995; Werber 1995) or signified difference from nature, positioning 'cultured peoples' or 'cultured nations' in contrast to 'primitive peoples,' to the 'primitives' (Schüttpelz 2005, pp. 18–19) or to the 'savages' (Schiller 1962, 4th letter).[1]

In the 19th century, it was apparently no longer sufficient (in Western Europe) to distinguish one's own society as a culture from the state of nature or the less civilized ('barbaric') neighbors; it was also deemed necessary to distinguish internally more cultured from less cultured classes or regions. This internal differentiation was aimed at stratification: what was suitable for cultural distinction was decided by the upper classes and served as a "code" in dealing with the "classes beneath" for status reproduction (Veblen [1899] 2007, p. 39). Advanced civilizations of antiquity were regarded as civilizations with a 'high level of human development', distinguished from 'primitive' peoples with a 'low level of edification'. Similar distinctions were now made in the same society. Educated upper classes were distinguished from less cultivated classes, much as an advanced civilization was distinguished from its uncivilized neighboring peoples. And just as these neighbors could be cultivated by learning Greek or Latin, writing and poetry, so could the 'common' people of a country attain these skills through upbringing, education, and enlightenment.

Popular culture in the sense of a widespread culture of the 'common' people was asymmetrically opposed to the high culture of the educated elites. This relationship is often modeled as a complexity gradient, but it need not be fundamentally deficient, for if high culture is considered 'decadent', for example, then popular culture can be declared a resource of 'authentic', 'healthy' renewal. In all of these cases, however, high culture is considered more refined, erudite, enlightened, and developed, while popular culture is considered to be simpler, meaner, plain, and backward. This qualitative meaning of the term 'popular culture' still plays a role nowadays, when superhero comics and pop music, Hollywood films and TV thrillers, and pulp fiction and videogames are quite naturally assigned to the realm of popular culture and thus excluded from high culture. This Special Issue interrogates this qualitative distinction through a multidisciplinary set of articles that reassess the significance of the high/low difference.

In the everyday self-descriptions of society, as seen in the mass media, high culture includes works that can be appreciated in art museums, are performed by philharmonic orchestras, presented in theaters and operas, memorized in schools, and interpreted in institutions of higher education. If popular culture is said to include productions that are quickly consumed and quickly forgotten, high culture is framed as being demanding. Participating in high culture is supposed to be challenging. You have to rise up to the task, and not everyone can.

Popular culture, according to common opinion, is undemanding, open to everyone. If high culture is elitist, popular culture is not—or so many people think. To play a piano sonata requires years of training, as high culture must be cultivated. To produce a hit for the radio or Spotify, one may not need music schools and master classes, but without an appealing sound, an infectious style, and catchy hooks, chances for success are low, which means that these things need to be cultivated, too, though perhaps in a different fashion. Nevertheless, popular culture is frequently viewed as self-evident, whereas high culture requires education.

Much has been written about the social function of this distinction between high culture and popular culture since Thorstein Veblen (Veblen [1899] 2007) and Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu [1979] 1987). One prominent example is Lawrence W. Levine's *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Levine 1988), which locates the emergence of the hierarchized difference of high and low in the United States in the second half of the 19th century.[2] Yet what matters most to us here is to recall the historical tradition of the term *popular culture* and its function as a counter-concept. For the US-American author and cultural critic Leslie Fiedler, the asymmetry of the distinction between high culture and low culture still characterized the production of art and the communication of values to such an extent at the tail end of the 1960s that he called for the difference to be overcome: "cross the border, close the gap"! (Fiedler 1969). This discourse, which is invested in the social power of judgment and always produces new distinctions, is still stratified (de Certeau [1980] 1988): high, middle, low culture, highbrow, midbrow, lowbrow, etc. We can only speak meaningfully of "midcult" in contradiction to "high culture" (Baßler 2022).

Umberto Eco has rightly remarked about the stratification of "democratic culture" ("high, middle, low") that these "levels do not correspond to class stratification": "As is well known, highbrow taste is not necessarily the taste of the ruling classes" (Eco [1964] 1986b, p. 52). Even if popular culture research of U.S. provenance tends to interpret popular culture as particularly democratic and as a more or less authentic expression of the lower and middle classes in contrast to the tastes of the elites,[3] it is worth noting once again that modern or, as Eco writes, "democratic" society is no longer structured by ancestry but is culturally stratified: with the "fine distinctions" (Bourdieu [1979] 1987) of social judgment (simple, good, exquisite taste), 'gross distinctions' (stratification, 'classes') are reproduced and made plausible. Although, according to a *bon mot* by Andy Warhol, no millionaire can drink a better Coca-Cola or eat a better McDonald's burger than anyone else, 'cultural capital' is still distributed very unequally, and owning a work from Warhol's 'Coca-Cola Bottles' series promises a different form of attention and recognition than ordering a meal at McDonald's. Pop Art remains 'high', fast food remains 'low' (Eco [1964] 1986a, p. 103). Despite all the brilliantly presented objections to the "pigeonholing" of social classes and cultural levels (Maase 2019, p. 177), we can still observe the coupling of social and cultural stratification (Werber 2021). For the German sociologist Andreas Reckwitz, our society is a "cultural class society" (Reckwitz 2017, p. 276), even if the "clear separation between the popular and the high-cultural subfield" since the 1990s "no longer seems to apply in that way" (p. 170).

In fact, we may say that, at least since the late 20th century, artifacts, genres, persons, or institutions that are attributed to popular culture are not meant to be disqualified because the reason for this designation rather lies in their quantitative distribution. The fact that something is considered popular culture can now have the simple reason that it is not only familiar to a few (like the hymns of Friedrich Hölderlin or the sonatas of Paul Hindemith) but is well known to many, like the songs of the Beatles, the *James Bond* films, or Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*. What is interesting about this assignment is that it no longer implies that the Beatles, the *James Bond* films, or Eco's novels must be plain, low-level, and trivial. Being popular is no longer associated per se with disqualification. On the contrary, the outstanding number of Beatles top hits, the blockbuster characteristics of the *James Bond* films, and the best-selling quality of Eco's *The Name of the Rose* can turn into a sui generis judgment of quality: what so many people like to hear, see, or read voluntarily (without

being requested to do so in schools or universities, churches, or cultural institutions) seems to deserve this attention. What is popular in a quantitative sense claims a notability for itself; its legitimacy derives from quantity—that is, a quality that could once serve as a reason for devaluing popular culture, since what appealed to the masses had to be unprofessional.[4]

"Being popular means getting noticed by many" (Hecken 2006, p. 85). This quantitative dimension of the term 'popular' is already well documented in the historical semantics of the 18th century in English and French, Italian, and German, where the many—that is, the *populus*—is distinct from the nobility or clergy. References to 'popular' aim at 'the great mob', at 'numerous people', at the 'masses'. 'Popular' thus implies not only ease of comprehension or vulgarity, accessibility, or meanness, but also a quantitative dimension, which at first also has mostly negative connotations (what is addressed to many people must for that reason alone be trivial, and what many people like cannot be sophisticated), but may have lost these pejorative connotations 'around 1800' (Penke, forthcoming).

'Popular' was also used in 19th- and 20th-century practice to index wide circulation and notoriety—and what is noticed by many seems interesting. That a book finds itself at the top of the bestseller list does not necessarily have to indicate its poor quality and undeservedness of attention. "It is important to understand", the author and critic Dwight Macdonald stressed in 1960, "that the difference [. . .] between High Culture and Masscult, is not mere popularity. [. . .] [S]ome very good things have been popular: *The Education of Henry Adams* as the top non fiction best seller of 1919" (Macdonald 2011, p. 7).

A bestseller does not have to be trivial; a book's wide circulation can suggest qualities that make it attractive to many. Today, 'popular' also means to be liked by many. It means not only that 'a good thing can be popular', as Macdonald conceded, but that it is a good thing to be popular. The quantitative dimension of attention takes on an evaluative note, as if the fact that many know something is also already evidence of that thing's popularity. This assessment must now no longer be due to the common 'rabble' or the uneducated 'masses', which help precisely the meanest and simplest things to become widespread and popular—but, conversely, to the popular thing, which obviously attracts notice by many, from whatever social background and of whatever education. The conceptual history of the popular is complex and multi-layered, and it is worthwhile—this is one of the basic ideas of this Special Issue—to at least distinguish the quantitative and qualitative dimensions of semantics and to observe their complex entanglements.

What changed fundamentally over the course of the 20th century was the way in which "what is noticed by many" was determined. In the 18th or 19th centuries, what is or should be popular in the quantitative sense, because it addresses the many, the rabble, the populus, the common people, or the ordinary people in a simple, plain, accessible, or also provocative, entertaining, exciting form, was usually simply assumed. In the 20th century, a cultural technique emerged that has already been tested by state and corporate administrations and that measures and counts what has received no, little, much, or even gigantic attention. We know this from popular bestseller lists, charts, ratings, opinion polls, top 10, 20, or 100 rankings, and so on. The amount of attention something has attracted is registered, totalized, compared, and ranked. These rankings, unlike internal company balance sheets, are published and themselves attract a great deal of attention from the public. For the literary and cultural studies scholar Thomas Hecken, this cultural technique is characteristic of popular culture:

> "Being popular means getting noticed by many. Popular culture is characterized by the fact that it constantly determines this. In charts, through opinion polls and elections, it is determined what is popular and what is not". (Hecken 2006, p. 85; see also Hecken 2010)

Thus, bestseller lists or opinion polls do not document the popularity of every song, movie, book, product, person, program, tweet, or university. Charts usually show only the first 10, 20, or 100 places in a ranking—the many other artifacts or performers, works, or actors are not listed as they are not popular enough to be considered by the list, poll, or charts. It is the No. 1 that counts, and looking at the other places, it is interesting to

see what or who may challenge the first-place position, especially since you yourself can play a part in this procedure: by buying the product or by getting others excited about it, such as by writing letters to the editor, founding and joining fan clubs, being active on fan forums, and so on (Stein 2021; Werber and Stein 2023). Here, a new, sharp difference is established between high and highest popularity, on the one hand, and low or no attention, on the other.

From a scientific perspective, it goes without saying that a high chart position does not have to be synonymous with high quality; likewise, it does not follow from a high ranking that something is without merit. Nevertheless, the placement in charts, polls, and rankings makes a massive difference for the distribution of attention. What has received much attention will receive even more attention because of its prominent placement; what is not listed in the charts at all hardly has a chance to become noticed by many. If the social distribution of attention, which in Bourdieu's sense (Bourdieu [1979] 1987) was still closely tied to Eco's "levels of culture" (Eco [1964] 1986b) and allocated "legitimate cultural capital" primarily to the products and practices of "canonized high culture" (Maase 2019, p. 193), it occurs under the regime of opinion polls and attention measurement and the representation of their results in charts and rankings (Adelmann 2021), along with a new distinction between 'head' (very much attention for the top 10 or top 20) and the 'long tail' (hardly any attention for all that does not appear in the rankings at all) (Anderson 2008).

If established high culture can no longer afford to do without popularity, i.e., wanting to be noticed by many, then it must be measured in the charts against what is already enjoying high popularity without high cultural pretense. In the bestseller lists, works of the poeta laureatus appear alongside the publications of expert crime novelists. The hierarchy between high culture and popular culture, on the one hand, and the educated classes and the uneducated masses, on the other, which was stabilized in the 19th century by the distinction between high and low, loses plausibility when it is the charts and rankings that matter and not membership in the 'legitimate' canon. The 'ranked society' becomes a 'society of rankings' (Esposito and Starck 2019, p. 1). Who and what counts is not to be taken from the registers and tastes of the upper classes, but from the charts and lists of popular culture: "In a society and in a world that do not have an indisputable and permanent order, knowing who one is and how and where one stands is perplexing. Ratings and rankings are tools to get an orientation in such a world—at a general and at a personal level" (Esposito and Starck 2019, p. 17).

In short, it is the charts that show what is popular, and occupying leading positions in the rankings is of paramount importance for the connectability of communication. It may have been enough in the 19th and early 20th centuries to point to the traditional rank of artifacts and persons (e.g., in schools and churches, in parliament, in universities, or in clubs) to make them likely to be noticed ('read Goethe!', 'listen to Bach!'). Today, however, it is far less likely for persons or artifacts that play no role in charts and rankings to achieve much notice. Since some rankings list 'sophisticated' works alongside 'entertaining' products as long as they have reached a very large audience, one must ask: why should one read (listen to, watch) something just because it is considered a 'classic' instead of that which is demonstrably popular? Because the classics are better, of course, but according to what criteria? If they are not noticed, then there might be good reasons to avoid these works. The problem may not arise in some cases. Yet if, for example, it might once have been easy to recommend reading *The Education of Henry Adams* as a canonical text, it was also because it was a bestseller and a Pulitzer Prize-winning publication (the latter a kind of seal of approval for high culture) and was selected by the Modern Library editorial board as the best nonfictional work of the twentieth century a few decades after its initial publication. But today?

From these observations, an interesting situation arises for popular culture research that we want to make productive for this Special Issue: Alongside the established differentiation of high culture and popular culture on the basis of the high/low difference comes a distinction that can build on the measurement of attention and exhibit its results

in charts and rankings. Highest attention is now no longer given to persons and artifacts of 'legitimate culture' (canon, classics, high culture), although this attention is still recommended or even demanded by many cultural institutions (schools, museums, theaters, operas, universities, etc.). The collaboratively written article that opens this Special Issue calls this phenomenon *first-order popularization* (Werber et al. 2023). From this perspective, products of low culture do not deserve attention. However, the most attention is, in fact, given to a large extent to those persons and artifacts that occupy the top positions in the ubiquitous charts and rankings and receive even more notice thanks to this placement. Bestsellers and top hits accumulate attention. Under the conditions of *second-order popularization* (popular things are measured and ranked, and these charts are in turn popularized), a new distribution of attention (with a head and long tail) emerges that finds its legitimacy not in the traditions and institutions of high culture, but in the evidence of great attention itself (Werber et al. 2023).

Graphically, these 'two cultures' can be visualized along two axes (Figure 1). The horizontal *X*-axis concerns the attention measured and recorded in rankings, ranging from the non-popular to the very popular. The vertical Y-axis distinguishes low culture and high culture. Both distinctions coexist. Canonical works may receive attention from few or from many—and it would be interesting to ask whether or not the lack or high popularity of a classic plays a role in society's value communication. Artifacts that would have been assigned to low culture due to their mass distribution (trash) can claim their bestseller status due to high values on the *X*-axis (noticed by many) and thus find recognition—and thus also a longer shelf life, because trash is generally disposed of quickly, whereas what interests many tends to be preserved. Tensions between the two modes of popularization can be expected if persons and artifacts that should be noticed from the perspective of high culture are not, or vice versa, if persons and artifacts that should not attract attention do, in fact, appear on the charts.
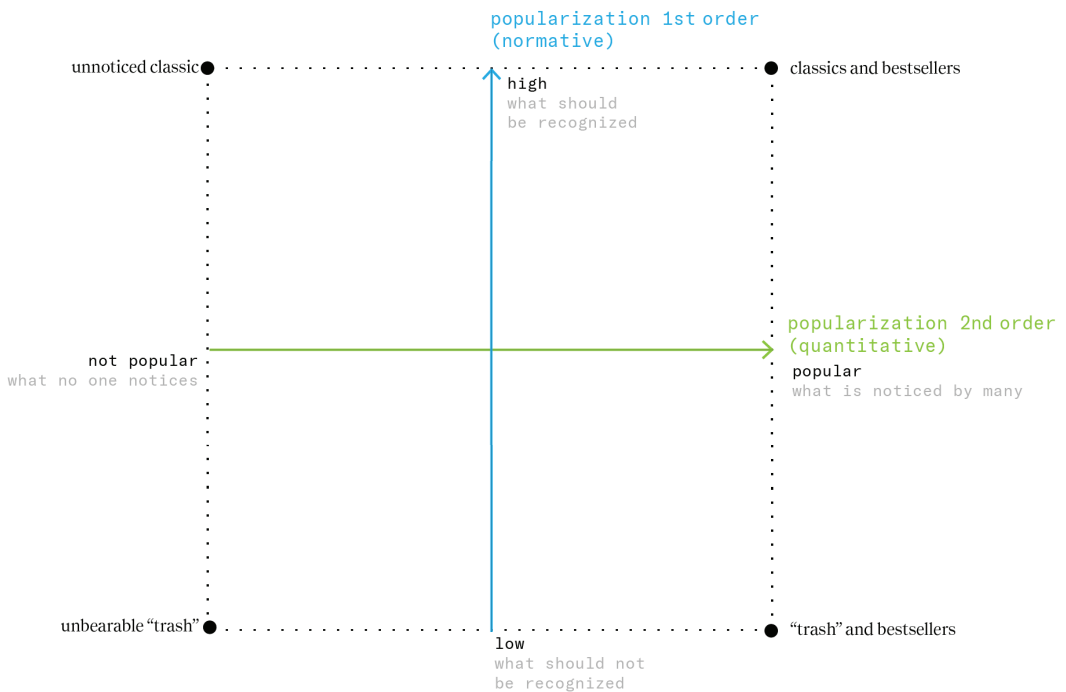

Figure 1. Matrix high/low—not popular/popular.

2. Doing Popularity/Dealing with Popularity

All of the articles in this Special Issue heed the prompt we offered in our initial call for papers, circulated in 2022. In this call, we noted that popular culture has long been identified either as the expression of the working class or the 'common folk', or as the lowly substratum of an idealized high culture, and that the emergence of a media-crossing pop aesthetic in the 1950s marked the beginning of a whole-scale social and cultural transformation. As an aesthetic of surfaces and artificiality, of the somatic, the serial, and mass-produced, and the "zany, cute, and interesting" (Ngai 2012), pop has amplified the ambivalence of the popular, such as its qualitative connotations of the simple and trivial or the resistant and subversive, as well as its quantitative claims of being better known, more commercially successful, and more widely disseminated than that which is not popular.

The quantitative and qualitative components of the popular inevitably intersect, our call suggested, if we assume that the simple and trivial can attract the attention of large audiences because it requires no effort on the part of the recipients. According to this approach, popular culture would always be 'low' culture. That this is not the case, as outlined above, becomes apparent when works of high culture enter the bestseller lists or when institutions of high culture seek popularity—when museums, opera houses, quality publishing houses, or theaters aim to attract the attention of many to justify their existence. The result of this process is the disruption of the established difference between low culture and high culture, as these institutions would not claim that their popular exhibitions, concerts, publications, or performances are trivial. With the popularization of the Internet around 2000 and with our current digital, algorithm-driven culture and its constant display of the metrics of popularity (likes, retweets, views; rankings, charts, hit-lists), the disruption of high/low distinctions has clearly intensified. In fact, pop's popularity is putting pressure on the institutions of high culture, whose reactions range from accommodation and resilience to outright resistance (Döring et al. 2021; Werber et al. 2023).

These developments call for new approaches to the study of pop culture that acknowledge and account for the contrast between the established (and well-researched) high/low distinctions of the 19th and 20th centuries and, since the 1950s, the ever-increasing importance of charts, polls, rankings, and bestseller lists for the social distribution of legitimate attention. What becomes of the difference between high culture and low culture when it is disrupted by what we label the "metrics of popularity" (Werber et al. 2023, p. 4)?

Addressing this question, all of the articles assembled in this Special Issue connect elements of *dealing with popularity* with aspects of *doing popularity*. Assuming the high popularity of certain narratives, artifacts, or activities and ascertaining what effects this popularity may have on their evaluation constitutes the first perspective: *dealing with popularity.* The choice of topics can follow the traditional classification of popular culture (on the basis of the high/low distinction) but will then pose the question of how taste judgments and classifications are reformed when high attention can be legitimized in the field. The second perspective explores how a field or genre may reshape itself under conditions of second-order popularization through a process of *doing popularity.* Here, the thesis would be that a field or genre changes in its formation and development when first-order popularization loses weight and second-order popularity becomes a motivational and legitimizing resource in its own right.

This Special Issue begins with the translated and significantly revised version of an article originally published in *Kulturwissenschaftliche Zeitschrift* (Döring et al. 2021), authored collectively by Niels Werber, Daniel Stein, Jörg Döring, Veronika Albrecht-Birkner, Carolin Gerlitz, Thomas Hecken, Johannes Paßmann, Jörgen Schäfer, Cornelius Schubert, and Jochen Venus, and retitled "Getting Noticed by Many: On the Transformations of the Popular" here. The article lays out the research objectives as well as the theoretical and conceptual foundations of the Collaborative Research Center (CRC) 1472 Transformations of the Popular, funded by the German Research Foundation (2021–2024) and hosted at the University of Siegen, and it also prepares the ground for the articles collected in this Issue. Formulating the major premises of the CRC—"being popular now means getting

noticed by many. Popularity is measured as well as staged, as rankings and charts provide information on what is popular while vying for popularity themselves"; "The popular modifies whatever it affords with attention" (Werber et al. 2023, p. 1)—the article outlines a theory of the popular that identifies two decisive historical transformations:

> "1. the popularization of quantifying methods to measure attention in popular culture around 1950; 2. the popularization of the internet around 2000, whereby the question of what can and cannot become popular is partially removed from the gatekeepers of the established mass media, educational institutions, and cultural elites and is increasingly decided via social media". (Werber et al. 2023, p. 1)

Moreover, the authors propose that "[t]he high/low distinction alone is not essential for understanding the transformations of the popular; rather, it is the scalable difference between what remains unnoticed and what is popular" (p. 3). This difference depends on "quantifying formats [that] compete with a wide range of qualitative judgments". To "[a]chiev[e] success across the metrics of popularity" and to "becom[e] more popular and noticed on a greater scale", the authors maintain further, "challenges the semantic and socio-structural difference between high and low culture" (p. 4). Today, they suggest, "high culture can no longer stand outside its relation to the popular", which is why we must ascertain "whether and how the longstanding contrast between high and low culture will be replaced with the distinction between the popular and the non-popular" (p. 5). This involves *dealing with popularity* as much as it entails *doing popularity*.

Niels Werber and Daniel Stein's "Paratextual Negotiations: Fan Forums as Digital Epitexts of Popular Superhero Comic Books and Science Fiction Pulp Novel Series", our own contribution to the Special Issue, puts many of the conceptual premises and analytical parameters outlined in the initial article to the test. It turns to two immensely popular and long-running examples of serial storytelling—the German pulp novel series *Perry Rhodan* (since 1961) and *Captain America* superhero comics (since 1941)—to examine how "the quantitative-empirical metrics of attention measurement and their public display" (Werber and Stein 2023, p. 1) affect both the material we study and the methodology through which we study it. The article focuses on digital paratexts, specifically fan forums in the tradition of printed letter columns and editorials, as a space that fosters a series' popularity by motivating its ongoing reception (*doing popularity*) and that shapes its public perception by facilitating legitimization as a popular narrative, genre, or medium (*dealing with popularity*). We develop our analytical method by "studying the evolution of popular genre narratives through the detour of digitally analyzing forum communication, which we understand as a particular form of paratextual discourse" (p. 4) that constitutes a "participatory element of popular culture [...] in the interplay between series text and serial paratext and [that] can be described as a force in serial evolution that thrives on a combination of variation and redundancy and of selection and adaptation" (p. 1).

Mirja Beck's "A Lived Experience—Immersive Multi-Sensorial Art Exhibitions as a New Kind of (Not That) 'Cheap Images'" is also interested in forms of popular reception. Yet rather than focusing on genres and formats that were initially relegated to the realm of the low (like the science fiction pulp novels and superhero comics in the preceding article), Beck investigates the intriguing history of popularizing art beyond the realms of high culture. Her analysis centers on "the phenomenon of multi-sensorial, digital, and immersive art exhibitions of popular artists" (such as *Van Gogh Alive* or *Van Gogh: The Immersive Experience*) and examines their connection to early-20th-century photomechanical art reproductions (Beck 2023, p. 1). Beck traces reactions to these exhibitions ranging from "resistance" to the cheap and popular to "accommodation" and pinpoints "noticeable similarities between the two types of popularization of high art, positioning the new immersive exhibitions in a traditional line of technical innovative art popularization" (p. 1). In each case, the artworks and artists popularized with the help of new technologies (photomechanical reproduction; digital projection) tend to be those who are already popular, suggesting that "[p]opularity guarantees success" (p. 9). While these immersive exhibitions are obvi-

ously *dealing with popularity* by pondering the potential effects of their popularity on their evaluation—they attract large audiences but teach little art history; their popularity inhibits scholarly engagement—it remains unclear whether they may also be *doing popularity*. If art reproduction, including immersive exhibitions, "plays a major role in canonization" (p. 9), it seems that the field of art is not so much reshaping itself under conditions of second-order popularization but is rather using this type of popularization to maintain a status quo where Van Gogh can continue to be appreciated as a high artist as well as a highly popular figure.

Daniel Stein, Laura Désirée Haas, and Anne Deckbar's "Of Auction Records and Non-Fungible Tokens: On the New Valences of Superhero Comics" also touches on the significance of high art discourses, but it uses these discourses as a foil against which new digital forms of popular validation of an already popular genre can be gauged. The article analyzes "the convergence of two widely publicized phenomena: the massive increase in value of old superhero comics, which serves as the prerequisite for new forms of digital value creation, and non-fungible tokens (NFTs), which popularize superheroes in a highly volatile digital marketplace" (Stein et al. 2023, p. 1). More specifically, it connects the spectacularized sales of well-preserved comic books, such as rare copies of *Action Comics* #1 (1938) or *Fantastic Four* #1 (1961), with Marvel's attempts to promote their intellectual properties by selling selected items as NFTs through a collaboration with the VeVe app, artificially creating scarcity in order to highlight the continuing value of comic books in the digital age. The article traces a "transformation from a popular but devalued ('low') product to a popular and culturally valued (but not necessarily 'high' cultural) artifact" and identifies "a shift from qualitative to quantitative valuation that was driven at least in part by popular practices of collecting, archiving, and auctioning that have enabled the ongoing adaptation of these comics to new social, technological, and media demands" (p. 1). *Doing popularity* and *dealing with popularity* go hand in hand, in this case. The popularity of superhero comics—measured in terms of their ability to produce "key" issues of tremendous monetary value, the longevity of their serial existence (more than 80 years and counting), and their continuing capability to attract much notice from many (e.g., newspaper headlines about bestselling issues, public celebrations of iconic characters, transmedia adaptions across the globe)—certainly affects their evaluation as it shifts from depreciation ('low') to appreciation ('popular') and establishes them as an important element of U.S. (popular) culture. In terms of *doing popularity*, it is the conspicuous display of their popularity—the headlines about sales prices and NFT values, the visible metrics on the VeVe app—that indicate how superhero comics evolve under the conditions of second-order popularization.

If the first three articles of this Special Issue approach pop culture through literary, cultural, and art historical lenses, Bernd Dollinger and Julia Rieger's "Crime as Pop: Gangsta Rap as Popular Staging of Norm Violations" takes the vantage point of educational science. Here, it is not so much the aesthetic properties of gangsta rap—the musical genre at the center of analysis—or its reception by fans or industry professionals that counts, but rather the ways in which young people in open youth work facilities relate to gangsta rap as a "pop-cultural phenomenon" and utilize it in "interactive practices of identity construction" (Dollinger and Rieger 2023, p. 1), examining practices of *doing popularity* in the process. Dollinger and Rieger take an ethnographic approach as they study "the reception and appropriation of gangsta rap [by] taking a look at how young people connect to motifs of the genre and integrate them into their own narratives and practices" (p. 1). They demonstrate that crime is not only measured extensively as an element of 'low' culture (e.g., in crime statistics), but that it is also "an ambivalent, often attractive and at the same time risky, event, in whose representation recipients are constitutively involved" (p. 1). Noting that "'Crime as Pop' [...] hinges on attention" and that "gangsta rap also thrives on the attention and appreciation it receives" (pp. 3–4), the authors trace—through ethnographic observation and group discussions—how young people incorporate the heroization and spectacularization of gangsta rappers and the "norm violations" these

performers promote into their everyday lives and make them part of their interactions with peers through a process of "narrative appropriation" (p. 6). By arguing that "'Crime as Pop' challenges the purely negative evaluation of crime as 'low culture' and focuses on crime as a phenomenon that receives attention because it is attractive to recipients" (p. 10), the authors counter another widely popular notion of crime as the cause for moral panics, underscoring possibilities of *dealing with popularity*.

Theresa Nink and Florian Heesch's "Metal Ballads as Low Pop? An Approach to Sentimentality and Gendered Performances in Popular Hard Rock and Metal Songs" moves us into yet another disciplinary territory. As a musicological investigation of a conventionally devalued and feminized yet paradoxically immensely popular musical genre (a representative of "low pop", in Nink and Heesch's nomenclature), the sentimental ballad as performed by hard rock and heavy metal bands, the article analyzes "the sonic, textual, performative, visual, and emotional-somatic articulation of love and the generation of sentimentality in three selected metal ballads" (Aerosmith's "Don't Want To Miss A Thing" (1998), Extreme's "More Than Words" (1991), Evanescence's "My Immortal" (2003)) (Nink and Heesch 2023, p. 1). Nink and Heesch argue that sentimental ballads recorded and performed by bands from "stereotypically more masculine-connoted genres [...] create friction and skepticism in their discursive evaluation, as they generate aesthetic discrepancies between concrete songs and genre conventions". Here, "quantitative popularity contrasts with [...] qualitative evaluation", feeding on a hierarchy according to which "low pop is popular in a quantitative sense but would be considered low in a qualitative sense" (p. 11)—an "axiological devaluation" (p. 12) that opens up spaces for gendered performances beyond conventional "metal masculinities" (p. 11). While the article concentrates on processes of *dealing with popularity* (how the popularity of metal ballads affects their reception), it does consider aspects of *doing popularity* as well, for instance, by using as its corpus the commercially successful German *Kuschelrock* ballad compilations, which indicate the permeability of genre boundaries and show that there is indeed a market for, and perhaps an expectation of, metal bands going sentimental.

Angela Schwarz and Milan Weber's "New Perspectives on Old Pasts? Diversity in Popular Digital Games with Historical Settings" investigates representations of diversity in digital games set in various pasts. The article adds a historian's perspective on popular culture to this Special Issue, considering both new developments in game culture and new ways of popularizing history and thus exemplifying what we call *doing popularity*: "digital games have come to stage notions of history and the past for ever broader circles of recipients, thereby shaping what is understood, interpreted, and negotiated as history in popular contexts", Schwarz and Weber observe: "Digital games with historical settings not only adopt already successfully popularized and widely mediated images of history. They also integrate current social debates into the historical worlds they construct and recreate" (Schwarz and Weber 2023, p. 1), the debate about questions of racial, ethnic, and cultural representation and the expectation to become more inclusive and diverse being rather prominent and urgent. Analyzing three games—*Red Dead Redemption* II (2018), the content addition to *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* titled *Freedom Cry* (2013), and *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* (2018)—the article identifies long-standing, frequently pernicious, but arguably popular stereotypes about historical periods and actors, as well as what the authors call "a contemporary, normatively charged discourse that is far from a consensus, which impinges upon popular notions of the past and thereby transforms and diversifies these very images without completely dissolving them" (p. 17). Schwarz and Weber show that *Red Dead Redemption II* (set in the Wild West of the second half of the 19th century) and *Assassin's Creed: Freedom Cry* (set among Caribbean slaveholding societies in the 18th century) manage to complicate popular iterations of their respective historical periods by creating complex settings and diverse—and thus historically rather accurate—casts of characters, whereas the game world of *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* (2018), the European Middle Ages of the early 15th century, "confirms Eurocentric and colonialist ideas about non-European societies" and avoids "any reflection on debates about Europe's colonial heritage" (p. 15). By noting

that gaming culture is no longer predominantly white and that presenting greater historical diversity is no longer detrimental to commercial success, Schwarz and Weber indicate how some of these games are *doing popularity* and promoting diversity at the same time.

Grace D. Gipson's "Now It's My Time! Black Girls Finding Space and Place in Comic Books" ponders "how Black girl narratives are finding and making space and place in the arena of comic books and television" (Gipson 2023, p. 1). It asks how these narratives depend on the parameters of popularity: getting noticed by many, as indicated by comic book sales and the size of television and film audiences, as well as on their broader (popular) cultural acclaim, such as the appearance of one young superheroine in a student-made live-action video short for the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) Admissions department. Conceiving of the "possibilities of popular media culture" (p. 1) as a mixture of progressive intent, made manifest in the desire to increase the visibility and complexity of Black girl characters in comic books and beyond, and the commercial need to attract and maintain audiences in order to generate revenue, Gipson turns to three more or less popular Black girl characters (Marvel Comics' RiRi Williams/Ironheart, DC Comics' Naomi McDuffie, and Boom! Studios' Eve) and tracks their creation and reception in terms of how they represent the experience of Black girlhood, how their creators approach racial representation, and how racialized identities are increasingly part of a larger effort to provide a more nuanced (and more intersectional) roster of superheroes and superheroines. While these efforts are commercially motivated and those characters and storylines allow Marvel to "move toward broadening their audience (tapping into the pre-teens and adolescent fanbase) and creating more diverse characters" (p. 4), they might bring about the "necessary change to the landscape of popular media culture" (p. 1) in a process of *doing popularity*.

This popular media culture is also at the center of Julia Leyda and Maria Sulimma's "Pop/Poetry: *Dickinson* as Remix", which looks at serial television in the age of streaming platforms and an emerging pop aesthetic called "cottagecore", defined as "a meme aesthetic of spectacularized selfcare and self-soothing widespread in pandemic popular culture" (Leyda and Sulimma 2023, p. 9). The article adds an important perspective to the Special Issue because of its double interest in what we can understand, in the terminology of the CRC, as the first-order popularization of 19th-century poetry, especially the poet Emily Dickinson and her works, beyond the traditional realm of high culture, and in the remix approach the series takes to its subject, which draws on internet culture from memes to social media tropes (p. 4). As Leyda and Sulimma suggest, the article "explore[s] some of the narrative and aesthetic strategies the series employs through its remixing of Emily Dickinson's life, poetry, and milieu with the archives of contemporary Internet culture and popular culture" (p. 4). Arguing that "[t]his remixing thrives on dissonance and anachronism" (p. 4), the authors conclude that "contemporary television may exceed distinctions between 'highbrow' and 'lowbrow' cultural productions—as well as previous valorizations of specific television shows as 'quality TV'—through a particular remix aesthetic form" (p. 12) that, as critic Laura Bradley notes about *Dickinson*, "appears to know exactly how Twitter will respond" (qtd. in Leyda and Sulimma 2023, p. 6). Leyda and Sulimma demonstrate how a show like *Dickinson* is *doing* and *dealing with popularity* by using first-order popularization to paint a new portrait of a canonical US-American female poet and tapping into the powers of second-order popularization through Apple TV's metrics and algorithms as well as the attention dynamics of Twitter and social media. As such, the series can "bring[] into conversation shifting boundaries of high and low culture across generations and engage with critical debates about the utility of the popular (and of studies of the popular) in literary and cultural studies in particular" (p. 1).

Two articles on popular music conclude this Special Issue. Ilias Ben Mna's "This Country Ain't Low—The Country Music of Dolly Parton and Johnny Cash as a Form of Redistributive Politics" adds a suggestive twist by revealing "how the country music styles of Dolly Parton and Johnny Cash serve as a form of redistributive politics in which ideological struggles are engaged in ways that dissolve low/high culture distinctions and instead offer a mass-accessible avenue through which cultural recognition is conferred to

marginalized identities" (Ben Mna 2023, p. 1). While country music as a musical genre is certainly popular, with Parton and Cash being among its most successfully and also most iconic figures, it is often associated in the broader public with a reactionary politics that is complicated by Parton's and Cash's "progressive populism" (a term Ben Mna cites from Nancy Fraser on p. 4). Ben Mna usefully refers to Markus Heuger's emphasis on popularity's "quantitative aspects" and his understanding of "popularity as high degree of dissemination measurable for example in air play statistics or sales figures" (Heuger 1997, np) but also acknowledges the effects of popularity publicly displayed. As Heuger puts it: "It is often believed that record charts as published weekly since 1949 in the U.S. music magazine Billboard, measure popularity. In reality charts have been developed as a complex instrument to organize sales effectively and not to represent cultural reality. Thus, they effect the popularity of artists and records rather than express it" (Heuger 1997, np). This is *doing* and *dealing with popularity* in a nutshell, and Ben Mna uses this conceptualization to argue that "questions of popularity also concern questions of mass readability and mass accessibility" (Ben Mna 2023, p. 9), concluding that "the progressive layers of Parton's and Cash's output and self-stylization broadened the scope of country audiences and showcased the genre's wider potential as a form of counter-cultural discourse" (p. 12).

Jörg Scheller's "Apopcalypse: The Popularity of Heavy Metal as Heir to Apocalyptic Artifacts", described by the author as "a door-opener in the tradition of scholarly essayism (from Montaigne through Leslie Fiedler to Donna Haraway and beyond) and what philosopher Paul Feyerabend termed 'theoretical anarchism'" (Scheller 2023, p. 2), coins the term "Apopcalypse" to suggest that the biblical *Book of Revelation* (the bible being the most popular book of all time) and classic heavy metal "as a modern heir to religious apocalyptic artifacts" are connected by "a specific appeal to the popular" (p. 1), a connection that is grounded in a powerful affective and aesthetic audience appeal and their function as media of "premonition or prophecy" (p. 1). In particular, the article considers the apparent paradox between heavy metal's popular apocalyptic visions and the genre's emergence and prominence "in relatively (!) pacified, wealthy, liberal western consumer societies" (p. 1). Asking "[i]n what sense is classic heavy metal popular [...], in what sense is the biblical apocalypse popular [...], and what social function might the metal-specific combination of popularity and apocalypticism have in the context of the postindustrial, relatively peaceful and relatively (!) prosperous Western societies in which metal emerged", Scheller combines an interest in *dealing with popularity* (heavy metal's popularization of apocalyptic imagery) and *doing popularity* (how aspects of the music and lyrics as a cultural phenomenon offer a version of what philosopher Günther Anders calls "aesthetic resilience training" (p. 1)). In light of the ongoing climate crisis, the rise of rightwing politics across the globe, and the denial of facts in our "post-truth" age, where AI and deepfakes are eroding trust in expert knowledge, it seems rather fitting that this Special Issue ends with an article on the apo(p)calypse.

While the topics addressed in the articles assembled in this Issue are certainly not exhaustive, we are convinced that the following pages offer highly valuable new perspectives on pop culture and, taken together, test, affirm, refine, and sometimes question the basic theoretical and conceptual parameters proposed by the CRC Transformations of the Popular. They are intended as discussion starters, as a concerted impulse to reassess the gap between high and low culture, to rethink conventional notions of pop and the popular, and to acknowledge popularity's increasing significance as a scalable force in contemporary society.

All of the articles underwent a process of double-blind (and sometimes triple-blind) peer review and benefited tremendously from the constructive responses of the reviewers, whom we wish to thank for their investment in this Special Issue and their support of the research collected here.

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Notes

[1]   We translated all originally German quotations into English.

[2]   Levine criticizes what he perceives as the arbitrariness of this basic but powerful categorization when he speaks of "the imprecise hierarchical categories culture has been carved into" and then asks: "How did one distinguish between 'low', 'high', 'popular', and 'mass' culture? What were the definitions and demarcation points? The arresting films of Frank Capra, one of the 1930s' best known and most thoughtful directors, were labeled 'popular culture' as was the art of Norman Rockwell, the decade's most popular and accessible American painter. But the same label was also applied to a grade 'B' movie produced with neither much thought or talent, or a Broadway musical comedy that closed after opening night. Why were all of these quite distinct expressions lumped together? What did they have in common? (It certainly was not 'popularity'!)" (Levine 1988, pp. 6–7).

[3]   This is the case in Jim Cullen's *The Art of Democracy: A Concise History of Popular Culture in the United States* (Cullen 1996). In the preface to the second edition of the essay collection *Popular Culture in American History*, Cullen argued with a view to the emergence of popular culture studies in the late 1960s and 1970s: "there was widespread consensus about a real and sometimes deep gulf between what was considered to be the culture of the working and middle classes [...] and what was considered to be that of the elite. It was the difference between blues and opera; between slapstick comedy and foreign-language drama; between mystery novels and literary fiction". Yet Cullen also acknowledged: "In the twenty-first century that sense of a division is a lot less sharp than it used to be" (Cullen [2001] 2013, p. xii).

[4]   Writing in the early 1950s, Dwight Macdonald presents the following examples of what he calls "mass culture": "in the novel, the line stretches from Eugène Süe [sic] to Lloyd C. Douglas; in music, from Offenbach to tin-pan alley; in art, from the chromo to Maxfield Parrish and Norman Rockwell; in architecture, from Victorian Gothic to suburban Tudor. Mass Culture has also developed new media of its own, into which the serious artist rarely ventures: radio, the movies, comic books, detective stories, science-fiction, television" (Macdonald 1953, p. 1).

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Article

Getting Noticed by Many: On the Transformations of the Popular

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Abstract: This article argues that the transformations of the popular, which began in Europe around 1800 and introduced the powerful distinction between low culture and high culture, have established a competitive distinction between the popular and the non-popular that has become dominant over the course of the 20th century. As a result, the popular is no longer either the culture of the 'lower classes' or the inclusion of the 'people' in the service of higher goals. The popular today is hardly the object of desired transgressions (Leslie Fiedler's "cross the border, close the gap") or an expression of felt or feared "massification" or "flattening". Rather, being popular now means getting noticed by many. Popularity is measured as well as staged, as rankings and charts provide information on what is popular while vying for popularity themselves. These quantifying formats do not speak to the quality or originality of the popular, only to its evident success across different scales of evaluation. People do not buy good products, they buy popular ones; they do not listen to the best music, but to popular music; they do not share, like, or retweet important, but popular news. Even the 'unpopular' can be popular: a despised politician, a hated jingle, an unpopular measure. The popular modifies whatever it affords with attention. Its quantitatively and hierarchically comparative terms ('bestseller,' 'outperformer,' 'high score,' 'viral') generate valences that do not inhere in the objects themselves. Conversely, the non-popular, which does not find any measurable resonance in these terms, risks being dismissed as irrelevant or worthless simply because it does not appear in any rankings or ratings. This can be observed particularly with artefacts whose relevance as part of high culture may be taken for granted even when they do not achieve mass resonance. The purpose of this article is to outline a theory of the popular that does justice to these developments by identifying two decisive transformations: 1. the popularization of quantifying methods to measure attention in popular culture around 1950; 2. the popularization of the internet around 2000, whereby the question of what can and cannot become popular is partially removed from the gatekeepers of the established mass media, educational institutions, and cultural elites and is increasingly decided via social media.

Keywords: popular culture; high/low; pop; populism; popularization; digitalization; social media; elites; experts; mass media; societal self-descriptions; praxeology; rankings; charts

1. Introduction

When landed and stratified social orders transformed into global, functionally differentiated societies around 1800, the question of what was relevant to whom was no longer culturally self-evident. It was no longer possible to control, normatively predict, or otherwise assume which issues would interest and capture the attention of many, nor how these issues would be evaluated. Instead, one had to observe what people paid attention

to. Distinctions were no longer a matter of duty prescribed by a society stratified by ranks, but instead a matter of practices that revolved around attention, with consequences for the understanding of the self and of others. Only something that is noticed by many and considered popular in this sense can become an object of social opinion whose distinctions do not repeat the landed stratifications of old European social orders.

As stratification and the attendant "transformation" of its semantics (Luhmann 1980, p. 32) ceased to be the primary mode of differentiating society, the popular was transformed from something common or lower-class, which could be circumscribed, or even improved—or an object of lower-class enjoyment that could be condescended to (Greiling 1805)—into an agent of discursive and sociotechnical systems that began to slowly grow in breadth and scope before advancing by leaps and bounds in the twentieth century. What is considered worthy of attention and how it is evaluated now depends on whether it is noticed, and by how many. This applies to questions of morality, elections, and cultural identity just as it does to fashion, consumer choices, or self-expression through aesthetic preferences. Whatever does *not* attract attention—whether that may be values, institutions, topoi, artworks, products, or behaviors—either becomes culturally irrelevant or must make its own bid for popularity. It is no longer granted without saying for allegedly culturally valuable or important things to receive their entitled share of attention; and those things which attract much notice often do not even attempt to position themselves as culturally valuable, but are instead satisfied with simply being popular: a hit, a star, a bestseller, a blockbuster . . .

Many knowledge systems and practices of the popular have emerged since the transition from stratified social orders to functionally differentiated global societies: discourses of complaint and critique; programs of valorization and popularization; practices of elite resistance, adaptation, and economic instrumentalization. An important—and occasionally decisive—contemporary factor for social development is the question of whether something or someone has received much attention in the consumer economy, in political programs, in the arts and sciences, or in public style communities or personal lifestyles. Today's social media counters and public opinion polls, earlier versions of which have existed since the 1940s, measure popularity differently than the billboard charts of the 1930s, the bestseller lists of the 1920s, or art magazines of the print-era listing a genre's or medium's most influential artists. Yet whenever a subject or thing achieves popularity, it is transformed: It becomes something different through this attention, as its popularity becomes subject to attention. It is hard to overlook the sticker on a *Spiegel* or *New York Times* bestseller or the like count under a tweet. The effects of this transformation can be observed in systems of interaction, organizations, and functional systems whose boundaries and hierarchies cannot exclude or ignore the popular and its logic. Thus, in the globalized present, the omnipresence of the popular has become an incontrovertible condition of cultural self-understanding. Yet this can mean very different things depending on the circumstances. Our goal is to research and describe these differences.

This article, which stems from the research program of the Collaborative Research Center Transformations of the Popular (which was established at the University of Siegen in 2021 and is funded by the German Research Foundation), will outline a set of concepts, hypotheses, interventions, and methodological reflections that can be used for the systematic and interdisciplinary examination of this contemporary cultural condition and its genealogy. The research agenda looks beyond the overarching meanings and normative terms that have dominated academic discourse on the popular until now. It does not attempt to fully diagnose all aspects of contemporary culture but instead seeks to describe particular causes and effects of the popular in various social spheres. Accordingly, the point is not so much to examine specific popular phenomena and their individual meanings, but rather to investigate the changing social conditions of popularity in a diverse set of cultural spheres and genres. The program does not aim to present a "theory of the contemporary" or a "canon of the popular". Instead, it promises a theory of the popular, from its historical

manifestations to current incarnations, that will allow us to better understand central issues of the contemporary world, from information transmission to populism.

2. The Concept and Dynamics of the Popular: Counters, Rankings, and the Reversal of Legitimation

In order to understand its transformative qualities, we must understand the popular as an indeterminate, problematic concept. "Popularity" has not only meant different things at different times and contexts, but it is also a term with sharp external boundaries that is internally diffuse and whose criteria remain indeterminate. Our research program thus begins with the following nominal definition: *Being popular means getting noticed by many* (Hecken 2006, p. 85).[1]

While this definition encompasses specific concepts of popularity, such as being widely beloved, known, or currently in vogue, it does not limit itself to them. Rather, it analyzes how the different forms in which the popular manifests itself are showcased, stabilized, and reproduced. One form of popularity can always be supplanted or upstaged by a competing form of popularity and its sociotechnical mechanisms of legitimation.

This nominal definition of the popular leaves open the question of who, or what, is being noticed, and by whom; it also does not predetermine the consequences. The definition only addresses the plurality of attention-getting events: As noted, being popular means getting noticed by many. This also implies that whatever is more popular has garnered more attention. The scalable qualities of the popular are part of our working definition.

The word 'attention' in our sense does not imply private, intimate attention, but public social notice. The intimate experience of paying attention does not contribute to popularity; instead, popularity is constituted by public notice, perhaps from many divided sources of individual attention (in which division may always be a constitutive intimate feature). Even when consumers do not pay much attention to a series, a text, or a song, they can still contribute to its success. It is irrelevant whether they are paying attention as long as they engage in an action (usage, stream, download) that can be counted and compared to other metrics. Insofar as bots can boost popularity on social media (through likes or retweets), it only seems logical to distinguish the quality of being noticed by many from whatever intimate, or psychological, attention is expended in the process.

In addition, the success of the popular at getting noticed is generally not a consequence of normative or institutional measures. To the contrary: It takes hard work to attract attention to areas in which it is normatively desired, such as school curricula, tax advantages for 'high culture,' or subsidies for the maintenance of traditions. However, things will succeed in attracting attention when many people are open to the popular. By contrast, there is also a high risk that despite great normative, financial, or organizational efforts, something will not receive the desired amount of attention: The museum remains empty, the schoolbook unopened, the sermon unheard.

Our conception of the transformations of the popular draws on the semantics of the popular in 18th- and 19th-century Europe, in which things that attracted attention were selectively observed and described using terms such as common, low, simple, authentic, or folkloric (*volkstümlich*). Yet our concept goes beyond these semantic traditions insofar as the artefacts and products of low culture can receive just as much or as little attention as those of high culture. The disparity between high and low, or "cultivated" and "uncultivated" semantics (Schaffrick and Werber 2017),[2] does not determine the inclusions and exclusions of aspects of popularity, but only the observational, performative, and communicative possibilities of the popular that continually transform over the course of history. The high/low distinction alone is not essential for understanding the transformations of the popular; rather, it is the scalable difference between what remains unnoticed and what is popular.

Records of everyday experiences and anecdotal evidence can help determine what is popular. In the 19th century, for example, peritexts such as information on publication numbers, subscribers, and editions indicated how much attention something was attracting

(Stockinger 2018). Quantitative observational methods such as rankings, charts, lists, surveys, and quotas also provide records of what has received attention. Quantitative methods have become increasingly influential since the 1950s—especially in western consumer societies—through the spread of charts and bestseller lists, and the publication of survey results and market data in an "editorially effective" and "popular" manner (Schmidtchen 1959). They have become even more ubiquitous, rapid, and relevant since the worldwide popularization of the internet and advances in automated data gathering since around 2000. These methods include widespread media formats that represent and make visible popularity, but also the charts, lists, peritexts, page ranks, infographics, and social media likes that performatively track this popularity and, thus, also vie for attention themselves (Gerlitz and Helmond 2013; Gerlitz and Lury 2014).

When something is declared to be popular—and this applies to anything that is noticed in a way where that attention is measured, compared to other measurements, and popularized—it is irrevocably transformed and viewed differently. It makes a difference whether and how a film, novel, opera, consumer product, politician, or university appears in charts, rankings, tables, and lists. Its presence reveals nothing about the quality or originality of the popular object; we can only trace its demonstrable success across heterogeneous benchmarks (Hecken 2006; Stalder 2016; Mau 2017; Reckwitz 2017). With precursors dating back to the 18th century (Spoerhase 2014), amplified since the 1920s (Miller 2000), systematized since the 1950s, and more widely and intensively available since the 1990s (Hearn 2010), these quantifying formats compete with a wide range of qualitative judgments. Achieving success across the metrics of popularity—in other words, becoming more popular and noticed on a greater scale—challenges the semantic and socio-structural difference between high and low culture (Gans 1974; Hohendahl 1983; Bourdieu 1987, 1999; Herlinghaus 2010; Hecken 2020), which remains a holdover from the social stratification of 'old Europe' (Luhmann 1980), i.e., a hierarchical society, differentiated in ranks, given by birth—and distributes attention with regard to these 'strata.'

Instead, valorizations are now frequently based purely on the object's success in attracting notice, without requiring any nods to high culture or tradition. These transformations of the popular put high culture—understood, in Bourdieu's sense, as the inheritor of "true" culture in contrast to "mass culture" (Bourdieu 1987, p. 389), or as a controversial and doubtful "distinction between high or elite culture and popular culture" (Mukerji and Schudson 1986, p. 47) made by the self-styled upper classes—under increasing pressure to justify its unpopularity, or even to strive for popularity itself. We can no longer assume that high culture necessarily legitimates the existing social order (Eagleton 2000) when high culture is called on to justify itself and explain why it is not and cannot be popular (Paßmann and Schubert 2020). To take a cue from research on popular culture in the 1970s, it is the popular itself that thereby questions the "cultural power structure of the society" (Lewis 1978, p. 21). Insofar as the "division between high and popular culture" defines and legitimates a society that is "antagonistic" at its core, its "semblance of legitimacy" (Adorno 2003a, p. 21) vanishes when we inquire why some examples of high culture should be worthy of attention although they receive none. This pressure for legitimation, which can be observed empirically, is particularly due to a social technology that equates the works of high culture and the products of mass culture (to use the vocabulary of the Frankfurt School) and that Adorno described as an instrument of cultural leveling and the "liquidation of the individual": the bestseller list, which juxtaposes so-called "classic" works of literature with the hits of the day (Adorno 1973, pp. 21, 22).

The common view of the "triumph of popular culture as the modal culture in the modern world" (Combs 1991, p. 102) requires further differentiation. Modern high culture, which has until now justified itself through universal norms and the historical consciousness of its tradition, has developed a recognizable field of resonance that opposes the justification of the popular, relying instead on "curated" semantics and organizationally, juridically, and financially resilient institutions. It holds up its own set of values, in a stoic or oppositional manner, against a "selection which has nothing to do with quality" (Adorno 1973, p. 22),

thus rejecting the demands of popular culture as expressed in charts and rankings, which decree that what is noticed by many deserves attention.

We can discern three ideal types of resonance in a culture that attempts to perpetuate the distinction between high and low: resilience, resistance, and accommodation. Resilience means shrugging off the popular (Endreß and Maurer 2015) and remaining notably unimpressed; resistance suggests actively objecting to the inroads that the popular has made in eroding traditional standards of quality and replacing them through qualitative metrics of success. Accommodation, in turn, describes the attempts of established powers to adapt to the demands of the popular, integrate it, and even cater to it. Regardless of the register, high culture can no longer stand outside its relation to the popular. Therefore, one of our central research questions is whether and how the longstanding contrast between high and low culture will be replaced with the distinction between the popular and the non-popular. This question can be taken up in various fields and with different research corpuses that will yield a differentiated set of answers.

Since the 1950s, consumer societies have shown that the popular can no longer be equated simply with the low, common, trivial, banal, or vulgar, but is elevated through various techniques that measure attention and are presented through comparative metrics (such as charts, top ten lists, rankings) that display this success: the item in position one obviously having received more attention than the one in position two. As Esposito and Stark suggest:

> "A ranking displaces complexity, yielding a hierarchy in which each element has a lower place than the previous one and a higher place than the next one. The hierarchy monopolizes attention. The users of rankings look at who's up and who's down, not at what it is". (Esposito and Starck 2019, p. 5)

The fact that these enormously popular zero-sum comparisons not only include products of the "culture industry" and thus participate in "enlightenment as mass deception" (Horkheimer and Adorno 1986, p. 128) but entail almost all actors, publications, and institutions, including high culture masterpieces, classic works, and canons, is a matter of course in contemporary culture, even if this may be a shocking fact for some. The renowned work, the beloved author, the musical prodigy, the cutting-edge researcher, and the top-tier university are now popular—and must be compared through charts and rankings. This culture of the popular is based on an "ordering power of comparison" (Epple 2015, p. 166) that arranges and compares objects in a ranking, endows them with value, and thereby transforms them.

The good, true, beautiful, sublime, meaningful, exquisite, and excellent can be popular—in fact, must be popular—if it is to attract some attention (and vice versa). The connective capacities of communications and the social resonance that a thing or person can achieve have drastically changed: As we suggested at the outset, high/low distinctions have become less important, and the scalable distinction between popular and non-popular, which is predestined for rankings of all sorts, has gained in importance. The popular is, indeed, that which is noticed by many. In contrast, it is unclear whether things that high or elite culture considers worthy of attention do, in fact, receive notice. Even when "advanced art" emerges alongside mass culture, it is "denied public reception," as Adorno stated indignantly, as early as 1941, in his critique of Thorstein Veblen (Adorno 2003b, p. 85).

Given these transformations, a theory of the popular must modify its foundational concepts if it wishes to propose methods and guidelines for understanding important contemporary processes. Much research and many theories of the popular until now have focused on the dominant difference between high and low culture present in North American and European societies. One typical standpoint is Adorno's conviction that it is a sign of "regression" when the celebrity of a thing replaces its value (Adorno 1973, p. 14). The popular's field of resonance is dominated by a critical tone, which can become an object of examination itself: The values of art ("humanity," "individuality") are "betrayed or, at the very least, ignored by the products of mass culture" (Löwenthal 1990). Works in the spirit of the Frankfurt School cast a critical glance on the cultural–industrial transformation

of folk culture (*Volkskultur*) and bourgeois culture (Haug 2009; Menke and Rebentisch 2010). Cultural studies also assumes a fundamental disparity between high, elite culture and lower-class popular culture, and thus understands its interventions—similarly to Adorno—as a "political practice" that participates in a "transformation" that will ultimately lead to the suspension of this difference (Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies 1982, p. 10). One reason for the "growing awareness of the theoretical and strategic importance of popular cultures" (Gruneau 1988, p. 18) is the Marxist hope of identifying sources of power within popular subcultures that promise to transform the social relationships described by the Frankfurt School "pessimists" (Thrift 1983, p. 13). Thus, in 1970, only two years after Leslie Fiedler had called for the destruction of barriers between low and high culture (Fiedler 1968), it seemed likely that the "polarization of high versus low literature" would "become an oddity of literary history by 1984" (Schenda [1970] 1977, p. 35). Following Fiedler's prominent intervention, a whole series of efforts were made to question the legitimacy of the boundary between "high culture" and "low culture".

Richard Shusterman's proposal to understand art as a historical ensemble of practices and to expand the field of the arts accordingly (for example, to include "rock" and "rap music" as well as other "popular arts") aims, at the same time, to abolish the high/low asymmetry. In his monograph *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, Shusterman states:

"One important and contested boundary concerns the expressive forms of mass-media culture, which are standardly relegated to the status of mere entertainment. Here, rethinking art as experience might help effect the artistic legitimation of a form like rock music, which affords such frequent and intensely gratifying aesthetic experience to so many people from so many nations, cultures, and classes". (Shusterman 2000, p. 58)

Shusterman raises a question here that is central to our thesis: Why should musical genres, of all things, which are recognized and appreciated by many, be excluded from art and its theory? In his chapter "The Fine Art of Rap," Shusterman attempts to prove that rap and hip-hop pieces are just as sophisticated, complex, self-referential, ambivalent, and refined as works of high art. They, therefore, have the same cultural value due to the same aesthetic categories. In doing so, Shusterman admittedly leaves the aesthetic register of high culture untouched. One might ask whether the many fans of rap, hip-hop, or rock actually do experience music in the same way as a poem by T.S. Eliot (Shusterman 148pp. and 215pp.). Would this finally legitimize these musical genres? As convincing as his criticism is (especially of representatives of critical theory) that popular art is "condemned" without further ado because of its popularity and "for not providing any aesthetic challenge or active response," it does not help research on the popular to prove that pop music is also (as complex and demanding as) high art.[3]

Cultural studies is not the only discipline to have analyzed the resistant, subversive pop styles cultivated by teenagers or other groups in the context of a struggle between the "popular" and the "power bloc". Sociology and the Humanities, influenced by the works of Bourdieu, Foucault, Gramsci, and Laclau, consider the elevation of socially accepted 'legitimate' culture over 'popular' culture to be a decisive factor in contemporary power relations. Ethnology and empirical cultural anthropology have analyzed popular culture since the late 1950s as a 'culture of the lower classes' in contrast to a culture of the higher classes, whose implicit alignment with the unpopular or non-popular has remained theoretically and methodologically unaccounted. Cultural studies has not probed the argument that the "high/low culture distinction" (Hall 1980, p. 57) not only separates the elites from the practices of large segments of the population but distinguishes between artefacts that receive a great deal of notice and those that do not, despite the fact that many of these artefacts, when appropriated by popular culture, publicly showcase the attention they attract as hits, bestsellers, or chart successes.

The popular today is no longer defined exclusively by its antipathy toward high culture and the elites, but instead by the (measurable) difference toward what remains unnoticed, achieves little resonance, and is unranked: the non-popular. When the "num-

bers" do not work out, even the "canon" of high culture must begin to legitimate itself and explain why it is to be deemed worthy of attention (Groys 2004). This increasing pressure for legitimation has been noted by cultural sociology since the 1990s, insofar as "fine distinctions" (Bourdieu 1987) can no longer be exclusively and naturally drawn from within the realm of high culture. The increased availability of art and consumer objects within high culture (Boltanski and Esquerre 2018), on the one hand, and the acknowledgment of the "independent complexity and inner density" (Reckwitz 2017, pp. 52–53) of pop culture items, on the other, reverse the question of legitimation. It no longer requires an a priori high/low distinction and thus sets up different frameworks of analysis: Science fiction films, action-adventure computer games, or fantasy novels are not automatically low because they are popular, but they can prove their worth through historical, scientific, or mythological references and thus encapsulate emic value concepts. At the same time, opera performances, museum exhibitions, and authors can be popular or noticed by many according to the ubiquitous charts and rankings without being dismissed as trivial, common, vulgar, or low. The argument that an artefact that has received much notice is undeserving of this attention now requires justification, just like the argument that an artefact should only receive notice because it belongs to high culture. One must, therefore, justify the exclusion of *Harry Potter* novels from school curricula and the inclusion of non-popular classics (Werber 2021a). The ways in which we look at popular objects have decisively changed, and it is no longer fully convincing to merely situate them within high or low culture.

This increased tendency toward a reversal of legitimation corresponds with the transformations of the popular since around 1950, which separate the popular from the high/low axis and instead posit the central criterion of cultural regimes of valuation to be its success in attracting attention. The popular is no longer the "culture of the non-elite" (Burke 1981, p. 11) that belongs to the "lower classes" or the "plebs," or an obligation of the educated to popularize themselves and their exclusive skills in order to motivate the "people" to strive toward higher goals (Stäheli 2002a, 2002b, 2003, 2005a, 2005b; Hahn and Werber 2004; Blaseio et al. 2005; Huck and Zorn 2007; Werber 2020a). The popular today is neither an object of desired transgressions ("cross the border, close the gap") nor the fulcrum of a perceived or feared "massification" or "flattening". The ubiquitous spread of the popular is no longer a normative project—it has already occurred. High culture virtuosos (from Simon Rattle to Olafur Eliasson) are presented to the public as pop stars, while museum exhibits are advertised as lifestyle or wellness events (Collins 2002). Ticket sales are counted and ranked. Contributions to high culture may still have their place in "institutions with limited accessibility" (Helmstetter 2007), but the attention afforded to "cultivated semantics" beyond institutions of high culture empirically is rather limited (Schaffrick and Werber 2017). In the context of the popular, high culture must frame its exclusivity in a popular manner. Its "classic works" are popular—if not, their non-popularity must be justified. Pop cultural "remaking" or "remodeling" is evident for "canonized classics" (Loock and Verevis 2012, p. 3). The "clear hierarchy" between "high and mass or popular culture" has been lost in the "competition for visibility and recognition" in the "digital world" of late modernism (Reckwitz 2017, pp. 239, 259). In addition, the popular has become an incontrovertible condition of cultural self-understanding in the globalized present: When an artifact becomes popular and appears in charts, rankings, and hit parades, or when it remains non-popular despite claims for its cultural relevance, its context and valuation change.

This situation has consequences for the scientific observation of (1) the popular and (2) the communication and distribution of cultural value within society in general. Analyses and theories that only rely on the opposing semantics of elite high culture and popular mass culture cannot adequately grasp the ubiquitous reality of the contemporary regimes of attention, valorization, and comparison, or their influence on experience and action in a culture transformed by the popular (Werber 1997; Matala de Mazza 2018). Whenever attention is registered and measured and these metrics of popularity themselves attract

attention, (a) the value-laden, normative distinction between high and low culture becomes less convincing and (b) the potential that public attention itself will become the value standard increases. Rankings are not only capable of "transforming qualities into quantities" (Brankovic et al. 2018). They also transform quantities into qualities, since "random chart success" influences valuation (Hecken 2006).

The popular transforms everything that attracts the attention of many and justifies its popularity through this attention. The popular also transforms everything that receives little or no notice and, due to this lack of attention, faces a crisis of legitimation. The characteristics of the thing itself have little to do with this transformation: A sophisticated radio show or highbrow television program appears legitimate as long as it can muster sufficiently high listener or viewer ratings but comes under fire for being elitist and out of touch with its audience if the ratings turn bad.

3. Three Domains of the Popular: Pop, Popularization, Populisms

In order to answer the central research question of whether, and in what respects, the distinction between high and low culture is being replaced by the distinction between the popular and non-popular, our research program heuristically identifies three central domains within the cultural dimensions of shared experience, organized action, and conflict. The domain of *pop* encompasses aesthetic forms and practices that have distanced themselves from the traditions and values of high culture and no longer seek to legitimate themselves beyond a pure regime of attention. The domain of *popularization* encompasses strategies for disseminating expertise and high culture whose goal is attracting the attention of many and whose legitimation since around 1950 largely stems from successes in ways of attracting attention that are measured, showcased, and popularized by displaying relevant metrics. The domain of *populisms* examines conflict surrounding the popular, which occurs when institutions argue that something should not receive attention although it has attracted great public notice. Formulated as ideal types, these phenomenal domains can produce further distinctions in our working definition of the popular: In its broadest sense, popularization means that a thing or person has come to the attention of many. The attention that pop attracts no longer requires an evaluative criterion beyond that of attention itself: A top hit in the billboard charts or a logo known to billions of consumers no longer requires aesthetic or social legitimation. If something becomes popular that, for any kind of normative, canonical, or hereditary reasons, is not supposed to receive notice at all, conflicts arise concerning the self-justification of the popular: Populisms arise when something that was meant to remain obscure undesirably becomes popular.

All three domains reveal how numbers, charts, rankings, lists, and infographics have decisively changed regimes of valuation and valorization. The popularity of a thing has consequences for its aesthetic, political, economic, religious, or scientific valuation, and it can lead to conflicts with 'elite,' 'bourgeois,' or 'high culture' actors and institutions (Bollenbeck 1996). These actors and institutions demand compliance with their axiological premises, which determine value without any empirical regard to quantitative attention. A research plan that investigates the different qualities of pop, popularization, and populisms, as well as their interpenetration, requires interdisciplinary collaboration: Pop aesthetics cannot only be understood solely through literary and art historical analyses of their form; popularization practices are not uniquely explained through the analysis of communication technologies and consumer access in media studies and the social sciences; and political science cannot exclusively explain populisms through quantitative studies on voters and parties. The populisms of our contemporary world can only be understood when we also consider their legitimation through attention metrics, their pop aesthetic performance, and their popularizing media practices. Popularity is not only a consequence of publicity or media dissemination, and is no mere effect of algorithms and metrics, platform logics and affordances, but is always upheld by aesthetic and affective mobilizations. While pop culture artefacts may primarily be aesthetic, their aesthetic (superficial, external, artificial, consumeristic, enticing . . .) is an effective agent of social and political distinction and ex-

clusion, as evinced by pop cultural "style assemblages" (punks, skins, preppies, cosplayers, hipsters, gangstas, etc.) that combine musical tastes with clothing fashions, gestures, and slang (Hecken and Kleiner 2017, p. 8). Contemporary phenomena such as partisans of climate change denial, supporters of conspiracy theories, *Querdenker* on political talk shows, superhero films based on identity politics (*Black Panther*), or finding a medical diagnosis using the most popular search engine in the world ("Dr. Google") must be addressed from multiple research perspectives. They appear, on the one hand, as agonistic practices of popularity, as pop aesthetic artefacts, and as risky strategies for self-empowerment through digital agents of popularization; and, on the other hand, as phenomena that demonstrate all aspects of the transformations of the popular. This challenge requires field-specific knowledge from the cultural and social sciences as well as from the humanities more broadly, in addition to the development of a shared, interdisciplinary vocabulary that can allow different research perspectives to enter the conversation and deepen the discourse.

3.1. Pop

Pop has, since the 1950s, endowed the popular with a specific aesthetic form whose spectacular self-referentiality (Venus 2013) reconfigures social discussions of taste into technically registered attention metrics. Strictly speaking, the pop artefact cannot be reduced to a specific form (Marilyn Monroe and Coca-Cola bottles have different shapes from Brillo boxes or McDonalds franchises). "Anything goes" as far as style is concerned (Hecken 2009, p. 307), but pop aesthetic elements always achieve a form of spectacularism. A "pop object never exists alone. Not only is the pop object indissociable from its labels and packaging, but it must stand out in a series of objects from other domains" (Hecken 2012, p. 99), which help this pop object achieve the attention it requires to reach a high position in the charts or become the star of a pop society. The self-referentiality of pop is not only spectacular in the sense that attention-grabbing, unusual objects clamor for attention (Hodkinson 2011, p. 266) and that their arrangement in a typical pop-cultural "style assemblage" leads to an "ornamental" relationship between these objects rather than a relationship to their environment (Venus 2013, pp. 65–66; see also Drügh and Baßler 2021). This self-referentiality also implies that the attention these pop cultural artefacts attract is no longer aesthetically validated, but simply legitimated through the metrics of attention. Pop thus distances itself from the meanings and aesthetic traditions of high culture—"stop making sense"—in favor of an aesthetics of desire (Hecken 1997) and the somatic (Diederichsen 2017). Pop requires no justification beyond numbers (Groys 2004), which of course had better be spectacularly high.

The pop aesthetic of the popular noticeably provokes resistance as well as appropriation by high culture, where pop phenomena are circumscribed and aestheticized through pop art. In part, this aesthetic is connected to observations and valuations in the context of a scene that establishes new categories and terms such as hip, cool, campy, underground, mainstream, or trash. The success of pop thus initiates a development in which established high culture is increasingly asked to legitimate its own terms of value. Pop justifies itself not only through the popularization of acknowledged, or cultivated, forms and semantics, but it also legitimates itself through its own success in aesthetically and affectively attracting attention. For one, pop saturates the leisure time and self-determination of the masses, especially through the connection between particular consumer products and distinct lifestyles (Baßler and Drügh 2019). Yet it can no longer be excluded from institutions of high culture on principle. Not only has pop art been canonized in museums for decades despite its inclusion of the consumer aesthetics of mass-produced goods, but these goods themselves have become objects of exhibitions, such as the "German Pop" exhibition held at Kunsthalle Schirn in Frankfurt (2015).

Pop's intrusion into high culture institutions has by no means led to a collectively binding 'dominant pop culture' (*Leitkultur Pop*) but has instead instantiated further differentiations, boundaries, and hybridizations of scenes and styles (Baßler 2015). Product design and consumer aesthetics become the object of voluntary group-expressive style

assemblages through pop (Hecken 2012; Hecken and Kleiner 2017; Venus 2013): clothes, hairstyles, gestures, musical preferences, slang, etc. that often transcend categories of race, class, and gender (Hebdige 1983) and have now become trans-generational.[4] Participation in a style assemblage requires leisure time, consumer options, and purchasing power, but it cannot be reduced to economic dimensions alone (Shusterman 2000, p. 256). The elements of a style assemblage can certainly consist of consumer goods: Pop and commerce do not exclude each another. Yet these elements, such as the safety pins worn by punks, are not necessarily rare goods. The mechanisms for determining the prices of goods are different from those for attracting attention, and so the latest number one hit or bestseller does not have to be more expensive than artefacts that have received significantly less attention.

Pop, which is characterized beyond "style assemblages" and "consumerism" by "superficiality" and "externality," accelerates the "artificiality" of the mechanisms and significations of popular culture (Hecken 2012, pp. 97–98). This acceleration is visible in the rising importance of studio recordings and post-production in music and film, as well as in the emphasis in marketing and design on surfaces and outer appearances that are largely independent of functional demands. The mechanisms of mass production and the spread of computer technology have facilitated the development of a pop-specific artificiality. Most audiovisual recordings are reworked during production or postproduction, and not only by professionals, but often by amateurs. Digitalization, archiving, and platforming guarantee the availability of all pop cultural artefacts for reception and production beyond their concrete historical context ('Retromania,' 'Remix'), with consequences for the temporalization of popular and collective memory (Esposito 2002). The latest accessory for an outfit could come from the 1950s or from a contemporary department store in Seoul. Music charts can juxtapose songs or albums from every phase of music history while disregarding their chronological disparity. Time and time again, "Last Christmas" (Wham!) tops the list of most popular Christmas music, classical works receive new recordings, the Beatles are remastered, and all these productions are included, sales figures permitting, in the charts directly alongside Lana Del Rey and Lady Gaga. This typical pop cultural "list-induced temporal diffusion leads to a flat past that contrasts with the chronotope of the 'broad present'" (Schaffrick and Werber 2017, p. 314; see also Gumbrecht 2014).

Since the 1950s, pop has proven to be a driving force that inscribes the practices of popularization with a functionalist aesthetics of somatics and desire. As such, it makes available a language of forms that is not symbolically generalizable and allows for new amplifications of emotions (in forms of non-differentiated epithets of affectation such as 'cooler,' 'hotter,' 'sicker,' 'more awesome'). The choice to renounce symbolic generalizations in favor of non-differentiated amplifications goes hand in hand with the self- and other-legitimation of pop through attention. Pop thus has an ambivalent relationship to political populisms: On the one hand, the artificiality and contingency of its aesthetic is incompatible with visions of unity and cultural essentialisms, but pop can also provide forms of expression for populist articulations as well as techniques for creating and popularizing the conflict agenda of the popular. In Brandenburg, as Moritz von Uslar notes in his "participating observation," combat boots, shaved heads, and right-wing music belong to a style assemblage whose practices cannot be simply explained through political or economic frameworks (Uslar 2010).

3.2. First and Second-Order Popularizations

Things which are meant to attract attention are popularized for exactly this purpose. This does not only require dissemination and recording media, distributors, and translators, but it also entails institutions such as schools, universities, museums, and publishing houses that can attract attention in one way or another. All these institutions are eager to popularize what *should* be noticed by many, and, for many historical reasons, used by grateful or at least uncritical recipients. If popularization is the general dissemination of expertise and cultural goods, its actors must implicitly ensure or explicitly justify the worth of that which is to be popularized and gauge the costs of this popularization. Education is expensive and

time-consuming. Since the European Enlightenment, popularization has been conceived as an educational instrument wielded by a functional elite with an optimistic, progress-driven goal of 'elevating' the masses. Culture and knowledge considered important by the representatives of enlightened high culture must be noticed and appropriated. However, popularization has also been considered the "social degradation" of cultivated knowledge and labeled a danger for the natural order of a classed society (Martus 2015). Parallel to these expert-led attempts to functionalize the popular or to affect its elite degradation, laypeople have generated their own knowledge discourses and practices (Warneken 2006), often leading to conflict with the demands and traditions of high culture and its representatives. This is especially the case when objects, persons, or ideas that, if it were up to the authorities, should not have been noticed at all, receive attention by many.

We suggest to understand the negotiations between experts and laypeople as *first-order popularizations* whose forms, procedures, and risks are often best described through a model of diffusion and deficit, at least on the side of the elite (Hilgartner 1990, p. 534; Schwarz 1999, pp. 220–54): In order to include the people in the project of attaining higher goals, legitimate culture and knowledge must be simplified and disseminated, e.g., through self-help literature, popular editions, books on manners, synopses of the classics, opera and travel guides, or cheap reproductions of artworks.

Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, developed, early modern, European societies "rely on stratifications. Stratification is their primary organizational principle" (Luhmann 1980, p. 72). Social preconditions for the high/low distinction result from the abandonment of this formerly stable stratification in premodern society: "High is high and low is low, whether or not you're looking from above or below" (Nassehi 2019, p. 39). Once this social stratification, which shapes historical semantics until far into the 18th century, is no longer self-evident, the cultural high/low distinction replaces it and determines communicational reach. Values such as high or low also determine dissemination and acceptance. Thus, the semantics of a modern, functionally differentiated society can create the impression that they follow the same stratified differentiation as the societies of preindustrial Europe. The asymmetry of high and popular culture is, however, not based on the stratification of society, which determines all communications, but rather on the enforcement of claims to validity and value that must first be popularized. The "transformation" of semantics "in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries" that Luhmann describes must be understood as a transformation of the popular as well, which achieved and undertook the demands of the functional differentiation of modern society: the expression of asymmetries "by means of the difference between authorities and subjects; producer and consumer; seller and buyer; teacher and student; judges and parties; experts and knowledge recipients". These asymmetries are, as Luhmann emphasizes, "independent from class differences," and they do not depend on stratification (Luhmann 1980, p. 139). They must be repeatedly justified and stabilized, and this process represents one way in which high and low culture distinguish themselves from one another.

The supposed (cognitive) deficit of the populace must be understood against this background; this is why the cultivated upper classes must condescend to the people and simplify things to popularize them. Qualitatively valuable or aesthetically successful things must be brought to the people in accessible forms through the axiological framework of a culturally stabilized, asymmetrical high/low semantic (high vs. low, educated vs. common, cultivated vs. vulgar, sophisticated vs. crude, lasting vs. ephemeral). While the popularization of that which is 'right' or 'important' has been understood as high culture's answer to the 'merely popular,' whose products are accused of being trivial, as well as morally and aesthetically dubious, the claim of the elite to determine things of value has been periodically relativized or ignored. The increasing 'legitimation problem' of high culture, which no longer succeeds in discrediting the popular as common, low, vulgar, commercial, or ephemeral, and which cannot attract enough attention to the things it wants to popularize, points to one step in the transformations of the popular that historically correlates with the rise of measuring attention and popularizing these results through charts

and rankings. Things that had been legitimated as high culture through institutionalized authorities, valued tradition, or general agreement and thus were considered deserving of popularity must now "justify" themselves (Habermas 1973, p. 21). The division between high and popular culture can only be described as a "cultural schism" (Bourdieu 1987, p. 65) when the slight or large differences implied by this distinction are called into question.

Radio, television, and the socioeconomic rise of consumer culture have brought about a popularization of popularization in the transformations of the popular. We introduce a heuristic term to describe this fact: *second-order popularization*. Second-order popularization neither refers to the popularization of what is already popular in the sense of "reappraising the residual" (Jenkins et al. 2013) nor to the cultural appropriation of the already popular. Second-order popularization instead refers to practices in popularization that create popularity by determining and highlighting the fact that something already has received much attention. This occurs through the publication of quantified frameworks for displaying popularity, such as charts, rankings, and lists, which in turn are themselves framed in a popular fashion: top 40 charts on the radio and TV; prizes for quantitative successes in attracting attention; the inclusion of sales numbers in product advertisements; rankings for museums, politicians, and universities; the widespread dissemination of market and opinion research. Algorithmic processes such as search results, personalized profiles, and popularity indexes contribute to the foundational techniques of second-order popularization and amplify their transformative dynamics through automation.

Second-order popularization has developed out of the increasing rationalization of market and opinion research since the 1920s. However, this has not made the popular 'objective.' It is true that the popular remains bound to easily fabricated, quickly changing, interpretable genre boundaries and is addressed to heterogeneous social collectives. Yet market research findings are often subject to no scientific or legal control and thus are created and disseminated by interested parties. It is important to note the consequences of an artefact or person achieving a high placement in a ranking. This moment catalyzes a transformation that does not transform the thing itself but its evaluation. It makes a difference if everyone knows that a certain comment is frequently cited; that a specific piece of music has been heard by many; that a particular exhibit has received large numbers of visitors; that some politician is widely known to the public. In contrast, when something remains unnoticed, it raises the question what this lack of success may indicate about the qualities of the unpopular thing or person.

The broad availability of quantified processes in market and opinion research for measuring mass attention destabilizes the preexisting high/low distinction. The objects and processes of this popularization are neither primarily determined by ideal value frameworks nor by considerations of the costs of simplification and dissemination. The question of whether an artefact is worthy of being popularized can no longer be normatively claimed or evaluated but must be investigated through the metrics of the popular. Bestsellers receive new printings while valuable works remain unavailable. Agents of popularization no longer only operate according to the diffusion and deficit model, but instead increasingly function according to an axiologically indifferent mode of technically registered value and target group maximization, which considers positions in rankings to be more important than the evaluation of quality and substance (however correct or incorrect that evaluation may be). Since a quick look at the charts saves much time in comparison to qualitative comparisons, even high culture institutions (such as museums, theaters, opera houses, universities, grammar schools) often base value judgments on rankings. When institutions use social technologies of second-order popularization to achieve first-order popularization, we describe this as a form of accommodation, even when these institutions continue to rhetorically espouse the demands of high culture and refute comparisons to popular culture.

However, this strategy makes high culture's claims to value suspicious of being mere expressions of elite regional taste. While high culture could, before 1950, still dismiss this relativization of its own value judgments through allusions to quality and originality, as

the controversies concerning canon formation reveal (Stanitzek 2000; Beilein et al. 2012; Freise 2013; Herrmann 2013; Martus 2012; Werber 2021a), in the decades that followed, high culture was increasingly compelled to react to the qualitatively different nature of the popular and translate this into its own forms of expression and transmission. Museums use video games to inspire interest in the ancient world among young people, universities use social media to foster student inclusion, while theaters include dramatizations of contemporary bestsellers in their programming.

Pop art reconstructs quantitative patterns of success in consumer culture on a qualitative basis, ennobles them as aesthetic experiences, and turns them into a motif for a fundamental problematization of the hitherto-unchallenged high/low distinction (and the first-order popularizations that follow from this asymmetry). The increasing importance of quantitative metrics by no means implies the irrelevance of qualitative judgments about the value of the thing to be popularized. Rather, it puts these judgments under new pressure to legitimate themselves. Since the late 1950s, the pressure of legitimation has articulated itself, especially in the realm of artistic production (which understands itself in the tradition of a sophisticated, self-referential aesthetics), as the desire to transgress and communicate, and its success must not only be measured by the evaluation of art critics, but also with respect to how much attention it may receive. Museums and concert venues publish and compare visitor numbers, which often range in the millions, and position themselves in corresponding rankings. Donors or foundations can try to strengthen the resilience of these institutions against the demands of the popular. Demands to justify the non-popularity of high culture can be dismissed when high culture projects are privately financed.

Lovers of fine art and literature may joke about the serial novels published by the German weekly paper *Gartenlaube*, which reached a circulation of 382,000 in 1875 (Stockinger 2018, p. 11). However, by 1958, circulation numbers alone remained relevant for evaluating the "literature of the day, ephemeral literature, practical literature, pamphlet literature, kitsch, kitsch literature, trash literature, conform literature (*Konformliteratur*), crime literature, mass literature, non-art, low literature, popular literature, audience literature (*Publikumsliteratur*), schema literature, hits, smut, smut literature, trivial novels, anti-art, and entertainment literature" (Merker et al. 2012, p. 444). In the same year, Ernesto Grassi published in Rowohlt's German Encyclopedia series "a book about rhythm and music in the Ancient Greek world translated from English—about which Enzensberger, in his famous polemic against the German paperback, 'Education as a Consumer Good' (1958), mockingly noted that there might be about 'two dozen specialists in the music history of the ancient world' in Germany who could understand it—with a print run of no less than 30,000 copies" (Döring 2017, p. 268). Grassi rejected the "*Gartenlaube* model" for his series but strove for high-volume print runs. Elite form and content veiled in professorial prose were married to expectations that the cheap books and high-volume runs would attract the attention of a large audience. This high culture project required legitimation on two accounts: It had to convince both "authors" and "readers" that "research could be purchased in paperbacks at low cost, but not with low intellectual standards" (Döring 2017, p. 268). Moreover, it had to justify why a work whose implicit audience barely included more than 'two dozen specialists' deserved 30,000 copies. The attempt to achieve quantitative popularity and high-culture quality in an academic book series reveals the dynamic with which the transformations of the popular since the 1950s have affected and shaped the asymmetric distinction between high and low culture.

This dynamic is amplified and accelerates when attention metrics and their comparison are automated, and when these metrics, which track relative popularity in lists or diagrams, are also automated and popularized in the same attention-getting media. It does not take long to find out what is popular on social media or digital platforms, because the most popular things are digitally selected, measured, and compared to other artefacts in the same category: the most listened-to song on Spotify, the best-selling cookbook on Amazon, the most-watched series on Netflix, the most-cited paper on SpringerLink, the most-retweeted tweet on Twitter.

With the ubiquitous spread of the internet around 2000, new ways of translating and negotiating second-order popularity have been tested and stabilized. Popularization has become an everyday occurrence on social media, which reflects its own effects quantitatively through likes, shares, and trending hashtags or topics. It unmistakably makes attention visible ("♥") and thus itself becomes an object of value negotiation (Paßmann 2018). In particular, the automation of second-order popularization has accentuated the reversal of the pressure of legitimation: Quantities are no longer the expression of popularization after the fact but are constituent parts of the popular. Qualitative judgments must now take place alongside the simultaneous measuring of attention. These benchmarks, which produce popularization as a side-effect of automation, can perhaps be contested, but they cannot be ignored. The automation of popularization through rankings or timeline algorithms on social media platforms puts technology in the spotlight as an agent of popularization and provokes a revaluation of human comparisons and judgments (Brankovic et al. 2018; Heintz 2016, 2018).

Second-order popularization, which promotes the attention of many, compares popularity, popularizing and making visible its metrics through rankings; it accelerates and transmits the developments driven by the transformations of the popular by allowing that which has already received attention to receive even more. Bestsellers, chart toppers, and trending topics become even more popular. The consequences for social evaluation are eminent because the high-ranking popularity of something that has not earned attention from a normative or traditional perspective cannot be ignored, and artefacts demand attention now simply because they are popular.

This leads to a shift in valorization regimes and transforms assumptions about what is valuable or worthless by realigning 'measuring' practices (i.e., the counting and ranking of attention) and the public labeling of relative value. No object can be popular simply because of its own qualities, but it can become popular as an object and product of valorization regimes. We can observe a "dramatically increasing quantification of the social, which is accompanied by a transformation in the ascription of values that translate into new hierarchies. Quantifications institutionalize specific 'value regimes' that give us evaluative benchmarks and justifications for seeing and evaluating things" (Mau 2017, p. 24). These are things that count or can be ignored, things that succeed in practices of social distinction or receive no attention. They increasingly depend upon automated metrics of comparison that continuously produce the popular across social and digital media. This is not only the case for pop songs or opera arias, fashion accessories, or gourmet restaurants, but also for politics.

3.3. Populisms

The conditions of second-order popularization problematize the popular, not only because they remove it from the high/low framework, but also because they invoke attention simply because an object, person, or idea has demonstrably already received much attention. This can lead to conflicts when something that was not supposed to achieve attention actually does. Interventions that attempt to change that fact and claim that something noticed by many was not deserving attention often disparage people who justify their positions by means of their popularity (Ellerbrock et al. 2017; Koch and König 2020; Werber 2020b). The popularity of positions, persons, or programs that have undesirably attracted attention is perceived as a threat. Hence, populisms are effects of undesired, threatening popularity.

Populisms become virulent when institutions, organizations, or persons demonstrate resistance or resilience to undesirable, but clearly popular, critique or opinion. The issue with this kind of popularity is that something can be very popular but remain disregarded by an institution or social consensus. This is problematic because it is becoming increasingly culturally self-evident that the popular simply legitimates itself through the attention it is receiving. It has become more and more difficult and even illegitimate to ignore popular positions, persons, or programs, because this would imply that the people who gave these

positions, persons, or programs their attention did so inappropriately. The explanation that one has bought, eaten, liked, or voted for the wrong thing is insufficient, since the ubiquitous attention metrics can show that many people opted for the same thing. YouTuber Rezo's critiques of the German CDU (Christian Democratic Union) represent a particular threat for the party's leadership, since many consider the number of viewers and clicks he has received as a sign of legitimacy (Werber 2021b). The problem of the reversal of legitimation emerges sharply here. Why should Rezo receive no attention in the middle of the federal election in 2021 if his critique has clearly received much attention already? Calling him a populist did not help to hamper public attention for his video.

In contemporary political and cultural discussions, especially in Europe, branding someone as a 'populist' is primarily a rhetorical weapon and discursive resource. According to this perspective, populists are always the 'others,' those who allegedly hold different opinions or positions illegitimately (Dahrendorf 2003). In political science and sociology, the term has been used to justify the fields' normative assumptions about democracy, the social welfare state, and participation (Decker 2006; Spier 2010; Priester 2012). The critique of this normative prevalence (Knöbl 2016) has led to a widespread formalist attempt at a definition in the sense of a "thin ideology" (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017), in which populism is identified in particular with anti-pluralism and the moral stance of speaking for the "true people" against the corrupt elites and is declared "essentially undemocratic" (Müller 2016). However, this definition is at risk of being rendered obsolete by political developments once the so-called populists have become the democratically legitimated elite. In this account, populism seems to just be one strategy among many for attaining power (Weyland 2017).

By contrast, we understand populism as a consequence of the transformations of society through the popular. Our hypothesis takes up the demands of a cultural turn in populism studies (Moffitt 2016; Rensmann 2017) and aims to investigate the communicative and media practices that allow the conflict agenda of the popular to emerge and develop. Thus, we respond to the argument that every rejection of a position as populist always involves setting boundaries that are implicitly connected to the status quo (Manow 2018a, 2018b). The fact that the status quo is changeable implies that these boundaries must also shift, and that positions and terms that were first considered populist will make their way into common grounds when these do not prove resilient. Populisms erode normative assumptions that form preconditions for the constitutions of states but cannot be guaranteed by these states—as Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde (2011) has noted—as well as the normative preconditions of other institutions. Populisms require the legitimation of customs, traditions, and value assumptions that previously enjoyed "protection of latency" (Luhmann 1987, p. 459), i.e., structures of society that are processing within a frame of implicit, tacit validity.

Accusations of populism are specifically made when something attracts much attention but collides, ignores, or even subverts normative value frameworks, fundamental assumptions, and claims to validity in politics, art, religion, economics, and science. Though the popular has legitimated itself simply through attracting attention over the course of the transformations of the popular since around 1950, it endangers its legitimacy when it questions assumptions made by high culture or the functional elites about what is right, good, beautiful, true, or holy. However, declaring something 'vulgar' or 'illiberal' (Strohschneider 2018) when it attracts undesirable attention does not remove that attention—especially not when the gains in popularity are achieved in scale-free networks (Rezo, Trump). The option to contain something that diverges from the political, religious, juridical, artistic, or ethical common ground or to normatively contain it in public discourse (Link 1978, 1997) has dwindled with the rise of second-order popularization. Since the popularization of the internet, classic mass media institutions can no longer prevent something from becoming popular. Thus, the chances are now higher that destabilizing, non-consensus-driven, extreme positions can achieve greater notice and that moral discreditation will even further increase their chances of popularization. Anti-populist strategies of exclusion and

containment, which were quite effective during the age of mass media, are increasingly useless, especially in the age of 'digital participation.' Successfully popularized positions that question the normative foundations of an institution (state, church, public media, independent media, universities) are declared populist and attacked with great resonance, but this strategy loses its self-evidence once the demand for legitimation is reversed: There must be a cogent reason (and this reason must itself be popularized) for a popular position to be deprived of attention.

Our heuristic situates populisms within the transformations of the popular and thus allows for perspectives on the relative resistance to popularization of dominant normative paradigms that attempt to push away or degrade popular persons, artefacts, practices, and positions. It also addresses the immense potential for popularizing incendiary opinions and positions within scale-free networks on the internet. This opens up new views on phenomena that have remained outside the scope of populism studies, such as popular divergences from artistic dogmas (Werber 2008) or the church (Eckstein 2001), as well as a new perspective on a history of populisms that begins around 1800 with the resistance of elites to the undesirably popular, continues with the resilience to popularity exhibited by the gatekeepers of public discourse in the age of mass media after 1950, and leads to extreme polarizations under the conditions of second-order popularization (Schreckinger 2017; Koch et al. 2019; Aral 2020). Threatening popularity has two dimensions: content and size. Provocations of the common ground that attract much attention lead to attempts at resistance and exclusion, which both emphasize the threatening content of the position and further popularize it.

4. Transformations of the Popular

While our research agenda systematically differentiates between the three fields of phenomena outlined above, it also operates with a concept of transformation that identifies historical stages of the transformations of the popular as well as their prefiguration. These stages can be further specified and differentiated as research results accumulate, so that diachronic dimensions of the transformations of the popular can be described with various degrees of complexity and refinement.

4.1. Stages of Transformation

We do not conceive of transformations of the popular as sudden, dramatic changes or as teleological processes, but rather as gradual shifts in observational and evaluative frameworks: New modes of assigning meaning lead to subtle changes, which slowly unfold their own dynamics and eventually produce lasting change in social frameworks of legitimacy. Transformations of the popular should therefore be understood in a twofold sense: Society is transformed through the omnipresence of the popular, while the popular is transformed through the popularization and automation of attention metrics. Changes in the forms of the popular are spurred on by its self-referentiality: Whatever is considered popular is made visible in the metrics of the popular. This, in turn, changes the social value of the popular. Being popular becomes a value in itself, independent from preexistent regimes of meaning, and thus turns the demand for legitimation back against high culture institutions and programs, which must justify themselves in light of the popular (e.g., visitor figures for exhibitions).

Innovations are therefore the result of a contingent and discontinuous transformation (see, e.g., Nelson and Winter 1977). This implies five heuristic assumptions that can be evaluated through case studies:

1. Transformations of the popular occur gradually.
2. Their dynamics are neither dictated nor implemented 'from above,' but rather result from a combination of various disparate, heterogeneous impulses.
3. These impulses often produce spectacles, which, however, do not guarantee their successful stabilization.

4.   They do not originate per se in elite cultural centers, but as well in eccentric areas with reduced pressure to conform, where innovations can be tested and carried over.
5.   These innovations must assert themselves over established orders.

These specific transformations of the popular involve step-by-step experiments, disseminations, and establishments of new observational and evaluative standards: Individual steps can either accumulate in a diachronic series or in great synchronous quantity, producing far-reaching changes. These processes do not unfold secretly but involve active discussions and conflicts among actors. In each step, temporal, spatial, factual, and social changes occur that endow the object—which is sometimes spectacularly transformed, sometimes seemingly unchanged—with a shifted aesthetic or normative potential meaning and make available established interpretive formats for this potential. When these chains in translation are frequent, long, or disparate enough, they will create a dynamic that makes a revision so improbable, complicated, or costly that it can no longer be undertaken.

Our research program posits two major transformational steps, the first around 1950 and the second around 2000. Both steps share a common dynamic: the supersession of qualitative axiologies by quantitative standards of evaluation. Around 1950, the concentration and intersection of globalized consumer culture with the mass-cultural visibility of new youth cultures and technical attention metrics in charts and radio/TV ratings (McLuhan 1996; Beville 1988) resulted in fewer retranslations of quantitative into qualitative evaluations; these quantitative evaluations instead became literal data that could circulate "as stable referents [. . .] that promised objectivity" (Gugerli 2018). This has increased the trust in depersonalized amounts of quantitatively measurable success. The rising dominance of quantitative standards of observation and evaluation led, in turn, to counter-movements in the form of resilience, resistance, or revaluations (Martus 2012) and thus to a continual negotiation of boundaries between the elite and the popular. Since the 2000s, with the automatized records of popularity afforded by digital media, the popular can usually make itself into its own standard and claim its quantitative dissemination as qualitative worth. In addition, we can observe a displacement of the agents of popularization from institutions to heterogeneous collectives, individuals, and the sociotechnics of digital media. The hypothesis that follows from these facts is that between the two stages of transformation, a tremendous reversal of legitimation occurs. If, since around 1800, the popular continually had to defend and legitimate itself against the elites, and the 'success' and dissemination of the popular were viewed with skepticism by high culture, the transformations of the popular around 1950 initiated a process that has put the elites under increasing pressure to justify its non-popularity or frame its elitism in popular ways. This reversal of legitimation is a crucial result of the most recent transformations of the popular and points to the gradual but fundamental change in social conventions of justification (Boltanski and Thévenot 2007), which have forced a change in the standards and practices of critique.

4.2. Genealogies of the Popular

A theory of the popular that attempts to outline these moments of transformation and describe their consequences must also understand the extensive conceptual history of the popular before 1950 as a field that lays the groundwork for its current manifestation. The 'popular' has programmatically aimed at the 'entire' or—according to the semantics of stratification—the 'lower' populace (Pestalozzi 1890) since the emergence of the discourse of 'cultivated' culture from the late 18th century onward (Luhmann 1980). Those who championed the popular, whether for the purposes of national culture or education, took two different paths: The first required the educated to condescend to the 'lower classes' to 'elevate' them by popularizing knowledge (Greiling 1805) or 'idealizing' appealing material (Schiller 2004); the second took a more positive view of the 'lower classes' and, for the sake of forging cultural unity between the 'common' and the 'cultivated' classes, demanded that the educated orient themselves increasingly on the 'simplicity, directness, and authenticity' of popular songs and folk legends. Herder proclaimed that his contemporaries should not just write 'always for scholars' but 'for the people' (Herder 1779). However, as Gottfried

August Bürger pointed out, this strategy also depends on quantity: "the most votes will decide" (Bürger 1987, p. 726; see also Penke and Schaffrick 2018).

These approaches will be subject to critique by the discourse of mass culture and mass media, which identifies a new form of unity (occasionally in neutral, but frequently in pejorative terms): Alienated individuals who are socially 'atomized' and freed from all ethical relationships are turned into a mass through 'mass consumption' and conditioned by offerings in the media. Given the long dominance of this semantics of the 'popular,' it is unsurprising that university research has only summarily examined these forms of 'culture' and that scholars have long scorned and critiqued popular culture (Eco 1986). Scholarly research has examined popular philosophy and popular religion, as well as the attempts at collecting folk materials from Herder to the brothers Grimm, but only since the late 1950s have more technologically advanced and mass-reproduced forms of 'folk,' 'plebeian,' or 'low-class' culture been accorded attention in ethnology and cultural studies (Hecken 2006, 2009; Penke and Schaffrick 2018). Especially in Germany, the term 'popular' remains highly stigmatized and relatively static even at the beginning of the 21st century (Herlinghaus 2010).

The idea of popularization as condescension or elevation is still present today but has lost its overarching relevance through the problematization of the distinction between high and low culture, which forms a constitutive part of the concept. By using the distinction of 'popular vs. non-popular,' our research agenda can, beginning in the 18th century, analyze self-enfranchisement attempts by non-experts that indicate a demand for their own knowledge discourses and practices.

5. Conclusions

Research on popularity to date, which tends to have a critical or affirmative relationship toward its popular objects, cannot continue along the same lines given the situation described above. Precisely by programmatically rejecting preconceived value frameworks around the 'popular,' our approach aims to create the conditions for a new theory of the popular, as well as new terms for its critique. It will not take up terms for popular actors that are frequently used in research (such as the assessments of 'mainstream,' 'subversion,' 'commercialization,' 'simplification,' 'populistic claims,' etc.) but will instead orient itself according to the transformational dynamics of the popular itself. Such a wide-ranging research program can only be carried out on an interdisciplinary basis and includes collaborations with researchers beyond literary and cultural studies (sociology, political science, linguistics, media studies, theology, business studies, and education). Should the proposed heuristic stand the test of time, the concept of the transformations of the popular could prove to be an important contribution for the historical understanding of a far-reaching contemporary phenomenon.

Notes

[1] This definition differs substantially from John Storey's dismissive reference to postmodern notions of popular culture as "little more than [. . .] *culture liked by many people*" (Storey 2014, p. 11). For one, we are interested in the transformations of the popular rather than in a more narrow focus on popular culture. We also do not presume that the popular has to be widely liked in order to be popular. Regardless of whether people like or dislike something, as long as they notice or pay attention to it, and as long this notice or attention is measured and the results are displayed, it can become popular.

2   All originally German-language quotations were translated by the authors to ensure maximum accessibility for our English-speaking readers. For an earlier, slightly different, German-language version of our argument, see (Döring et al. 2021).

3   Ryynänen (2020) offers an art historical and globally informed perspective on the ways in which European institutions and evaluations of (fine) art have been challenged by non-Western forms of art as well as by productions of popular culture.

4   There is also no dearth of more recent considerations of these issues in popular culture (e.g., Tasker and Negra 2007; Perez and González-Martín 2018; Dittmer and Bos 2019; Houlden and Atia 2020).

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Paratextual Negotiations: Fan Forums as Digital Epitexts of Popular Superhero Comic Books and Science Fiction Pulp Novel Series

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Abstract: This article examines the reception of popular serial narratives. Starting from the assumption that this reception presents both a challenge (how to study the vast and heterogeneous readerly engagement with these texts?) and a chance (readers of such texts tend to comment profusely about the reception process), we identify the paratext as a privileged space of readerly communication on, and serial engagement with, popular storytelling. We develop the concept of "paratextual negotiation" as a means of understanding letter columns and fan forums as (now mostly) digital epitexts that shape the evolution of particularly popular—widely noticed, commercially successful, long-running—narratives, with a focus on the German science fiction pulp novel series *Perry Rhodan* (1961–) and additional thoughts on the US American comic book superhero Captain America (1941–). Taking the quantitative-empirical metrics of attention measurement and their public display seriously by identifying and close-reading the most popular forum threads and the most broadly recognized commentary about these narratives, we argue that the participatory element of popular culture can be reconstructed in the interplay between series text and serial paratext and can be described as a force in serial evolution that thrives on a combination of variation and redundancy and of selection and adaptation.

Keywords: popular seriality; periodicals; fandom; letters to the editor; forums; reception; paratext; superhero comics; science fiction pulp novels; negotiation; popular culture; high/low; digital methods

1. Reception as a Problem; Popular Series as a Solution

Proponents of cultural studies often argue that the meaning and value of cultural artifacts emerge from a "participatory culture" to which recipients contribute as much as producers (Jenkins 1992). The analysis of the practices of the actors involved in that culture plays a special role in this research (Hall 2019; Fiske 1990). A survey of recent praxeological studies in the fields of sociology of literature and literary studies (with a focus on the German context), however, indicates that while work has been conducted on the writing of literature (Amlinger 2021) and also on literary studies' practices of analyzing literature (Martus and Spoerhase 2022), it has rarely focused on reading literature (Olave 2022). This relative lack of critical engagement may be due to the empirical challenge inherent in the study of reading. How could we account for the readings of hundreds, thousands, or tens of thousands of readers? A pragmatic solution to the problem appears in qualitative reception studies with (relatively) small groups (Sexl 2003; Goldstein and Machor 2007; Ang 2013; Knipp 2017). How representative these studies can be in the face of phenomena whose popularity expresses itself in enormously high "viewing figures" remains questionable, however. As Ang admits, "popularity is always an extremely complex phenomenon" (Ang 2013, p. 5).

While we will, in the following, train our gaze on the German science fiction pulp novel series *Perry Rhodan* (1961–) and its reception by German readers in fan forums as

examples of a participatory digital epitext, we also aim to position our research in critical dialogue with Anglophone scholarship (e.g., Beaty and Woo 2016) as well as with US American forms of popular serial narrative (*Captain America* comics). We do so for two reasons: First, we want to test, sharpen, and, if necessary, correct assumptions about US popular culture by comparing and contrasting Anglophone research with our empirical and analytical findings, as well as with insights from German pulp novel research. Second, we want to gauge the applicability of Anglophone research to the most popular German science fiction pulp novel series and also trace transformations of the popular beyond the borders of the nation state.

Addressing the reception side of literary works while taking empirically seriously the inevitable individuality, heterogeneity, and diversity of readers seems almost impossible. Not much is known about what readers do when they peruse a work. Cultural studies have pointed out this deficit. Following the motto *Reading the Popular* (Fiske 1990), however, is methodologically costly and risky in the context of literary studies:

> "Manifest documents of reception, such as reviews or previews in illustrated magazines or other popular media, constitute [what Fiske labels] secondary texts. Examples of [what Fiske calls] tertiary texts of reception can be found, among others, in readers' letters, in elusive documents of oral processing, i.e., everyday conversation and gossip about popular culture, and especially in interviews with recipients. In all these secondary and tertiary forms of processing culture-industrial texts, meanings appropriate to the recipients' social experiences are produced and 'negotiated'; the primary texts are often little more than the occasion for this." (Müller 1993, p. 58)[1]

Literary scholars, we believe, should not approach primary texts merely as an "occasion" for cultural sociological studies of their reception. But if we take reception seriously, we face a methodological challenge. The problem lies in the asymmetrical relationship between authors and readers. Out of thousands of readers of a text, only a few will comment on their reading impressions, and even if some reception testimonies are available, the fact that they were made after the publication of a literary work means that they cannot have had any influence on its production. Exceptions to this rule are perhaps the revised, supplemented, or expanded editions of one or more works, e.g., Goethe's *Werther* of 1787, Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* of 1855, or Henry James's *New York Edition* (1907–1909). But even in these cases, the possibilities of taking reception into account are rather slim since we are not always dealing with substantial rewritings or fundamental reconceptualizations of the original works. It would be difficult to correlate the practices of such authors with those of their readers, as has been done in the case of "writing" (for authors: their personal environment, their editors (Amlinger 2021)) and "intellectual work" (for scholars: their collaborators, publishers, colleagues, secretaries (Martus and Spoerhase 2022)).

Thus, we build on but also venture beyond Bart Beaty and Benjamin Woo's more sociologically oriented effort to map the field of US comics production through studying ascriptions of "symbolic capital" (a concept they borrow from Bourdieu) by various actors and institutions interested in determining the "greatness" of a certain comic book or series (Beaty and Woo 2016, pp. 1–14). In fact, we identify a type of popularization that does not strain to elevate popular forms previously denigrated as "trite, trivial, and trashy" to the status of canonical literature (Stein and Böger 2023, p. 95). Rather, we expand Beaty and Woo's tentative interest in quantification as an important means of validating comics, exemplified by their reference to the number of scholarly analyses of particular comics and their notion of a comic's "success" as a critical guidepost. Beaty and Woo usefully connect cultural with economic forms of valuation, but we want to investigate more thoroughly how quantifiable popularity, defined as being noticed by many and becoming visible for everyone in ubiquitous charts and rankings, may drive the popularization of a superhero comic or science fiction pulp novel.

Fortunately, there is one field that is quite excellent for observing recipients and their practices, a field where the reception of artifacts is extraordinarily well documented: the

field of popular serial narratives. Pulp novel series and serial comic books contain, in many cases, letters to the editor and editorial statements directed at the readers. Empirical research on reception will find rich material here, and cultural studies research interested in the agency of recipients will find ample evidence of the importance of these testimonies for the continuation of the series. There are thus good reasons to put aside the canonical classics of the discipline for a moment and focus on serial literature that is actually received by many readers: "read literature", or *gelesene Literatur* in the original German wording (Martus and Spoerhase 2018), that readers have reported reading many times.[2]

As for traditional genres, novels, dramas, poetry cycles that appear in book form: As a rule, there are no letters to the editor here that would have these works as their subject. *Readers' letters pages, on the other hand, are one of the peculiarities of long-running comic books and pulp novel series*. What seems to be virtually impossible in the case of completed works of literature that are printed as books constitutes the rule in the case of popular series whose episodes extend over many issues. Letters pages become established when a series is popular enough to continue. This is the case with *Captain America* comics and *Perry Rhodan* pulp novels, our objects of investigation. In both cases, an audience can obviously be counted on to follow the series from issue to issue, rather than picking up a copy sporadically or just once at the newsstand. And this audience is counting on this very fact: *This is why letters to the editor are written and also answered*. And printed.

2. Why Paratext Matters

In the case of the *Perry Rhodan* series, which has been published in weekly installments since 1962 and continues to this day, a "Reader Contact Page" (*LKS*, i.e., *Leserkontaktseite*) was set up with issue #302 (1967) that featured letters from readers. The *Captain America* comic book series was launched several decades earlier, in 1941, by Jack Kirby and Joe Simon at Timely Publications (now Marvel Comics). Although there were no letters to the editor in superhero comics at that time, this had changed when the character was relaunched in the mid-1960s, first in the *Tales of Suspense* series and then also in the stand-alone *Captain America* series in 1968. The *LKS* and the comic book letters page are not merely virtual contact zones for initiating intimate relationships. They indeed create the space to institutionalize public exchanges about *Perry Rhodan* and *Captain America* that are unlikely and unwanted in many other places (the *Perry Rhodan* clubs and Marvel/*Captain America* fan clubs excepted).

The editors of *Captain America* and *Perry Rhodan* can assume that the authors of the letters will also be readers of the comic books and the pulp novels in which these letters are printed a few weeks or months later. The establishment of the *LKS* and the comic book letters page suggests that there are enough readers who actually write letters to the authors and the editors of the series, and that the interest of the readership in the series is stable enough to expect that the letter writers will continue to follow the series, at least until the decision to print their letter is made, and maybe even longer if there is hope that their praise will be heard or their criticism will be met.[3] "On the whole, I haven't been too pleased with your scripting on this book", reader Bruce Canwell writes in a letter printed in *Captain America* #208, cover-dated April 1977 (Figure 1). "I hope things will improve as time goes on".

Taking such statements seriously, we draw on the notion of the paratext as a productive space for negotiations among producers and readers of popular serial narrative, as outlined in the chapter "Negotiating Paratext" of *Authorizing Superhero Comics* (Stein 2021), a study from which our argument derives significant input. Our goal is to test the main theses of this chapter by turning to a representative, extremely popular German case and by considering the quantitative challenge created by the longevity and vastness of the epitextual negotiations in letter columns and digital fan forums. In doing so, we develop and try out a new method: studying the evolution of popular genre narratives through the detour of digitally analyzing forum communication, which we understand as a particular form of paratextual discourse whose pertinence to superhero comics we can only assess

cursorily in this article but which we will examine more systematically in a follow-up study based on our findings on *Perry Rhodan*.
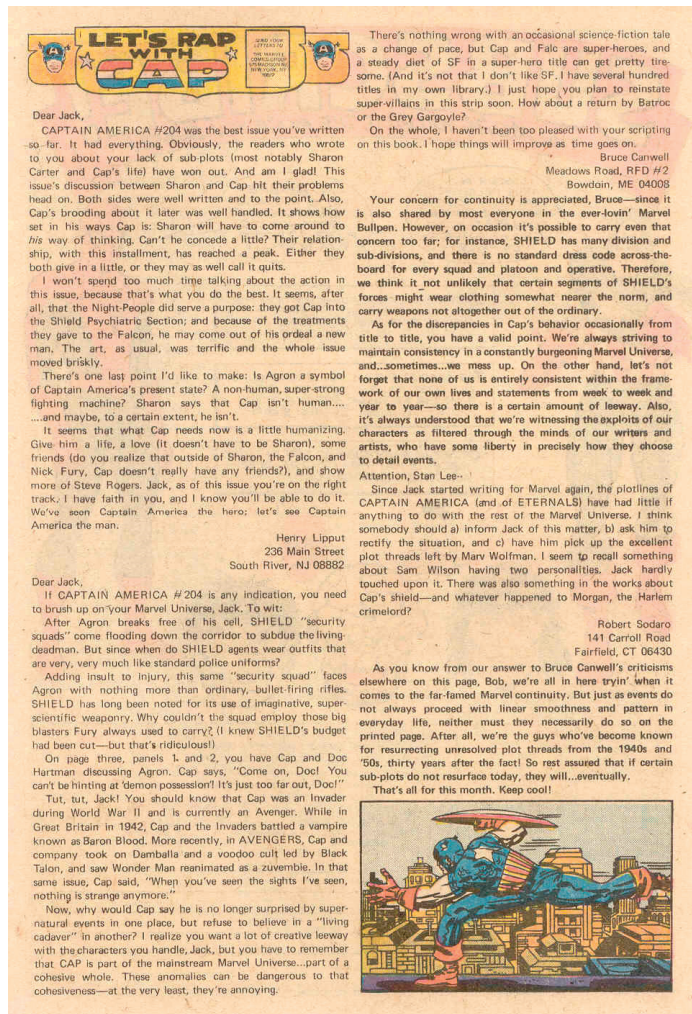

Figure 1. "Let's Rap with Cap" letter column, *Captain America* #208 (April 1977).

The fact that the *Perry Rhodan* editors begin to answer the letters in October 1967 with issue #318 confirms this assumption, and the existence of the *LKS* in thousands of issues up to the current issue (#3200) indicates that readers are not only addressed as passive recipients but that successful attempts are made to interact with them. In the case of Marvel Comics, this interaction between the producers of the issues and the recipients historically became the core of the company and fan discourse, where the comics creators and their readers called each other "true believers" and imagined themselves to be united by a shared interest in the continuation and further development of the series and who address each other in the letter columns month after month (Stein 2021). Authors and readers engage in a conversation that is documented in the comics as well as in the pulp novels and thus becomes a material part of each series. The research question we wish to pursue on the basis of this simple observation pinpoints the consequences of this interaction for

the quasi-endless story that each series tells over the course of hundreds or thousands of issues. Describing this phenomenon of open-ended serial storytelling, the *Perry Rhodan* reader Ganerc explains in the huge online *Perry Rhodan-Forum*, dedicated exclusively to this series:

"Perry Rhodan is an ongoing series, so it's sort of THE never-ending story, . . . no self-contained stories in each issue."[4]

The open-endedness of the series means that the many hundreds of readers whose letters were printed can see these letters and the production team's responses in the very pages of the *Perry Rhodan* series. The *LKS* offers an interactive print forum that has now lasted 55 years and that finds its continuing justification in the *popularity and seriality* of the *Perry Rhodan* novels. Popularity is understood here as a sufficiently large and continuous amount of attention by the readers—regardless of the reasons for this attention. What—literally—counts is being noticed by many (Döring et al. 2021; Werber et al. 2023). Popularity in this sense of stable attention by many people is the necessary condition for a comic book superhero or a science fiction space pilot to become protagonists of serial narratives that shape their adventures over numerous issues.

According to this logic, series are *not* popular when they are unable to create a stable readership, which also implies that they *cannot* establish letters-to-the-editor pages simply for the lack of letters. *Captain America* is a good example in this regard because the series went through ups and downs in its first decades, was discontinued and relaunched several times, and only achieved enduring popularity and continuous publication by the mid-1960s. But even a superhero narrative or science fiction novel, no matter how popular, that would appear in print as a completed work rather than as a long succession of episodes would have to do without an *LKS* or letters page, since such a space of interaction presupposes a certain temporality and also, on a material level, the printing of ongoing episodes or sequels. In his analysis of the *Captain America* letter columns of the late 1960s and 70s, J. Richard Stevens describes a politically motivated controversy that unfolded over a long period of time, and that was made possible solely by the serial publication of the comics: "The letter feud lasted almost eighty issues, long enough to involve seven comic writers and twelve different artists" (Stevens 2011, p. 606). One could also imagine letters to the editor in the case of serialized novels that appear in daily or weekly installments in newspapers, for example, but not in a work published as a book.[5] Following Carey Snyder and Leif Sorensen, we can therefore conceive of these letters to the editor as a serial form of its own (Snyder and Sorensen 2018) and study them as such.

LKS, the "Reader Contact Page" that regularly opens a space for interactions between readers and editors on the final pages of the *Perry Rhodan* issues, belongs to the paratext of the series. Letters to the editor and replies to these letters do not count as part of the text, but they do count, even physically, as part of the issue. They are peritexts, as Genette calls these instances in which a "message [. . .] has taken on material form [and] necessarily has a *location* that can be situated in relation to the location of the text itself: around the text and [. . .] within the same volume", like "the title or the preface [. . .], like chapter titles or certain notes" (Genette 1997, pp. 4–5). They count as "accessories" of the text, similar to a preface, a front cover, a back cover with a blurb, the publisher's information about the edition and price, information about the author or the text. But even if peritexts can be distinguished from the text in many respects, the reading of the text is not unaffected by the paratext. Readers first encounter a text in the material form of its paratexts, that is, in the concrete, printed form with a cover and author's photo, in this or that typography, in a particular layout on a specific type of paper, presented in garish colors or rendered in more elegant hues, with a preface or an epilogue, or even with advertisements for further works by the author or the publisher. There is no text that materializes without the paratext, no text without concrete selections from the many possibilities to give the work an "accessory". Through the "vestibule" of paratexts, we agree with Genette, every reader must pass (Genette 1997, p. 2); the form of this vestibule shapes the reception the text will receive. A hardcover book published in an established, classic series is read

differently than a flimsy periodical whose motley covers are emblazoned with a cheap price tag. Genette, however, was not interested in pulp novels or comic books, but it is worth examining what consequences his considerations may have for *serial paratexts* and their relationship to the continuously narrated *text of the series*. Would it be fruitful here to speak of the "serial accessories" of the *series* in analogy to the paratext as an "*accessory*" of a *work* and to understand this serial paratext as a stable site of negotiation of an ongoing series (Figure 2a–d)?
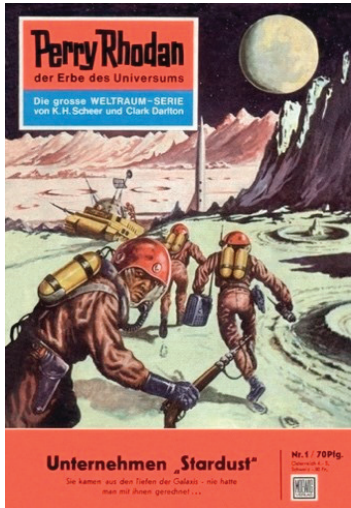
(a)

(b)

(c)

(d)

Figure 2. (**a**) *Perry Rhodan*, cover Issue #1, (**b**) Issue #19 title pages and page 1, (**c**) Cover Issue #19, (**d**) Reader Contact Page: Issue #3079.

In a first step, we embrace Genette's distinction between text and paratext as well as between peritext and epitext. We then assign the letters pages printed in issue after issue to the paratext of the issue—or, more precisely, since the *LKS* or comic book letters page is materially connected to the issue, to its peritext. The fact that letters to the editor and

editorial responses are part of the peritext does not imply that they have no significant relationship to the series text. On the contrary, if we assume that readers write letters to the editors and that the editors of the letters pages expect that the authors of the letters will also be the readers of their answers, then it is very likely, first, that the letters and the answers will relate to the series and its continuation and, second, that the popularity of the series represents a necessary condition of communication for both sides. In fact, in the *Perry Rhodan* series, the dialogue between readers and the *LKS* editorial staff unfolds across many issues, typically involving

(1) the larger story arcs ("cycles") of the novel series;
(2) its most important protagonists (above all Perry Rhodan and his closest circle: characters who shape the series over hundreds or thousands of issues);
(3) the quality of a single issue or a particular author; and
(4) always also a concern for the falling or rising circulation of the series, the gaining of new readers, in short: the popularity of the series.[6]

Since the letters are selected by the editorial team for publication on the *LKS*, meaning that only a slice of the overall submissions will appear, we can surmise that it is precisely these published letters and the responses to them that are of particular importance, just as the editors of the series who make this selection have a gatekeeping function and, associated with this, an institutionally based special authority. If, for example, suggestions are made or wishes or criticisms are expressed in these letters, then we must believe that these will not remain irrelevant for the continuation of the series. Why give space to criticism of an author, approval of a plot development, applause for the introduction of a new protagonist, or displeasure with an episode on the weekly "Reader Contact Page" if the expectations of the letter writers are to be ignored anyway? The comic book *Amazing Fantasy* #15 (August 1962), in which Marvel's superhero Spider-Man makes his very first appearance, underscores this logic in a remarkable peritextual plea, voiced on a specially designed "Fan Page" and promoted as an "Important Announcement from the Editor!": "We are most anxious to have your opinions, and will be waiting eagerly for your letters. Rest assured . . . that we carefully read each and every one, and are guided by your desires when we edit our magazine!" (Figure 3). This argument assigns a special status to the published letters and justifies qualitative analyses. Yet the comparison of the *LKS* and the letters pages with the unpublished letters, insofar as they have been preserved, continues to be a desideratum of pulp novel research. In the case of superhero comics, it remains unclear whether unpublished letters have been archived by the publishers at all.

Karl-Heinz Scheer was one of the initial authors of the *Perry Rhodan* series and, at the end of the 1960s, its most important exposé author. In this capacity, he planned the major plot lines and central events of the series' "cycles" and provided the structure for the authors of the individual issues. In an interview with the WDR television program *Monitor* (from 23 February 1969), he responded to a critical question about the science fiction series—denounced by the interviewer as harmful to young people, crypto-fascist, and militaristic (cf. Friedrich 1995, p. 327f.)—by thanking his fans, some of whom were organized in clubs. Their many letters to the editor, some of them critical, had contributed to the development of the pulp series and to its better adaptation to the expectations of the audience, he acknowledged: "You wouldn't believe how well and how much I've already been able to use them for my exposés".[7] Whether and "how well" this succeeds is a question that would have to be answered with a view to the further course of the series and further letters from readers about the "utilization" of their constructive suggestions or critical remarks.

Figure 3. "Fan Page", *Amazing Fantasy* #15 (August 1962).

Even though the *Monitor* program attributes responsibility for the series to Scheer by describing him as its "chief thinker" and "idea generator", in the case of the *Perry Rhodan* series (as with superhero comics), there is always shared authorship. "The series is written by a team of authors coordinated by an exposé editorial team" (Friedrich 1995, p. 330). Involved in the production of the series, however, are not only the editors, the editorial office, the exposé team, and many issue writers, but, as Scheer points out, also the readers of the series, whose letters cannot be ignored in the long run. Without the lasting commitment of tens of thousands of readers, the series would lose the popularity without which it would not be continued. It is thus precisely the frequently criticized commerciality of the series (Hügel 2003) that favors a collective, cooperative form of series production. As Hans-Edwin Friedrich writes about *Perry Rhodan*:

> "The series concept initiated the success and led to the monopoly position in the sector of the SF pulp novel. Readers were tied to the series via clubs and reader contact pages, the most popular young authors were signed up, in the SF magazine novel sector the authors of *Perry Rhodan* received the best fees, the series has been successfully adapted to the respective social change." (Friedrich 1995, p. 338)

The zone of interaction established by the series through the *LKS*, in which the successful (in terms of popularity) "adaptation" of the series to its constantly changing contexts is thematized and observed by all sides, constitutes the pulp novels' paratext. Unlike Genette, whose paratext theory treats the book as the medial standard for publishing a "work" finished and completed by the author, *Perry Rhodan* presents a *serial* paratext that allows readers to be involved from issue to issue by working on the "recursive" continuation of the series (Kelleter 2012, p. 31; 2017, pp. 16–18). This serial paratext is a "zone not only of transition but also of *transaction*" (Genette 1997, p. 2) in the sense that negotiations take place here that are also relevant to the series text. How things continue intradiegetically with Perry Rhodan and his friends (and enemies) depends (to some degree) on the "paratextual negotiations" (Stein 2021, p. 39ff.) that occur in the letters and answers of the *LKS*, but also in the fanzines of the many *Perry Rhodan* clubs.

As already mentioned, these observations also apply to Marvel comic books, which we treat as a representative case of the genre of superhero comics with a focus on the character Captain America. Only a few years before the introduction of the *LKS* in the *Perry Rhodan* novels, an extremely lively paratextual discourse developed in the letter columns of Marvel comics that proved significant for the genesis of the publisher's series. If popular series such as *Tales of Suspense* (1959–1968) and *Captain America* (from 1968) seek to ensure their own continued existence—which they must as they represent the offerings of a commercial company whose products are to be bought, read, exchanged, and collected, and not just once, but again and again, month after month—they are well advised not only to use the reactions of their readers to continually adapt the narrative to the expectations of the audience, but also to pay attention to these reactions publicly. They do this by aggressively soliciting expressions of opinion and printing the most promising letters. The selection of letters and the editors' responses regularly serve as triggers for debates about the series text, but also about issues not directly related to the series. Their content ranges from praise and criticism of individual characters, settings, and plot cycles or judgments about the quality of the page layout and drawing style to political readings, often combined with insights into the readers' ideological positions, social circumstances, and personal experiences.

It makes sense, then, to understand these peritexts as a recurring site of serial negotiation. Even though this site is characterized by a certain authority gap between producers who are legitimized by their status as representatives of the culture industry and readers conventionally positioned as consumers, it nevertheless cannot be controlled unilaterally and authoritatively. We thus understand the mutual development of the serial peritext and the serial text as a result of this negotiation and conceive of it as an evolutionary (i.e., open, nonteleological) process. We use the term "evolution" following the work of Frank Kelleter and Daniel Stein, who replace the notion of a personally or institutionally attributable agency with an idea of the inherently dynamic form of serial evolution characterized by variation, selection, and adaptation (Kelleter and Stein 2012, p. 260; Kelleter 2017, pp. 7, 14; Stein 2021). "In the field of popular productions and receptions, there is obviously no central management" (Kelleter and Stein 2012, p. 263). Rather, it is the basic dynamic of popular serial storytelling, which Umberto Eco once described as the dialectic of redundancy and variance (Eco 1994, pp. 84–100), that enables stability and change, as it were, in the constant pursuit of popularity. And it does so via a number of mechanisms through which serial evolution unfolds: What is particularly popular and can adapt to constantly changing environmental conditions will survive and will be perpetuated; what does not become popular or cannot remain so will be discarded. It thus makes sense to speak of evolution in the context of popular seriality as a combination of variation and repetition, selection and adaptation (cf. Luhmann 2012, pp. 251–306; Kelleter 2012, 2017), and to understand the paratexts of the series as an important evolutionary element that has so far been underexposed in research. The serial paratext not only enables continuous commentary on the relationship between redundancy and variance in the series. It also facilitates negotiation of the selection conditions and adaptation requirements of individual series.

The example of the letter column in *Captain America* comic books raises the question of whether our considerations about the establishment of a paratextual negotiation space in popular series can be generalized. Before we can reap the analytical benefits of our proposal, we must confront two problems that arise from our turn to an exploration of the relationship between the serial paratext and the ongoing text of the series.

3. Empirical and Methodological Problems

Serial paratexts promise information about the evolution of a popular series, as our first look at the function of the peritexts of *Captain America* comics and *Perry Rhodan* novels suggests. But how should we continue the investigation? If paratexts matter, how can we include them into the analysis of popular seriality?

The first problem facing paratext analysis of the two series is a *quantitative-empirical* one: Popular comic book and pulp novel series are "long-running narratives" (Stein 2021, pp. 46, 49, 56). In the case of *Perry Rhodan*, "long-running" means 3200+ issues (each containing about 64 pages of text) to date. About 2900 issues each contain about two pages of letters and answers from the editors. Thus, about 5800 pages of the *LKS* would have to be examined to see what consequences the transactions (Genette 1997, p. 2) that take place there may have for the continuation of a narrative that extends over 200,000 pages. Which letters to the editor should we consider? Which issues or cycles should we read? Which readers' concerns should we single out?

The same problem of case selection and corpus formation exists in the case of the Marvel franchise *Captain America*. Even if we leave aside DC Comics, ignore dozens of Marvel series, and restrict ourselves entirely to comics with Captain America as the main character, we are still dealing with hundreds of issues and as many letter columns since the 1960s. Which ones are worth reading in order to pursue the thesis of an evolutionary connection between serial text and serial paratext? As in the case of the *Perry Rhodan* novels, the multidecade popularity of *Captain America* comics has produced a form of ongoing seriality whose growing complexity poses a challenge for its study (Kelleter and Stein 2012, p. 283).

Superhero series themselves have responded to this information overload with retcons and reboots, among other things, that seek to reduce the complexity of the diegesis by eliminating protagonists, plot lines, and settings:

> "Plot lines, character constellations, and back stories of the interacting comics series [became] so complex that DC felt compelled to eliminate them in one fell swoop. Marv Wolfman and George Perez's twelve-issue miniseries *Crisis on Infinite Earths* (1985–1986) reduced the various multiverses back to a single universe; a host of characters were simply killed off." (Kelleter and Stein 2012, p. 279)

Moreover, the fact that a reboot does not even stop at rebooting popular protagonists was demonstrated in 2018 in the film *Avengers: Infinity War*: Bucky Barnes, T'Challa, Groot, Wanda Maximoff, Sam Wilson, Mantis, Drax, Quill, Dr. Strange, Peter Parker, and Nick Fury literally vanish into thin air. Steve Rogers (aka Captain America) survives, but there is no way of knowing that he will not be curbed from the MCU in the next segment of the franchise. Such evolutionary cleanups are essential to the continued existence of individual series and large comic book universes. Without occasional radical selection, their ever-growing backlog alone, driven by the interplay of redundancy and variance and the need to keep adapting to new circumstances, would eventually render such series and universes completely unmanageable, from both a production and a reception standpoint (Stein 2021, pp. 26, 251).

Research does not have this brute possibility of "complexity reduction" (Kelleter and Stein 2012, p. 283). How should one choose—especially in the case of series that are open-ended and have not yet concluded—from the multitude of "plotlines, character constellations, and backstories" that have emerged over the long course of the series, but also from the abundance of available letter columns and editors' notes, in order to test our thesis about the function of paratexts for series evolution? Are a few well-chosen examples

enough? And if so, would it not be necessary to search for possible counterexamples—and this in a hardly manageable abundance of texts and paratexts? And how could *exemplary* cases, which are supposed to have a *representative* character, be distinguished from other, *nonrepresentative* cases at all, if most of the issues—be it comics or pulp novels—are left out of consideration? Friedrich's observation holds true: "The series is a research problem simply because of its size" (Friedrich 1995, p. 327).[8]

The empirical, and first of all quantitative, challenge for research on popular "long-running" comic books and pulp novel series such as *Captain America* and *Perry Rhodan* thus presents us with a *methodological* problem: According to which criteria should the corpus formation take place? Here, we will present a two-step proposal that first *exacerbates* the quantitative problem, only to eventually *circumvent* it and *work around* it by using digital methods.

For some time now, digital methods seem to be the obvious choice whenever we study large corpora, which is why one could immediately suggest that our proposal is unoriginal. Yet our corpora have not been systematically digitized so far; and anyway, one should not expect too much from the digitization of the comic book narratives as far as the verification of our hypothesis on paratext is concerned. In many cases, hundreds of pages of letter columns and thousands of reader contact pages have not yet been digitized: the effort to set up the corpora for investigation with digital methods in the first place would be enormous and expensive.[9]

The *detour* we therefore want to take expands our field of investigation and seems to aggravate the problem of corpus formation even more. We add the *Internet forums* in which Marvel and *Perry Rhodan* readers exchange ideas about the series with each other and sometimes seek to communicate with the producers responsible for their series. We understand these spaces of interaction, which, just like the serial peritext, enable recipients and producers to work together on the continuation of the series, as *serial epitext*. This epitext does not need to be digitized. It is already a digital phenomenon, and the data can be prepared—even in large quantities relatively quickly and with little error—for analysis with established digital tools. As we proceed to analyze our material, we will make the data of the relevant forums, already prepared by our team, which we use for our *mixed methods* analyses, available to the scientific community.

We therefore ignore the many printed letters to the editor and editorial responses for the time being in order to be able to test our hypothesis about series evolution on the connection between *digital epitext* and *series text*. However, this still does not solve the basic problem of corpus formation: Which of the thousands of posts and threads in the forums should be examined more closely? It may seem that we are only increasing the problem of selection. Thus, in order to test a viable solution to the problem, we take a second methodological step that uses the peculiarities of popular seriality to adjust the digital tools. In order to do so, we draw on the notion of second-order popularization presented in our collaborative essay "Getting Noticed by Many: On the Transformations of the Popular" in this special issue (see also Döring et al. 2021).

4. Second-Order Popularization and Digital Epitext

Perhaps the most important common feature of the serially published comic books and pulp novels we study is their popularity. Unlike a substantial segment of cultural and literary studies, as well as of sociological and ethnographic research, we do not approach the popular in opposition to "high culture" as a simple, easy-to-understand, trivial, low, mean, commercial, or superficial culture, nor do we aim to "rescue" popular culture from such views by suggesting that it is necessarily complex, subversive, or democratic. We do not distinguish "low culture" from "high culture" in order to then situate our objects of inquiry accordingly. Rather, we understand popularity as a quantitative, scalable dimension: Objects or people, topics or concepts, can be more or less popular, depending on whether they are noticed by many or by few. "Popular is what is noticed by many" (Hecken 2006, p. 85).

What follows from this basic assumption is that comic books and pulp novel series, which are generally assigned to the realm of popular culture and viewed as products of the culture industry, as part of "mass" or "low" culture by virtue of their genre, may be noticed by many or by few and that they can therefore be more or less popular. Moreover, works, artists, authors, and institutions that are generally assigned to high culture, the canon, the classical period, "or legitimate" culture can also be noticed by many or by few, which means that they can also be more or less popular. Instead of opposing high and low, we thus distinguish two different dimensions of the popular: a *quantitative-nominal* dimension that ranges from the nonpopular (no attention) to the extremely popular (very much attention) and a *qualitative-normative* dimension that assigns cultural value and, with a nod to Bourdieu or Reckwitz, ranges from the "low culture" of the lower strata to the "high culture" of the upper strata (Bourdieu 1987; Reckwitz 2017) (Figure 4).
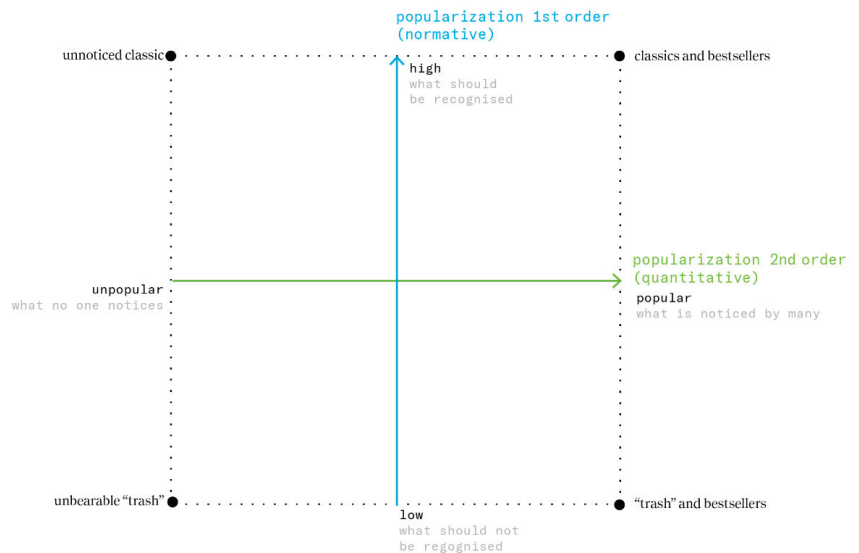
Figure 4. Matrix first- and second-order popularization.

Our proposal for this alternative differentiation becomes analytically interesting when objects come into play that receive much attention even though they *should not* (according to established taste-making institutions) because they are considered low level and lacking complexity, or when objects receive no attention *but should be noticed* because they are considered works of high culture and are said to belong to the classics, situated as canonical works everyone should supposedly know.

Popularization of the first order is normative: What is to become popular is *that which is to be observed by many*. The objects of this desired observation are specified in the name of "legitimate" culture and promoted with great financial and organizational effort: Schools, universities, museums, theaters, opera houses, and philharmonic halls are institutions that seek to ensure that that which is understood to deserve notice is actually noticed. It is part of their range of services to produce and protect the popularity of certain artifacts that belong to the traditional canon of (still disproportionately male) authors, to the classics, to the educational goods of a culture. According to these institutions, it is desirable to know the works of Goethe and Schiller, Melville and Hawthorne, Kant and Hegel, Emerson and Thoreau, Bach and Beethoven, Glass and Cage, Dürer and Klee, Hopper and O'Keefe. Those who do not know these canonical heavyweights are sanctioned, whether by poor grades or by disrespect. Those who aim at social differentiation through "fine distinctions" (Bourdieu 1987) must be able to rely on the fact that that which is to be respected is also sufficiently

known. Cultural capital is thus dependent on what we call *first-order popularization* (Döring et al. 2021; Werber et al. 2023). And without cultural institutions—often tax-favored, state-subsidized—first-order popularization, which is indispensable for the social distribution of attention and cultural value, would have little chance of success.

Even Umberto Eco embraces the foregone conclusion that a work of high culture cannot be popular and serial: "high art", i.e., "original and not serial" (Eco 1994, p. 93). The social asymmetry between "high culture" and "low culture" has taken the place of the class stratification of society since the eighteenth century in Europe and still dominates cultural self-descriptions (in the US as well) in the 1960s (Fiedler 1969). It comes under pressure to legitimize itself when it becomes increasingly easy to observe *how popular certain artifacts actually are*. Since the advent of charts and hit parades (e.g., the "Billboard Music Popularity Chart" from 1940), ratings (e.g., the Nielsen ratings from 1950), and polling data as ranking technologies, a wide audience can know *what is noticed by many and what is not*. Inevitably, this audience will also realize that what is *intended* to be noticed by many by no means always coincides with what *is* noticed by many. Harry Potter is more popular than Wilhelm Meister. Captain America is more popular than Charlie Marlow. Asterix is more popular than Charles Swann.

At least since the middle of the twentieth century, Western consumer societies have routinely measured and publicized whether something receives much or little attention. Bestseller lists, top 10 lists, audience ratings, the name recognition of goods, services, institutions, and people of all kinds are surveyed, compared, and ranked (Miller 2000; Heintz 2016, 2018). Translated into charts or diagrams, these rankings allow us to grasp at a glance whether a particular song has been listened to more often than others, whether a book has found more readers than others, whether a program has reached more viewers than another, whether a museum has had more visitors in a year than others, whether an author's drama has been played more often than another play, or whether a scientific paper has been cited more often than another publication on the topic. These popularity scores are translated into zero-sum rankings (such as a top 10 list or a global ranking of blockbusters) that are then published again with as high a resonance as possible. We call this process *second-order popularization* (Döring et al. 2021; Werber et al. 2023). We should note that we are not talking about absolute numbers here: Topping the bestseller list of fiction or, as a blockbuster, the ranking of new movies implies a far larger readership or greater audience numbers than ranking nonfiction or radio plays: What matters is being ahead (or behind) in a particular sector. How popular something is, is *comparative*: i.e., how many people pay attention to something in a certain category (from nonfiction to concerts, from comics to movies) is determined and, in turn, publicized so as to garner additional attention.[10] Popularity is surveyed, compared, and popularized. The knowledge that a song, a novel, a film, a play, a museum is at the top of a ranking has consequences for the evaluation of this song, novel, film, drama, or museum:

- If the extremely popular artefact—the highly ranked bestseller, the blockbuster, the chart topper—is conventionally counted among the products of "low culture", the associated devaluation can now be opposed by asking why an artifact that is already noticed by many and places much higher in the rankings than other artifacts, even those of high culture, should not receive any attention. Why should one of the most popular comic books or the most popular science fiction novel series in the world be ignored?
- If a novel, a piece of music, an exhibition is generally counted among the products of "high culture" but receives little attention according to the ranking, or at least much less attention than other novels, songs, or events in the ranking, then one might ask why something should receive attention (high culture, the canon, classical music, educational material) even though it is not popular at all.

These two basic observations complicate, and ultimately move beyond, Dwight Macdonald's classic "theory of mass culture" (Macdonald 1953) as well as later scholarship

that conceives of popular culture as a commercialized culture aimed at maximizing mass consumption.[11]

In the *Perry Rhodan* forum, where since the late 1990s about 2000 members have written a total of 680,000 posts on about 10,000 topics, these questions are formulated as follows:

"As an example I can give you 'Der Vorleser'. Hordes of young people are forced to read this 'book' in schools, yet it is worth no more than toilet reading in a public station restroom! Never in my life have I wasted so much time as when I had to read this book!"[12]

This post received approval in the same thread of the forum:

"I agree with you there, the two SF books are more interesting than novels suggested by German teachers that students have to slog through against their better judgment."

In a thread that was consulted 153,770 times by "forists" (the emic term for the users of the forum) and that received a total of 1516 comments under the topic "Opinions on the *Mythos* cycle", one of the *Perry Rhodan* fans states that he cannot imagine why many readers should follow the current cycle (cycles consist of a hundred issue novels; in superhero comics, one speaks of story arcs or events) of the series without also finding the issues "good". Whether he checks "Amazon or Thalia", the series is "always an online bestseller". So the current cycle cannot be all that bad, this forist suggests. It would be "absurd" to deny quality to a series that is read by so many in the science fiction segment that it leads in the rankings.[13]

The "German teachers" can be taken as examples of popularization of the first order: They mandated that Schlink's *The Reader* be read. At the same time, these teachers proclaimed what should not be paid attention to: *Perry Rhodan*. The series' editor (since 1992), Klaus N. Frick (KNF), states in the forum: "In the past, pulp novels were considered 'trash' across the board, disparaged by well-meaning educators, or confiscated in school".[14] Many long-time readers have experienced this themselves, but they did not give up reading their favorite popular science fiction series.

The qualitative, ultimately normative legitimation of first-order popularization encounters justification difficulties when the rankings of second-order popularization make transparent that pulp novels are read by a great many, while the "classics" of literature are often read only when mandated: "Schiller's 'Kabale und Liebe', which would have long since been in a box in the basement if I hadn't been forced to read it".[15] Pulp novels, as well as comic books, are obviously read even without institutional pressure: "Of course, one had a hard time with the teachers; if they found out about it".[16] The forist Vincent states: "I know that in my life I was often mildly smiled at by some people in my circle of acquaintances for reading a *science fiction* series". *Perry Rhodan* may be popular, but it is not supposed to attract attention. As long as the distinction between "high culture" and "low culture" is stable and the series is attributed to "popular culture" and *thus at the same time* to "low culture", its readers can be disregarded. In his discussion of such assessments of the series and its readers, Vincent continues as follows:

"One argument that critics like to use is 'Let's stick to the facts: Let's just take the form of publication: a booklet a week', to which I like to counter 'Okay, let's stick to the facts: A booklet of which one has been published every week for 52 years (50, 45, 30 years (interchangeable, since it depends on the time))'.

There must be something to such a perennial favorite. A 52-year consistency can no longer be a coincidence. There are trends, global companies, even a whole state that hasn't existed that long."[17]

There "must be something to" a pulp novel series that has been finding its audience for more than half a century (or, for that matter, for comic books with a more 80-year history, such as *Superman*, *Batman*, *Wonder Woman*, or *Captain America*); its "consistency can no longer be a coincidence". This argument not only counters the disparagement of the

material "appearance" of the series as flimsy periodicals, or "booklets", but at the same time plays off the quantitative dimension of popular seriality against the taste judgments of "legitimate" culture. Under the conditions of second-order popularization, the assumption that the series deserves no attention loses its self-evidence.

A first consequence of the distinction between first-order and second-order popularization is the need to discursively classify a recurring theme of forum communication: Circulation figures, bestseller successes, attendance figures at fancons, membership figures of fan clubs, etc. are connected with the experiences that fans have had with cultural degradations of a series, its authors, and its readers. The fact that the series, due to its popularity, is no longer categorized as "low culture" *per se* but is easily compared by its readers with works of "high culture" marks a major *transformation of the popular*. The fact that superhero or sci-fi series receive the attention of many becomes an argument for their notability (but not necessarily for their nobilitation).

However, by no means do all readers see it this way, and one of the advantages of analyzing digital epitexts is that exceptions can be found quickly and weighted quantitatively. The forist Roi Danton comments: "Well, Perry Rhodan was and is trivial literature. He should own up to that, and we all should [own up to that]". Haywood Floyd, on the other hand, argues in book-medial terms: If the texts of the series were not published as a periodical, but in book form, i.e., if text were accompanied by a stable paratext like other works of "recognized literature", then this attribution to trivial literature would be omitted:

> "PR [*Perry Rhodan*] between book covers (no: not silver ones . . .) or at least paperback covers would probably be recognized as literature. And some recognized mainstream literature wouldn't be worth a damn in booklet form, it's so shallow and trivial."[18]

Printed as a book and set in "silver" book covers, the series has made the *Spiegel* (a leading German weekly news magazine) bestseller list several times. This list does not distinguish between "serious" and "trivial" literature and therefore privileges quantity (measured by sales) over quality (measured by economies of taste) (Figure 5).

Figure 5. *Spiegel* bestseller list *Hardcover Belletristik* from 19 May 2018. The *Perry Rhodan* volume ranks at place 16 behind Elena Ferrante and before Daniel Kehlmann, a representative of "high culture", who has been honored with renowned poetry and literature awards.

In terms of the cultural legitimacy of popular serial narratives, however, it is interesting to see contributions from forists who do not participate at all in these comparisons and positionings on the high–low scale and who therefore speak of "booklets" or "periodicals" without associating devaluations or obligations of justification with them.

"Each issue, new questions, and the reader is thinking 'Wow, rad', speculating in all sorts of directions, which provides immersion and excitement."[19]

However, we would have to observe these negotiations of the cultural value of the series in forums and wikis and in readers' letters and fanzines since we cannot simply deduce them from the series' generic status as a *pulp novel*. And we would have to examine whether and how, in the practices of readers, the popular becomes a reference value that serves to reverse the burden of proof in the discourse of valuation (Döring et al. 2021, pp. 4–9; Werber et al. 2023). To make empirical progress here, a few more quotes from the seemingly inexhaustible treasure trove of fan forums cannot help. Rather, we have to ascertain which quote, or which position toward the series, represents a single finding that hardly plays a role in the discussion, and which positions have received much attention in the forums. Forums tend to provide information on this question: Platforms index, via digital counters, what receives much attention and what receives little. At the same time, they indicate through their user ranks who is responsible for many posts and who only for a few.

The logic of second-order popularization thus plays not only a semantic role in forum communication, insofar as attention by many becomes an argument in the debate about the quality of the series. Rather, forum communication is also organized by the platform according to the logic of second-order popularization: The logic of popularization is already inherent in the *Perry Rhodan* forum software, which displays the number of replies to a post and the frequency of hits (Figure 6). The functionality of the software also includes the possibility to sort the posts according to the number of replies and hits. Such attention measurement is automated, and the display of the forum's pages includes the *rankings* (by the number of replies and hits). Thus, the display follows popularity criteria.

This is no different in the forums in which Captain America receives a particularly high volume of attention. For example, Marvel Publishing has a subreddit that has 2.1 million followers—who are called, rather nostalgically, "true believers"—and which the platform ranks as the top 1% of all subreddits. The posts can be sorted by different categories ("hot", "new", "top"), with additional internal differentiations. Under "top", you can choose between "today" and all "times", for instance, with the most popular thread of all times accumulating 45,400 posts, the most popular on a single day (a random example: 11 July 2022) at least 5000.[20] What is more, if you click on names of the forists, you get to their profile page, where so-called karma points are displayed that have been awarded based on forum activities such as posts, comments, and upvotes.[21]

We can use the attention measurement (counting) and the ranking (listing) of popularity that platforms perform and display for our analysis as we pursue the argument that *whatever receives the most attention in the forum should also be relevant for research*: A thread with hundreds of comments and tens of thousands of hits would thus be preferable to the analysis of a discussion in which only a few forum members are involved and which garners little attention from other fans of the series. Let us recall: We want to observe the coevolution of serial text and serial paratext. Our *hypothesis is that it is more likely that popular positions in the forum make a difference to the way the series is continued than those positions that are not popular, i.e., receive little attention in the forum*. Methodologically, this means that in the digital epitext of the series, we first have to identify those threads that have conspicuously high numbers of comments and views, in order to then turn to the question of the long-term connection with the text of the series via a close reading of these selected threads.

Figure 6. *Perry Rhodan* subforum issue series EA, sorted by the number of hits. The *threads* are also displayed—and can be sorted—by the number of posts to a topic (*replies*), by the topicality of the posts, and by *authors*. The participation in a thread can also be read graphically by the number of pages in the forum the posts cover, e.g., 4 pages to the first thread, but 45 pages to the second thread.

One of the most popular threads in the *Perry Rhodan* forum over the past 5 years is titled "Opinions on the 'Mythos' cycle—issues 3000–3099".[22] Issue #3000 was published on 15 February 2019, and the last issue of the cycle was published on 8 January 2021. There are 1505 posts in the discussion; the thread has been viewed 184,893 times. In both categories (reply count, view count), the thread ranks third. This is comparatively high, considering that the forum's ca. 2000 active members have made a total of 680,000 posts on approximately 10,000 topics over the past decade. We prefer the thread selected for our close reading to the two more highly ranked threads because we are already familiar with the *Mythos* cycle (including the serial text and the serial peritext) from previous research and also because the forum discussion of these issues has another striking feature. The spoiler thread about issue #3072 of the cycle, "The Ilt Must Die!", is again the most popular thread in the discussion of the individual issues of the cycle and at the same time (rated by replies) of all spoiler threads: it gathers 977 posts and registers 68,410 hits.

This spoiler thread is in 11th place in the overall ranking (Figure 7). In issue #3072, one of the most popular and beloved protagonists of the *Perry Rhodan* series, the "mouse beaver" or Ilt named Gucky, dies (only supposedly, as later installments will eventually show). Sixteen weeks later, in issue #3088 ("Gucky Returns"), the Ilt is written back into the series: He has never been dead. Both events, Gucky's death and his return to the series, have been intensely discussed among readers. This particularly high level of attention to Gucky's fate may also play a role in the attention that the cycle as a whole has received in the forum (Figure 8a,b).

Topic ID	Forum → Title	Reply Count	View Count	Date	Title	URL	Avg Views	Autho
							Bildschirmfoto	
9278	Allgemeine Diskussionen	2 216	385 252	2017-03-14T21:32:57+00:00	Meinungen zum Zyklus "Genesis" Band 2900-2999	https://forum.perry-rhodan.net/viewtopic.php?t=9278	173,85	1051
8800	Allgemeine Diskussionen	1 575	218 372	2016-09-07T17:01:01+00:00	Zyklusfazit "Die Jenzeitigen Lande"	https://forum.perry-rhodan.net/viewtopic.php?t=8800	138,65	9349
11119	Allgemeine Diskussionen	1 505	184 893	2019-02-15T06:40:29+00:00	Meinungen zum Zyklus "Mythos" Band 3000 - 3099	https://forum.perry-rhodan.net/viewtopic.php?t=11119	122,85	1068
8240	Allgemeine Diskussionen	747	132 188	2016-02-11T10:38:07+00:00	Kurzzyklus ab Band 2875 - Die Sternengruft	https://forum.perry-rhodan.net/viewtopic.php?t=8240	176,96	9349
4772	Allgemeine Diskussionen	916	113 762	2013-10-16T07:47:53+00:00	Atlan kehrt zurück in die EA	https://forum.perry-rhodan.net/viewtopic.php?t=4772	124,19	8060
10218	Projekt Band 3000	633	104 289	2018-03-11T16:22:34+00:00	Spekulationen 3000 ++	https://forum.perry-rhodan.net/viewtopic.php?t=10218	164,75	9491
8381	Spoiler	541	95 154	2016-03-31T18:07:02+00:00	Spoiler 2850: Die Jenzeitigen Lande v. Vandemaan/Montillon	https://forum.perry-rhodan.net/viewtopic.php?t=8381	175,89	9349
9082	Spoiler EA	281	95 137	2016-12-22T11:29:30+00:00	Spoilerschreiber gesucht	https://forum.perry-rhodan.net/viewtopic.php?t=9082	338,57	8001
9044	Romantitel	450	93 986	2016-12-06T08:04:58+00:00	Titel und paar Infos zum Zyklus ab 2900	https://forum.perry-rhodan.net/viewtopic.php?t=9044	208,86	80
7280	Spoiler	403	91 649	2015-04-16T09:01:40+00:00	Spoiler 2800: Zeitriss von Michelle Stern	https://forum.perry-rhodan.net/viewtopic.php?t=7280	227,42	700
12208	Spoiler	976	85 396	2020-07-01T11:41:12+00:00	Spoiler 3072: Der Ilt muss sterben!, von Leo Lukas	https://forum.perry-rhodan.net/viewtopic.php?t=12208	87,5	1052
4778	Spoiler	587	84 603	2013-10-17T10:19:08+00:00	Spoiler 2722: Altin Magara von Michael Marcus Thurner	https://forum.perry-rhodan.net/viewtopic.php?t=4778	144,13	9776
3980	Spoiler	597	84 456	2013-05-15T15:19:33+00:00	Spoiler 2700: Der Techno-Mond von Andreas Eschbach	https://forum.perry-rhodan.net/viewtopic.php?t=3980	141,47	58
10784	Allgemeine Diskussionen	806	83 324	2018-09-06T11:57:29+00:00	Zeitriss - Scherung - Dyschrone Drift	https://forum.perry-rhodan.net/viewtopic.php?t=10784	103,38	9349
8458	Spoiler	389	79 678	2016-04-28T07:55:26+00:00	Spoiler 2854: Der letzte Mensch, v. Oliver Fröhlich	https://forum.perry-rhodan.net/viewtopic.php?t=8458	204,83	435
11645	Kurs 3100	700	78 524	2019-09-23T16:37:12+00:00	Kurs 3100 ...	https://forum.perry-rhodan.net/viewtopic.php?t=11645	112,18	87
10024	Spoiler	404	76 647	2017-12-28T01:35:06+00:00	Spoiler 2941: TEIRESIAS spricht, von Kai Hirdt	https://forum.perry-rhodan.net/viewtopic.php?t=10024	189,72	1055
8821	Spoiler	454	74 377	2016-09-15T18:14:23+00:00	Spoiler 2874: Thez, von Vandemaan und Montillon	https://forum.perry-rhodan.net/viewtopic.php?t=8821	163,83	114
5093	Spoiler	484	73 505	2013-12-05T13:10:04+00:00	Spoiler 2729: In eine neue Ära von Marc A.Herren	https://forum.perry-rhodan.net/viewtopic.php?t=5093	151,87	8186

Figure 7. Listing of the most popular forum threads by replies and views. The thread about the *Mythos* cycle is in 3rd place; the thread about issue #3072 in 11th place.
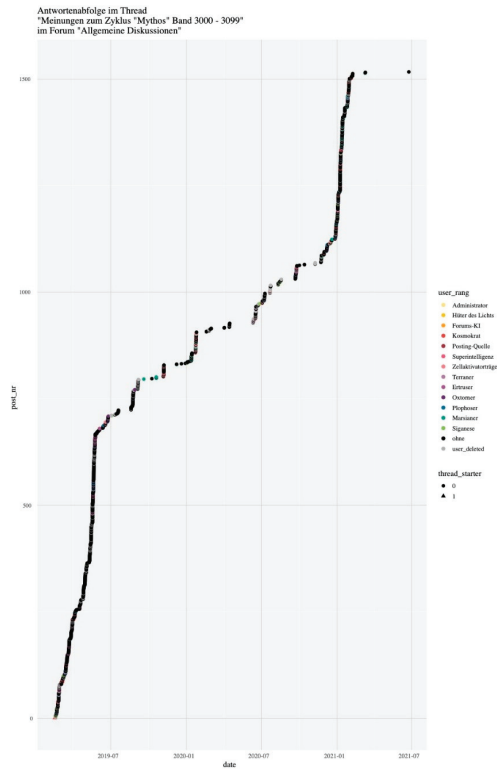
(**a**)
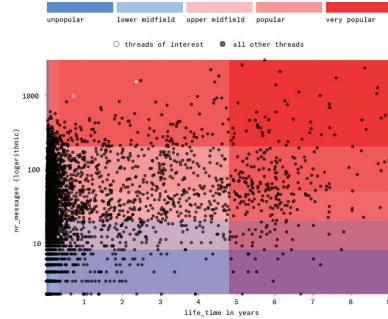
(**b**)

Figure 8. (**a**) Reply dynamics in thread 11119: *Mythos* cycle. In the graphic representation of the response dynamics in the thread, i.e., the distribution of comments over the time the thread is discussed, we can see that the discussion stops several times, does not restart until November 2020, and then develops continuously. The title "The Ilt Must Die!" (issue #3072) has been known since the end of June; issue #3072 (Gucky's Death) is due out on 3 July 2020, and issue #3088 (Gucky's Return) is due out on 23 October 2020. (**b**) Speed of the comments and popularity of the thematically relevant threads (without the large off-topic area). The two white dots in the red area on the top left represent the threads about issue #3072 and the *Mythos* cycle. There is only one thread that generates as many comments so quickly. Only discussions that run over many years and thus show a larger participation and more hits in absolute numbers are more popular.

This digital analysis suggests a connection between the incisive event in the text of the series (Gucky's death) and the serial epitext (the discussion of the current cycle in thread 11119). This settles the question of which issues to read and which readers' comments to examine more closely.

5. The Serial Epitext: Close Readings

In February 2020, the forum exchange of opinions about the newly launched *Mythos* cycle begins, starting with issue #3000. Through a kind of time jump of 493 years, Perry Rhodan and his crew return to the Milky Way in the spaceship Ras Tschubai, where due to a galaxy-wide computer virus ("Posizid"), nobody has reliable memories of Earth, Perry Rhodan, or the history of the Terrans. Without functioning storage media, the history that Perry Rhodan has written in the galaxy during thousands of years (and issues) is passed on like a rumor. Rhodan, his starship, his immortal friends Atlan and Gucky, and even his home planet are remembered at best as parts of a "myth". The first one hundred posts in the thread discuss intradiegetic details of the series, with experts being among themselves. Take the forist astroGK as an example:

> "Data flood, posicide, and the arrival of the Cairans must have happened at the same time. Only contradictory info was available, Terra was no longer there, apparently never had been there, nobody was allowed to investigate(?), and the people who remembered a different history were denounced as madmen and enemies(?), and so it was inevitable that after one generation myth-making was already a given.

I am extremely curious what we will find in the Sol system. How is the system stabilized if Terra is gone? How do you give the impression that this planet never existed?"

Readers speculate in a rather sophisticated manner about possible lines of development here. They use their knowledge of the preceding cycles, the lives of dozens of main and secondary characters, the political situation in the galaxy, and the most diverse technical possibilities of the spacefaring peoples.

Another topic in the forum discussion is the thesis that the anniversary issue (#3000), according to Ce Rhioton, uses the heightened public attention to "introduce new readers [...] (without having to assume great knowledge of the Perryverse) to the series". The beginning of the cycle is diegetically well suited for this maneuver, because the plot— the forum speaks of a "reset", but we may just as well use the more established term "reboot"—starts without too many prerequisites: The core crew around Perry Rhodan aboard the Ras Tschubai is manageably small, and the galaxy is also relatively unfamiliar to them after the lapse of 493 years. The "Posizid" and the patchy and uncertain memory of what the series has narrated over 3000 issues not only offer talking points about "current" political problems, such as "conspiracy theories" and "fake data", but above all provide an intradiegetic occasion to recall and consolidate all that is necessary for the understanding of the series. An alternative past that is explicitly refuted in this reappropriation of galactic history (#3005: "The Cradle of Mankind") is the memory of Perry Rhodan as a totalitarian autocrat. The reboot excludes this not entirely improbable past of the series' titular hero (Werber 2018, pp. 87–90).[23]

The "new readers" are thus introduced to the "series canon". The start of the cycle, which is perceived as "quiet" or "slow", has "of course the purpose of letting the reader slowly get to know the 'new' Milky Way together with our heroes", says Rainer Nagel. Many commentators express similar sentiments: The cycle wants to "take new readers along by visiting important players in the Milky Way". The aim is to "make it easier for new readers [...] to get started". That the series needs new readers is undisputed, but the narrative strategies used for recruitment purposes are not appreciated by all "old readers". Repetition and explanation can be boring for recipients who know the series well and thus become risky for series evolution. Ce Rhioton suspects:

> "I think the crux is (and [*Perry Rhodan* author] Christian Montillon has mentioned this here in the forum) that the balancing act of catering to different reader groups

(regular readers, return readers, new readers) has been attempted since volume 3000. And this balancing act, in my opinion, inhibits the creativity of the stories."

Forist AushilfsMutant shares this view and asks for understanding and patience:

"I also think that this is exactly the reason. At the moment, old things are partly reintroduced or/and new things are added. This simply requires some time."

As soon as new readers can get their bearings, the cycle will pick up speed and gain momentum, Kosmonaut hopes. Julian comments:

"In my opinion, the plot was very well prepared, especially for me as an old reader, now also physically, it has been a pleasure for me to witness how they tried to attract new readers and thus keep them engaged in order to maybe become old readers themselves at some point."

Not surprisingly, there is also criticism of this "balancing act" the forists perceive. One answer to the question of what the series criticism expressed in the forum could be good for at all is this: "because everyone involved is interested in the greatest science fiction series also being the best possible". Others share this view: "Agree", writes Old Man. And Aarn Munro confirms: "I agree! That's why we nag . . . But it's always justified". The expectation is that critical support for the series will help to ensure that it continues and, as much as possible, meets the expectations and hopes of its readers. This is what the forum is all about. The forists' discussion of issues and cycles in the context of the entire "history of the Perryverse" provides information about the "reader expectations" and the "reception" of the series. Nanograinger writes:

"How could it be otherwise? After all, we're reading an endless series, many of us for years, if not decades, or hundreds of volumes."

Especially since the "old readers" in the forum, who have been following the "endless series" for decades and are also particularly active in the thread, articulate the expectation that the new cycle should also have surprises in store. Aarn Munro criticizes: "Nothing (serious) has really happened yet. Maybe more in the next volumes that push the galactic plot a bit. Right now, all I see is: repetition, repetition. Like on German television". Nanograinger concurs: "Perry Rhodan, Atlan, Gucky and Bully also play leading roles again, they really can't think of anything new". Ce Rhioton confesses, "I'm longing for that *Wow*! effect", to which he adds: "The structure of a cycle follows predictable paths. Why not leave tried and true paths?" In this discussion about repetition and deviation (or variation), Eric Manoli maintains that the longevity of the series indicates that, in light of 3000 issues in the series, the concrete relationship between innovation and redundancy must have been successful: "I think 'never change a running system' might have proven itself to be a golden rule after 60 years".

This exchange calls to mind Frank Kelleter's thoughts on the "evolution" of popular series. In the course of their continuation, series experiment with the difference between "redundancy and variability" (Kelleter 2012, p. 28). Whether the result of the combination of variation and redundancy is evolutionarily convincing can be observed in their popularity, which either drops to the point that the series is discontinued (negative selection) or is so strong that the series is continued (positive selection) and might even spread into other series and other media (proliferation; spread) (Kelleter 2017, pp. 18–22). In the case of *Perry Rhodan*, this includes miniseries, spin-offs, remakes (*Perry Rhodan-Neo*), novels such as Andreas Eschbach's bestseller about Perry Rhodan's youth (Eschbach 2020), or, in the decades of its greatest popularity (1970s to 1980s), the *Atlan* series and the planetary novels (Werber 2018, p. 79f.). We could also cite many similar examples from the transmedia Marvel universe.

As a theoretically saturated concept rather than a metaphor for observing change or adaptation, evolution implies at least the three-figure differentiation suggested above—namely, "of variation, selection, and restabilization" (Luhmann 2012, p. 252). Society, and its internal differentiations, "is thus a result of evolution", Niklas Luhmann states (Luhmann 2012, p. 301). According to Luhmann (cf. Werber 2000), society evolves according to the

"neo-Darwinian schema" (Luhmann 2012, p. 252), i.e., through "variation to the elements" of the system ("that is, communications"), through the "selection of structures" of the system ("that is, the formation and use of expectations") (p. 286, cf. p. 273), and through the "restabilization [...] of the evolving system after selection, whether positive or negative" (p. 274)—and therefore, through the use of evolutionary achievements such as agriculture or stratification, writing or organizations for new variants, and further structural formation.

Series evolution is also based on evolutionary achievements, for example, on the storytelling in cycles, on the "onion model' of the Perryverse, on the establishment of galactic peoples and technologies, on a readership that is familiar with them. The much-vaunted complexity of a long-running series consists precisely in the fact that it has itself, with its narrative, created the conditions for otherwise highly improbable selection offers (in the case of the series, written communication appearing in a periodical form) to have a chance of being positively selected. The fact that tens of thousands of readers do not have the slightest problem with a time jump of 493 years, with immortal protagonists and mutants gifted with superpowers, with superintelligences, self-aware computers, and faster-than-light engines is due to the fact that certain structures of expectation have been successfully established in the readers. After all, it is rather improbable that a communication offer that confronts the recipient with a galaxy in which Earth and Moon have been abducted from the solar system (*raptus terrae*) and replaced by other planets will connect text and readers week after week. Moreover, the fact that in the course of the *Mythos* cycle, with a machine that must be activated in another universe, Earth is enabled to return to its ancestral place proves to be a completely unproblematic development of the diegetic possibilities that the series has created for itself. In the thread, such twists are not even mentioned. The most important evolutionary achievement of the *Perry Rhodan* series is thus a readership that is able to read each new issue against the backdrop of the self-created complexity of the Perryverse and enjoy "improbable" selection offers that would have little chance of connectivity outside the series.

The initial story of an American crew flying to the moon did not make great demands on the recipients in 1961. This is very much different with the current state of the plot, with each new *Perry Rhodan* issue requiring vast knowledge about the history of the series. A new reader without this knowledge will most likely not derive the same sense of tension, satisfaction, and fulfillment as long-time followers and may thus not be motivated to buy and read the next issue. For forists, however, this is indeed very likely. According to our evolutionary approach, the reasons for this likeliness lie in the "increasing functional specification" (of the readership as well as of their series) that makes it possible to deal with the "increasing complexity" of the series and increasingly normalizes "improbabilities" (Luhmann 2008, p. 108; cf. Luhmann 2012, p. 253).

The forum also demonstrates a sense that the series narrative and its readership are evolutionarily related or "coupled" (Luhmann 2012, p. 269). There is a shared understanding of the improbability that new issues represent a selection offer that is accepted because the conditions of writing and reading, the possibilities of continuing the series, and the expectations of the readership change from issue to issue. Observing forum communication has consequences for the formation of expectations, that is, expectations that readers and authors have of readers and authors. Whether this is true or not, the forists assume that the continuation of the series will take their expectations into account; the editors and synopsis team, for their part, plan the continuation under the assumption that they will take the readers' expectations into account. Whether the continuation of communication (new issues are written and read) succeeds, despite the great improbability arising from the self-generated complexity of the series and the consequent high demands on its continuation (is everything correct?) and the specification of the recipients (do you understand everything?), can only be observed *post hoc*. This temporal dimension also becomes an issue in the thread.

A popular series can be "irritated" by the forum discussion and convert these internal "irritations" into its own communicative operations of "information-processing"

(Luhmann 2013, p. 116). But it cannot accomplish this simultaneously. It needs time for its own operations. The forist Halut describes this cause-and-effect model thusly:

> "While an individual author can react within a few weeks, an exposé takes much longer. Basic plot concepts will probably have quite a few months delay. I myself have perceived things that were implemented after 'only' six years.
>
> Criticism and reaction fall very far apart, but they must have a perceptible temporal and factual connection in order to be noticed. This connection is often too tenuous."

This observation gets to the bottom of the problem: There is a "connection" between the series criticism practiced in the forum and the continuation of the series, but it is very difficult to observe and specify, especially since the readers' memory must last long enough to observe conversions after years. Nevertheless, in some cases, the temporal difference is only "a few weeks", and the thread deals with such a case.

There is no question that Gucky's "death" irritated the readers. Yet for the production team, it is naturally not this character's "death", narrated in issue #3072, that causes irritation, but the readers' reactions to this issue. This irritation, which the producers of the series perceive as unexpected "surprises, disappointments, disturbances", must be channeled into a specific form of information to which the system (the organization of the production of the series) can then react:

> "A system that does not repress its own irritation, but observes and processes it, gives them the form of information. Information also does not occur in the environment, but only in the system itself. Thus, it cannot be transported as identical units from the environment into the system. This is because information presupposes a design of possibilities from which it selects one (and no other). Such constructions, however, are always the system's own achievements [. . .]. In the form of information, the system can then use eigenstates to choose other eigenstates." (Luhmann 1990, p. 99)

The system learns (Luhmann 1990, p. 99). It reshuffles the relationship between variance and redundancy. Combinations that cannot maintain their popularity in a changing "reading(r) environment", to borrow a term from the forist Nanograinger, are discontinued. *Perry Rhodan* itself has to adjust to these "changes" again and again to survive as a series. For Nanograinger, it is "clear: even if it is an endless series, we never read the same thing (despite all the repetitions)". And even those who read change and never read the same way.

Even if the more than "50,000" readers may have different "requirements" for "pulp novels", ovaron29 argues that the most important factor for the continuation of the series is that it "continues to be bought". The series can then continue, quite independently of the individual motives for the purchase. Ce Rhioton is aware that the "act of purchase" itself is not a quality criterion (Hecken 2006, p. 87):

> "A sold issue doesn't really say anything about the satisfaction of the buyer. Measured against the total number of copies sold, the feedback is comparatively small. No one can really know whether the majority of buyers/readers are satisfied or not."

A distinction must therefore be made between the popularity of the series and the quality of the episodes. "If a consumer has to decide in the evening whether to read a PR novel or watch 'Game of Thrones' or another exciting television series", Arkosan writes", his decision will depend on the quality of the product". So the decision to read the pulp novel, made week after week, would be an indicator of quality. Looking at series evolution, we can assume that the *Perry Rhodan* series, which has retained its audience ("old readers") and keeps renewing ("new readers") it in the span of thousands of issues, is already "outstandingly good" and "enthusiastically read", as Julian puts it in a post. It is the attachment to the series that matters, not the individual issue. After all, notes Eric

Manoli, "[n]o regular reader will drop out because of one or two bad issues. It can take quite a few issues".

But how are "regular readers" won, and how does the series keep them? The question occupies the forists because they know that the series will only continue if new readers are gained, who will gradually replace the aging regular audience. Ninety percent of the 50 most active forists (over 2000 posts) are over 40 years of age; 85% are over 50. Just as the longevity of the series forces it to integrate new editors and writers into the production team, so too does the readership change. In both cases, the series' greatest success—appearing continuously every week since 8 September 1961—creates a need to continually recalibrate supply and demand. The evolutionary achievement that makes this possible is a readership, trained by the series itself, that is able to understand and appreciate the "complex" novel series in its seventh decade and is robust enough to continue reading even after a few boring, irrelevant, confusing, or annoying issues.

The forum provides "irritations" that the series can use for its evolution. This has the great advantage that it can make changes in order to maintain its "reading/reader environment". It is not faced with the quasi-existential alternative of either being discontinued or being continued but instead is able to react to an abundance of irritations by means of variations—which in turn leads to discussions in the forum that can irritate the series once again. The digital epitext enables this permanent self-adjustment of the series to the information it gains from the irritations. The organization (editors, synopsis writers, authors) can base its decisions (about how to continue the series) on more than subscriber and sales figures, namely, on the ongoing ratings of the issues and cycles and on the ongoing issue reviews in the forum (and on the *LKS*). Eric Manoli recalls in the thread KNF's "statement that the forum here is a kind of seismograph for him". This is an apt metaphor as the swings of the seismograph do not causally lead to certain consequences for the way the series continues but rather motivate continuing self-adjustment to ongoing irritations.

As is typical of other mass media formats (such as newspapers and magazines), it is true for pulp novel series that "no interaction among those co-present can take place between sender and receivers" (Luhmann 2000, p. 2). First, the authors must write; then the readers can read. What is written and how it is written, and whether and how it is read, "cannot be coordinated centrally" (Luhmann 2000, p. 3). This impossibility creates uncertainty on both sides: Readers cannot know what authors will write before they purchase an issue, and authors cannot know what readers will want to read in the future. However, the fact that *Perry Rhodan* is not a single, self-contained, autonomous "work" of literature but a series of science fiction pulp novels (Werber 2021) makes possible a reciprocal observation that enables the formation of stable expectations imputed to the other side. Each issue of the series is a test for both sides as to whether their assumptions are still correct. This can be observed not only in the issues themselves, which continue to be written and sold, as well as bought and read, but also in the serial paratext.

In the *Mythos* thread, Gucky_Fan, like many others, assumes that the "responsible people [...] certainly read the critical contributions". The editor responsible for *Perry Rhodan*, Frick, confirms: "We discuss this internally, no question". Could the crisis that shook the series after issue #3072 have been avoided? AimeeAbuh is just one of many readers who were so shocked by the plot development that they suspended their reading (and purchase of the issues): "I still haven't touched any of the new HR's [issues] since Gucky's death, by the way". If, for many forists, and even for very experienced readers, "Gucky's death [...] is a slap in the face", could this not have been known by the synopsis team planning the series' progression? Ce Rhioton claims: "They should have seen 'Gucky disaster' coming just the same".

On 7 July 2020, a few days after issue #3072 (Gucky's Death) was published, Mentro Kosum notes: "For the first time since this thread was created, the 'Don't Like' votes have taken the lead in the poll (48 votes to 45)". On that day, the "seismograph", as the ongoing poll is called, indexed a majority of dissatisfied readers. Then, there were no posts at all in the thread from 9 July to 21 July 2020. As for the exchange of views on the *Mythos* cycle,

conducted over 72 weeks, the forists are silent. The complaint made there at the beginning of the cycle about the predictability of the series has been heard. However, the surprise that was achieved with issue #3072 seems to represent a variant that is negatively selected by the "reading environment".

We can observe similar reactions in other serial media, for instance, in the numerous backlashes against several Marvel comic books, one of the most prominent being the depiction of Captain America as a fascist HYDRA leader in Nick Spencer's *Secret Empire* story arc (2017).[24] In the case of *Perry Rhodan*, the sometimes outraged reactions concern not only a single issue and its author, but the series and the production team (editors, exposé writers, authors) as a whole. In letters to the editor that appear on the *LKS* (in issue #3079, cf. Figure 2d), there is speculation about the end of the series, which was heralded by Gucky's death: Without Gucky, too many readers are considering to opt out of the series to guarantee its continuation.

Only on 21 July 2021 does a new post appear in the thread, in which Kardec refers very briefly to a post by Zeut-42 that had appeared elsewhere in the forum. Those who follow the link Kardec included in his post learn that, according to the editors, Gucky did not actually die, but only a "clone" version of him did. It had been the goal of the production team to shock the protagonists of the series (Gucky's friends: Atlan, Bully, etc.) with this death, but not the "readers", who, the editor explains, were meant to actually "get it", to recognize "that it is somehow a 'fake', because they have more information than the heroes".[25] To ensure such recognition, however, a more appropriate narratological focalization should have been chosen (zero focalization). The death scene is internally focalized—so there was no access to the events other than through the protagonist (Lionel Obioma), from whose co-view the events are conveyed. And he is sure that the Ilt has died. Another possibility would have been to provide hints in the narrated world itself that there was a Gucky clone and that it was at least questionable in the key scene whether the popular mouse beaver or a replica was threatened. Zeut-42 accuses the exposé authors of "operational blindness". They were apparently no longer able to anticipate the reception of the series by their readers.

The editor agrees with the forist "in some respects":

"More correct would have been (and afterwards one is always wiser) to show how the Cairans prepare the Gucky plan. Then everyone would have seen crystal clear what was happening. The characters in the novels would still have been horrified and shocked, but for the readers it would have been an exciting story that would not have annoyed them but would have evoked sympathy.

Be that as it may: we haven't thought this through properly, that's obvious. I'm sure you can't blame individuals for that anyway. If I had presented the whole thing to my team colleagues, Sabine Kropp or Bettina Lang or Klaus Bollhöfener, with their experience, would certainly have pointed out the problems to me. If the two exposé authors and I had discussed the situation more thoroughly . . . would-if-had."[26]

The thread on the *Mythos* cycle references this discussion (in the subforum "Questions to the Editors") several times. The new state of knowledge now, weeks before the mouse beaver appears again in the series itself, is that Gucky did not die in issue #3072. Some people claim to have always known this, being congenial readers, but the general opinion that the "Gucky plan" failed remains unchallenged among the forists. Is it because of the "operational blindness" of authors and editors insinuated by Zeut-42? Ce Rhioton remarks: "At times I have the impression that those in charge also live a little in their bubble". Mentro Kosum thinks that the "authors" are "alien to the view of the simple reader". On 22 July 2021, he comments on the editor's concession that the murder of an Ilt should have been narratively prepared in a different manner:

"After the fact, you're always smarter. But with a product that reaches tens of thousands of readers, it would have been better to be smart up front. You can't change it now, but I'm afraid it will have a long-lasting effect."

Some forists speculate that the publisher would benefit from making better use of the readers' expertise in planning the course of the series, avoiding setbacks like the "Gucky debacle". "There is so much expertise in the fan scene: the creators of Perrypedia, PRFZ [Perry Rhodan Fan Zentrale/Headquarters] and also here in the forum. Not using that is completely incomprehensible to me", Arkosan writes. "The competence within the fan scene is a godsend after all". The quality assurance of the series can "only work through a feedback mechanism with the fan community", that is, through an organization of "interaction with the fan community".

For the forist Rebecca, the forum is a "place of exchange" about "what's going well and what's not going so well in the series". She speaks of a "serial community" of "authors, readers, forists, or publishing people". All these terms—"interaction", "exchange", "community", "community"—connote familiarity and closeness. This might also be the reason why forists repeatedly offer authors to "act as test readers". A "panel of experts assembled from among the forists [could] read the novels before publication and make their comments". In 183 posts, the forum discusses the possible advantages and disadvantages of test readers. Many posts in the thread profess a willingness to contribute their own expertise, acquired over decades, for the best of the series. The *Perry Rhodan* forum, one might think, is virtually a model case of popular culture's "participatory culture", as Jenkins recently defined it with regard to digital networking opportunities:

"My initial use of 'participatory culture' to refer to fandom (Jenkins 1992) relied on a not fully conscious blurring between forms of cultural production and forms of social exchange; fans understood fandom to be an informal 'community' defined around notions of equality, reciprocity, sociality, and diversity." (Jenkins 2016, p. 2)

The members of the forum claim "equality, reciprocity, sociality" not only for their interaction with each other, but also for their back-and-forth with the authors and editors of the series. What is more, it seems, the "fans ha[ve] a clear and (largely) shared understanding of what they [a]re participating in" (Jenkins 2016, p. 2). Thirteen authors of the series are among the members of the forum, plus four members of the *Perry Rhodan* editorial staff and one of the cartoonists. A total of about 15,000 contributions to the forum come from this group. The "interaction" within the "series community" that has been called for is certainly taking place here. Is this "participatory culture" in practice?

The thread under investigation includes a post by the editor that gives a different impression. Klaus N. Frick posted the following on 19 May 2019, at 5:20 p.m.:

"You have already noticed that the team of authors almost completely and also the editorial staff nearly completely do not want to have anything to do with the forum anymore, haven't you? It frustrates me. And I can understand it."

A few hours later (at 9:16 p.m.), Wim Vandemann joins the discussion. Vandemann is the author of about three dozen *Perry Rhodan* issues, but above all (since issue #2700) one of the two exposé authors responsible for the series development. He writes:

"Hello and good evening everyone,

we have just finished the preliminary work on Expo 3032 and are sitting on Expo 3033. [. . .] I read the forum almost every day. And it is well known that at the last team meeting we talked about the forum posts, exclusively in terms of how helpful they were and are.

I don't always share the criticisms, but I haven't read anything here that I think is unfounded or worthless in terms of Expo work.

I'll admit: posts from people who haven't read the novels, or have only read them in part, or have only read them in spoiler form, are of no interest to me. They're

mere statements, not criticisms. But the forum is large and has room for everyone, so please. [. . .] The other posts (almost) always make me think."

Vandemann seems to want to confirm the view formulated by Ce Rhioton 2 days earlier:

"You think those responsible are resistant to criticism? Christian Montillon, Wim Vandemaan and KNF are supposed to be completely indifferent to readers' opinions?

Pardon me, I don't believe that. According to the editor, at least once a year they determine what went well, but also what didn't go so well."

The forist LaLe replies 3 min later:

"No, I don't think so. Obviously, though, they disagree with the critics. And if the series is successful, from that point of view, they're absolutely right to act differently than some readers hope/expect."

The open and undecided discussion in the forum about whether or not the opinions and expectations of the forists are given enough attention by the "PR team" does not mean that the forum discussion does not play a role in the evolution of the series. Even the disappointing reactions of the team for some forists still confirm that their comments are not meaningless for the continuation of the series. Through these reactions, editor and authors take part in the interaction in the forum and confirm its relevance. Nonattention looks different.

Frick admittedly takes the position that a central coordination of senders and receivers, which would serve to optimize the series and serve the goal of reader satisfaction, is not possible.[27] Readers' wishes, opinions, and comments are so diverse that they simply cannot all be taken into account:

"And one thing is clear after all these years: I get a lot of very different opinions from the readers' point of view. And the authors can't fulfill everyone's wishes. That's not possible, I'm afraid."

The authors can only ever selectively refer to the forum discussion, i.e., be "irritated"— and thereby make their own selection as to what they will consider and what consequences they may draw for the series. This is exactly what evolution as self-adaptation means. Frick responds skeptically to demands from the forum to seek "interaction with the fan community" in order to plan the course of the series together:

"With what part of the fan community? The ones who comment on the forum? The ones on the SF Network who have been declaring the series dead for a dozen years? The people in the Facebook groups? The #Twitter gang [. . .]?

It makes sense to me that someone who doesn't like the series would call for a change of course. But it's really not clear to me now—if I were to take this seriously—which course would find a majority."

Frick rejects the idea of having an expert panel of readers act as advisors to the exposé authors:

"About twenty years ago, when the Forum was young, it was very seriously suggested in this Forum that a Readers' Council be convened. It sounded very much like that. I can't imagine that a more extensive bureaucracy will make even one novel more entertaining or exciting."

Systems theory confirms that there is indeed no other way because "central coordination" between readers and authors is fundamentally impossible, not even through bureaucratization or mechanization (for example, in the form of opinion polls). Series evolution does not mean optimizing the satisfaction of readers and authors over the course of the series through more exchange or more feedback. Series evolution means that the mutual observation of readers and authors in the serial paratext is not indifferent to the continuation of the series. How the series continues is not the result of a "better" match

between authors' skills and readers' expectations, but the result of a specific combination of redundancy and variation that is either stabilized in the series' ecological niche (= popular enough) or not (= nonpopular). Whether something gets attention or not can be tested out in the forum—and precisely with respect to how much attention something attracts in the forum. The popularity of a thread, a post, a thesis helps to turn an irritation into information to which one can react. This can be done very quickly. Zeut-42 states in the thread even before the end of the cycle:

> "Gucky came back and the writers put an incredible amount of effort into the characters after the 'Gucky incident.' You just have to acknowledge that the authors have written very well—and even before all discussions about cycles, the characters have to be right."

Whether, then, the next cycle has hit the right ratio can only be observed *post hoc*—and again related to the paratexts of the series. Whether, after all the criticism of the *Mythos* cycle, the *Chaotarch* cycle will do better or worse cannot be observed in the *Mythos* thread, but only later. And then, months or years down the road, it will be possible to observe in the forum whether forists attribute the development of the series to comments they had made months or years earlier. Anyway, at the end of this *Chaotarch* cycle, over a hundred issues after the Gucky disaster, we can observe that the narrative deals differently with the death of main protagonists. When Gucky and Atlan, Perry Rhodan and Alaska Saedelaere are "blown to pieces" by explosions ("They are all dead". #3197, p. 56), readers immediately learn that this will not be the last word.

Which threads and which posts have been considered comes into view only with temporal distance, and from the perspective of the continued series, which, at the time of this writing, has just concluded the next cycle with volume #3199. Just as the evolutionary history of a species is not determined by a coordination council between a gene commission responsible for variation and an environmental committee responsible for selection, the series evolution cannot be described as a coordination process between readers and authors and reconstructed in the paratext. Nevertheless, and this is precisely our evolutionary argument, a fit into the environment can be observed in the case of successfully stabilized variants—otherwise, negative selection would have occurred and the species would no longer exist. For the observation of the evolution of the series, it would therefore be necessary to understand this fit not as the result of a conscious, motivated negotiation process but as the effects of the mutual observation and self-adaptation initiated by these observations. Readers and authors observe according to their own possibilities and standards and draw their own consequences—and adapt in their reading and writing to what they have observed in the text and in the paratexts of the series.

The last issue of the *Mythos* cycle appeared on 8 January 2021, with Ce Rhioton summing up a week earlier:

> "I'm just going to assume that the Mythos cycle was (also) a concession to the new readers who started with anniversary volume 3000. There always has to be a balance between regular readers, newcomers and new readers.

> And with the new cycle, the serial steamship will pick up speed again. After all, it will be under the sign of chaos—and this prospect already conveys a sense of optimism."

In a new thread in which "opinions on the *Chaotarch* cycle" are exchanged, the forist asks with some satisfaction on 2 February 2021: "86%—has any cycle ever had such a high approval rating?"[28]

At least this much can be said about this *Chaotarch* cycle: It will not go on without "Perry Rhodan, Atlan, Gucky and Bully" in the "leading roles". There will be no further experiment of the so-called expocrats (*Perry Rhodan* writers and editors) with the favorite and main characters of the series. In the exchanges about the new cycle (issues #3100–#3199), this conviction appears repeatedly in the discussion of possible plot developments. Ce Rhioton states with a sense of certainty: "You mean the authors would throw us off the scent

a second time with one of the main characters after the Gucky disaster? Impossible".[29] After the "Gucky disaster", those responsible for the series "wouldn't dare fool the readership like that for a second time".[30] So far, this prediction has been accurate.

6. Outlook

Pulp novel series and superhero comics are evidently part of the popular culture of Western societies. The fact that they are popular and widely read is a necessary prerequisite for their serial continuation. Both popularity and seriality enable the formation of a paratextual space where recipients and producers exchange ideas about the past, present, and possible future of the series, which can only ever begin on the condition that the current issue is popular enough to justify continuing the series. The letters to the editor sections and digital fan forums offer a glimpse into these multidecade negotiations. The "participatory culture" of popular culture can be reconstructed here in the interplay between series text and serial paratext and can be related to series evolution as a combination of variation and redundancy, selection and adaptation.

We too have exemplified the potential of this research approach, but we have also taken a new approach to corpus formation: We made the crucial importance of the popularity of the series the criterion for selecting reception testimonies. The analyzed thread has received the greatest attention in the forum, and the speed with which forum members have responded to the discussion is also significantly higher than in other discussions. The interventions of authors and editors in the discussion attests to the importance of these reception testimonies for the continuation of the series. Because the quantitative dimension of popular series threatens a methodological overload, we believe this detour is a promising approach that deserves further testing. The idea is to examine more closely what has already received the most attention in the "paratextual negotiations". This approach sees its biggest chances where the seriality of popular phenomena has created stable forms of exchange, such as letters pages and fan forums. The highly regarded peritexts and digital epitexts of popular pulp novel series and superhero comic books shed light on how "read literature" is received and what function reading practices have for the continuation of the series.

Notes

1. All translations from German language sources are ours unless otherwise noted.
2. Even now-canonical works may have originally been serial at one time, but their seriality is often invisible once they are published in book form and read as works of the canon (e.g., Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, E.D.E.N Southworth's *The Hidden Hand*, or George Lippard's *Quaker City*).
3. While *Perry Rhodan* continues to include letters to the editor in the printed installments, publishers of superhero comics such as DC, Marvel, and Image Comics largely ceased to run them in the early 2000s, when most communication about the series began to occur online, first in message boards and now on forums and especially social media platforms.
4. Forum entry from 9 October 2015: https://forum.perry-rhodan.net/viewtopic.php?p=438186#p438186 (accessed on 29 March 2023). We only cite freely accessible contributions that can be viewed online without being a forum member. Obvious typos and

spelling errors will be corrected. Quotations are italicized in the same way as in the original. Cf. the privacy policy of the forum: https://forum.perry-rhodan.net/ucp.php?mode=privacy (accessed on 29 March 2023).

5 An early example of this phenomenon is the French feuilleton novel *Les Mystères de Paris* by Eugène Sue, which appeared in serial form in the *Journal de Debats* from 1842 to 1843, received considerable national and international attention, and generated a substantial number of letters to the editor (Hügel 2012, pp. 63–65). In the German-speaking world, one could think of serialized novels that were first published in the *Gartenlaube*, for example, and only later as works in book form (Stockinger 2018). In the case of Theodor Fontane, 10 out of 17 novels and stories first appeared in newspapers and magazines (Beintmann 2019, p. 48). The requirements of popularity and seriality do not seem to have been sufficiently explored for the serial novel with regard to the place of publication, reader responses, and changing paratexts (newspaper/book).

6 These observations also apply to the letters pages in superhero comics. See Stein (2021, chp. 1) for a detailed discussion; see Walsh et al. (2018) for an attempt to use digital methods for the study of superhero letter columns.

7 Minutes 5–6. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XnXc33z5D5I (accessed on 29 March 2023).

8 (Stein 2018) proposes some solutions to this problem, but they are less concerned with completeness and empirical validity than with analyzing superhero comics as an evolutionary network and thus are not necessarily geared toward solving the problem addressed here.

9 Digital archives, such as the subscription-based Marvel Unlimited, are not complete and also do not contain the most important original peritexts (especially the letters pages, editorials, and bullpen bulletins). CD-ROM collections of Spider-Man, Captain-America, and a few other series heroes appeared in the mid-2000s with PDF files of the scanned original comics, including all peritexts, but these files are not yet sufficiently prepared to be adopted as a searchable corpus that would satisfy the demands of digital analysis.

10 In the field of US comics, the website Comichron.com provides the most accurate numbers: https://www.comichron.com/index.php (accessed on 29 March 2023). The site's byline—"Comics history . . . by the numbers"—illustrates the numbers-based attention economy we discuss here.

11 Macdonald included comic books and science fiction in his list of media brought forth by mass culture. He distinguished between a "'High Culture' [. . .] that is chronicled in the textbooks, and a 'Mass Culture' manufactured wholesale for the market". Macdonald was obviously aware of the fact that this distinction might run counter to the actual popularity of certain artifacts, but this did not dissuade him from sticking with it: "['Mass Culture'] is sometimes called 'Popular Culture', but I think 'Mass Culture' a more accurate term, since its distinctive mark is that it is solely and directly an article of mass consumption, like chewing gum. A work of High Culture is occasionally popular, after all, though this is increasingly rare" (Macdonald 1953, p. 1).

12 Entry from 24 October 2012: https://forum.perry-rhodan.net/viewtopic.php?p=60041#p60041 (accessed on 29 March 2023). *Der Vorleser* (English title: *The Reader*) is a novel by the German author Bernhard Schlink, published in 1995.

13 Entry from 10 June 2020: https://forum.perry-rhodan.net/viewtopic.php?p=710620#p710620 (accessed on 29 March 2023).

14 Entry from 3 August 2017: https://forum.perry-rhodan.net/viewtopic.php?p=548072#p548072 (accessed on 29 March 2023). In the US, a particularly derogatory discourse was formed in the 1940s, which manifested itself in descriptions of comics as "the lowest, most despicable, and most harmful from of trash" (John Mason Brown in the *Saturday Review of Literature* in 1948), continued in the 1950s through the claims of youth endangerment (e.g., in Fredric Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent* of 1954), and then continued for decades. In the late 1960s, the mastermind of Marvel Comics, Stan Lee, therefore, expressed a desire to nobilitate comics (in White 2007, he speaks of the "elevation" of comics). See Stein (2021, pp. 116, 229, 241).

15 Entry from 24 December 2012: https://forum.perry-rhodan.net/viewtopic.php?t=14&start=350 (accessed on 29 March 2023).

16 Entry from 18 December 2013: https://forum.perry-rhodan.net/viewtopic.php?p=207948#p207948 (accessed on 29 March 2023).

17 Entry from 17 April 2013: https://forum.perry-rhodan.net/viewtopic.php?p=116123#p116123 (accessed on 29 March 2023).

18 Entry from 16 April 2014: https://forum.perry-rhodan.net/viewtopic.php?p=246920 (accessed on 29 March 2023).

19 Entry from 8 January 2021: https://forum.perry-rhodan.net/viewtopic.php?p=740687#p740687 (accessed 29 March 2023).

20 https://www.reddit.com/r/Marvel/top/?t=all; (accessed on 11 July 2022)

21 https://reddit.zendesk.com/hc/en-us/articles/204511829-What-is-karma- (accessed on 29 March 2023).

22 All quoted posts from this thread can be found here: https://forum.perry-rhodan.net/viewtopic.php?p=702514 (accessed on 29 March 2023). We used data from the forum as of July 2022. The analysis with digital tools is based on a closed discussion in which no one has participated for months.

23 This narrative cycle recalls the search for memories of Wakanda in the intergalactic turmoil of a great empire imagined by Ta-Nehisi Coates in his *Black Panther* run (Marvel, 2016–2022). Whether the *Perry Rhodan* production team was inspired by these comics or whether the similarities are due to the shared tropes of the superhero and science fiction genres cannot be ascertained with any degree of certainty. On the connection between series history, or archives, and the Afrodiasporic implications of the figure's history and the history of imperialism, see Stein (2022).

24 See also Stein (2023). The titles of the online coverage already show the importance of epitextual reactions to the series: "Secret Empire: Did Fan Reaction Affect the Ending?" (https://screenrant.com/marvel-secret-empire-fan-reaction-alternative-ending/; accessed on 29 March 2023); "Marvel Desperately Reassures Fans Captain America Is Still a Hero after Secret Empire

Backlash" (https://gizmodo.com/marvel-desperately-reassures-fans-captain-america-is-st-1794849294; accessed on 29 March 2023); "Marvel Pleads for Readers to Wait until the End of Secret Empire to Pass Judgement" (https://www.comicsbeat.com/marvel-pleads-for-readers-to-wait-until-the-end-of-secret-empire-to-pass-judgement/; accessed on 29 March 2023).

[25] Entry from 21 July 2021: https://forum.perry-rhodan.net/viewtopic.php?p=717610 (accessed on 29 March 2023).

[26] Entry from 22 July 2021: https://forum.perry-rhodan.net/viewtopic.php?t=12275 (accessed on 29 March 2023).

[27] In the 2010s, the two major superhero publishers Marvel and DC switched from moderated message boards to a social media strategy where content is presented on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter and moderated according to the practices of these services. In addition, fan-run forums dominate the epitextual discourse, although it is usually unclear whether what is posted is even noticed by the creators of the series.

[28] Entry from 2 February 2021: https://forum.perry-rhodan.net/viewtopic.php?p=744848 (accessed on 29 March 2023).

[29] Entry from 9 January 2022: https://forum.perry-rhodan.net/viewtopic.php?p=787464 (accessed on 29 March 2023).

[30] Entry from 27 March 2021: https://forum.perry-rhodan.net/viewtopic.php?p=752910 (accessed on 29 March 2023).

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Article

A Lived Experience—Immersive Multi-Sensorial Art Exhibitions as a New Kind of (Not That) 'Cheap Images'

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Abstract: This article analyzes the phenomenon of multi-sensorial, digital, and immersive art exhibitions of popular artists, which has been widely neglected in academic research, from a historical perspective. Reflecting the significance of lived experience in art consumption, this 21st-century phenomenon can be confronted productively with early-20th-century art reproductions. The article focuses on the characteristics of both popular phenomena and on their advertisement, as well as on the discourse around them, documenting reactions from resistance to persistence and accommodation. The analysis shows noticeable similarities between the two types of popularization of high art, positioning the new immersive exhibitions in a traditional line of technical innovative art popularization. Whereas photomechanical art reproduction had an immense influence on the popular art canon, being also dependent on 'photogenic' conditions of artworks and thus focusing predominantly on painting, the contemporary canon is predisposed by the immersible characteristics of artists' oeuvres.

Keywords: immersive exhibition; photomechanical art reproduction; popularization of art; canonization; experience; popular culture

1. Introduction

"Ah, this is incredible. I feel like I am actually *in* the painting" (Emily in Paris 2020, TC 11:54). Sitting on the floor, leaning against the illuminated wall of the immersive exhibition Van Gogh—Starry Night at the Parisian Atelier des Lumières, which actually took place from 22 February 2019 to 5 January 2020, Netflix series Emily in Paris' protagonist Emily Cooper is impressed. The multi-sensorial exhibition hence fulfills its promise of full immersion into the paintings shown in digital reproduction.

The viewer of the series accompanies Emily and her two friends through the exhibition hall and catches a glimpse of the historical building's interieur, which is illuminated with projections of Van Gogh's Starry Night that not only cover the walls but also the actors' bodies and faces. Emily identifies the painting, adding that it is "one of my favorites" (ibid., TC 10:52). She apparently does not have any further knowledge about the painter and his work, whereas Emily's friend Camille, a gallery owner, adds some supposedly art historical information about Van Gogh's mental condition. Gabriel, Emily's neighbor, love interest, and also Camille's boyfriend, relates to Emily by saying "mine, too" (ibid., TC 10:56). They both look at each other as if it was extraordinary for two people to like the same popular painting of one of the most popular artists in Western art history. What functions within the series as a suggested intimate relation between the two meant-to-be-together main characters in reality points to the absence of any real individual interest in the consumption of popularized culture. Nevertheless, for fictional Emily, visiting the exhibition is an inspiring key moment that works as a catalyst for her career and thus makes her more interesting as a person.

The fact that many facets of the 'immersive exhibition' are reflected in a fictional story like Emily in Paris makes it seem worthwhile to analyze this popular phenomenon in

greater detail. Interestingly enough, academic research about immersive exhibitions so far has almost only been done in the form of master's theses and with a focus on (positive) visitor experience (De Círez Jiménez 2018; Brosset 2019; Carú et al. 2020; Pan 2021). This article is an explorative attempt to analyze and classify the phenomenon and its discourse, offering a new perspective by comparing it with the historical discourse on cheap and popular art reproductions (especially in popular book series) around 1900. In doing so, the focus lies on the public reactions to the popular then and now, demonstrating that there are considerable similarities and arguing that, in following the traditional line, immersive exhibitions might be seen in the context of Malraux's Imaginary Museum. The historical perspective also makes it possible to retrace the development of the popular art canon through new forms of popular reception.

2. Old Artworks Brought to Life: The 'Experience' of Immersive Exhibitions

Since 2011, so-called immersive exhibitions make "masterpieces come to life, giving visitors the sensation of walking right into [...] paintings" (Van Gogh Alive). These exhibitions seem to want to reach an almost Stendhalian way of art reception, 'submerging' into and mentally approximating, nearly touching the artwork('s reproduction).[1] State-of-the-art light and video technology illuminates mostly old industrial halls with oversized moving reproductions of famous artworks. The 35- to 45-min loop 360° video projections have more similarities with film screenings than with exhibitions, as visitors can wander around the space but are obligated to follow the digital projections in the video's pace in the manner of a cinematographic show.

These successful installations have been touring the world for years, showing the same artist's work simultaneously at different places while saving on high rental fees. Since 2018, the company Culturespace has even established permanent exhibition centers, called Digital Art Spaces, in places like Seoul, New York City, Dubai, Amsterdam, Paris, Bordeaux, and, from 2023 onward, in Dortmund, as well as, beginning in 2024, in Hamburg.

Especially in a post-pandemic and digital society, these immersive exhibitions seem to reach a public willing to subject itself to live and lived experiences, that is, to "impressions of presence",[2] according to Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht (2003, p. 210). It is not without reason that the term 'experience' appears in every exhibition's title. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, the English term 'experience' does not differentiate between experience as "(the process of getting) knowledge or skill from doing, seeing, or feeling things" and (lived) experience as "something that happens to you that affects how you feel." Presumably also playing with this double-meaning of experience, the immersive exhibitions allude more to the second type of only perceptive experience—also named 'lived experience'—by addressing the public on an emotional level, not in a knowledge imparting, rational way (Gumbrecht 2003). Lived experience always has to do with the self, and it is related to individual emotions, biographies, and memories (Lessau and Zügel 2019, pp. 8–9). 'Art experience,' in this sense, is a non-rational, un-reflected impression caused by art (Renner 1991, p. 300). Experience-driven events can be seen as a self-staging of individuals searching for a special or especially interesting life (Hitzler 2011, p. 13; Eickelmann 2016, p. 361), performing lived experience rationality (Schulze [1992] 2005). Shows like immersive exhibitions, according to Hitzler's definition (2011), have a high event potential and experience value addressing both qualitative and quantitative dimensions. The experience is something extra-ordinary, that is, not commonplace, as it makes the participator special, *and* it offers accessibility for anybody, being both low-threshold and high culture. According to Vester's classification of the 'lived experience' (Vester 2004), immersive exhibitions can be located in all of the three 'dimensions of the experience': cognitive, affective, and locomotive/behavioral. They thus ideally offer a 'whole' and intensive experience. Concerning the 'modes of experience' they are rather passive than active, even though they aim to offer a more active-orientated mode by encouraging visitors to 'interact' with the projected images. Immersive exhibitions are furthermore situated in Vester's aesthetic 'field of experience', nevertheless aiming also to address the theoretical field.

Whereas for example panoramic painting or cinema can show immersive characteristics in 19th century popular culture (Grau 2003; Werber 2012), lived experience and pleasure in *academic* art reception have been removed from the discourse since the enlightenment, making 'not taking effect' and insularity the main characteristics of high art (Kemp 1985, p. 16). In contrast, immersive exhibitions include experience, affect, and effect of high art from both a productive and a receptive side. In this sense, the personal experiences of the artist are staged as decisive for their art production (see Section 3.1), while the very own life of the individual visitor influences the way they see and feel the art. What seems to be a postmodern appearance of individualism, event-culture and experience-society (Schulze [1992] 2005; Bachleitner 2004) can be traced to early-20th-century culture, also focusing on the lived experience of art contemplation in the context of cheap art reproduction. The experience in both cases is led by the medium of (re)presentation more than by the art itself. These similarities, discussed in the following section, point to the apparent need for a non-academic, experience-driven art approach in society. The exclusion of lived experience in high art discourse especially might make the exhibitions so successful.

3. Popularization of Art through Reproduction and Lived Experience: Today and in the Past

In this main part of the article, I relate the discourse of the currently popular phenomenon 'immersive exhibition' to the discourse around art reproduction and popularization around 1900. I do so especially by considering popular monographic art book series, since both immersive exhibitions and book series are based on the 'big names' of art history.

Art series for the great many emerge in Europe and the US around 1860, multiplying around 1900 (Kitschen 2021, p. 15) due to the development of photomechanical reproduction techniques and a growing interest in art and art history. Kitschen (2021) distinguishes between specialized literature, popular-scientific publications, and popular series without the aim of deeper art historical understanding that are there to offer enjoyment of art to everybody. Since immersive exhibitions claim to be non-academic and often do not offer any (popular) scientific information, I will only compare them with popular series. In doing so, I will include primarily the discourse on the German-speaking reproduction industry but also base the study on Kitschen's analysis of international art series.

Within this research, the aim is not to illustrate a whole discourse but to explore examples from Germany, Europe, and the US in order to make visible the very similar mechanics in dealing with popular phenomena then and today. Since both the reproduction industry and the immersive exhibitions have become an international business, despite their national differences, I argue that their characteristics, their advertisement, as well as reactions concerning them can be seen as a general transnational (Western) discourse about the popularization of art.[3] In doing so, I refer to the theoretical framework of CRC 1472 Transformations of the Popular from which this article emerges, which enables me to compare the two different phenomena systematically. In this context, popularization means the distribution of high cultural knowledge as an intended 'elevation' of the people, defined as 'first order popularization' (Döring et al. 2021). According to the logic of this high/low-axiology, knowledge is edited and prepared adequately in order to be popularized, which is exemplified especially in Section 3.1. The cheap, photomechanical reproduction of art on a massive scale as well as its new, less cheap, digital, and immersive reproduction form destabilize the established differentiation between, and the access to, 'high' and 'low'. They transform the view on and the dynamics of the popular, comprehensible for example in the form of (self-)advertisement (cf. Section 3.2). Moreover, the destabilization of 'high' and 'low' provokes resonance (Döring et al. 2021). Those reactions to the popular are assessed in Section 3.3.

3.1. Characteristics

The main characteristics detected in both popular art series and immersive exhibitions can be summarized as the following:

- Monographic, and thus biography-focused;
- Simplified, catchy wording;
- Image above text, enjoyment above education;
- Guided seeing and feeling;
- Popularity;
- Deinstitutionalized, and thus a lower entry threshold.

The highest percentage of art-related popular series were (and apparently still are) monographic series dealing with the life and work of mainly male artists (Kitschen 2021, p. 15). Likewise, today's immersive exhibitions work monographically, even though they sometimes summarize various artists. There are monographic shows about Da Vinci, Monet, Kahlo, Klimt, Dalí, and of course Van Gogh, but also collective ones about French Impressionism (Monet & Friends Alive) or the "giants of the Renaissance" (Leonardo Da Vinci—Raffael—Michelangelo: Giganten der Renaissance). The reduction to a biography happens to be a popularization strategy based on the assumption that the story of an interesting life generally is more appealing and approachable than formal (art) historical knowledge and able to develop a veritable "craze for biographies" (The Spectator, 14 April 1888, 11, quoted in Kitschen 2021, p. 17). The work hence is being explained through and traced back to the artist's life experiences. Experienceability is given through the artist's life and one's own relatability. "[...I]t must not be forgotten that the easiest access to the art of the past is usually not through the study of comprehensive works but rather through the work of one representative master (MONOGRAPHS). If we occupy ourselves lovingly with Michelangelo or Rembrandt, we are likely to learn more about Italian or Dutch Art than if we read a good many surveys of the whole fields" (Gombrich 1950, p. 449). The art historical canon, of course, contains artists' names, consolidated through monographic exhibitions, genius cult, and popular art series, departing from personal and relatable biographies aiming to entertain and educate at the same time (Kitschen 2021, p. 17). As Gombrich describes, we are able to 'lovingly' deal with artists and art through the stories of their lives.[4]

Even though the mere artist's name is often enough to speak for itself, in some early cases, the wording, particularly in titles, subtitles, and accompanying texts, can be characterized as simplified and catchy, summarizing the artist's life in one quality. Particularly, the German art book series Kleine Delphin-Kunstbücher, published from 1915 to 1926, campaigned with Grünewald: Der Romantiker des Schmerzes (Mayer 1917), Murillo: Der Maler der Betteljungen und Madonnen (Mayer 1918), or Tizian: Der Maler venezianischer Schönheit (Kirschstein 1923).[5] Some similar form of artist popularization occurs in today's titles, for example "Leonardo Da Vinci—Raffael—Michelangelo: Giganten der Renaissance" and "Monet: Rebell und Genie",[6] or Van Gogh being called the "Sunflower Superstar"(Van Gogh Experience).

The main characteristic of the popularization of art is, of course, the image, i.e., the reproduction of the artwork itself. In popular art publications and in relation to the written word, the image appears in large quantities (Kitschen 2021, p. 19). Generally, popular series contain only a few pages of text without original research that accompanies a large number of reproductions, preferably, in color (Imorde and Zeising 2022). Art historical factual knowledge was explicitly not desired (Kitschen 2021, p. 149), and—within the Kunsterziehungsbewegung—confronting laypeople and children with scientific knowledge was not appreciated pedagogically (Joerissen 1979). Letting the artwork speak for itself, for example, in classrooms, was seen as an effective method of 'quiet' education and visual enjoyment (Imorde and Zeising 2018).

This focus on the visual goes hand in gand with the claim by the advocates of popular reproductions for an aesthetic experience and enjoyment of art through emotion for the

many (Imorde 2009a). It leads Michel (1920, p. 150) to state that the reproduction industry is based on the experiential value of artworks. As Imorde (2009b, p. 127) confirms, only the claim of emotional autonomy of the individual made art suitable to the mass market. A similar kind of democratization and spectacularization of culture (Brosset 2019, 15ff.) is rooted in the idea of immersive exhibitions. The (moving) image and colorfulness appeal to visitors' emotions on another level of spectacularity, adjusted to a digitally prone cultural public, making them 'understand' art in their personal way without adding much educational text-intensive information (some of the exhibitions do not provide any). As Kitschen (2021, p. 161) notes: "[...]mages enable a more direct access to art than text, independent of educational background, and at the same time meet the modern tendency of over-illustration [Bilderwütigkeit] of the public." Interestingly enough, this quote can be read as a description of both phenomena, today and a hundred years earlier.

Nevertheless, the (emotional) reception seems to be guided in both examples. Early-20th-century consumers of popular art series were prepared for reception through instructions on how to see, enjoy, and empathize with art. Accompanying texts focused additionally on expression and the atmosphere of artworks (Kitschen 2021, pp. 189, 193). Website texts of immersive exhibitions can also be seen as this kind of user manual, telling visitors to be prepared to be "surrounded by a vibrant symphony of light, colour, sound and fragrance"(Van Gogh Alive) or to focus on "the glowing colors, the expressive way of painting and the powerful brushstroke" (Van Gogh: The Immersive Experience). The freedom of reception is even more restricted by the linear video projections, already confronting different paintings with each other or focusing on details, giving no room for individual direction of the look.

Opening elitist high art reception for the greater public generates popularity. Whereas popular art series counted on five-digit circulation (Kitschen 2021, p. 23), multi-media installations about great artists of course reach a larger audience of up to several millions of visitors, which is surprising considering the high ticket prices. What made popular art series and reproductions so popular was, inter alia, the low price, making the enjoyment of art affordable for literally everybody. This seems to be one of the major differences between the two phenomena. It can be assumed that due to the general welfare in 21st-century's Western societies, the high cost is no longer a barrier for high culture access. In any case, we must ask: What is the intended and actual audience demographic for immersive exhibitions?

The great acceptance of both art reproduction in the early 20th century and immersive exhibitions deinstitutionalizes society's general knowledge about art. Decisions of editors and organizers of immersive exhibitions are taken beyond scientific institutions such as museums and universities. Even though popular art series are supported by recognized scholars, they develop their own dynamics, as they're dependent on economic and other success factors.[7] Apparently, some immersive exhibitions also rely on the input and consultation of art historians, like the German production Monet: Rebell und Genie, drawing attention to the scientific consultation on their main page while Beyond Van Gogh: The Immersive Experience's art history consultant Fanny Curtat does not appear on the website but in magazine articles about the exhibition as a mediator to the spectacle (Alter Mark 2022; Daley 2022). Some immersive exhibition spaces like Leipzig Kunstkraftwerk even have an accompanying scientific education program.

3.2. Advertisement

In this section, I analyze the main elements and strategies present in self-advertising by both immersive experiences nowadays and popular art publications around 1900. For a better overview, promoting elements are condensed into the following bullet points. Special characteristics already named in Section 3.1 are, understandably, used to advertise:

- Non-academic, but educational;
- Immersive;
- Approachable;

- Unique;
- New and technologically up to date;
- Abundant with (colorful) images;
- 'Second order' popularization (Döring et al. 2021).

Van Gogh Alive promotes its show in opposition to traditional art reception, characterized as "tiptoeing through silent galleries and view paintings from afar in quiet contemplation." Nevertheless, the "feeling" visitors get in the installation "is simultaneously enchanting, entertaining and educational" (Van Gogh Alive). While distancing himself from "prefabricatedly offered indoctrination" (brochure by E.A. Seemann for Seemanns farbige Kunstblätter, 1911) and "long-winded analysis and reflections, entangled historic studies and verbose digressions" (brochure for Klassiker der Kunst in Gesamtausgaben: Hans Thoma, 1909, p. 2, quoted in Kitschen 2021, p. 19), Bergner (1910), for instance, promotes the products of the publishing house E.A. Seemann within the context of traditional museums as well. Museum experience in the early 20th century seems to be different from the experience a hundred years later. Bergner (1910, p. iii) describes the endless halls with an overload of paintings, not to mention the pressing, hurrying, and chattering visitors, an interplay that does not allow any educational benefit. Even though the criticism of traditional art consumption is different, both opinions point to another way of art contemplation, which is experience-based and immersive.

"And indeed, there can be no purer enjoyment for quiet hours than the immersion[8] in these wonderful house museums" (ibid.). Promoting E.A. Seemann's three-color prints, Bergner sees immersion into art, i.e., through contemplation, empathy, and, importantly, self-education (ibid., p. iv), as the way of reaching a development of taste. Seeing, contemplating, and experiencing art is declared as key for enjoyment but also for long-term education of art friends and lovers (brochure by E.A. Seemann for Georg Warnecke's Meisterwerke der bildenden Kunst). The multi-sensorial approach of the immersive exhibition, addressing the individual in an intimate and private way,[9] is possibly the 21st-century version of the silent contemplation of reproductions at home.

Other common elements of advertisement in both cases are the reference to the artefact's approachability both emotionally and physically, its uniqueness, and its technical novelty, as well as fulfillment to contain realistic reproduction, quality, and quantity of the images.

Another promotion strategy is the exposure of popularity. The CRC 1472 Transformations of the Popular calls this kind of popularization 'second order popularization' (Döring et al. 2021). It is a phenomenon that has come up especially in the 1950s when observing popularity acquired its own dynamic through rankings, ratings, and charts. Having become an automatism in the 21st century, it is not surprising that immersive exhibition companies use their enormous quantitative success in the promotion of their events.

Van Gogh Alive apparently is "[t]he most visited immersive multi-sensory experience in the world". Van Gogh: The Immersive Experience has "already fascinated over two million visitors" and promotes its show on Facebook, drawing the attention to the fact that they are the most purchased event in Berlin, being no. 1 of Eventim's Ticket Charts on 19 July 2021. Another strategy to display popularity and especially customer satisfaction is the customer review, which can be found on almost every immersive exhibition's website, drawing attention to the numerous appreciations for the unique, emotional, and immersive experience.

Both strategies appear in advertisements for popular art reproductions and series, although the popularization through quantification is not as striking as in the contemporary example. Editorials promote their products by pointing to the reproduction of the most "renowned" (Franz Hanfstaengl Catalogue of Photogravures, p. 92) or "celebrated" (ibid., p. 93)[10] artists and artworks "whose names are now household names and whose works are too widely known and appreciated to need comment here" (ibid., p. iv). Yet they also refer to the already given circulation; E.A. Seemann's Berühmte Kunststätten "have already circulated in over 100,000 volumes" (brochure by E.A. Seemann for Berühmte

Kunststätten), and their series Die Galerien Europas, which "today have already circulated in thousands of copies in German and foreign editions," are "received with lively interest by the art loving public" (Brochure by E.A. Seemann for Die Galerien Europas, 1907). Hence, audience reception and quantification already play a role in early-20th-century advertisements for art reproduction. Furthermore, customer reviews are an integral part of advertising brochures and can be documented in large numbers. This reference to high circulation figures is anything but self-evident because art is usually not justified quantitatively, but qualitatively. Another form of second order popularization can be identified as the exposed prolongation of exhibitions and, as I argue, its equivalent: the exposed reissue of a series or volume.

3.3. Reactions

Instead of offering an empirical study or complete discourse analysis, I want to point out some typical reactions to art popularization observed in both historical and contemporary cases. According to a main hypothesis of the CRC 1472 Transformations of the Popular, there are different types of reactions or legitimation strategies handling popular phenomena (Döring et al. 2021).

One historically dominant reaction to the popular is resistance. Members of the elite who stick to the distinction between high and low supposedly feel threatened by the growing prominence of the popular and fear the loss of discursive power (Döring et al. 2021, p. 6). This kind of reaction can be noticed in feuilleton articles or art magazines, through journalists' 'field reports' calling the immersive effects "kitsch" (Kreye 2019; Raymann 2021), a "crude" and "aggressive" (Zamankhan 2015) "bombardment" (Klimovskaya 2021), or a mixture of "slideshow, documentary and Hollywood blockbuster" (Zamankhan 2015). Articles furthermore criticize historical misrepresentation and de-contextualization as flattened, cheapened, and downgraded original works, the focus on the visitor instead of the artwork (Sattler 2021; Rustler 2021), the exploitation of "long-dead artists for commercial gain" (Taylor 2021), or the lacking fidelity to the original and the unrealistic size of painting reproductions (ibid.). Denouncing the superficial persuasive and manipulative qualities, and especially the economic character of staged experiences, is a common point of criticism, as Bachleitner (2004, p. 19) states.[11] Yet it must be said that much feuilleton criticism is conciliatory and also sees positive sides of the phenomenon. A more condemning reaction comes from cultural elite's representative Max Hollein, director of Metropolitan Museum of Art, who stated that multi-sensorial experiences are nothing but entertainment (Crow 2021).

Another historically consistent argument regards the loss of imagination whilst visiting immersive exhibitions. Contemporaries of technical progress seem to criticize the increasing loss of demanded imagination in cultural production from the written word and black-and-white illustrations to color reproductions, from silent cinema and sound to color and 3-D cinema, arriving at immersive exhibitions (Avenarius 1911; Kisa 1906; Beck 2022, pp. 97–107).

The historical resistance against cheap art reproductions and popular art series can be found, for instance, in art historian Wilhelm von Bode's article "Die Sintflut deutscher Kunstbücher" (1924). The 'flood' he evokes both considers the great amount of popular art books and the vast number of reproductions in it. It can thus be paralleled with today's criticism of bombardment and overload. Bode also criticizes the economic interest in the reproduction market (Bode 1924, p. 175) and the competition between valuable and cheap, amateurish products (ibid. p. 176). Furthermore, in his article "Zur Illustration moderner deutscher Kunstbücher" (Bode 1899), he focuses on the flawed quality of most of the reproductions. Art historian Joseph Sauer (1907, sct. 401) states his opinion about the scientific value of popular series, calling them trivial, superficial, and written by dilettantes. Judgments referring to quantities like overload, or flood, or pointing to the economic factors qualify the product (both immersive exhibitions and photomechanical art reproduction) as non-artistic. It is conceived as too much affect-orientated and thus

as related to 'low culture' being "sensually fascinating, but alien and dismissive towards meaning" (Venus 2013, p. 56).

Moreover, there is one type of reaction that is difficult to document, as I assume that there is much non-reaction due to non-appreciation. This kind of reaction—supposedly not reacting at all on purpose—which I would like to call persistence against the popular, seems to be an even stronger form of resistance than openly writing against something. Looking for research on multi-sensorial immersive exhibitions, I only found material on the immersive, interactive, and technological elements in science or art museums (Belaën 2005; Carú et al. 2020), on experience-oriented museum exhibitions (Eickelmann 2016), and on immersive (non-reproductional) art installations. Admittedly, as a relatively new phenomenon arising only in the last two to three years, it is not surprising that these installations have not made it into academic research yet and have been covered only journalistically. However, as already mentioned, research has been done on visitor experience, leading to the conclusion that there generally has been very little academic interest in the phenomenon from a productive and/or discursive perspective, supposedly because of the art historians' unanimous negative opinion about immersive multi-sensorial exhibitions. This kind of ignoring persistence against the popular can be methodically difficult to detect in a historical case but, for instance, can be traced to the persistence of some popular art series in not including a popular artist like El Greco, supposedly *because* of his emerging popularity.

As a third form of reaction, there is accommodation, that is, the acceptance of, and especially the adaption to the phenomenon as a new part of (popular) culture (Döring et al. 2021). In case of the immersive exhibitions, accommodation can be documented, for example, through art history consultants. A number of institutional representatives argue in favor of the exhibitions by pointing to the positive aspects, e.g., in interviews with newspapers or magazines. Elke Kollar, chair of the German Bundesverband Museumspädagogik, sees the potential of immersive experience in sharpening and changing the perception of the original works and diminishing people's distance to high art, justifying every form of approach to artists and art, and including a different kind of audience (Oelrich and Czerny 2022). Apart from individuals or individual representatives of institutions, forms of adaptation by big elite institutions exist. Grand Palais, Paris, installed their 'subsidiary' Grand Palais Immersif as a permanent immersive exhibition showroom; Newfields Museum, formerly the Indianapolis Museum of Art, dedicated a floor to immersive installations, calling it THE LUME Indianapolis, supposedly due to financial reasons, since digital exhibitions tend to be more lucrative (Sattler 2021). Van Gogh Art Museum in Amsterdam sees the touring digital Van Gogh exhibitions as a good supplement, given that not everybody can afford traveling to the Netherlands (Rustler 2021). Accommodation generally seems to go along with the potential seen in immersive installations of getting people back to 'real' museums. Even though the art history content is questionable, critics acknowledge the democratic potential and the power of popularity, appreciating to "see a hall of lucky people, silently and devoutly falling into close-ups of brushwork and the whole oeuvre, no matter if they understand what it is about or not" (Kreye 2019). While speaking in an elitist tone, Kreye acknowledges that emotion can be a legitimate access to art, if not to art history.

An institution historically adapting to popular reproduction is school, as art reproductions were broadly used in school education as teaching material or wall pictures (Imorde and Zeising 2018). Today's Grande Experience admits that "[s]chool groups love coming into our experiences" even though "[t]hey're not necessarily learning anything, but we're just introducing them in a different way, in some way. Hopefully, they'll get something from it that would engage them further" (Wiener 2022). The word 'learning' in this context seems to be related only to art history content, at the same time promising some future influence on a subconscious emotional level, similar to the widespread belief of the silent but lasting effect of art reproductions in classrooms around 1900 (e.g., Richter 1909, p. 181; Imorde 2018, p. 31). In any event, experiencing art through digital projections at least seems to be seen as more meaningful than other activities. Simi-

larly, popular series on art, literature, and music around 1900 were also accepted because of being a better alternative in the fight against trashy literature (Kitschen 2021, p. 165).

3.4. Malraux's Dream?

Today's popularity of immersive exhibitions supposedly cannot be related to a "hunger for art" (Seemann 1901), as editor Artur Seemann called it in 1901, but there still seems to be a broad interest in having access to what is defined as high art. Just as an increasing group of readers and consumers were interested in art history and artists' biographies at the beginning of the 20th century and used the new offer of popular art reproduction (Kitschen 2021, p. 205), people are still interested in art, which becomes literally visible, inter alia, through art prints on t-shirts, tote bags or shoes, or the social media trend of recreating artworks, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, when museums remained closed (#artrecreation, #betweenartandquarantine). This approach to high art, relatable to the historical practice of tableaux vivants (cf. e.g., Männig 2021), is personal and non-academic. Even though in order to recreate an artwork, the elements have to be looked at in detail, interests might not go beyond self-staging and appropriating high art. Museums, in turn, in order to reach a broader audience, give more importance to experience-oriented exhibitions through educational programs, interactive elements, events, and exhibition design, apparently, perceiving a competition toward, for example, digital and immersive art experience, as Alte Pinakothek Munich's slogan 'Experience originals' ('Originale erleben') shows, pointing at the unique selling point of art museums as well as at their experienceability.[12] Nevertheless, the popularity of the immersive exhibition in comparison with the traditional art museum seems to indicate that the latter as the guardian of high art and as a still high-threshold institution cannot accommodate the cultural needs of the many.

Phenomena such as digital immersive exhibitions, artwork recreations, or even the video mapping The Great Masters of Renaissance[13] as a contemporary popular art reproduction practice might ultimately be understood as the enhanced realization of Malraux's Imaginary Museum. They provide the advantages of reproduction, i.e., mobility, recontextualization, comparison, and combination, and, at best, they have retroactive effects on the actual artwork. Simultaneously, they still feature affective qualities comparable to the original work of art, perhaps yet losing the quality as objects (Malraux 1949, p. 44), but being bound to a corporeal experience.

Immersive exhibitions are the theatrical performance of the Imaginary Museum, pointing strikingly to the antistatic characteristic of reproduction.[14] The divestment of the museum space is returned and re-enacted while holding on to the mobility and inherent dynamic of reproduced artworks and the imagination. In the current, often monographic version, immersive exhibitions are of course limiting, offering only oeuvre-internal and predefined relations. Nevertheless, as Malraux did not see the Imaginary Museum as a replacement for the real museum, immersive exhibitions ideally do not substitute non-immersive exhibitions but function as mobile auratic museums, and even as 'immutable mobiles', reinforcing the Western art history canon (Latour 2006; cf. also Perry 2017).

4. Outlook: The Reapproval of a Western Art Canon

"The program includes what is known and popular", Pofalla (2022) notes about the topics of immersive exhibitions. Popularity guarantees success, which is one reason for the early consolidation of Western art canon, as Kitschen (2021) describes. "Trop souvent, dans le domaine de l'histoire de l'art, les mêmes sujets déjà traités sont repris, car il est des titres qui, pour l'editeur, sont la garantie d'une bonne vente" (Brière 1902, p. 604). Art reproduction hence plays a major role in canonization (Camille 1996; Kitschen 2021).

The touring multi-sensorial, and apparently borderless, exhibitions recall of UNESCO Travelling Exhibition of Color Reproductions (1949–1979) and its accompanying catalogue. As "a response to the massive spoliation of artworks by the Nazis during the war" (Perry 2017, p. 170), UNESCO's color reproductions were both a conservational measure and a democratic project of art popularization, which, according to Perry, transformed

"the education, appreciation, and consumption of art globally" (ibid., p. 181). Certainly, it reproduced a Western art canon, focusing predominantly on French modernist artists, thus reinforcing "an existing canon" (ibid., p. 180). Familiarity and repetitive exposure seem to lead people to value things, including art.

Coming back to the remarkable success of, especially, Van Gogh digital exhibitions,[15] familiarity indeed seems to play a major role. Kitschen (2021) exemplifies Van Gogh's artworks' success in early color reproduction, showing that E.A. Seemann reproduced the Dutch artist's works from German collections already by 1916, reissuing various portfolios. Kitschen (2021, p. 261) states that almost no other painter accumulated such an amount of color reproductions in portfolios, monographic series, books, magazines, postcards, or prints on canvas, becoming the world's most popular painter in the age of photome-chanical color reproduction (ibid., p. 259). This popularity that emerged already in the 20th century once again is exposed in the immersive exhibitions and profits from today's general popularity of immersive multi-sensorial installations. At the same time, the big name of a renowned canonical artist legitimates the popular medium itself by contributing to a ('first order') popularization of art. Nevertheless, we must question whether this massive popularization of certain artists once again negatively influences the academic perspective on them toward a devaluation of the 'noticed by many' (see Werber et al. in this issue). Interestingly enough, the popularity of art history pop stars in this context can popularize other, less popular artists. The new edition of Van Gogh: Starry Night at Atelier des Lumières (5 September–20 October 2022) was followed by a ten-minute screening of Yves Klein—Infinite Blue, which one could hardly escape as a spectator. This combination of a famous main show act and a shorter presentation of a lesser known artist or subject is a common program for immersive exhibition spaces. Even though Yves Klein's art historical value might be less approachable to a general audience—especially without mediation—the color International Klein Blue shows qualities that can be defined as 'immersible' and seems to be suitable for a light installation.

Malraux's understanding of the history of art as the history of the photographable (Malraux 1949, p. 24), referring to painting and especially colorful painting, proves to be true for art history pop stars like Van Gogh, Klimt, Monet, and also Frida Kahlo, who seem to be particularly "color photogenic" (Kitschen 2021, p. 226). This photogenicity presum-ably helped artworks to become popular in early reproductions and again is important in the selection of artists for immersive exhibitions, as transnational artists remain in the popular canon for being also 'immersible' and 'experienceable.' Nevertheless, color repro-duction not only focused on color photogenic artwork, but also chose already established masterpieces for a reissue in color (ibid., p. 253). Immersive exhibitions about Da Vinci and Co. are proof of the functioning of the "masterpiece principal" (ibid.).

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Notes

[1] This article deals with the very popular form of immersive exhibitions based on reproductions of older artworks. Nevertheless, there also exist other types, for example those produced by artists themselves, or non-artistic, ambient versions.

[2] All originally German quotes are translated into English by the author.

[3] To avoid extending the article unnecessarily, I name only a few exemplary sources.

[4] The artist's signature as a personal approach to their psychology seems to play a role in relating to them, visible in immersive exhibitions as in popular (and specialized) art literature.

[5] Grünewald: The Romantic of Pain; Murillo: The Painter of Paupers and Madonnas; Tizian: The Painter of Venetian Beauty.

6   Monet: Rebel and Genius.

7   Michael Fuhr (2004, pp. 84–87), for example, names various external, i.e., non-art-historical factors that influence the selection of certain artists for the Künstler-Monographien (Artist Monographs) by Velhagen & Klasing, such as: anniversaries or deaths, the selection of other editorials, nationalist reasons and/or variation in artist's nationalities, and especially the suspected interest of the audience as well as cost saving. It can be assumed that other editorials proceeded in a similar way.

8   In the German original, Bergner uses the term "Vertiefung." Rudolf Roß uses the expression "sich in das Kunstwerk versenken," translatable as "to immerse oneself in the artwork" (Roß [1901] 1929, p. 25).

9   De Círez Jiménez (2018, p. 57) argues that the dimmed environment does not put pressure on the visitor's open reaction in the same way as it happens in a bright museum space.

10   These are examples from the English version of Hanfstaengl's brochure. German brochures more often use the term 'bedeutend' (important).

11   The resistance against experience-orientation can also be traced to the mere description of art. For example, Robert Vischer's and Richard Muther's texts were popular with the educated audience but criticized by his expert colleagues as superficial and focused only on the effect (Rebel 1996, p. 82).

12   Beyond that, the stillness of paintings seems to be challenged by the attention regime of moving images, provided by social media. Just as immersive exhibitions, museum's social media accounts like @staatlichemuseenzuberlin animate their collection's artworks on Instagram.

13   The Berlin exhibition Die großen Meister der Renaissance (The Great Masters of Renaissance), created by Manfred Waba, shows reproductions of originals that are moved digitally through video mapping. Thus, it does not offer an 'immersive' experience but shows many similarities to digital immersive exhibitions concerning characteristics, aims, and reactions.

14   Malraux himself describes the relation between museum and reproduction as one between the visit of a theatrical performance and the lecture of a play (Malraux 1949, p. 44).

15   Currently touring Van Gogh immersive exhibitions are: Van Gogh: The Immersive Experience (by COFO Entertainment, Passau), Van Gogh Experience (by Gianfranco Ianuzzi, Renato Gatto, Massimiliano Siccardi), Van Gogh Alive: The Experience (by Grande Experiences), Beyond Van Gogh: The Immersive Experience (only in the US, Canada, and South America, Paquin Entertainment Group, Art History Consultant, Fanny Curtat), Van Gogh Exhibit: The Immersive Experience (by Exhibition Hub Edutainment), Imagine Van Gogh Exhibition (by Imagine Exhibitions).

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Article

Of Auction Records and Non-Fungible Tokens: On the New Valences of Superhero Comics

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Abstract: This article examines a recent form of marketing superhero comics that has garnered extensive media attention and has been promoted as the next big step in comics production: the decision by companies like Marvel Comics and DC Comics to offer selections of their intellectual properties as *non-fungible tokens* (NFTs). Focusing specifically on Marvel Comics' collaboration with the VeVe app, which serves as a digital auction house through which customers can buy comics and related merchandise, this article suggests that we are witnessing the popularization of an already popular product (superhero comics) in a process that is indicative of larger transformations of the popular. As an agent of such transformations, superhero comics were introduced in the 1930s and 40s as a "low medium" with mass appeal that was critically devalued by proponents of high culture, but they are now widely celebrated as a "popular medium." We argue that this transformation from a popular but devalued ("low") product to a popular and culturally valued (but not necessarily "high" cultural) artifact marks a shift from qualitative to quantitative valuation that was driven at least in part by popular practices of collecting, archiving, and auctioning that have enabled the ongoing adaptation of these comics to new social, technological, and media demands. The article uses the newsworthiness of big auction sales and the sky-rocketing prices that well-preserved comic books can garner as a framework for assessing the appearance of superhero NFTs and for gauging the implications of this new media form for the cultural validation of comics.

Keywords: superhero comics; popularity; non-fungible tokens; auctions; collecting; high/low culture; copyright; ownership; digital market; blockchain

1. Auction Records: Popularity and Validation

Popular is what is noticed by many (Hecken 2006, p. 85), and "[w]hen something is declared to be popular [...] and [...] that attention is measured, compared to other measurements, and popularized—it is irrevocably transformed and viewed differently" (Döring et al. 2021, p. 4; see also Werber et al. 2023).[1] This is the minimal definition of "popular" that grounds our argument in this article. But how can we investigate the consequences of such popularity? How can we identify changes in the appraisal and evaluation of artifacts simply because they are noticed by many? We refer to these processes as transformations of the popular and investigate their premises and consequences by focusing on the convergence of two widely publicized phenomena: the massive increase in value of old superhero comics, which serves as the prerequisite for new forms of digital value creation, and non-fungible tokens (NFTs), which popularize superheroes in a highly volatile digital marketplace.

"How Are VeVe Comic Book NFTs Changing the Collecting World[?]", one enthusiastic commentator named Dr. Howard recently asked on the website *NFT News Today* (Howard 2022). Dr. Howard promoted the VeVe app, through which customers can bid for and purchase NFTs released by Marvel and other comics publishers, and which we will analyze at length below, as a "digital solution" to the "physical problems" of comic book

collecting. Despite the cheerleading tone and promotional rhetoric that often dominate NFT coverage, the durability of superhero NFTs (and NFTs, more generally) is still very much uncertain. It remains unclear at the time of this writing whether they will end up as a short-lived fad, pushed for a limited time by certain companies and promoted by certain kinds of media attention, or as a stable element of digital popular culture. This uncertainty, we suggest, does not invalidate our argument about the new valences of superhero comics. The history of the genre is filled with fads and commercial failures, all of which have contributed in one way or another (as paths ultimately not taken but occasionally revived at some later point) to the successful multi-decade evolution of the genre. In fact, as popular genres face new social, media, and technological environments, adaptation becomes a necessary means of survival, with some adaptations enabling evolutionary progress and others ending up as dead ends.[2]

Heeding our initial premise—popularity means getting noticed by many, and the display of measurable popularity makes a difference—we begin our foray into what we call the new valences of superhero comics with a sample of spectacular headlines from major US newspapers and magazines. "First 'Fantastic Four' Comic Sells For $1.5 Million," reads the headline in the online edition of *Forbes Magazine* on 8 April 2022 (Porterfield 2022). On the same day, the *New York Times* reports: "First Issue of *Captain America* Comic Book Fetches $3.1 Million at Auction" (Patel 2022). A year earlier, on 7 April 2021, the *LA Times* ran the headline: "Look! Up in the sky! It's a stratospheric $3.25-million record sale of rare *Superman* comic" (*LA Times* 2021). We could continue this list of headlines, but the phenomenon that primarily interests us in this article can already be articulated on the basis of these examples: In all three cases (Marvel's *Fantastic Four* and *Captain America*, DC's *Superman*), we encounter a well-preserved first edition of the first issue of a popular comic book series (a so-called "key" issue[3]), and the millions raised are presented as a stunningly high sum.

The spectacularism of these sales, which the Superman headline simulates by alluding to the opening credits of the television series *Adventures of Superman* (1952–1958)—"Look! Up in the sky! It's a bird! It's a plane! It's Superman!"—remains largely implicit, however. It arises from the latent tension between a pop aesthetic rooted in the promise of entertainment, which advertises the historically denigrated but immensely popular medium of comic books primarily through spectacular titles such as *Action Comics*, *Captain America*, and *Fantastic Four*, and the exorbitant auction prices that these flimsy floppies may fetch and that readers would most likely rather attribute to the art market.[4] What was often considered trivial and inferior by proponents of high culture around the middle of the 20th century and originally reached the hands of readers through inexpensive periodicals (*Action Comics* #1, *Captain America Comics* #1, and *The Fantastic Four* #1 each cost 10 cents) is now garnering astronomical prices.[5] It is a long way from derogatory accounts of the medium, as evidenced, for instance, by the psychologist Fredric Wertham's essay "Such Trivia as Comic Books" (Wertham [1953] 1998) or the critic and author John Mason Brown's tirade against comics as "the lowest, most despicable, and most harmful form of trash" in the *Saturday Review of Literature* (Brown 1948), to their current status as potentially valuable artifacts.[6] Historical cultural inferiority and current monetary value do not seem to converge in this case; what was deemed by such older critics as part of comic books' dangerous allure—their massive popularity, which had the potential to seduce the innocent, as Wertham announced in the title of his eponymous book *Seduction of the Innocent* (Wertham 1954)—now constitutes a major part of their appeal. We no longer read comic books against the high cultural grain of established public opinion but with the knowledge that we are engaging with a medium that is legitimized, instead of denigrated, through its popularity.

How is it possible that a throwaway artifact that once cost 10 cents can now, under certain circumstances, garner $3.1 million? These prices are only achieved because what had started out as individual comic book issues turned into long-running series that continue to be popular and have spawned a highly differentiated and professionalized collectors' market (Bachman 2022). This market, we should note, was built around and structured by

a number of interacting institutions, from publishing companies, trade magazines, price guides, and auction houses to comic book stores, comics conventions, and various forms of fan engagement. Premised on the ongoing financial and personal investment of comic book sellers and buyers, including collectors with more or less commercial incentives, this market has helped sustain the superhero genre through its evolution across successive "ages" (Golden, Silver, Bronze, etc.) and through technological and media changes, from the digital affordances of comics production, distribution, and reception to its shifting place in the ever-expanding transmedia environment (television, cinema, videogames, etc.).

The fact that the first issues of certain superhero comic books can be traded as "rare" and thus treated as "valuable" commodities follows from their status as "classics" and "milestones" of a genre that is still commercially successful, still subject to serial sprawl (Kelleter 2017, p. 20), and still emblematic of US exceptionalism. Rare objects that receive little or no attention have no increased cultural or economic value. If the sales success of particularly well-preserved original issues of classic comic books is exhibited in newspaper or magazine articles as proof of their importance, then we are dealing with a price-coded form of what we might call *second-order popularization*, defined as follows: "Second-order popularization [. . .] refers to practices in popularization that create popularity by determining and highlighting the fact that something already has received much attention," e.g., through charts or rankings (Döring et al. 2021, p. 13; Werber et al. 2023, p. 12).

What may look like a rather simple, perhaps even tautological observation becomes a much more complex affair when we consider its fundamental implications: It makes a crucial difference if we are aware of the fact that the comics we read are not only read by many other people but that they are no longer denigrated as trashy entertainment but revered as a commercially and culturally potent popular artifact. This has implications for how we talk about these comics, how we read them, and how we treat them (e.g., as collectibles rather than as disposables), but also for our decisions about what to read, what to buy, and what to collect. The increasing prominence of second-order popularization in our current cultural moment indicates and fosters new regimes of validation, we suggest, according to which quantified forms of popularity (sales numbers, views, clicks, comments, etc.) are used not only to further market a product but also to validate, or legitimize, its cultural value. While these processes are facilitated by people and institutions, they also possess an "inherent tendency" (Kelleter 2017, p. 19) according to which popularity seems to be supplanting, or at least challenging, older forms of cultural validation.[7] Based on our understanding of popularity as large-scale public attention that is quantified and displayed as evidence of an artifact's cultural legitimacy, superhero comics have established themselves as a fixture of US and indeed global popular culture precisely because they have been able to generate continuing and massive interest (and sales, of course) for almost a century.

There is no doubt that the content of the auctioned comic books celebrated in newspapers and magazines as well as across the internet is popular since the stories remain in print many decades after their initial release (which means that there continues to be an audience for them) and since the superheroes they introduced now dominate film, television, and, to a lesser extent, videogames (Rauscher et al. 2021).[8] It is not just that these stories are still available; in fact, the so-called classics of the genre have been and continue to be reprinted in various anthology formats despite the fact that they are readily available as digital copies on places like Marvel Unlimited. Stories that are no longer popular, however, will eventually cease publication. They may still be collected by some and archived by others, and perhaps sold on occasion, but the broader public will no longer encounter them. Only specialists in comic book history will know all of the early comics Jules Feiffer (1965, p. 23) lists in *The Great Comic Book Heroes*: "*Whiz, Startling, Astonishing, Top Notch, Blue Ribbon, Zip, Silver Streak, Mystery Men, Wonder World, Mystic, Military, National, Police, Big Shot, Marvel-Mystery, Jackpot, Target, Pep, Champion, Master, Daredevil, Star-Spangled, All-American, All-Star, All-Flash, Sensation, Blue Bolt, Crash, Smash*, and *Hit Comics*."

Due to the large proceeds and the spectacular exclamations of the headlines, the increased economic and historical value of the comic books, initially conceived by their producers as disposable products that are now revered as collectable artifacts, is additionally highlighted as particularly noteworthy. This means getting noticed by many—not just by fans, who can, of course, be many but who represent only a portion of the general populace, but also by those who would not necessarily buy comic books yet encounter news about the spectacular value of these artifacts in major news outlets and countless online spaces. The argument, thus, is no longer whether superhero comics are worth reading or collecting at all or whether their "low" content is harmful to their followers but rather that comic book superheroes are widely noticed and central to an increasingly global popular culture.

The superhero comic books that emerged from rapid industrial production processes in the early years of the genre, when they were assembled by creator teams with work-for-hire contracts and sold at newsstands and in supermarkets, have become big players in a globally proliferating market of serial transmedia entertainment. The enduring popularity of this genre—this is the first part of the thesis we want to propose in this article—is the most important condition for the subsequent validation of early comic books, in both a monetary and a cultural sense. Since these issues were mass-produced and sold for a very low price, the newspaper articles cited above do not report on the only existing issue of a comic, nor on its designation as an original in the classical sense. There is indeed more than one copy of *Action Comics* #1. In fact, it is estimated that about 50–100 copies exist today, although a total of 200,000 copies were produced in 1938 and the comic has been reprinted countless times (Roe 2014).[9] This stark discrepancy between the initial circulation and the remaining copies harks back to the fact that the issues were once considered ephemeral due to their poor paper quality and their status as an easily consumable item for a primarily youthful audience, which usually purchased them without archival or otherwise preservative ambitions (Stein 2021b, pp. 15–70). Accordingly, the auctioned issues are by no means unique, but they are quite rare given the fact that not all the issues that are still available enter the market at the same time and that not all of them are in good condition. These comic books are thus not originals in the strict sense but rather industrially produced mass items that have surprisingly outlived their sell-by date.[10]

As mass-produced narratives aimed at a mainstream readership, Golden Age comics from the 1930s to the 1950s were the work of self-identified craftsmen, who saw themselves as skilled professionals but not always as artists in any traditional sense and who were usually paid a fixed amount per page without any claim to copyrights or royalties.[11] Moreover, the final product that readers hold in their hands resulted from a collaborative production process that historically included not only the efforts of editors, authors, and illustrators but also the processing of the artwork, which was initially drawn in black and white and provided with instructions for coloring, into the printed comic book page. Some of the early original drawings and artwork have survived, but because they are only accessible to very few readers and have therefore not received widespread public attention, they are much less prominent than the iconic issues that have become "classics" and have been read by generations of fans (Gabilliet 2016, pp. 16–25). The monetary value of the few remaining first editions of these "classics" thus results from a paradoxical situation: Only extremely well-preserved floppies that show (almost) no signs of usage can fetch very high prices, and only individual copies of very popular series that were virtually unread at the time of their publication and stored in a pristine or near-pristine condition afterwards will be close to their original quality.[12] This is not to suggest that only these high sellers matter. Indeed, readers, collectors, and commentators are certainly aware of the fact that older comics in less-than-ideal condition can still sell for substantial sums. However, there is a significant difference between these mid-level sales and the spectacular top-sellers because it is the latter that catapult the comics into the public limelight. When *Action Comics* #1 sells for $3.2 million, it is international news, and the number of people who become aware of the sale will be substantially higher than those who will notice when a non-pristine copy of a lesser superhero and a less iconic issue sells for a much smaller sum.[13]

Superhero comics are a form of popular serial storytelling that has largely left behind its initial status as an inferior and ideologically suspect product of *low culture* and is now admired as a representative of a *popular culture* that has attained monetary as well as cultural value.[14] Since the 1990s, they have been auctioned by some of the world's most renowned auction houses, including Sotheby's and Christie's, as well as on web portals such as eBay.[15] Their spectacular sales, we believe, mark a transformation in the cultural appreciation of popular artifacts that are increasingly noticed by prestigious publications such as the *New York Times*, *LA Times*, and *Forbes* (not to mention comics blogs and websites) as well as beyond the United States (*Spiegel Panorama* 2022). These new valences of old comic books raise a number of questions we will address in this article: How can the rise of these superhero comics from a mass-produced disposable product to a popularly acknowledged and broadly legitimized coveted collectible be described? How may we understand the (re)validation of originally cheap print products of bygone eras in the age of digitization, where readers are ultimately just a few clicks away from an inexpensive digital version of the auctioned issues, and where purchasing the original issue is no longer necessary to access the content?[16] Which popularization dynamics—which transformations of the popular—drive the emergence of the new digital valences of superhero comics through NFTs and apps such as VeVe?

2. New Digital Valences: Non-Fungible Tokens

At the beginning of this article, we mentioned two phenomena that have been attracting significant attention in the field of superhero comics (and beyond) and that are both expressive, each in its own way, of what we have termed the new valences of superhero comics. The second phenomenon, in addition to the auctioning successes of old comics, includes recent attempts by industry leaders DC Comics (Warner Bros. Discover) and Marvel Comics (Disney) to promote and sell their intellectual properties in the digital marketplace. This leads us to the second part of our thesis. We propose that while these marketing efforts contribute to the ongoing validation of superhero comics, they also raise different questions than the high-stakes auctions of now-expensive print issues. While the public commentary about the print sector tends to foreground the discrepancy between the original cheapness and lowness of comics and their current status as valuable cultural artifacts, digital formats move different issues—including copyright and ownership—as well as different conflicts—between publishers and artists—into focus. In addition, if old comic books really have to be rare (and in excellent condition) to scale the heights of auction sales, companies like Marvel and DC artificially create scarcity in the digital realm by purposefully limiting their offerings, attracting potential buyers with different probabilities of success, and at the same time presenting themselves as *cutting edge*, in tune with the zeitgeist.

Consider the contrast between collecting physical comic books and NFTs, which is encapsulated in the following comparison provided by the online commentator Dr. Howard:

"Imagine owning a physical Fantastic Four #1 (1961) comic book (CGC 9.6 graded has fair market value over 6 million$), there comes the liability for you in proof of authenticity, dealing 6–12 month grading timeline with grading companies (CGC, CBCS etc), insurance and trivial tips for preserving. I bet you would be too afraid to take this amazing book out of your house in case ruining the potential million-dollar 'paper'. It is even much more tricky when it comes to selling.

With comic book NFTs:

1. Worldwide marketplace open 24/7, transactions are completed within milliseconds.
2. They don't degrade, saving you efforts in preserving.
3. You can own thousands of comic books without storing them in several long boxes.
4. Possible language toggle to allow owners to read comics in various languages, bringing comic collecting into a truly global market.

5. They are officially licensed comic NFTs from IP holders with proof of authenticity and ownership." (Howard 2022)

This is, of course, a highly idealized comparison that ignores the pleasures of owning and handling physical items in a collection, of participating in a long-standing community of comic book collectors, of reading trade magazines, and of the thrill of acquiring valuable floppies to expand a collection. The comparison is also somewhat disingenuous because it takes the extreme cases of the physical market—the few surviving million-dollar issues, which are, however, highly significant because they attract attention to the monetary value of "old" comics and thereby shift the validation of these comics from a qualitative to a quantitative logic—as the norm against the supposedly easy-access and no-risk NFTs. Nonetheless, this comparison shows that NFTs can be regarded as an attractive alternative or addition to the print market, and their particular digital affordances have some bearing on how people engage with superhero comics.

In the following, we will analyze non-fungible tokens as a means for comics publishers to attract attention and create value in a digital marketplace, where notions of originality, materiality, and scarcity attain a very different hue than in the heyday of print.[17] Non-fungible tokens, or NFTs for short,

> "allow you to buy and sell ownership of unique digital items and keep track of who owns them using the blockchain. NFT stands for 'non-fungible token,' and it can technically contain anything digital, including drawings, animated GIFs, songs, or items in video games. An NFT can either be one-of-a-kind, like a real-life painting, or one copy of many, like trading cards, but the blockchain keeps track of who has ownership of the file." (Lyons 2021)[18]

As Patrick Rosenberger points out, "[a blockchain] works like a digital journal in which all transactions are recorded" (Rosenberger 2018, p. 63). NFTs are thus the ownership blockchain and not the artwork itself, even though they are almost always used as a synonym for the artwork. The uniqueness and non-exchangeability of tokens makes it possible to distinguish originals from copies in the digital realm. In fact, it is through these tokens that digital originals become conceivable in the first place. They are sometimes traded as a "new kind of art" and seen as part of a new "art market" (Reichert 2021, p. 7). Wolfgang Ullrich even speaks of the "gamification of art" (Ullrich 2022a, pp. 10–18) to describe the lottery principle of NFTs as well as the playful practice of making NFTs compete against each other, as in a quartet game. However, the term "gamification" entails much more. As will become clear in our assessment of the VeVe app, the respective NFT platforms and apps simulate a wide variety of ludic practices and implement a broad range of serial practices that include the collecting, archiving, and public display of superhero comics.[19]

All of this has far-reaching implications for the legal status of copyright and ownership, but it also adds a new dimension to the question of the value of comics. According to Kolja Reichert, whose book *Krypto-Kunst* (Reichert 2021) takes an in-depth look at NFTs as digital property, almost everything since 2021 has revolved around the desire for the indubitable attribution of authorship and digital ownership.[20] In addition, non-fungible tokens are now also being sold by major auction houses such as Sotheby's and Christie's, leading Reichert to speak of a race between the "stakeholders of traditional art" (Reichert 2021, p. 9).[21] However, it is apparent that purchase price and appreciation do not always immediately go hand in hand. For example, Christie's auctioned *Everydays: The First 5000 Days*, a collage composed of 5000 digital images by artist Mike Winkelmann, known as Beeple, for $69.36 million (Reichert 2021, p. 7). According to Reichert, at the time, it was the "third most expensive artwork ever sold by a living artist." Headlines such as "Beeple NFT Sells For $69.3 Million, Becoming Most-Expensive Ever"; "Beeple JPG File Sells For $69 Million, Setting Crypto Art Record"; and "JPG File Sells for $69 Million, as 'NFT Mania' Gathers Pace" reflect the massive public attention the sale generated (Brown 2021; Weiner 2021; Reyburn 2021). However, Wikipedia has refused to include the collage in its "List of most expensive artworks by living artists" because it allegedly is not art (Dieckvoss

2022). Such a denial of a work's art status recalls the barriers of privilege imposed by established gatekeepers in the rejection and devaluation of comics by educational and cultural institutions throughout the 20th century—now somewhat ironically erected by the self-declared "free encyclopedia that anyone can edit."[22]

The new popularity of traditionally low-impact artifacts, made possible by digitization and digital forms of communication, is exemplified by the astonishing success of the NFT collaborative animation of the British author Arch Hades's poem *Arcadia*, whose publication is described as "the first time poetry was sold as fine art through the medium of blockchain" (Steiner-Dicks 2021). The nine-minute animation of the work, which features auditory support from musician RAC, was auctioned at Christie's in November 2021 for $525,000. The news coverage of this sales success indicates a profound shift from qualitative to quantitative valuation, where popularity and price instead of literary quality appear as the most important factors in the mutual validation of NFT and poetry. "The poem is 102 lines long—making each line worth more than $5000. It is 1000 words long, so each word sold for $525," writes Katherine Steiner-Dicks on the website *The Freelance Informer* on November 14, 2021, expressing surprise at the astonishing value of individual words and lines. In the following quote, Arch Hades herself puts the price of the poem first and is pleased with its successful reception. Note the absence of any qualitative—aesthetic, literary, formal—criteria:

> "Now having the most expensive poem ever sold is just an incredibly surreal feeling and I'm thrilled with how well Arcadia was received by everyone. I'm hoping this inspires other women and creatives to go after whatever it is they're passionate about, nothing is too far out of reach."[23]

Arcadia made Arch Hades the "highest paid living poet of all time" (Simons 2022), with critics subscribing to (and thus also legitimizing) a quantitative scale of literary valuation that already implies the next, even more-expensive, poem. Arch Hades's ascent confirms our assumption that NFTs generate new valences and thereby change established notions of art and aesthetic value. Whether these new valences make this poem a candidate for canonical inclusion remains to be seen, however. At the very least, its monetary success shows that the developments we are tracing are neither limited to superhero comics nor to the art world; they also encompass the field of literature and, as such, speak to more general and more encompassing transformations of the popular.

Moreover, the digital is attractive because it enables new, faster sources of income and career opportunities outside of established and perhaps more tiresome paths. Arch Hades's poetry animation, for example, resulted from her unemployment as a book tour was canceled because of the COVID lockdowns: "Suddenly we realized, fuck, we have to make money somehow" (Simons 2022). NFTs thus offer new possibilities of self-empowerment for artists, literary or otherwise, but they do not easily fit into elitist concepts of art and do not inevitably lead to success. Nevertheless, the devaluating discourse on the popular as a commercially viable but culturally inferior (or at least not unreservedly high-quality) product—familiar from the history of superhero comics—is not simply repeated in this case. Here, the popular is admired, as the value of the poem is derived less from its literary quality than from the attention Arch Hades's work has been able to attract. Indeed, the description of the poem's content seems rather banal and clichéd—"Arcadia explores the concepts of modern-day anxiety and loneliness as by-products of cultural and societal constructs"; she writes poems "about love and heartache"—and is followed in the very next sentence by a reference to the bestselling status of Arch Hades's poetry collections: "The 21st century Romantic poet has penned three bestselling poetry books despite only having written professional poetry for three years" (Steiner-Dicks 2021).[24]

While the art market and the literary world may still prove somewhat resilient to the advances of the popular, despite the notable successes of Beeple and Arch Hades, this does not seem to be the case in the realm of superhero comics or pop culture at large. A headline in the online industry magazine *CryptoPotato* (7 August 2021) that is paradigmatic for the

discursive connection between auction records, non-fungible tokens, and superhero comics, reads: "Marvel Enters The Crypto Space by Releasing Spider-Man NFTs" (Dzhondzhorov 2021). With a view to the competitor DC Comics, the website *Screen Rant* proclaims on 30 March 2022: "Batman NFTs Officially Announced as DC Promises Relevance to Future Comics" (Isaak 2022). A bit less enthusiastically, the comics news site *CBR.com* reports on 16 April 2021: "Marvel and DC Crack Down on NFTs Featuring Their Characters" (Cronin 2021).

According to these reports, both Marvel and DC were quick to jump on the NFT bandwagon. This seems only logical. For one, investing in an exciting technological innovation and being at the forefront of debates about the possibilities of digital marketing and production makes good commercial sense because it generates headlines and often sensationalist reporting beyond the more limited sphere of comic book culture. The broad public attention afforded to these developments produces popularity—in the sense of free advertising, of course, but also as evidence that Marvel and DC continue to be relevant media players and that their products continue to attract consumers. Secondly, superhero comics operate on an already thoroughly commercialized terrain—perhaps in contrast to artists who are trying to establish themselves in the art market, where high-cultural aspirations may be stronger, and who are dependent on income from this market. The mainstream comic book publishers do not have the same high-cultural reputations to lose and can therefore readily utilize NFTs as a way of further monetizing flagship characters like Batman, Spider-Man, or Wonder Woman.[25] It is important to note that headlines include superhero-typical talk about entering "crypto space" and what these innovations mean for "Future Comics." Rupendra Brahambhatt and Langston Thomas even speak of a turning point on the website *nft now* in connection with "200,000 unique 3D-rendered Bat Cowl NFTs that will go on sale starting April 26: 'DC Comics Believes Batman NFT Drop Will Be a "Watershed Moment"'" (Brahambhatt and Thomas 2022). References to adventures ("crypto space"), time travel ("future comics"), and earth-shattering events ("watershed moments") activate the superhero imaginary to authorize a commercially enticing technical innovation.

With the new possibilities of digitally marketing one-of-a-kind products, the notorious battle for copyrights and exploitation rights, which had been waged vehemently and prominently by authors and artists in the late 1980s and early 1990s, also takes a new turn.[26] If artists initially saw NFTs as a way to sell digitally produced drawings in the same way in which they had previously sold their print sketches or pencils, the corporate crackdown followed almost immediately, as the above-quoted headline on *CBR.com* illustrates.[27] The article itself states:

> "Comic book artists are claiming that this is depriving them of the ability to make money off of their original artwork like the two companies [Marvel und DC] have always allowed with their physical artwork, except that this is digital work and not physical, during an era where much of the art being made for comics no longer exists as pencils and ink on a page." (Cronin 2021)

Despite the media shift from physical to digital objects, the discourse of personally attributable original artwork continues in this vein. In response to this new form of potential self-empowerment for comics artists, DC Comics announced:

> "As DC examines the complexities of the NFT marketplace and we work on a reasonable and fair solution for all parties involved, including fans and collectors, please note that the offering for sale of any digital images featuring DC's intellectual property with or without NFTs, whether rendered for DC's publications or rendered outside the scope of one's contractual engagement with DC, is not permitted." (Cronin 2021)

Marvel Comics issued similar statements aimed at maintaining control over the creation and sale of NFTs, seeking to put a legal stop to the rogue sale of digitally created, digitally available, endlessly distributable, and thus extremely popularizable artifacts.

As *CBR.com* further reports, the well-known comics artist Mike Deodato sold work he had created for Marvel as NFTs, including the cover of *Amazing Spider-Man Family* #2 (December 2008). After Marvel sought to prevent this, Deodato penned an open letter available on *CBR.com*:

> "The big comic book companies are sending letters to artists asking them not to sell their digital original art because they are copyrighted. They are asking nicely, you would say, so what is the problem? Well, they are also sending DMCA's (Digital Millennium Copyright Act) to the platforms to stop them from selling the art.

> So, let me get this straight. If you are a traditional comic book artist you can sell your original art on paper. If you are a digital comic book artist you are not allowed to sell your digital original art. In both cases, there is no copyright involved. In both cases.

> So WHY digital comic book artists are being deprived of their rights? Isn't a pandemic destroying economies and making people losing their jobs bad enough?"[28]

Deodato's distinction between traditional and digital comic book artists is just as relevant in the context of our argument as his statement that both forms of artistic expression— drawing on paper with pen and ink vs. digital forms of drawing—produce art originals whose copyright lies or should lie with the artists. In both cases, he is not so much concerned with the end product (the printed or the digital comic book) than with the original *artwork* before its conversion into commercially available superhero fare.[29] Deodato's efforts exemplify the fact that the introduction of NFTs as a new technology and marketing tool for superhero comics is not simply a corporately controlled operation but that even within the culture industry, new opportunities to popularize certain narratives, artifacts, and actors create new conflicts and raise new questions of legitimacy. This is especially so because Deodato's move to market and sell his artwork as NFTs sought to shortchange the comics publishers, appealing directly to fans and collectors in order to generate personal revenue—either much deserved or at the expense of the copyright holders, depending on whose argument we are willing to side with.

If we follow the critical examination of the definitions of works and their value, we may get the impression that digital works are to be denied the potential to become art objects from the perspective of a rather traditional and elitist understanding of art (especially by experts). Until the second half of the 20th century, this was the dominant view of mass culture, which positioned popular narratives and artifacts as trivial (and sometimes dangerous) consumer goods produced by a manipulative culture industry. From this perspective, the conflict between copyright and trademark holders and the artists' desire to market their own works, which has become particularly virulent in the digital realm (Koenigsdorff 2022; Reichert 2021), has remained largely invisible. We must therefore ask how the art-related discourse of devaluation and the pop-aesthetic discourse of valorization described here are shaping the public perception of digital superhero comics with NFTs and also which transformations we can trace from the old high/low distinction to new forms of popularity determined by second-order popularization.[30]

3. Marvel and the Marketplace App VeVe

The implications of these questions are already being practically tested by some platforms. On 20 January 2022, Twitter released the feature of issuing a self-owned NFT using a cryptowallet's[31] connection through a hexagonal profile picture, as we can see in a screenshot taken from a German location (Figure 1).[32] Because this was interpreted both as an experiment and as a sign of exclusivity, this service was only available to paying members of the *Twitter Blue Labs* service, which was, until recently, unlocked in only a few countries.[33] The hexagonal avatar differs from the regular, Twitter-standard circle shape.

Clicking on it will yield additional information: Designer, Owner, Description, Collection, Property, NFT Details, NFT Definition (Figure 2). Furthermore, it offers a redirection to certain marketplace platforms, where the presented NFT may be purchased by the current owner. The platform OpenSea, which is also used by Christie's, is a good example in this context. In order to create a sense of viability, this marketplace lists its "top NFTs" according to "volume, floor price and other statistics"; like a stock exchange, it indicates the daily performance (*OpenSea* 2023).[34] The ranking does not include individual works, only collections. As already mentioned, such rankings also represent a unique feature on Twitter. This means that the collaboration and presentation of this new form of digital trading of art not only leads to prestige and an increase in the value of artists or buyers but that it also unlocks the serial dynamics of collecting.

Considering the fundamental connection between seriality and collecting, it makes sense that companies like Marvel and DC are investing in NFTs.[35] DC Comics offered certain NFTs to members of *DC FanDome* and to "all *fans* who share on social media" (*DC* 2021)[36] in December 2021, while Marvel partnered with the marketplace app VeVe in August 2021 (this app could only be used on smartphones until June 2022).[37] VeVe was launched in 2020 and offers the purchase of exclusive and limited comics and collectibles (pictures, figures, stamps; also of Disney, Coca Cola, or DC characters (ECOMI 2020a, 2020b) through NFTs. The name, list price, and degree of rarity of these NFTs recall trading cards in their presentation and aesthetics, and they are designated as such by VeVe itself (Figure 3). The app thus fits in with the bestsellers on the NFT market, as the success of so-called CryptoKitties trading cards shows (Fadilpašić 2020).[38] Like at a swap meet, the NFTs on VeVe can be resold or auctioned off after an auction.[39] Whereas readers and fans in the past flocked to flea markets, comics conventions, and the back issue bins of comic book stores to complete their collections, they now engage in online practices like offering, auctioning, and comparing digital artifacts.

The app also has a social media-like feed where likes, comments, and follows can be assigned. Users further receive a modifiable profile that can either remain private or be made public. In addition to the avatar and the account name, the number of *collectibles*, *comics*, *full sets*, *followers*, and *likes* is displayed for everyone in mobile use; in the web app, *comics* and *collectibles* are combined, and the registration date and the number of *follows* can be viewed. This means that the app's automated attention measurement not only records and presents the popularity of individual NFTs but also specifies the degree of their owner's popularity. This is yet another example of what we are calling second-order popularization: Being active on the app not only means gathering collectibles and becoming a respected collector, it also creates popularity (or non-popularity for those who are not noticed or liked by many). Public profiles can also display their collection cards. The display of property and collections (*full sets*) is accordingly an essential component of the app—and shapes the initially primarily privately practiced prestige experience of the owner into a public event.[40]

This is further reflected in VeVe's planned *Master Collector Program* (VeVe 2021). This program offers a reward system well known from fan forums. Every activity and every purchase allows users to visibly advance in level and rank by amassing points. They can also earn badges and receive certain privileges with each level up, such as access to drops before the official release as well as exclusive chances at limited editions.[41] Complete collections and rare NFTs score more points.[42] This is not just a "gamification of art" in Ullrich's sense but also a gamification of collecting, exhibition, and advancement practices prevalent in video and online games, in the sense of adapting ludic principles in game-unique spaces.[43]

Figure 1. Twitter informed all users about the new NFT feature in 2022, although Twitter Blue Labs was not yet available in Germany.
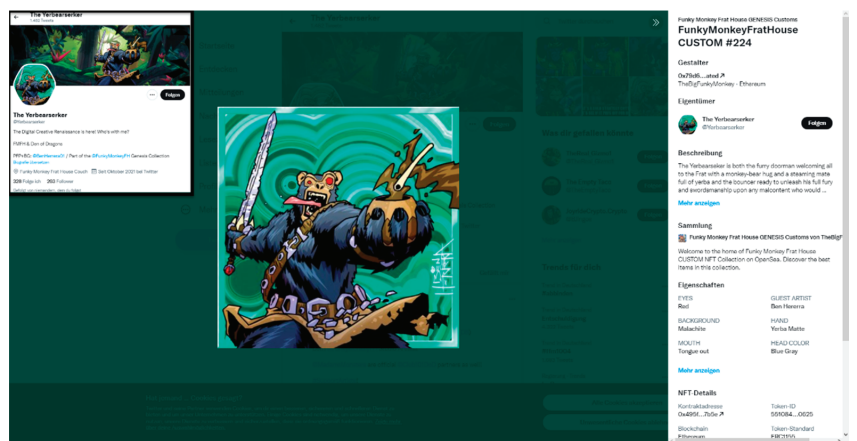
Figure 2. Clicking on the Twitter profile picture not only enlarges the NFT but also displays information about it, as this example from @Yerbearserker shows.
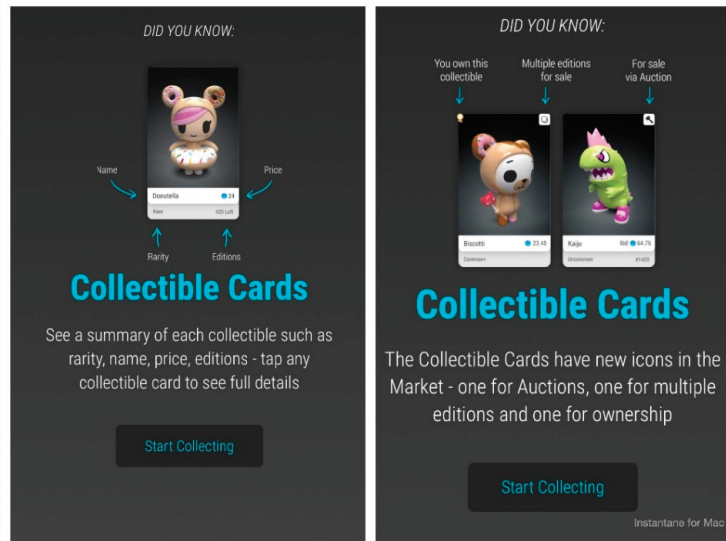
Figure 3. Logic and aesthetics of the trading cards on VeVe.

In addition, VeVe has a private "My Showrooms" feature (Figure 4). This allows purchases to be displayed in a visual space (usually a vault). By connecting to a smartphone or VR camera, these spaces can also be transferred to the "real" world and can be shared with everyone in the feed. Digital collectibles, which users previously could own only as files on their home computers and, at most, present in forums and on fan websites, are thus given the status of originals and a "physical" as well as official exhibition space (Stevens and Bell 2012, pp. 751–72; Steirer 2014, pp. 455–69).
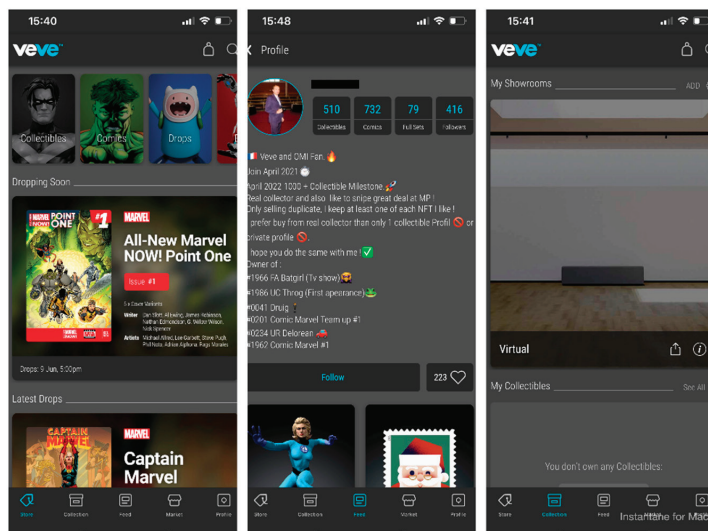
Figure 4. VeVe: example of the home page, a profile, and an empty collection showroom.

In its NFT offerings, Marvel mostly includes older, already published single comics[44] for the price of 6.99 Gems (1 Gem equals 1 USD).[45] The exclusivity of this offer (the base unit is, after all, Gems) is reflected in the fact that comics can be purchased that are hard

to come by in print due to their rarity and that, should they be pristine or near-pristine copies, would auction for several million dollars (such as *The Amazing Spider-Man* #1, 1963; *Fantastic Four* #1, 1961; *Marvel Comics* #1, 1939).[46] In addition to first or special (i.e., "key") issues, the app features first appearances of popular characters such as Scarlet Witch, Ms. Marvel, Falcon, Loki, and She-Hulk.

The primary sale of single issues could be understood as a focus on (popular) individual works rather than a focus on (popular) series or artworks. However, each comic comes with a choice of five cover versions. At first glance, this is reminiscent of the variant covers that were especially popular in the 1990s and were intended to make comics collectible and attractive as investments, leading to a short-term speculators' boom. The VeVe strategy is similar. Cover selection in digital comics has not been a common feature, unlike in their print counterparts today. This may be related to the fact that they are denied a collectible value, as they have had no true/aesthetic exhibition space thus far and are essentially identical mass-produced items in potentially unlimited supply. Each specimen corresponds to a "near mint"/"gem mint" condition. There is no uniqueness equal to an original, nor is there technically a need for rarity. To make digital comics attractive as collectibles, the digital transformation into a unique, non-exchangeable token is therefore of eminent importance. The VeVe app also plays a part in this transformation, as its exhibition space turns the initially disposable digital copy into a perpetually presentable mobile archive.[47] VeVe also exhibits exclusivity through the first-ever collectible cover variants, which are not infinitely available but rather strictly limited. This limitation affords the comics a particular rarity value that, as we have already noted, leads to advancement in the app's reward system.

The rarity values of the cover versions offered on VeVe are distinguished by the labels "common", "uncommon", "rare", "ultra rare", and "secret rare", which are taken from the collectors' market of the print editions.[48] Marvel also refers to them as "classic cover" as well as "vintage", "hero", "vibranium", and "true believer" variants.[49] These covers are designed specifically for VeVe as "exclusive" and thus perform new paratextual work for an otherwise consistent text. According to the French narratologist Gérard Genette, the paratext serves to make the initially naked text publishable and readies it for circulation. Page numbers, chapter headings, title images, interviews, or the like, which are incorporated as peri- or epitext depending on their distance from the text, are indispensable for the publication of a work, but they are conventionally considered rather insignificant accessories to the literary text (Genette 1997, pp. 1–15). This changes with the collective logic of NFT comics on VeVe, where paratext morphs from an often-assumed interchangeability to a prestigious work of art, shifting the focus of the original text-based series to a paratextual seriality.[50] It is, after all, the covers of an issue that are seen as collectible, and not the text, which is always the same.[51]

The app reinforces this impression by highlighting the collaboration with selected artists with a note that "[t]he release features VeVe-Exclusive Rare & Secret Rare covers by...." Since September 2022, this concept has been expanded with the introduction of "Marvel Artworks" in the VeVe Web App: The artworks are exclusive covers created by artists for existing comics, but not entire issues that can be purchased in silent auctions and cannot be resold afterwards.[52] These are given the rarity grade "Artist Proof" (Figure 5). In most cases, the artwork is designed by the original cover artists of the respective issues and exists only as a single copy. Interestingly, the artists are not listed under "Artist" but under "Brand" as well as "Series" and listed with "Season," as can be seen in Figure 5. As shown above, serial processes are unlocked through these forms of digital collecting. However, we may still wonder about the hierarchical structure that positions publishers versus artists, since "Artist Proof" refers to Marvel in the VeVe logic and "Marvel Artworks" frames the profile images of the designers. While artists in contrast to the publisher are given their own VeVe profile to highlight the value of their previous work, the Marvel logo is also present there (VeVe). The covers are auctioned at high prices, so this process can be compared to the well-known auctions of more traditional works of art (Figure 5). (VeVe Digital Collectibles 2022a, 2022c).
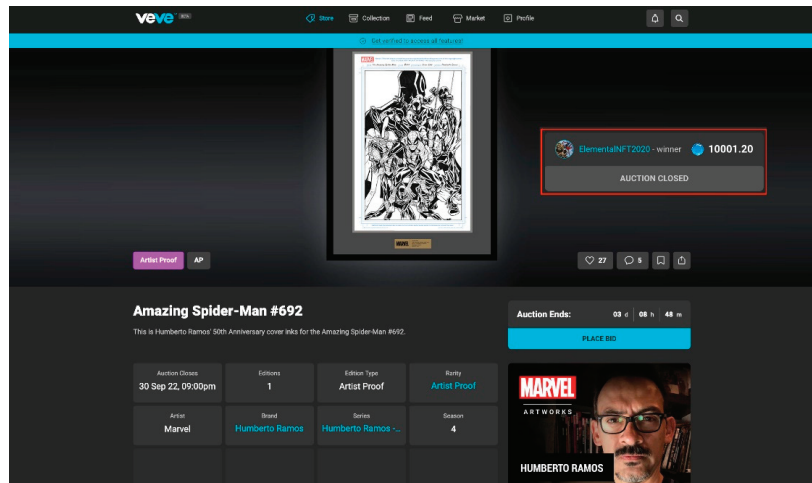
Figure 5. Marvel artwork of Humberto Ramos's *Amazing Spider-Man* #692 auctioned for 10001.20 Gems (see inserted red box at top right).

Enhancing the paratext of regular comic book purchases, VeVe also includes nearly forgotten peritextual elements such as editorials (*Fallen Son: The Death of Captain America* #4) or letters to the editor (*Ms. Marvel* #16). In digital reissues, these elements are usually omitted or included only irregularly or arbitrarily. However, such letters are crucial if we want to study a series' evolution, its fluctuating popularity, and thus also its history before the shift to the more dynamic world of online communication. As Frank Kelleter maintains about popular serial narratives, "[l]ooking at individual texts often doesn't make sense" (Kelleter 2012, p. 15). Moreover, due to the limited page range of the printed comic book, the publication of the letters was considered a privilege because they made readers visible within the comics community and offered them a way to distinguish themselves as critics. However, the digital invisibility of this peritextual communication erases crucial forms of "participatory culture" (Henry Jenkins's term) and thus also delimits its value (in the sense of a decrease in "cultural capital" in Pierre Bourdieu's sense).[53] The staging of rare peritexts in digital VeVe reprints, however, gives them a new status since it is above all the exclusivity of the paratexts that endows the digital comics with a new value, which is expressed in the price and attention standards described above.

As already noted, NFT comics are strictly limited precisely because it is their artificial scarcity that makes them rare and thus potentially valuable. If they are available at auction, all interested parties can see both the number of copies in stock and the likelihood of purchasing a particular cover; after that, they only see the likelihood and the list price. However, buyers cannot choose which issues of the comic book they purchase. VeVe uses a "blind box format" that randomly distributes the covers after the payment process.[54] This leads, at least initially, to an increase in the value (and exclusivity) of collectibles (or series) and their resales. Each day between 11 April and 15 April 2022, Marvel offered for sale on VeVe one issue of the five-issue miniseries *Fallen Son: The Death of Captain America*. Each issue inventory ranged from 20,900 *common cover*, 4900 *uncommon*, 2200 *rare*, 950 *ultra rare*, and 500 *secret rare*.[55] The nearly 30,000 issues usually sold out in a minute (which was the norm for app offerings at the time). The demand for such offers is high and leads to an automated popularity of the respective issues, especially since there is a possibility to snatch a comic whose market value is much higher than the low price of 6.99 Gems.

In connection with the transparent rarity and the promising status of a "true believer", acquired issues are traded at a higher price. A *common cover* usually sells for less than the original price of 6.99 Gems. This is largely analogous to the resale value of a common

print copy (issue #1 from 4.95 Gems, #2 and #3 from 4 Gems, #4 from 3.88 Gems, #5 from 3.90 Gems). Issues rated *ultra rare* or *secret rare* are usually advertised at larger amounts (*ultra rare*: #1 from 50 Gems, #2 to #4 from 30 Gems, #5 from 47 Gems; *secret rare*: #1 from 119 Gems, #2 from 160 Gems, #3 and #4 from 95 Gems, #5 from 90 Gems). Special comics that auction for more than $1.5 million in print also receive a higher starting bid at VeVe: *The Amazing Spider-Man* #1 was offered in April 2022 with a *common cover* from 85 Gems, an *uncommon cover* from 130 Gems, a *rare cover* from 285 Gems, an *ultra rare cover* from 619 Gems, and a *secret rare cover* from 8999 Gems. However, it seems that the economic value of the NFTs decreases with an increasing temporal distance to the offer, in a somewhat counterintuitive development that we want to ponder in the concluding segment of this article. For example, an *ultra* or *secret rare* cover of *Fallen Son* in November 2022 is already available between 15 and 42 Gems in the Market. The covers of *The Amazing Spider-Man* #1 with the same rarity markings can be purchased from 145 and 1500 Gems at the same time.[56] In this sense, NFTs behave almost contrarily to their print counterparts. It seems that the value of the NFTs tends to decrease, while the value of the print editions increases in relation to their rarity. This finding may initially come as a surprise because unlike the rare comic books discussed at the beginning of this article, which can only noticeably increase in value if they resist natural aging and the wear and tear of reading and storing, NFTs do not have this problem. As digital artifacts whose sales and purchases are documented in their blockchain and which thus acquire a certain historicity, they nevertheless (at least ideally) always remain pristine.[57] However, unlike the print floppies, which are now considered classics of the genre, they cannot look back on a long and stable past. Whether a particular NFT work will ever prove to be particularly popular in the long run or formative for a whole generation is unclear at this point. The entire phenomenon is too new and perhaps also affected too much by the vagaries of public attention. Moreover, in the case of the artificial scarcity of Marvel offerings on VeVe, NFTs ultimately remain latently precarious—we can only speculate whether artificially scarce and thus rather valuable NFTs (e.g., variant covers) will not be devalued either by the possible fading of the current NFT hype or by new forms of subsequent duplication.[58]

4. Conclusions

As we have seen, the artificial exclusivity of NFTs has increased the popularity of an already popular medium in the digital space and has equally enhanced and transformed its art potential as well as its paratextual features. Our prime example, the VeVe app, has adapted and appropriated elements of gamification, such as reward and ranking systems already established in videogames, as well as practices for highlighting success (in the sense of transforming the popular). In addition, second-order popularization is enabling new concepts of artistic and commercial valence, especially in digital spaces previously associated primarily with the realm of the "high" (auction houses invested in the sale of art and rare goods). Second-order popularization is thus appealing to traditional institutions of high culture. Since NFTs, unlike their physical counterparts in the blockchain, archive all transactions and document all previous owners, artists, universities, and museums are also embracing this technology (Tonelli 2022). This is because they can invest not only in exhibitable originals but also in information of an individual, automated, digital as well as mobile archive.

Despite these developments, we must still ask what would happen to these blockchains, their exhibits, and their monetary value should the Marketplace app or the associated wallet cease its digital existence. In the case of VeVe, the merchandise cannot be downloaded, and it is forbidden to share and sell merchandise purchased there on other platforms; even the attempt is punishable (VeVe 2023a). In addition, Marvel usually does not make the paratextual exclusivity prepared there available for other formats. Based on our analysis of the VeVe app, we can conclude that the breakdown of the high/low axiology in favor of a new understanding of art and the popular as being primarily characterized by conflicts over copyright and ownership—as well as by digitally mediated possibilities of acquiring,

collecting, exhibiting, and acting—enables new axiologies in what occurs to us as a more or less exclusive digital space. The app cannot be accessed without registration. Users must verify themselves in order to access all functions. Sharing materials outside the exclusive space is not integrated into the logic of the app. The digital world offers more and more opportunities to acquire, collect, and exhibit artifacts designated as originals. In the context of superhero comics, however, the affordances of the digital are primarily used to drive the second-order popularization that is attractive for the commercial development of the genre and, in conjunction with the sales records of rare comic books and the almost ubiquitous transmedia presence of the characters, to ensure getting noticed by many.

However, there is a proverbial elephant in the digital room: the recent waning of the NFT craze and of the public enthusiasm this new media form was able to generate only a very short time ago (in 2021 and early 2022). Writing before the introduction of NFTs but with a focus on more than a decade of attempts by comics publishers to utilize the affordances of the digital to increase comic book sales without hurting the more lucrative print market, Alisa Perren and Gregory Steirer remained doubtful about the impact of the digital sphere on comic books. The authors maintained that "the advent of digital distribution technology has had relatively little effect so far on how the comic book industry functions and how it is comprised" (Perren and Steirer 2021, p. 196). In light of this assessment, it may not be surprising that we are currently caught up in the midst of what seems to be an NFT blues, a moment when initially successful and popular NFTs are losing worth and when the market seems to be shrinking, rather than expanding, while the print market continues to thrive. In 2021, Stephanie Chan wrote on the website Sensor Tower that "VeVe Collectibles Leads NFT Trading Space on Mobile with More than $100 Million in Consumer Spending" (Chan 2021). The article includes a graph that visualizes the immense and rapid increase in NFT spending, showing the explosion of expenditures on VeVe from 13,000 USD in January 2021 to 34.5 million USD in November of the same year. However, writing less than a year later, the author Ariel noted on the website Appfigures that "NFT Marketplace Veve Collectibles Revenue [Was] Down 84% in 2022" (Ariel 2022), indicating that NFTs may already have become "old news".

Looking back at the history of superhero comics, its various fads, and the general fickleness of popular markets, however, we would argue that it is still far too early to forecast the end of NFTs—popular genres have a way of maximizing attention, either through short-term efforts (which the NFTs may or may not be) or through ongoing adaptations to changing media constellations. "Is it still worth getting into Veve?", one member of the Reddit group "VeVeCollectables" asked in spring 2022, to which another member replied: "If you believe in the value proposition of owning the first ever licensed NFTs from Disney, DC, Marvel, Star Wars etc and you have the money to comfortably purchase some of the 'grail' pieces and don't mind sitting on it for the long term, I'd say sure" (VeVe Collectables 2022). It would not be the first time that fans rescued a commercial product or once-popular form from oblivion by paying lasting attention to it. If many of the buyers are fans—and will therefore continue to collect even after the craze is over—and if the artificial scarcity of the NFTs keeps prices somewhat stable, the NFT phenomenon is not all that different from the old and precious, "rare" comic books. Even if the fans do not save the superhero NFTs, it appears that these NFTs will nevertheless end up promoting the popularity of comics publishers like Marvel, as generating news stories and sensational headlines is conductive to increasing attention to the company's latest attempts to adapt their products to the demands of a constantly changing mediascape.

Notes

1. All originally German-language quotations were translated by the authors of this article. This article emerges from our research project (with Niels Werber) "The Serial Politics of Pop Aestehtics: Superhero Comics and Science Fiction Pulp Novels," which is part of the Collaborative Research Center Transformations of the Popular, funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG).

2. For evolutionary readings of superhero history, see Lopes (2009); Stein (2021a). Perren and Steirer (2021, chp. 6) provide an evolutionary framework for understanding the development of the digital production, distribution, and reception of comic books, which begins with an experimental/pre-market phase before 2007, continues with a market-making phase between 2008 and 2011, enters a phase of consolidation from 2012 to 2014, and culminates in the still ongoing monopoly phase from 2014 onwards.

3. Key issues, or "keys," are, for instance, "a #1 comic, a 1st appearance, death, or other significant event" (*Comic Spectrum.com* 2018).

4. We base our understanding of pop aesthetics on some of the parameters identified by Thomas Hecken, including consumerism, artificiality, and superficiality (Hecken 2013). Further reflections on the appeal of speculation are provided in Stäheli (2013).

5. Astonishment at the monetary value of older comic books is not a recent phenomenon. On 6 December 1964, the *New York Times* printed the short article "Old Comic Books Soar in Value; Dime Paperbacks of 1940's Are Now Collector Items" (*New York Times* 1964), which inspired similar reporting around the nation. However, the prices that the coveted 1940's comics used to fetch in the 1960s were very moderate (between $2 and $25) compared to today's auctions. For an in-depth discussion, see Stein (2021a).

6. See also Jules Feiffer's comment: "Comic books, first of all, are junk. Junk is there to entertain on the basest, most compromised of levels. It finds the lowest fantasmal common denominator and proceeds from there. [. . .] Junk is a second-class citizen of the arts; a status of which we and it are constantly aware. There are certain inherent privileges in second-class citizenship. Irresponsibility is one. Not being taken seriously is another" (Feiffer 1965, p. 186).

7. On questions of cultural value, or symbolic capital, in the field of US comics, see Beaty and Woo (2016, pp. 1–4), who argue that cultural value is not intrinsic to a comic but is assigned by reading communities aiming to define excellence or greatness. In the context of our argument, quantitatification is part of this endeavor even though it is not always recognized as such. The excellence of a popular, i.e., much noticed, bestselling, creator or comic takes on a different quality when readers are aware of this popularity. Popularity might even be cited as evidence of excellence—how could thousands or millions of readers who like a certain comic book be wrong about its worth?

8. Fortune Business Insights provided the following figures in January 2021: "The global comic book market is projected to grow from USD 9.21 billion in 2021 to USD 12.81 billion in 2028 at a CAGR of 4.8% during the 2021–2028 period" (*Fortune Business Insights* 2022). The Marvel Cinematic Universe has grossed more than $25 billion since it was launched in 2008 (Clark 2022).

9. A total of approximately 600 million Superman comics were sold between 1938 and 2015 (Statista Research Department 2015).

10. Concerning the normative pejorative discourse around the concept of "mass culture," for instance, in Dwight MacDonald's "A Theory of Mass Culture" (MacDonald 1953), Thomas Hecken writes: "Mass culture is considered here above all as the lower than the bad culture. It is the negative foil of high culture [. . .]. If one adheres to the influential art critic Clement Greenberg, the products of mass culture are the 'kitsch' that lags behind the 'avant-garde' of genuine art by a wide margin—as a poor and standardized copy" (Hecken 2010, p. 205).

11. See statements by Jack Kirby, the illustrator of the first *Captain America* issues in the early 1940s and later of the *Fantastic Four* and several other superhero comics, about the collaborative production process: "I believe we were professionals [. . .] who had something to give to each other that culminated in a product worth selling. Joe [Simon] and I manufactured products worth selling. And they sold. They sold a lot." And: "[A]t the time I really didn't want to be a Leonardo da Vinci. I didn't want to be a great artist, but I loved comics and wanted to be better than ten other guys" (Eisner 2001, pp. 197, 199). Kirby values comics as professional works but does not see them as art (yet). For detailed studies of the self-understanding of succeeding generations of comics artists, see Lopes (2009); Gabilliet (2010).

12. The problem of preservation in the case of early comic books is exacerbated by the fact that, in addition to the low paper quality with its tendency to fade and degrade fairly quickly, fans could not rely on the kind of collectors' equipment that would have allowed them to store the comics in the best possible way. See also the advice offered in an article on "slabbing" on *Comic Spectrum.com*, which defines this term as "slang for getting a comic professionally graded and encased in an un-openable hard plastic shell from CGC, PGX, or CBCSthe" and suggests to the interested comics collector that, once a comic has been slabbed, "you never want to physically touch that book again. Any kind of handling could easily drop a grade" (*Comic Spectrum.com* 2018).

13   This includes voucher copies that did not even go on sale. Less-than-pristine copies can, of course, also fetch thousands of dollars, which means that even copies that show significant use can mark the discrepancy between their cheap original price and their current monetary value. However, the sale of such copies is not newsworthy enough for major news outlets to report on, which means that they do not quite serve as agents of second-order popularization as the highest-selling issues that are making the headlines.

14   Important introductions to the cultural history and narrative specifics of popular serial storytelling are Kelleter (2012, 2017).

15   Bart Beaty examines the inclusion of comics in the catalogs of such prominent auction houses and analyzes the resulting cultural appreciation (Beaty 2012). A near-pristine version of *Action Comics* #1 sold for $3.2 million on eBay in August 2014 (Roe 2014).

16   The "classics" of the genre reappear in numerous anthologies and collected editions, and they can be purchased as digital issues directly from the publishers, via online bookstores, or as a bundle with thousands of other issues on a subscription basis (e.g., Marvel Unlimited). Many of the issues are also available on more or less legal websites. However, most of the paratexts that are relevant for collectors and for us as researchers are missing, including editorials, letters to the editor pages, publication announcements, and advertisements.

17   In the 1990s, when the major auction houses offered individual comics as well as entire comic book collections, so-called pedigree collections, i.e., collections of rare and very well-preserved comics, were also referred to as "blue chip comics" and thus marked as particularly valuable (Beaty 2012, pp. 163–67).

18   See also Reichert's definition of NFTs as "digital certificates of ownership with tamper-proof record in the blockchain" (Reichert 2021, p. 8).

19   Ullrich's comments on the 2021 raffle of works by British artist Damien Hirst, who added NFTs to 10,000 dotted original paintings and raffled them off for $2000 each, are also relevant. Over a period of one year, buyers could choose either the (material) painting or the (virtual) NFT (Ullrich 2022a, p. 12). Ullrich therefore speaks of two markets and maintains that we cannot foresee which one of them will prevail. In the meantime, the first findings on the decisions of the buyers are already available: "5149 people exchanged their NFT for a [. . .] painting [. . .] 4851 [NFT are] still in circulation." See also Hitz (2022). On these developments, see also the following lecture by Wolfgang Ullrich in the context of the CRC 1472 Transformations of the Popular: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z11HiNhSvnM (Ullrich 2022b, accessed on 30 October 2022).

20   See the podcast "NFTs—Spiel, Hype oder gigantisches Schneeballsystem?" (Mannweiler and Kremer 2022) as well as (Meier 2021). In addition, a major event series for "NFTs in art and culture" was held for the first time in German-speaking countries in May 2022 (Vogel 2022).

21   Sotheby's has its own platform for crypto art (Dieckvoss 2021); in September 2022, Christie's launched "Christies 3.0 [a]s a fully on-chain auction platform dedicated to exceptional NFT-based art" (*Christie's.com* 2023). The platform can be accessed at https://nft.christies.com/ (accessed on 8 February 2023).

22   The privileged position within art is also reflected in the fact that only a few can work full time as artists and be successful. Therefore, they often do not describe themselves as artists, as has already been shown in this article by the classification of comic actors as craftsmen.

23   Arch Hades mentions other artists, but again, the focus is on measurable success rather than artistic innovation and brilliance: "Then to have our work selected by the world's leading art auction house for such a prestigious sale alongside titans like Doig and Hirst, is something I never thought was possible for me" (Steiner-Dicks 2021).

24   Arch Hades's poetry can be categorized as an example of what Moritz Baßler labels "midcult." See, for instance, Baßler's observations on the most successful poetry collection in literary history, Rupi Kaur's *milk and honey* (Kaur 2014). With a view to Kaur's millions of Instagram followers and the discrepancy between literary-critical doubts about the quality of the poetry and the masses of anthemic lay reviews on platforms like Amazon and Goodreads, Baßler writes: "[S]ocial media and the interactive Web 2.0 are not only overriding professional gatekeeper functions on the reception side; something similar is already happening in production." Kaur had initially published her poems on Instagram and found a publisher due to the attention she received there (Baßler 2021, pp. 132–49).

25   Conversely, one could argue that popular series and their aesthetics have always contributed to the legitimization and popularization of new media (Hagedorn 1988, pp. 4–12).

26   This struggle came to be known as "creators' rights," including coverage in *The Comics Journal* #137 (9/1990), which features interviews with Steve Bissette and Scott McCloud as two key representatives of this movement and reprints the transcript of a panel discussion titled "Creator vs. Corporate Ownership".

27   Precisely because comic artists were generally not granted copyrights to their work for the major publishers until at least the 1990s, the sale of original drawings is considered an officially tolerated way of generating additional income, even though it involves protected content. This is also due to the fact that these drawings, as already noted, are not originals in any conventional sense but templates for an industrially shaped end product.

28   One solution to this problem is the time-consuming and labor-intensive creation of entirely new characters and content, as Rob Liefeld, known for his work for Image Comics, plans to do (Epps 2022). Where Liefeld envisions a whole new superhero universe, renowned comic book artist Alex Ross is invested in the establishment of "a permanent digital archive of [his] lifetime of work" (*Colivingvalley.com* 2021).

²⁹ Spider-Man and other popular serial characters are trademarked intellectual properties, so this is not necessarily a copyright issue. Therefore, the artists do not have the right to sell their drawings without the consent of DC or Marvel. See also Gordon (2013, pp. 221–36).

³⁰ It is important to stress that we are not so much interested in market analysis or investigating Marvel's digital business models than in the ways in which the app creates new possibilities for buying, trading, and collecting digital "originals" and how the aesthetics of the app as well as the discourses surrounding the introduction and promotion of superhero NFTs indicate the transformation from qualitative to quantative regimes of valuation, including a shift from the older high/low logic to a new popular/non-popular logic. For more on these changes, see Döring et al. (2021) as well as Werber et al. (2023). For an astute and well-researched history of comic book publishers' evolving investment in the digital distribution of comics, see Perren and Steirer (2021, chp. 6). As these authors indicate, digital distribution—for instance, via subscription-based platforms such as DC Universe or Marvel Unlimited—has not yet surpassed the print market, which continues to dominate the sale of superhero comics.

³¹ In a cryptowallet, the password-like keys to the blockchains of the respective owners are stored and thus make transactions possible.

³² See Twitter Blue (2022). Instagram followed in May 2022 (*Stuttgarter Nachrichten* 2022). Since we are based in Germany, we sometimes reference the platforms as they appear for German users.

³³ Since Elon Musk's acquisition of Twitter, this practice has changed (*Spiegel Netzwelt* 2022).

³⁴ See the collection statistics on the Opensea platform. On lists as a characteristic phenomenon of the popular, see Schaffrick (2016, pp. 109–25); Adelmann (2021).

³⁵ For a broader context, see the chapter "Collecting Comics: Mummified Objects versus Mobile Archives" in Stein (2021a).

³⁶ In the context of the FanDome (October 2021), DC made "selected" covers available free of charge for this period in cooperation with the Palm NFT Studio platform. Interested users had to register or be registered (on both platforms) to receive one (maximum two) random NFTs. Since mid-2022, DC has been trying to establish its "own marketplace," also in cooperation with Palm NFT Studio (currently, however, this is still in the BETA phase). It is reasonable to assume that DC has made attempts in the context of FanDome to generate attention and gain users in advance, as well as to test the popularity or success of the NFTs first. Examples are (*DC Universe* 2023; Downing 2021; Ledger Insights 2022; Daz3D 2022).

³⁷ Beyond VeVe, Marvel is also collaborating with NFT artists and creating its own comics with them (Marvel Entertainment 2022). In addition, Marvel is promoting other exclusive NFT offerings via the late Stan Lee's account, which will be posthumously used by Marvel (Lee 2021) and BeyondLife.club and Orange Comet Launch Stan Lee's Chakra The Invincible NFTs (*BeyondLife.club* 2022).

³⁸ According to Reichert, the market is dominated by sports trading cards (Reichert 2021, p. 24). Sports trading cards and superhero comics have had a close relationship since at least the 1980s. Starting in the 1990s, the industry magazine *Wizard* reported on the cards and comics, among other things, as well as on movies and computer games (Beaty 2012, p. 168). The Italian company Panini is a good example, as it still publishes both comics and sports trading cards.

³⁹ Usually, the market is closed 30 min before and after a drop so that the app can adjust to the traffic. However, with the constant software development, the time-out is more and more suspended, which could also refer to a decreased popularity of the app (VeVe 2023b).

⁴⁰ It should be noted, however, that "public" by the act of registration refers to a public that is not open to everyone. In July 2022, VeVe also introduced KYC (Know Your Customer). This is a verification system designed to confirm the identity and address of users in order to protect them from "fraud, corruption, money laundering and terrorist financing." Only after verification are the app functions available to users (VeVe Digital Collectibles 2022b).

⁴¹ Kerkmann writes: "An NFT Drop refers to the release of an entire collection of unique trading cards, objects, or artwork. Usually, new NFT collections are announced with some lead time before they are finally minted and distributed to buyers. The term 'minted' refers to the process of transferring an NFT to a blockchain. A drop usually includes the entire collection of an art series or specific trading cards, but can also consist of just a single NFT" (Kerkmann 2022).

⁴² Ullrich touches on the topic of user behavior (with reference to game theory) on the online platform Discord: "They meticulously study their sheets to discover value-enhancing features. And, of course, they observe the price development." The users thus become art (trade)/NFT experts (Ullrich 2022a, p. 12).

⁴³ Far more pronounced forms of this gamification can be found on the U.S. platform *Comic Vine* (*Comic Vine* 2023), which describes itself as the "largest comic book wiki in the universe," complete with forums, reviews, videos, podcasts, and much more. In addition to a comprehensive metrification system that ranks the most popular and most active contributors, one can acquire so-called "wiki points" and thus move up in the ranking (https://comicvine.gamespot.com, accessed on 8 February 2023). Non-digital versions of such practices can be found in comics as early as the mid-1960s. There, Marvel fans were ranked by the number of letters to the editor they sent to the publisher.

⁴⁴ VeVe marks such an NFT comic with the respective era of its creation (Golden Age, Bronze Age, Silver Age, Modern Age).

⁴⁵ The fact that the payment method is Gems not only reflects another form of gamification but also suggests a certain prestige (like claims to the cryptocurrency) as users exchange their regular money for valuable Gems. However, this line of thought is complicated by the fact that Gems and USD are equal in value.

46   The TV series *Pawn Stars* (History Channel, since 2009) contains several episodes in which the joyful financial expectations of owners of rare comics (e.g., *Batman* #1 from 1940) are disappointed, as the issues are in good but not outstanding condition (e.g., 5.5 out of 10.0 on the official scale) (Pawn Stars 2021a, 2021b). They still fetch prices in the thousands or tens of thousands of dollars, but they do not become the kinds of megasellers that will dominate headlines and produce popularity.

47   For more information on mobile archives, see Stein (2021b, p. 37) and Stein (2021a, chp. 4).

48   This classification system and its logic of artificial rarity can be usefully connected with the practice of "slabbing" superhero comic books. Slabbing means grading these comics according to their condition, which in conjunction with their popular appeal will ultimately determine their market value. Only rare and well-preserved (i.e., highly graded) comics can fetch large sums; well-preserved comics that are very common will not achieve any sensational prices. Moreover, the very act of slabbing a comic, and, in analogy, of assigning digital rarity, tends to increase the value of the product and may thus facilitate a rise in popularity. As the entry on slabbing on *Comic Spectrum.com* suggests, "High-grade slabbed books will frequently sell for multiples of what an unslabbed (also called 'raw') book will sell for" (*Comic Spectrum.com* 2018).

49   Here, classical era and genre designations ("classic cover", "vintage", "hero") mix with terms from the fictional universe of comics (e.g., the magical metal "vibranium" from the Black Panther mythos). The labeling also recalls the paratextually mediated communication between producers and recipients (the readers referred to as "true believers" by Marvel editors on editorial and letters pages). See Marvel (2021).

50   On the importance of paratexts in superhero comics, see Stein (2021a, chp. 1); Haas (2023).

51   This could lead to the question of whether these digital comics are actually read. However, VeVe has already integrated various measures into the app to address this question. For example, it is possible to read an NFT comic virtually in the "real" world using an eReader and the AR function. In addition, the showroom displays how much of the comic has already been read. Since VeVe also collects user data and shares it with partners, it can be assumed that Marvel may also receive such reading statistics (VeVe 2022).

52   Artists who have already provided artwork include Humberto Ramos, Steve McNihen, Mark Brooks, and Brian Stelfreeze.

53   See Bourdieu (1983); Jenkins (2006).

54   Gamification can also be observed at this point, as this is very similar to the Loot Box principle in popular PC, console, and mobile games such as *Overwatch*, *Star Wars: Battlefront II*, or *Marvel Puzzle Quest*. Through virtual rewards or in-game purchases (again, there are often regular, rare to very rare boxes), players can obtain regular to very rare exclusive items, cards, or characters to advance in the gameplay or increase or expose the value of their account.

55   At the time of the first draft version of this article, *common covers* had a probability of 1 in 1.41, *uncommon covers* 1 in 6.02, and *rare covers* 1 in 13.11. For *ultra rare*, it was 1 in 31.05, and for *secret rare*, 1 in 59. These probabilities have changed somewhat in the meantime. *Common* is now available from 2.10, *uncommon* from 2.25, *rare* from 7.20, *ultra rare* from 15, and *secret rare* from 41.99.

56   Premium members of the app are able to track the hourly value price of NFTs (ECOMI Wiki 2023).

57   In the case of VeVe, however, developers and app users are already debating whether the NFT comics should "age" or even show signs of use through resale (Seedeejee 2021).

58   The financial risk that NFTs, in general, can entail is shown by the recent example of music artist Justin Bieber. He purchased a work from the Bored Ape Yacht Club series, which was popular at the time, for 1.3 million USD but whose value has since dropped drastically to $69,000. See Mok (2022); Frohn and Littman (2022); Daryanani (2022); Petereit (2022).

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Article

Crime as Pop: Gangsta Rap as Popular Staging of Norm Violations

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Abstract: Crime is quantified extensively, mostly in order to prevent it, therefore assuming it as something purely negative. With the concept "Crime as Pop" we argue that such a view is one-sided, since crime is often staged as something that can be attractive and that can be used constructively for different purposes. We investigate this perspective by studying gangsta rap, which we consider a pop-cultural phenomenon that young people relate to in the context of interactive practices of identity construction. The stories told in gangsta rap are used by the youth recipients in a situation- and location-specific manner to present themselves in a certain way. Young people reproduce motifs of success that often characterize gangsta rap. They portray themselves as agentive and stage forms of resistance against people and institutions to which they might otherwise appear passive and powerless. Young people's engagement with gangsta rap thus shows how the pop-cultural phenomena can be appropriated in many different ways. "Crime as Pop" illustrates the contingent connections of cultural phenomena and their appropriation that require detailed empirical reconstruction.

Keywords: pop; crime; gangsta rap; narrative; statistics; youth

1. "Crime as Pop"

Crime is a very popular phenomenon in several respects: It is committed frequently, reported on and staged extensively in the media, so that it is an integral part of pop-cultural discourse. In the following, we will investigate gangsta rap to outline a perspective that devises crime as an element of pop culture. We assume that crime in this context is not purely negative. On the contrary: "Crime as Pop" is connected to complex strategies of staging crime as an ambivalent, often attractive and at the same time risky, event, in whose representation recipients are constitutively involved. The example of gangsta rap makes this view particularly clear, as the depiction of criminalized actions and characters is constitutive of this music genre. As an essential component of contemporary culture, gangsta rap is certainly relevant to the question of images and interpretations of crime. In the following, we turn to a perspective 'from below' by using an ethnographic study on the reception and appropriation of gangsta rap, taking a look at how young people connect to motifs of the genre and integrate them into their own narratives and practices.

We expand on this view by first discussing statistically measured attention. Compared to 'traditional' forms of quantifying crime, "Crime as Pop" exhibits particularities that can be analyzed if—as contended in the following—we do not (only) focus on statistics but on stories that are associated with the representation of crime and that enable its broad appropriation. Against this background and with a focus on gangsta rap, we explore how adolescents appropriate stagings of crime.

2. Statistical Measurement of Attention

Statistics are supposed to provide information on the frequency of crimes. Official statistics show how many cases of crime come to the attention of the police and other agencies of the criminal justice system,[1] and the numbers are—of course, depending on the

perspective—more or less high. To give an example: In Germany, the police crime statistics for 2021 count an absolute number of 5047.860 cases of crime; 1,892,003 persons were identified as suspects (BMIUFH 2022, p. 10). The number of cases per 100,000 inhabitants was 60,704 in 2021. The corresponding numbers vary considerably historically and internationally. They can be used—despite the difficulties arising from the fact that each country's official national statistics measure different things—to carry out international comparisons and to determine explanatory factors as to why similarities and differences exist (Harrendorf 2018; Lappi-Seppälä 2018; Nelken 2017).

Further statistical data on crime are collected through offender and victim surveys, which aim to provide more precise information on the frequency and background of offences. Official statistics are rightly accused of only recording crimes that come to the attention of law enforcement agencies and are processed by them. However, crimes often remain institutionally undetected, so that it is necessary to also make the so-called dark field visible through offender and victim surveys, i.e., cases that may escape the attention of the police and public prosecutor's office (Desrosières 2007, p. 10). As these surveys concentrate on certain groups of people and offences, they also do not paint a complete picture of crime (Brown et al. 2019, pp. 67–121; Newburn 2013, pp. 49–80) but still show a relatively high crime rate, as do official statistics. This is especially the case in adolescence, as most young people engage in delinquent behavior at least once in their lives.[2] Official statistics and dark field surveys differ considerably in their conception, but both are employed to depict the reality of the crimes actually committed in a given social or geographical area. They are thus part of a quantification of social processes that goes back to the late 18th century and continues today with the increasing differentiation of statistical methods (Espeland and Stevens 2008; Mennicken and Espeland 2019).

There is another form of statistical recording that is crucial for "Crime as Pop", namely the measurement of crime as something that is *portrayed and staged,* for example, in the media, by tracking the corresponding demand through audience ratings, book purchases, likes, etc. Already in the early modern period, crime was a media event through pamphlets and other printed matter, depicting, for example, acts of violence and executions (Haerter 2010; Peil 2002). Subsequently, this interest became successively greater (Schwerhoff 2011, pp. 181–82). With recent developments in digital communication, representations of crime have become an integral part of everyday life. There is probably no medium today that does not report extensively on crime.

Crime is omnipresent in digital media; its representation reinforces certain images of crime and the threat associated with it in the everyday life of recipients (MacCahill 2014). With the permanent media representation of crime, however, according to Ferrell et al. (2015, p. 171), the boundary between reality and staging becomes questionable, "resulting in the categories of the 'real' and the 'virtual' becoming ever more hybridized". It might therefore be difficult to distinguish where the 'real' and the 'virtual' reality begins and ends, as they become blurred in the media staging of crime.

According to Ferrell et al. (2015, pp. 161–64), gangsta rap is an example of this blurring of boundaries. It reverses the logic of statistical measurements by official offices and dark field surveys. These have as their constitutive reference point the actual commission of crime. For methodological reasons, it may hardly be possible to depict it exactly, but the aim of getting as close as possible legitimizes them. Gangsta rap, however, demonstrates that something else can be measured relatively precisely: The mass attention of this music genre in the public and among certain groups of recipients.[3]

As Espeland and Stevens (2008, p. 417) explain, numbers have a high authority; "people find numbers credible". Recorded music sales and streaming frequencies can be measured more or less objectively. Large-scale attention—millions or even billions of streams, clicks, followers, etc.—can develop a strong authority: What is demanded by many people seems to be worth paying attention to; it thus legitimizes itself (Döring et al. 2021). Crime statistics had already shown that crime is attractive insofar as the corresponding acts are committed millions of times over. With billions of sales and streams of songs (and

of course, movies, books, comics, etc.) that deal with crime and especially violence, it becomes even clearer that crime is not simply something negative that must be prevented but, on the contrary, something that people find attractive or fascinating, for which they provide mass attention and spend money. The quality of crime as something negative and to be devalued, as a 'low culture,' is thus irritated—especially since by no means only disadvantaged youths listen to gangsta rap (Riley 2005). For official statistics and dark field studies, crime is by definition something that belongs to 'low culture' since it is forbidden and must be prevented. Pop-cultural attention, on the other hand, implies that depictions and stagings of crime are attractive and have special appeal or can act as "seductions" (Katz 1988).

In this sense, "Crime as Pop" differs from the mere representation of crime in the media. Crime in the media often follows the logic of official statistics and dark field studies to axiomatically discredit crime and call for its prevention (Surette 2011). These media portrayals often dramatize offences, and they selectively draw on serious crime, such as murders, extremely violent acts, sexual offences, etc. In criminology, the concept of "moral panic" (Cohen 2002) has been established for such dramatizing presentations of crime. According to this concept, crimes are presented by the media as a threat to order and security, and countermeasures are demanded and implemented. Media, politicians, and experts—Cohen (2002, p. 1) speaks ironically of "editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people"—represent the morality and order to be protected (high culture), while crime is the undesirable phenomenon to be suppressed (low culture). As Garfinkel (1956) adds from a different theoretical perspective, this moral imputation is associated with a degradation of the status of those who function as the object of the accusations. These persons are devalued, while the accusers present themselves as representatives of higher values in whose name they speak and whom they protect.[4]

"Crime as Pop" overlaps with these representations. Moreover, in gangsta rap, crime is often stereotyped and exaggerated, and in public discourses of scandalization, gangsta rappers are stylized as a "danger to the social order" (Seeliger 2017, p. 38). At the same time, however, the traditional high/low distinction is irritated and challenged by "Crime as Pop". Compared to the usual portrayals of crime in the media, three differences can be cited for "Crime as Pop":

Firstly, in "Crime as Pop", it is partly the perpetrators who articulate themselves, and they are not anxious to hide their offences but tend to present them publicly. In gangsta rap, rappers boast about particular crimes they have allegedly or actually committed or plan to commit. While official statistics, dark field investigations, and 'established' media reports primarily make visible what perpetrators want to conceal, pop statistics display the attention paid to something that is supposed to be public. Pop-cultural stagings refer to attempts of "self-exaltation". They seek "attention and recognition" (Klein and Friedrich 2003, p. 40), and the presentation of crime is part of this staging in gangsta rap.

Secondly, pop is always associated with a tendency to violate norms and risky behavior (Klein and Friedrich 2003, p. 116). Elvis's hip-swinging, the hairstyles of the Beatles, the drug intoxication in *Trainspotting* etc. are also part of pop culture because they each crossed boundaries in their time. This transgression also applies to the character of the gangster as part of pop culture, to which gangsta rap connects (Leland 2005, p. 232). Violations of norms are presented that cross boundaries—but in a specific way compared to other media representations. Thus, "Crime as Pop" depicts certain types of criminality. Gangsta rappers do not boast about sexually abusing children, for example. Environmental crime, tax evasion, and the like do not serve well for their self-promotion either. Instead, gangsta rappers use norm violations that have a connotation of protest, such as drug use (Leland 2005, pp. 260–81), or that, like violence or misogyny, aim to stage superiority. They speak in part from a delegitimized social position and strive to reverse devaluations in their songs.

Thirdly, media representations of crime often aim to create interest by shocking their audience. People are supposed to be outraged and see themselves as members of a superior moral community (Cremer-Schäfer and Stehr 1990). "Crime as Pop", on the other hand,

hinges on attention. Pop is essentially a phenomenon of appropriation, and gangsta rap also thrives on the attention and appreciation it receives (Dietrich and Seeliger 2013, pp. 119–20). Those who only reject gangsta rap will not buy the songs, will not stream them, and will not spend money on attending gangsta rappers' events. Gangsta rap is often about the—albeit ambivalent, see below—heroization of actors who commit crimes, not about their demonization. Thus, there is also a clear difference here to media "moral panics".

These three points illustrate central characteristics of "Crime as Pop" in comparison to the representation of crime in official statistics, dark field surveys, and 'established' media reports on crime. "Crime as Pop" refers to pop-cultural mass attention, in the context of which crime is often staged by (alleged) perpetrators themselves; crime appears as a form of protest and self-assertion that can be attractive and appealing. The devaluation of crime as an unacceptable kind of 'low culture' is challenged by "Crime as Pop". Nevertheless, crime cannot simply be portrayed in a positive light. In "Crime as Pop", it does not readily become an element of 'high culture,' but ambivalences are presented that tend to contrast a high/low differentiation. This balancing act of presenting crime as attractive and risky at the same time, we suspect, points to particular narratives.

In this article, we aim to reconstruct this narrative balancing act. Using gangsta rap as an example, we ask what lies 'behind' the statistics of attention measurement. The statistics show that gangsta rap is a phenomenon that is popular with a large number of (especially young) people, but we must explore in more detail what this attention actually means for them. From our perspective, this point should not be approached on the basis of a devaluation of criminality, but the aim should be to fathom what attention to gangsta rap and its depictions of offences and norm violations actually means for recipients.[5]

3. Narratives of Gangsta Rap and Their Appropriation

3.1. Gangsta Rap as Narrative

Gangsta rap is attractive to a particularly large following (Baker 2018; Keyes 2002). For a deeper analysis of its success story, it is necessary to take a closer look at the story of success that it recounts. Gangsta rap taps into the most successful and well-known narrative of the Western world: "from rags to riches" (New York Times 2003, cited in Smith 2003, p. 80; see also Boendel and Kargoll 2021, p. 315). Stories cannot be told arbitrarily; there is a cultural "common stock of plots" (Polletta 2006, p. 21) that can be drawn upon to make stories understandable and plausible. Additionally, the story of success, according to which someone rises from misery ("rags") to wealth and success ("riches"), is the central story of the Western world and possibly beyond it (El Ouassil and Karig 2021). In gangsta rap, success is staged extensively: As monetary success using status symbols, as sexual success through the portrayal of submissive women,[6] as social success in the sense of popularity with fans and recognition in the peer group, as physical strength, and so on. Gangsta rap refers to power and agency. Well-known rappers earn considerable sums of money (examples in Baker 2018, pp. 225–37)—a kind of success that stands in sharp contrast to the original narrative of gangsta rap, which refers to the lives of disadvantaged black youth in the US, to "stories of black ghetto life" (Rose 2008, p. 4). Rappers seem to be able to be very successful despite this environment, which is often perceived as difficult and problematic. The texts and images of gangsta rap thus reproduce the story "from rags to riches" and give it specific twists through which recipients can relate to gangsta rap in different ways. Ultimately, it is the recipients themselves who give pop-cultural phenomena a special meaning; depending on the context, stories can always be interpreted differently (Polletta 2006, pp. 171–75). However, previous work on gangsta rap has identified various motifs that can be taken up in processes of appropriation, and combined with the "from rags to riches" narrative, offer a high level of appeal for recipients.

Such a motif is that of *self-assertion*, which refers to the almost heroic characteristics of gangsta rappers. Stories of gangsta rap tie in with this motif in that individual rappers stage themselves as extremely capable of acting and asserting themselves, especially with reference to the character of the gangster who has worked his way up to riches (also)

through crime (Boendel and Kargoll 2021, p. 190).[7] Offences are celebrated with which one presents oneself as great and superior. As Ahlers (2019, p. 468) cites the example of a particularly successful gangsta rapper in Germany ("Kollegah"): "It is evident that his artistic identity or *persona* is a mixture of the hustler, criminal and pimp stereotypes [. . .]. He very soon establishes his self-representation as the boss, even using this for his album titles (*Boss der Bosse* [Boss of Bosses], *Bossaura*)". Gangsta rappers seem to be able to realize a heroic rise due to their assertiveness and cleverness, which contrasts with origins—a "ghetto"—that are often portrayed as bleak, discriminatory, and disadvantageous. They are not 'pure' heroes, as their actions obviously contradict traditional moral categories and legal guidelines (Watts 1997). They can be described as "anti-heroes" (Lena 2012, p. 463) who nevertheless appear heroic and have a broad appeal. The violation of norms and the heroization of the gangster are an integral part of pop culture. Gangsta rap picks up on this attractiveness of norm violations and integrates them into the heroized plot structure of the "rags to riches" narrative.

Another motif that directly follows from narrative heroization but gives it a specific turn is that of a *stable, authentic identity*. Well-known heroic stories combine with an inner conversion of the hero (El Ouassil and Karig 2021): He becomes more mature, wiser, more prudent, etc. with his experiences. In gangsta rap, the hero or rapper is instead portrayed as someone who, despite his success, remains at the core who he is and has always been. Part of the staging of authenticity and realness in gangsta rap is the statement that one can remain connected to one's origins and thus at least to a part of one's former identity, so that gangsta rap is, in a sense, anti-educational: A person does not have to be formally educated or otherwise transformed but can be successful and street-smart if they remain themselves. Despite all socio-economic advancement: "Ghetto" and "street" remain key reference points of a gangsta rapper's identity (Smith 2003; see also Rauch 2019, p. 81). According to Rose (2008, p. 38), this imputation of an enduring, authentic identity gives "fans a sense that they themselves have the potential to reach celebrity status, to gain social value and prestige while remaining 'true' to street life and culture, turning what traps them into an imagined gateway to success". Success is therefore possible without revealing that it would require self-conquest and alienation from one's origins. You remain who you are and can still be successful, which in turn legitimizes that you are valuable as a person.

Another motif is *resistance*. Narratives of heroization are often associated with extensive mobility and travel. Not so with gangsta rap, whose main protagonists stage authenticity by being able to assert themselves against all the adversities they face in their milieu of origin. By claiming to remain true to themselves while being successful, rappers remain connected to their environment and their origins.[8] Their success unfolds against all impositions, and by resisting them, they prove their assertiveness. What marks heroes in the first place are "heroic deeds" (Broeckling 2020, p. 40). While socially critical academics often point out that living in precarious conditions makes people victims of society, this is negated in gangsta rap. Rappers locate themselves in 'their' neighborhood and 'their' peer group and attest to the possibility of being active and successful. The greater the resistance and disadvantages, the greater the ability of the individuals to assert and defend themselves. Those who overcome powerful opponents—and stage this strength widely—prove to have the capacity to act (El Ouassil and Karig 2021). Dissing and fighting with rival rappers as well as against elites, discrimination, the police, or the mainstream are part of this staging. In gangsta rap, breaking the rules is proof of the possibility of overcoming resistance and succeeding—even at the risk of tragic failure, as Riley points out (Riley 2005).

These three motifs—self-assertion, stable identity, and resistance—could be expanded, which is primarily an empirical task. They illustrate that the "rags to riches" narrative is harnessed and commodified in a special way in gangsta rap, so that it can be attractive for heterogeneous groups of recipients. Gangsta rap offers a polysemous, broad range of possible references (Dietrich and Seeliger 2013). These references can be used to identify with songs, characters, or the genre as a whole by comparing one's own life situation or desires, interests, and experiences with the narratives presented (see Loseke 2019, pp. 7–9).

3.2. Narrative Appropriation

Thus far, we have described narratives and motifs that characterize gangsta rap as a pop-cultural product staging crime in a special way. However, "crime as pop" is essentially a phenomenon of appropriation, which is to be understood as a creative, interpretative process "in which there is no inevitable correspondence between coding and decoding" (Hall 2004, p. 77). The framing of meanings (encoding) and their appropriation (decoding) can differ, so the latter must be examined empirically.

In the following, we exploratively reconstruct the meaning of the motifs presented from the perspective of young people based on selected excerpts from field protocols. The protocols and findings are taken from a research project that is currently ongoing; in this project we study interactive identity practices of young people with an affinity to gangsta rap.[9] Our focus is on the question of how young people—who are often the center of attention in public discussions about gangsta rap—perceive the norm violations associated with gangsta rap, and if applicable, assign a special meaning to them. In a total of four facilities of open youth work[10]—i.e., in facilities where young people can spend their free time with socio-pedagogical guidance—we conduct ethnographic observations and group discussions in order to collect relevant practices and stylizations as well as conversations of the youths. The corresponding data makes it possible to analyze whether and how the young people connect to the narratives and specific motifs just described.[11]

Against this background, we describe the initial findings from the research project using ethnographic data on one of the facilities. Given the visitor structure and the local setting of this institution, our data refers primarily to male youths who live in a segregated part of a large German city. These structural categories were made relevant by the young people themselves during our fieldwork, for example by pointing out 'their' neighborhood.[12]

We selected the excerpts from the field protocols by identifying passages that relate to the gangsta rap motifs presented. These passages were compared with each other and analyzed by the research team. We have translated them from German into English for this article. It should be noted that the findings are preliminary and will be specified as necessary in the further process of our research. Nevertheless, we assume that they provide a consolidated impression of the appropriation of gangsta rap as a pop-cultural phenomenon.

(a) Success

The representation of success is constitutive for the main narrative in gangsta rap: "from rags to riches". If one takes into account the often marginalized position of the speaker, the relevance of motifs such as self-assertion and resistance becomes particularly clear. In gangsta rap, these motives and the pursuit of success are portrayed through style and linked to criminality through the character of the gangster. Our empirical data shows that the young people who participated in our study also stage their social, sexual, or other success in narratives to each other. In the context of their aesthetic and stylistic references to gangsta rappers, fashion plays an important role and can symbolize financial success. Accordingly, our ethnographic observations revealed that the youth recipients almost exclusively wear clothes with brand symbols or lettering, with Nike and Adidas occupying a dominant position alongside luxury brands. This mix of streetwear with expensive luxury brands and jewelry was worn and popularized early on by gangsta rappers. Wearing luxury brands—Palm Angels, Moncler, or Balenciaga, among others—can function as a status symbol that, according to Bengtsson (2012, p. 684), can be part of a "gangsta style" in the sense of representing "expensive consumption". However, since the clothes and accessories of these brands are hardly affordable for large parts of society, and apparently, also for the youth in our sample, a discrepancy between financial resources and self-portrayal became apparent. Some of the young people who wore brand-name clothes dealt with this discrepancy by acknowledging that the brands were counterfeit, thus indicating that what counts for them are the brands as signs and symbols, not their genuineness. Nevertheless,

some young people marked their clothes or accessories as genuine and stated that they could afford the brands. The following excerpt from a field protocol, which focuses on an interaction with a 12-year-old youth ("Dragan"), illustrates the relevance of luxury brands, the discrepancy described, and the connection to gangsta rap:

> *Dragan answers that the film "House of Gucci" will be released in cinemas next week. He adds that he definitely wants to see it and tells me that he used to exclusively wear Gucci himself. Astonished, I ask him if he wore real Gucci clothes. He replies that some of them were also real. "But aren't they incredibly expensive?" I ask further. "It's OK," Dragan answers and says that3 sometimes he got Gucci-pieces as a gift. For Christmas or something. "And now you only wear Adidas, it looks like," I say laughing, looking at the black trousers with the white Adidas stripes, the black hoodie with a big Adidas emblem on the chest and the Adidas shoulder bag. I have seen this outfit on him many times before. Dragan jumps up and happily tells me that he used to wear only Louis, "Louis Vuitton" he adds, and then Gucci and then Nike and now Adidas. (. . .) I still have a lot of questions, but Dragan has already been fidgeting a bit and now asks me if I would like to play table football with him. "Sure," I say, and we go over to the adjoining hallway where the football table is located. While we play, Dragan casually tells me that he is a Capital fan. "Capital Bra?" I ask and Dragan nods enthusiastically. "Oh, I see," I laugh, "that's why the Gucci and the switch to Adidas?" Dragan confirms and explains that he always wore exactly the brands that Capital Bra was wearing at the time.*

In the passage, Dragan himself refers to the brand "Gucci". However, he does not initially address why he "used to" wear exclusively Gucci clothes and how the change came about. The fact that wearing these clothes is not a matter of course but rather arouses astonishment due to the high price of the products is expressed in the ethnographer's questions. She articulates the obvious contradiction between a rather disadvantaged living situation, which is often described as such by the young people themselves, and wearing expensive clothes. Since Dragan does not react indignantly to the insinuation that he can probably hardly afford the clothes, he too seems to acknowledge the discrepancy. He tries to resolve it, or at least to provide an explanation, by stating that only "some" of these clothes were genuine. At the same time, he puts the association of Gucci as "incredibly expensive" into perspective and thus presents himself as a person who is not further impressed by the prices. Expensive brands seem to be quite affordable for him, at least in part. After all, some of his clothes from Gucci are "real", so he confirms that he has or has had sufficient financial means. The contradiction between rather precarious living conditions and economic prosperity is thus not completely resolved but persists. At least financially and symbolized by owning and wearing luxury brands, Dragan—or at least people around him who can afford to give him expensive gifts—seems to be successful.

In the continuing interaction, the connection between the success or prosperity motif and gangsta rap becomes clear. The ethnographer points out that Dragan now wears Adidas clothes exclusively, whereupon he first lists different brands that he has worn exclusively one after another. He begins with the brand Louis Vuitton, which he initially only calls by its 'first name' ("Louis"); only for the researcher he indicates that it is Louis Vuitton, so he conveys a special familiarity with the brand. How and why the change of brands came about, or why he became enthusiastic about these specific brands, is not explained in more detail at this point. However, after the conversation about brand-name clothing was broken off by Dragan, he mentions during the table football game that he is a "Capital fan", i.e., a fan of the gangsta rapper Capital Bra, who is well-known and very successful in Germany. Dragan himself does not make any explicit connection to the previous topic of brand clothing; only when the ethnographer asks, based on contextual knowledge, whether "Gucci and the switch to Adidas" can be linked to Capital Bra, a connection between the young person's clothing preference and his rap idol is drawn.[13] This connection is confirmed by Dragan, so that the rapper's function as a fashion model becomes clear. Accordingly, a brand does not stand for itself, even if it is a luxury brand. It is attractive for style appropriations if it is exemplified by a prominent gangsta rapper

(Ege 2013, pp. 200–7). Even a brand like Adidas, which can hardly be described as a luxury brand, can be used for aesthetic self-expression, provided it is promoted by a suitable role model.

(b)   Self-assertion and Criminality

According to Dimitriadis (1996, p. 189), the character of the gangster, which is constitutive of gangsta rap, functions as "a ready-made tool for male teen rebellion". Particularly based on song lyrics, Dimitriadis describes how, during the popularization of gangsta rap in the late 1980s and 1990s, a gangster narrative with which this "ready-made tool" was established prevailed. Appropriation, however, is a complex process that cannot be explored primarily through texts. With our data, it is possible to break down this complex process more precisely.

If we look at the "ready-made tool" of the gangster character, then for the young people in our field it is closely interwoven with stories of successful self-assertion in which criminal action can play a role. The success just described, which can manifest itself, among other things, in the wearing of exclusive brand-name clothing, is framed in a special way because it is seen as a symbol that someone—by whatever means—can assert himself and overcome resistance. Gangsta rappers appear as highly empowered actors who can act cleverly to obtain large sums of money. For example, the rapper Xatar is repeatedly named by the young people as someone who can authentically talk about crime. This is also the case with Bari (19 years old), who recounts the following about Xatar:

> This one is definitely real too. But the old things are better, Bari points out. Meanwhile, he [Xatar] has become a real entrepreneur, Bari explains. I should think about it: he now owns a kebab shop, a record la3bel and all that. He had really made something of himself and really achieved something. But he [Bari] truly celebrated the gold robbery, that was really good. Bari also recommends that I watch an interview of Leeroy with Samy, in which he talks about the gold robbery that he committed together with Xatar. They made 1.8 million euros. That's not like selling a few packs here, Bari comments. Think about it, Bari continues, they dressed up as policemen and one of them hid in a bag, you must come up with that first.

This excerpt is exemplary for similar descriptions of Xatar in the field. It follows the ethnographer's question about what music Bari likes to listen to. In addition to French rap ("here it looks like at them at home, with all the skyscrapers"), the youth names the rappers O.G ("he's really real") and Xatar. These statements, as well as the reference to Xatar, are closely connected to the imputation of authenticity, which is central to rap in general and which we will discuss in greater detail below. The excerpt also makes it clear how important success is: Xatar has "really made something of himself and really made it". He seems to have become a successful entrepreneur, evidenced by having his own shop and record label. Such attributions, which are characteristic of gangsta rappers (Baker 2018), imply self-assertion and agency, especially against a background of precarious biographical circumstances. Accordingly, Xatar is very successful and can assert himself. Young people appreciate that—but this status also seems to jeopardize his standing as a credible, 'real' gangsta rapper: His "old stuff was better", while now he is "a real entrepreneur". Good rap and entrepreneurship seem to be at odds with each other. Nevertheless, Xatar knows what he is rapping about, since he himself was a criminal, and a relatively big one at that. The gold robbery is described as "really good", so it meets with approval from the young people. It is not rejected by Bari on a moral level but is evaluated as particularly successful ("1.8 million"; "not like selling a few packs," i.e., not like selling just a little bit of drugs) as well as creative and clever ("you'd have to come up with that first"). Xatar appears as a gangsta rapper who is authentic because he 'really' was a criminal, who is also highly empowered and can be credible despite his new role as an "entrepreneur"—as the following quote will underscore. Bari's assessment of Xatar is balancing and not comprehensively positive. But with the attributions that Xatar "really made something of himself and really made it" and that the robbery "was really good", it becomes clear that criminality can be

attractive in the staging of gangsta rap. Xatar functions as a positive projection surface for the youth in the field. This is all the more true since Xatar describes himself as someone who comes from a precarious background and was a refugee (Seeliger 2021, p. 64).

(c)   Stable and 'Authentic' Identity

A central motif for gangsta rap is local attachment. Well-known rappers highlight their financial success and emphasize their social advancement (Smith 2003). However, they maintain references to their origins. In their lyrics and videos, they refer extensively to their origins and the milieu they come from (Rose 1994).

The discrepancy between successful entrepreneurship and precarious origins is also perceived by the young people. Using Xatar as an example, a youth (Hamza, 18 years) reports

that Xatar and SSIO live in [luxury district] and only come here to make their videos— because of the high-rise buildings and because it's dirty and all that. I ask him what he thinks about that. "Let t3hem," he answers briefly. After a short pause, he adds that Xatar is also doing some correct stuff. He has this kebab shop, Hamza explains, and after the last shoot he had set up a large table here and all the children were invited to eat from a huge kebab skewer.

The youth's narrative suggests that the rappers are not seen as members of the neighborhood but as coming from outside. For the imagery of his videos, Xatar uses the socio-spatial environment of the youth ("high-rise buildings"; "dirty"), which stands in stark contrast to his current residential neighborhood. Hamza's short answer to the question about his opinion in this regard apparently does not pay any further attention to this fact, but in the designation of the rappers ("them") the demarcation is additionally reinforced. After a short break, Hamza takes up the topic again by saying that Xatar nevertheless "is also doing correct stuff". With his kebab action, Xatar seems to be interested in the neighborhood. He seems to be or to have remained connected to it despite his success. He may only use the neighborhood as a stage for video recordings, but there seems to be a continuing bond. Xatar remains true to himself and his origins, according to this portrayal, by caring for the neighborhood and the children who live there. Success and origin are therefore reconcilable. Keyes (2002, p. 171) also notes this motif, stating: "As they move up the socioeconomic ladder, rap artists generally do not forget their humble beginnings". This is precisely why, Keyes argues, rappers become the heroes of young people, as they simultaneously symbolize success and remain connected to their origins. Despite their social and economic mobility, they appear as role models with whom one shares common ground and with whom one can identify.

(d)   Resistance

We noted at the beginning that "Crime as Pop" irritates the traditional distinction between high and low culture. Crime, such as Xatar's gold robbery, is in a way even celebrated by some youths as proof of the authenticity of gangster portrayals. This kind of crime is not disapproved; the youths do not mention the harm that it may cause but they appreciate the courage and cleverness to which it attests. It takes on a semblance of resistance against disadvantageous, oppressive living conditions, such as those repeatedly associated with gangsta rap (e.g., Lamotte 2014; Riley 2005; Rose 1994).[14] Discriminatory notions of people and places seem reversable in rap and appear transformable into attributes of honor and pride (Bengtsson 2012; Judy 1994); likewise, criminality can become evidence of assertiveness and strength.

But the demonstration of resistance against norms and laws does not always have to refer to 'big' crimes such as robbery, murder, or drug dealing. More minor forms of deviance can also be staged with the help of gangsta rap—in a kind of game that negotiates which norms are valid in a social space and how or whether they are enforced. The following excerpt illustrates this game-like negotiation. It describes a sequence of interactions in the youth center where listening to gangsta rap is prohibited if the songs contain content that can be interpreted as misogynistic or glorifying violence and drugs:

Then the young people who have been sitting on the couch with their backs to the rest of the room turn around and the whole group in the chill corner looks towards the bar with expectant grins on their faces. The music has got a bit louder. I pay closer attention to the lyrics and a few words come up that I immediately classify as not conforming to the rules of the youth club. Then one of the staff members walks towards the young people with determined steps. Halfway there, he says loudly that they should skip it and that this is a deliberate provocation. Turning to Deni, who is apparently connected to the box, he says he exactly saw how Deni turned his head. The young people laugh, and Deni starts the next track.

The situation described in the field protocol is about the music selection in the youth club. Deni (16 years old) is connected to the PA with his smartphone and has already played some gangsta rap tracks. This situation is not unusual for the youth club. However, as the young people turn "towards the bar with expectant grins on their faces," it becomes clear that something unusual is happening. By looking at the bar, the staff of the youth center standing there becomes the center of attention. Obviously, the young people know that something special is happening and now expect a reaction. By turning the music up a little louder than usual and by turning toward the bar, the expressive quality of a 'small' violation of norms becomes clear: The young people are playing a song with illicit content. The ethnographer also notices this norm violation and thus confirms it. The subsequent intervention of the staff member is then consistent and as expected; he explicitly recognizes and articulates the provocation. The violations of norms thematized in gangsta rap are thereby used by the young people to flout or play with norms; they exhibit a certain degree of resistance to the rules set by the staff. At the same time, the non-verbal communication of the young people ("expectant grins"; "laugh") makes it clear that breaking norms can be quite appealing and fun, as theoretically laid out in the concept of "Crime as Pop". In this sense, rap does not have to be 'serious' per se, and for example, point to disadvantage. It can also just be fun (Kelley 2012). Through the provocation that the lyrics trigger in the staff, the chosen track has an appealing effect on the young people. They can test boundaries, undermine rules, put staff members to the test, prove themselves, etc. The playful handling of the deviance conveyed in gangsta rap makes these actions possible.

4. Conclusions

As stated at the beginning of this article, official statistics and surveys of crime as well as measurements of the attention paid to pop-cultural stagings of crime represent its most important quantifications. Quantification forms a common point of reference for the cultural perception of crime, and the numbers indicate that crime carries a high degree of social relevance. Statistics on crime prove that it is committed very frequently, and pop-cultural measurements of attention prove the high attraction that depictions of crime experience. From our perspective, a distinction should be made here: On the one hand, there are representations of crime that portray it as something purely negative to be prevented. The concept of "moral panics", for example, refers to such negative attributions. On the other hand, there are more positive or 'alluring,' or at least ambivalent, depictions of crime. We conceptualize "Crime as Pop" as a respective kind of staging that exhibits a particular attractiveness of crime. "Crime as Pop" challenges the purely negative evaluation of crime as 'low culture' and focuses on crime as a phenomenon that receives attention because it is attractive to recipients. This quality is reflected, for example, in the great economic success of gangsta rap and the broad attention it has received internationally. This attention may sometimes be conditioned by stereotypical and discriminatory attributions (Khan 2022), for instance when members of middle-class social milieus assert their distance from a "ghetto" life as the essence of gangsta rap (Kelley 2012; Rose 2008). But there are also numerous connections to gangsta rap when young people engage with and identify with the characters and stories that distinguish gangsta rap. In this article, we have illustrated some of these connections, although further studies are needed to determine the manifold ways in which gangsta rap can be appropriated. This multifaceted appropriation can be

related to "Crime as Pop" in general: It is essentially a phenomenon of appropriation that needs to be elaborated empirically. What pop-cultural, statistical attention measurements point to are ultimately extensive possibilities of connecting to the various representations of crime. They must be researched in detail by focusing on the question of how crime is turned into a phenomenon that 'deserves' and experiences attention and that can be attractive to various audiences. Our contribution provides a small step into this direction.

One possibility we find particularly useful in this context is a narrative approach.[15] Through specific narratives, people can assign meanings to crime that make it attractive. In the case of gangsta rap, they can identify with successful rappers who stage themselves as formerly disadvantaged and discriminated against and who tell of multiple norm violations in their songs, so that they seem to prove that one can be successful despite multiple disadvantages—among other things also by committing crimes. Crime is an authentic and at the same time a staged part of life experiences that one may be proud of and that, even if challenging, do not automatically prevent social and economic upward mobility. One may grow up in a precarious neighborhood but still seem to have opportunities to find a way to climb the social ladder. Deviant behavior can demonstrate a willingness to assert oneself against all odds, which in turn can be emotionally stimulating and yield social status. Benefits can not only stem from 'big' crimes, but also from 'small,' relatively inconspicuous rule-breaking and provocation that young people perform as part of their everyday identity practices. In this sense, "Crime as Pop" makes it clear that pop-cultural phenomena can be harnessed in very different ways. Their appropriation—which quantifications only represent as a numerical entity and thus one-sided—is a complex and contingent process.

Notes

1.   Official statistics were introduced mainly in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, when statistical offices were established in Europe, for example, in Prussia in 1805, in France in 1800, in Sweden already in 1756 (Desrosières 2005, p. 21). The starting point of these statistical-administrative efforts lay in the "need to know a nation in order to administer it" (Desrosières 2005, p. 19).

2.   The exact percentage of offences committed in adolescence depends to a large extent on the exact formulation of the survey questions, the groups surveyed, and the types of offences focused on. However, we can assume that more than 90% of adolescents commit offences that can be considered typical of adolescence (such as theft, drug use, fare evasion, etc.). Muncie (2021, p. 19) therefore speaks of crime as an "everyday part of young people's lives". The vast majority of young people stop committing offences without special interventions, but it must be acknowledged that crime is extremely popular among young people, as the vast majority commit offences.

3.   According to Tricia Rose (2008), gangsta rap in its current form is essentially a product of measured attention. When new measurement tools were introduced in the early 1990s to track the popularity of songs, the result was an unexpected appeal of relatively 'hard' genres such as gangsta rap, which was then massively promoted by the music industry, for example, on the radio and through videos. In the course of new attention measurements and new media distribution possibilities, gangsta rap became an extensively propagated commodity, so that Rose (2008, p. 23) states: "gangstas, pimps, and hoes are products that promotional firms, working through record companies for corporate conglomerates, placed in high rotation".

4.   Critical criminologists, in particular, assume that parts of criminological research and the administrative handling of crime follow a moral devaluation. Hester and Eglin (2017, p. 51) speak of a "correctional criminology", since on the basis of a respective devaluation claims are made to change the individual behavior of offenders. The demand for behavioral change implies that the

behavior is considered undesirable. Following this assessment, we can assume that criminal prohibitions determine a behavior not only as illegal, but also as amoral, as part of a 'low culture' (which of course is not illegal as a whole).

5. An important point of reference for our paper lies in the question of how delinquents can become celebrities or heroes (e.g., James and Lane 2020; Kooistra 1990; Penfold-Mounce 2009). Studies related to this question usually refer to Hobsbawm's (1969) analysis of "social bandits" and the question as to why some of these "bandits"—like their prototype Robin Hood—appear to be heroes. Hobsbawm limited the emergence of social bandits to agrarian societies but described the gangster as a kind of successor to the social bandit (Hobsbawm 1969, p. 113). Recent studies relate a celebrity status of delinquents to the present as well. In this regard, James and Lane (2020, p. 8) emphasize the role of escapism and voyeurism, which they cite to explain the creation of criminal heroes. In our view, this explanation is insufficient, as the staging of crime as a pop event, we assume, refers to the complex narrative balances described above. Penfold-Mounce (2009, p. 107) points to the need to connect "the public's resonance with elements of a good story"; Kooistra (1990, p. 219) identifies a kind of central plot in the heroization of delinquency. We follow up on such findings, but we do not aim at tapping the breadth of popular crime stagings as a whole; instead, we take a detailed look at the narrative appropriation of crime depictions by specific recipients.

6. Gangsta rap is a male-dominated music genre. But of course women can also be important gangsta rappers and deal with gender stereotypes, reproduce them, or subvert them (Suess 2021).

7. To name just one example: The US rapper Snoop Dogg claimed gangsters were his inspiration. He wanted to combine the gangster model with a business model (in Baker 2018, p. 227).

8. It therefore seems problematic when Rose (2008, pp. 51–60) notes that the criticism of gangsta rap and its violent lyrics often ignores the fact that rappers come from disadvantaged and discriminatory backgrounds. She argues that social problems are wrongly personalized and decontextualized when rappers are attacked as individuals. This critique of criticism is problematic insofar as this is precisely a core of the narrative used in gangsta rap, namely the reversal of the assumption that rappers or the youth recipients of gangsta rap are passive victims of social circumstances.

9. Following Michael Bamberg (2012), we understand identity as a multidimensional, interactive performance. The communication and negotiation of narratives and forms of narrative self-representation are of central relevance for negotiating identities.

10. The institutions were selected according to the criterion that gangsta rap plays a significant role on site. The relevance was determined through prior consultation with staff and observation of the music actively selected by visitors. In addition, we made sure to contrast institutions in different local contexts.

11. We thank Katharina Bock and Friederike Schmidt, who participated in the data collection and interpretation.

12. Although the categories are grounded in the field, we are aware that with this selection we reproduce, among other things, the male dominance in the sphere of gangsta rap (cf. Suess 2021) as well as in criminological research (cf. Ferrell et al. 2015, p. 23). In the further research process, we will expand the sample, taking into account an intersectional perspective.

13. Capital Bra had dedicated a track to Gucci at first. Later he switched to Adidas.

14. As Hobsbawm (1969) had already described, the type of offense plays an important role in the appreciation of delinquents, which still holds true today (Penfold-Mounce 2009, pp. 97–101). The decisive factor is the symbolic quality attributed to offenses.

15. There are, of course, many options to stage crime and portray offenders. A narrative approach is one among many; its relevance is confirmed by the recent criminological interest in narratives (e.g., Fleetwood et al. 2019).

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Metal Ballads as Low Pop? An Approach to Sentimentality and Gendered Performances in Popular Hard Rock and Metal Songs

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Abstract: Ballads are often among the bestselling songs of heavy metal and hard rock bands. Within these genres, ballads represent a way to address emotions such as love that are not part of the primary self-understanding of those genres. Still, "genre ideals and style" often seem to be at odds with the sentimental aesthetics of the ballad and its emotional expression and experience. In this article, we take a close look at the sonic, textual, performative, visual, and emotional-somatic articulation of love and the generation of sentimentality in three selected metal ballads. Even if the term "power ballad," which is often used in reference to hard rock and metal ballads, refers to the simultaneity of "heaviness" in the sound and the thematization of love in the lyrics, sentimental ballads in the stereotypically more masculine-connoted genres nevertheless create friction and skepticism in their discursive evaluation, as they generate aesthetic discrepancies between concrete songs and genre conventions. Their quantitative popularity contrasts with their qualitative evaluation. Therefore, in a second step, we analyze the reception of the selected ballads, in particular their discursive evaluations in music reviews, in order to point out the ways of argumentation through which frictions are established. As a result, we show that evaluations are related to how love is addressed in the songs and to the extent of proximity of the ballads to genre rules.

Keywords: popular music studies; gender studies; discourse analysis; reception; evaluation; ballad; sentimentality; heavy metal; hard rock

1. Introduction

Ballads are often among the most popular songs across genres, including heavy metal and hard rock. For instance, Metallica's "Nothing Else Matters" is the band's most-played video on YouTube with 1.1 billion views and more than 859 million streams on Spotify, making it their second most-played song.[1] The 2022 version of Guns N' Roses "November Rain" achieved 14 million views within the first month; the original from 1992 reached number three on the charts.[2] In terms of what can be called second-order popularization, this popularity is displayed in charts or rankings, such as the top 100 music videos worldwide on YouTube, which results in a renewed popularization (Döring et al. 2021). What is remarkable about these sentimental types of ballad is that, despite their quantitative popularity, they are often devalued in journalistic discourses and have hardly been recognized as a serious subject by scholars. The present research gap seems to be related to a triviality bias that assigns the sentimental ballad to an area of popular music hypothetically referred to as 'low pop,' characterized by its inscribed devaluation and ambivalent mode of reception. We call this type of ballad the sentimental ballad in order to distinguish it from ballads in traditional 'folk' music or in medieval or classical literature that not only have in common the characteristic of narrativity but have also gained significantly greater attention in scholarship (Porter et al. [2001] 2013).

In this context, it seems to be precisely the aesthetic and performative production of sentimentality that, in its relation to divergent gender connotations in different popular music genres, is reflected in a discursive feminization in value judgments. This feminine

connotation of ballads in hard rock and metal is accompanied by their devaluation as something low, often affirmed by their popularity, which is itself connoted and devalued as feminine. Such gender connotations seem consistent with Richard Middleton's map of popular music genres, on which stereotypically masculine genres such as blues and rock are juxtaposed with the stereotypically feminine ballad (Middleton 1995, p. 474). Thus, where the ballad as low pop appears in genres with stereotypically more masculine connotations, such as hard rock or heavy metal, ambivalences arise that affect the self-concepts and popular images of such genres. In order to avoid reifying such gender stereotypes, on the one hand, and to account for the diversity of both rock and metal as well as the ballad, on the other, this article examines the aesthetics of diverse metal ballads as well as the discursive construction processes of their gender connotations, including the associated value judgments.

We illustrate the ambivalent evaluation between the song form ballad and the genre metal by assessing three examples: "Don't Want To Miss A Thing" (1998) by Aerosmith, "More Than Words" (1991) by Extreme, and "My Immortal" (2003) by Evanescence. Our epistemological interest lies in determining whether the evaluations of the songs in the relevant discourses of music criticism reveal a devaluation that points to a hierarchization of metal ballads as low pop. While the high/low distinction is increasingly replaced socially, the question arises whether such a distinction becomes significant in the realm of the popular (Döring et al. 2021, p. 6). To this end, and in a first step, we take a multi-perspective look at sonic and textual levels of the songs, the performative and visual levels of the music videos, as well as emotional-somatic aspects, especially the musical articulation of love and the generation of sentimentality. In a second step, we draw on discourse material about the ballad's reception, primarily journalistic critiques from the German magazine *Rock Hard*, in an explorative study of a small selection of cases, in order to highlight evaluation criteria through which frictions between song form and genre are established that might contribute to a high/low hierarchy in popular music.

Following the principle of theoretical sampling, we draw on the three songs as a "chain of selection decisions building on each other"[3] (Strübing 2004, p. 30) that is based on contrasting criteria. The criteria for our selection were the assignment of the performers in the relevant discourse to the genres of heavy metal or hard rock, the gender of the performers and their gender performance, the representation of love in the songs, and the coverage of a broader temporal spectrum of the performers' popularity (Aerosmith has been popular since the early 1970s, Evanescence since the early 2000s). While providing contrasting aspects, the three selected ballads are all products by U.S. bands established within the global proliferation of American rock and metal music. By looking at a part of the German discourse in music criticism, we study the popularity of those ballads in a locally determined focus.

2. State of Research and Situating the Project

The ambivalence between the popularity of metal ballads and their friction with "genre rules" (Fabbri 1981), or with "genre ideals and style" (Lena 2012, p. 15), is also reflected to some extent in research. In his study "The Ballad of Heavy Metal" (2016), Andy Brown changes the perspective of looking at ballads as a deviation of the genre, describing the release of power ballads as singles by heavy metal bands as one key aspect of the increasing quantitative popularity and commercial success of heavy metal in the years 1984–1991. The same time period of heavy metal's enormous popularity is described by David Metzer in his analysis of formal, historical, and discursive aspects of the song form power ballad, where he lists the 1980s metal ballads as one among four phases. For Metzer, power ballads appear across genres. By detaching them from their sole reference to rock genres, he defines power ballads "by the use of both a musical formula based on constant escalation and an expressive formula that combines the euphoric uplift created by rousing music with sentimental themes and ploys" (Metzer 2012, p. 437).

Despite these examples, ballads are among the less frequently addressed topics of metal research. This fact is reflected in sociologist Motti Regev's more general observation that there is a gap between two research perspectives in popular music research. Either research is devoted to the singularities of individual music scenes, or it is concerned with the so-called mass effects of popular culture, all too rarely taking into account the fact that neither the music nor its listeners adhere to such a classification (Regev 2013). Andy Hicken describes a subsequent explanatory approach for the low level of scholarly engagement with metal ballads in this way: When selecting music worthy of study, researchers pick up on insider evaluations from the corresponding scenes. Hence, insider constructions of ballads as irrelevant exceptions within the genre may lead researchers to focus on other pieces of music that are marked as relevant and authentic by members of the scenes. Hicken describes the appropriation of authenticity concepts by scholars:

> "[T]he metal subcultures of the 1980s did, in fact, commonly consider power ballads to be inauthentic crossovers. Music journalists naturally sided with the subcultures on this issue. Popular music scholars may have, too—if we judge their interest by the paucity of scholarship on power ballads and the much larger body of work on the less commercially successful forms of metal." (Hicken 2010, p. 204)

Hence, while the study of hard rock and metal ballads could hardly earn researchers much "subcultural capital" (cf. Thornton 1996, p. 11; Kahn-Harris 2007, p. 121), it may lead to a more comprehensive picture of the whole musical spectrum of said genres. Moreover, focusing on the ballad can potentially contribute to a better understanding of the relation between heavy metal and popular culture in general, as Brown (2016) in his contribution to a corresponding anthology has shown. Furthermore, the ballad is relevant to a broad range of popular music because of its productivity and proliferation across genres, including pop, hip hop, rhythm, as well as blues and soul. Therefore, studying ballads in hard rock and heavy metal can shed light on the genres' borders and their relations to other popular music genres, thus even contributing to a more comprehensive study of what Regev conceptualizes as the pop-rock continuum. Considering the characteristic content and expressive quality of the ballad, its potential study across genres may even open up a comparative perspective on sentimentality and the sentimental in popular music.

While this article will keep its focus on examples from hard rock and heavy metal, the cross-genre relevance of the ballad is the overall topic of our subproject "Low Pop: The Sentimental Ballad" in the Collaborative Research Center 1472 Transformations of the Popular at the University of Siegen in Germany.[4] The project's starting point is the observation that sentimental ballads, as a measurably successful song form, represent the popular of popular music. They frequently occupy the top of the charts, run in heavy rotation on radio stations, and have the highest click counts on online platforms like YouTube and Spotify. In contrasts to ballads' outstanding popularity, their evaluation in the accompanying discourses of music criticism is often ambivalent. Our interest lies in investigating to what extent the discursive devaluation of sentimental ballads reveals the existence of a high/low hierarchy in popular music. For this purpose, we resort to the German compilation series *Kuschelrock*, which assembles, and thus re-popularizes, a selection of previously popularized songs once a year as a CD. Serving as the data basis of our examination, *Kuschelrock* currently includes more than 1300 songs, predominantly sentimental ballads from first releases of the 1950s to the present, among them the three case studies analyzed here. The vast majority of the songs on *Kuschelrock* previously achieved a high position in the German charts; otherwise, they were mostly represented in the US Billboard Hot 100 or the UK Singles Charts. *Kuschelrock* concretely illustrates how the proliferation of Anglo-American pop/rock music (Regev 2013) established itself as a global, seemingly neutral model in Germany and its German-speaking neighbors in the second half of the 20th century. Until the 2000s, the Anglophone model of rock remained virtually untouched on compilations. Only in the wake of the increased popularity of German-language pop music in the 2010s does the overall constellation gradually shift.

The label *Kuschelrock* implies a collection of sentimental ballads that have become particularly popular in the Global North, with a focus on the US and UK. The discourse on heavy metal in particular, as well as on pop and rock in general, is characterized by the fact that "Anglo-American pop-rock became a world model, a source of inspiration and influence on local and national music fields in numerous countries" (Regev 2013, p. 43). Regev has described this global efficacy as an example of the expressive isomorphism of a particular aesthetic. Such isomorphism is not neutral in terms of power relations but is ultimately based on the inequality of global cultural influences. For Metal Studies, as for Popular Music Studies in general, this raises the challenge of critically reflecting on such inequalities. In that sense, we refer to Donna Haraway's (1988) maxim of situated knowledge, as well as to the reflection called for in Adele Clarke's methodology of situational analysis, both of the researcher's position and of the inclusion of the silent, non-visible elements of social situations (Clarke et al. 2018). In this specific case, it follows, among other things, that we need to analyze the image of particular music as part of a specific temporal-spatial and socially configured co-constellation even when their situatedness in discourses remains invisible in favor of a supposed global validity of ideas about rock music. Our account of ballads and their relationship to metal deliberately makes no claim to universal observations. Rather, we understand our case study as exemplary for the reception of U.S. hard rock and metal ballads within the Global North with a focus on Germany.

3. Ecstasy: The Heteromasculine Articulation of Love

3.1. Aerosmith's "Don't Want To Miss A Thing" (1998)

Songwriter Diane Warren wrote "Don't Want To Miss A Thing" in 1998 for the disaster film *Armageddon* (dir. Michael Bay 1998); Aerosmith recorded this and three other songs for the film's soundtrack album.[5] The song is Aerosmith's first one to reach No. 1 on the U.S. Billboard Hot 100, as well as charting in the top ten in 22 other countries in Europe, Australia, and Canada. Stream and click numbers on Spotify and Youtube also indicate it as Aerosmith's most popular song.[6] As a ballad, "Don't Want To Miss A Thing" is not an exception in the band's repertoire but rather represents an important characteristic of their sound as is indicated by further ballads, such as "Dream On," "Crazy," "Cryin'," "Amazing," and "Hole in My Soul," all included in the Spotify list of Aerosmith's most popular songs, as well as by the band's representation on *Kuschelrock* with a total of five songs.[7] It is important to note that the sound of the ballads does not deviate too much from that of other songs of the band. Rather, instrumentation and vocals are used in a remarkably consistent way. In contrast to the following example of the band Extreme, the ballad is neither an exception in Aerosmith's repertoire nor in their sound.

"Don't Want To Miss A Thing" can be described as a power ballad, which David Metzer in his seminal study characterizes as follows: "The songs are defined by the use of both a musical formula based on constant escalation and an expressive formula that combines the euphoric uplift created by rousing music with sentimental themes and ploys" (Metzer 2012, p. 437). In sync with Metzer's definition, "Don't Want To Miss A Thing" continuously increases in the use of strings, drums, guitars, as well as the expressiveness of Steven Tyler's vocals, reaching a climax in the transition from bridge to chorus. At this point of the song, Tyler's scratchy, partly shrill and screeching voice expresses a declaration of love in superlatives: "I just wanna hold you close/I feel your heart so close to mine/And just stay here in this moment for all the rest of time/yeah, yeah, yeah." Such superlatives, similar to 'forever,' 'only,' 'never,' or 'no-one else,' are frequent stylistic devices in the lyrics of sentimental ballads, as our analysis of the 1300 *Kuschelrock* songs has shown.[8] Moreover, the fact that the protagonist of this escalation elsewhere repeatedly addresses the missing of the beloved ("I don't wanna close my eyes [. . .] 'Cause I'd miss you, babe") reveals the combination of "the sorrow of sentimentality and the stimulation of uplift" characteristic of a power ballad (Metzer 2012, p. 441).

Said combination is underscored visually in the music video, which collages the band's performance with clips from the film *Armageddon*. While the video expresses a

sense of sentimentality through (partly tearful) farewell scenes of the film plot, ecstasy receives its visual equivalent in the launch of a rocket. A rocket launch enables various associations, such as a high degree of technical specialization (as in the saying "it's not rocket science"), the "space race" between the Soviet Union and the USA in the 1960s, or today's new "space imperialism" of super-rich tycoons, such as Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos. Not least with the last example, rockets are often plausibly interpreted as phallic symbols in journalistic coverage (Onibada 2021). At the same time, rocket launches are accompanied by highly emotional media coverage and usually by passionately applauding audiences at the respective locations. On an auditory level, a rocket launch is accompanied by an enormous noise, which is replaced here by the song's loudness peak. The music even delays the actual "take-off" by inserting a full additional bar before delivering the chorus in its loudest version, hence emphasizing the ecstatic nature of the performed climax. Reading such audiovisual ecstasy in terms of sexual desire would clearly associate it with a phallic version of erotic pleasure that, while far from being universal, "comes into line with the discursive practices associated with imperialism, capitalist expansion, and scientific risk-taking" that Susan McClary has plausibly identified as dominating strands of European-American modernity (McClary 2002, p. 127). While McClary critically reveals narratives of androcentric sexual power in classical music, she carefully circumvents stereotypical associations of aggression with rock music by stating that said narratives turn "violent [. . .] more often and more devastatingly in nineteenth-century symphonies than in heavy metal" (ibid., p. 130). However, apart from heavy metal's relation to sexual violence being diverse and complex (Hill 2016), it is clear that the combination of a power ballad climax with the pictures of launching a heroic rocket mission connects the video of "Don't Want To Miss A Thing" with narratives of male power that have been well established in the cultures of the Global North.[9]

Interestingly, the song's masculine-connoted power symbolism contrasts the sentimentality of the lyrics and the emotional expressivity of the music as well as the gender ambiguity of Steven Tyler's performance. The singer's exalted gestures and facial expressions, especially the play of closed eyes and his demanding gaze into the camera as well as his extravagant mouth movements, can be read as appropriations "of the elements of appearance that have been associated with women's function as objects of the male gaze," revealing androgyny in heavy metal (Walser [1993] 2014, p. 124).[10] To this degree, Tyler's performance is consistent with photographs and concert videos of Aerosmith from the 1970s and 1980s, which show him in tight-fitting, strikingly patterned, low-cut clothing, with black make-up on his eyes; at concerts he moves expansively across the stage.[11] Hence, the video for "Don't Want To Miss A Thing" combines expressions of sentimentality and uplift with a culturally established heavy metal androgyny that allows for the inclusion of feminine elements without destabilizing heteronormative masculinity. The question remains concerning the extent to which such a reading of the song and video as a heteromasculine articulation of ecstatic love or loving ecstasy is consistent with Aerosmith's reception.

3.2. The Reception of Steven Tyler's Masculinity and Aerosmith's Ballads

The appearance of Steven Tyler's stage persona has been part of the discourse surrounding Aerosmith since the band became popular to a larger audience with their third album *Toys In The Attic* reaching number 11 of the Billboard Hot 200 in 1975. Retrospectively, in a 2016 interview, Tyler puts his gender appearance on stage in context with Aerosmith's music:

> "'I have never been afraid to show my androgynous side because I live through music,' he said. 'I think music is very feminine. In fact, I think I've got a—being a male, you know, like I've got 70, 60, 70 percent feminine in me that I live through, you know. I've got three daughters and a beautiful son and I live through female through my fashions, my hair, the way I dress. It just makes me—it seems to me that it goes along with the music, the Aerosmith music.'" (Toce 2016)

Interestingly, at an earlier point in their career in the mid-1970s, Aerosmith were perceived precisely as distinct from the gender ambiguity that is characteristic of glam rock protagonists, such as Alice Cooper, David Bowie, and Lou Reed, as is evidenced by a 1975 review[12]:

> "Through with each album, they get better at minimizing their weaknesses—(Tyler's sometimes colorless voice, weak ballad material)—and capitalizing on their virtues (Perry's tough, classy guitar playing) it is Tyler's ability to project crude, leering sexuality that makes Aerosmith attractive. Coming after a brief era when rock'n'roll fans in their adolescence were bombarded with the exaggerated sexual ambiguity of Alice, Bowie and Reed, it must be reassuring to have a band that knows everything we've wanted to know about sex all along: that it's dirty." (Robins 1975)

The evaluative demarcation made here between Tyler's sexuality and the gender ambiguity of other artists is brought into a context on a musical level with a demarcation from the "weak" ballads. Via the feminine connotation of ballad pop suggested by Middleton in his map of musical genres, its devaluation is simultaneously constructed in juxtaposition to "male" rock: "Gauging authenticity, then, has often involved a process of raising 'artistic' (male) rock above 'commercial' (female) pop" (Meier 2008, p. 241).

This principle is also mirrored in an interview with songwriter Diane Warren, who associates Tyler with a "macho rock star" masculinity that is making her ballad "Don't Want To Miss A Thing" "cooler" than a female singer could:

> "And so when I wrote the song, what was so cool about when Aerosmith did it, when Steven Tyler sang it, it became a different thing, because if you hear a girl singing that—when I wrote it I thought it would end up being like Celine Dion or somebody like that, you know, back in the day—I mean, who's a great singer—but it's so much cooler to hear someone like Steven Tyler—this gruff, macho rock star, this amazing tough guy—for him to say that lyric, it just brought a whole other dimension to it. I don't think it would have been the same hit, or the same standard, if it wasn't for someone like Steven Tyler doing that song." (Fawbert 2016)

Warren, too, places Tyler's masculinity in a dualistic opposition to the ballad as a genre. On that basis, she then evaluates his performance of this very ballad as an interesting clash and a challenge. By neglecting the androgynous aspects of the singer's performance, Warren emphasizes Tyler's untouched "macho rock star" masculinity as contrasting the femininity of established ballad divas like Celine Dion.[13]

While an award-winning ballad composer like Warren would certainly not devalue the ballad genre per se, metal music criticism, too, agrees on the quality of Aerosmith's interpretation of her ballad, as the following review by the German heavy metal magazine *Rock Hard* indicates[14]:

> "That, for example, Steven Tyler & Gang, after the nevertheless rather disappointing 'Nine Lives' CD, would once again come along with such a commanding performance as on 'I Don't Want To Miss A Thing' (terrific earworm penned by Diane Warren) [...] probably surprises even the most optimistic members of the Aeroforce [...]."[15] (Rock Hard 1998)

The contrasting ratings between 1975's "weak ballad material," suggesting devaluation as low pop, and 1998's "commanding performance" demonstrate the tension within the discourse around legitimate gender roles, genre rules, and authenticity. The accompanying gender connotations of the first with femineity and the latter with masculinity seem to become ambivalent in their evaluation as soon as those songs become popular. The range of evaluations also points to the mutability of these concepts in their interplay with other social discourses when considering the dates of the critiques. Such changes, visible in diachronic perspective, highlight the importance of "temporal-specific listening" suggested by Stan

Hawkins: "Understanding the reception of artists along a timeline tests assumptions based on popularity and success" (Hawkins 2016, p. 2).[16]

Although the scope of our discourse analysis has its limits, it nevertheless allows us to conclude that Aerosmith's interpretation of the power ballad as ecstasy seems to involve no serious challenge to the band's heteromasculine rock band status. Rather, their highly lauded approach to combining the expression of sentimental emotions and feminine sensibility with a powerful performance of uplift is regarded as in sync with stereotypical images of hard rock masculinity. The huge popularity of the song in 1998 thus is no risk to the band's assignment of authenticity in relation to the hard rock genre.

4. Exceptionalism of Intimacy
4.1. Extreme's "More Than Words" (1991)

Unlike Aerosmith, who achieved great popularity on the charts in the U.S. and Europe with several ballads during their 50+ year band history, the reception of Extreme's "More Than Words" emphasizes the song's exceptional status: "'More Than Words' was an anomaly in not just pop, but hard rock; acoustic guitars were standard in many a power ballad, but they were often surrounded by bombastic production and splashy solos" (Johnston 2015). The exceptional status here is established by the deviation from the typical sound of ballads by rock bands at the time of their creation, which again demonstrates the importance of temporality as a category of analysis. Instrumented exclusively with acoustic guitar, with Gary Cherone's soft vocals partly changing into the head voice, as well as the second harmony voice of guitarist Nuno Bettencourt, the song lacks the powerful elements of sonic uplift characteristic of a typical power ballad. Among all the tracks on the album *Pornograffitti* (1990), "More Than Words" is the only purely acoustic one. If the description of the song as an exception initially refers solely to its unamplified sound, specifics of this exception can also be identified in the lyrics and music video. The protagonist of the lyrics describes his need for affection and closeness, his need for feeling that he is being loved. He thus takes on a position in which he shows himself vulnerable: "All you have to do /Is close your eyes and just reach out your hands /And touch me /Hold me close don't ever let me go."

In the music video, the band stages the exception from their usual sound. The video begins with a tracking shot over the knobs of an amplifier, which can be heard humming but is then turned off. Likewise, the bass guitar and the drum sticks are put aside. Those utensils that refer to the sound through which the band experienced genre assignments and which are not used in this song, such as hard rock or funk metal, are visually "immobilized" in the first sequences of the music video. In that way, the music video marks the song as a ballad, or more accurately, it marks the song as the ballad of a rock or metal band. After this exposition, the camera focuses on Gary Cherone and Nuno Bettencourt, moves alternately over the hands and torsos of the two musicians, shows their unbuttoned shirts, their long hair through which they run their hands, their painted fingernails, to a perspective in which both musicians can be seen side by side in one shot facing each other. The tracking shot follows a lustful gaze, which—if it the musicians were read as female—could be described with the term *male gaze* coined by Laura Mulvey. In this sense, Cherone and Bettencourt are simultaneously "looked at and displayed" (Mulvey 1975, p. 11). Since sexuality and desire do not appear fixed in the staging, this also applies to the reception, which allows for polysemous readings and perspectives. The two band members not involved in the performance are later seen in the role of the audience as they wave lighters, referencing the practice at concerts of holding up lighters (or, more recently, cell phones) when a ballad is played, thus also contributing to the framing of the song as a (stereo)typical ballad.

The song and music video convey a sense of intimacy created on an auditory level by the solely acoustic accompaniment, on a lyric level by sharing the protagonist's feelings, and through the visual staging by creating proximity to the physical presence of the two performers. The intimacy in the auditory and visual interaction of the two musicians involves and keeps out the recipients at the same time. This is the paradox of media

technologies, which Kornelia Hahn characterizes with Georg Simmel as "both distancing and intimization" (Hahn 2014, p. 17).[17] The bodily–tactile representation of love through intimacy in the lyrics as well as in the video clearly deviates from that of the conventional power ballad. Thus, the song does not allow any conclusions to be drawn about those "concepts, images, and experiences of power" that characterize heavy metal according to Robert Walser ([1993] 2014, p. 2). Nor can their performance be characterized by "hypermasculinity or androgyny as visual enactments of spectacular transgression" with regard to gender aspects (ibid. p. 109). An extreme turn away from these genre rules as well as from associated stereotypical gender rules is presented in "More Than Words" by *showing* the presence of these rules in their music video performance. By performing exception and especially by simultaneously performing reflection on this exception (e.g., turning off the amplifier, waving lighters), Extreme paradoxically take a position of simultaneous distance and intimacy.

4.2. The Reception of Extreme's Crossing-Over

In a 2015 interview, Bettencourt describes retrospectively how the song's divergence from the band's customary sound caused their record label to hold back on the release: "And they were like, 'Where are we going to put this? Rock stations aren't going to play it, and it's too adult-contemporary. You guys aren't that'" (Johnston 2015). The assumptions of the label's representatives about what recipients want to hear and thus buy (and what not) mirror connections between music industry marketing principles and genre differentiations, as described by Simon Frith: "The marketing and packaging policies, in other words, that begin the moment an act is signed are themselves determined by genre theories, by accounts of how markets work and what people with tastes for music like this want from it" (Frith 1996, p. 76). Lena's industry-based concept of musical genre further emphasizes the importance of genre for the market economy perspective that aims at winning over as many consumers as possible for a musical product. To achieve this, "efforts are directed toward codifying, simplifying, and teaching the genre conventions" (Lena 2012, p. 41). The fact that a deviation, or a "crossing-over," of the conventions expected by the target group represents a marketing challenge explains why Extreme's label showed reluctance to release "More Than Words" as a single: "Crossing over is inherently risky. If it works you gain access to a larger audience but this could be at the expense of your core audience" (Brown 2016, p. 63). That taking the risk of "crossing-over" generally involves the chance of greater popularity, radio airplay, and increased sales of their albums (ibid., p. 64; Metzer 2012, p. 448) was indeed confirmed by the success of "More Than Words", at least from the marketing point of view. However, as Brown reminds us, the band's relation to its core audience was also affected by its crossing-over.

With regard to Extreme's "core audience" in terms of their (hard) rock fans, it is revealing to take a look at the discourse in music criticism not the least since the latter includes evidence on how the evaluation of crossing-over from rock to ballad-pop is combined with assumptions about the genres' gendered connotations. For instance, a review published in the German magazine *Rock Hard* about *Pornograffiti*'s follow-up album *III Sides To Every Story* (1992) refers to "More Than Words" and its popular success in an insinuating manner:

> "The replacement program turns out to be extremely worth listening to upon closer inspection, but it remains to be asked whether EXTREME haven't dug their commercial grave with this follow-up to their big breakthrough. [. . .] Brian May will understand 'III Sides To Every Story', but the little girls will NOT understand. Any bets: this disc will not be a smash."[18] (Rock Hard 1992)

This passage makes use of a stereotypical dualism by assigning the *Pornograffiti* album with its commercially successful track "More Than Words" to a female, and even childish audience, while claiming its allegedly non-commercial successor for adult expert listeners like the male guitar hero of established rock band Queen. Such assignments obviously reify the gendered devaluation of the most popular music as well as its presumably female

teenage audience in contrast to anti-commercial, independent rock music. The latter is then defined by its delimiting from the notion of popular music understood as being commercially successful, which gives rock the possibility of being valued as authentic instead. This dualistic connotation goes along with pop as being stereotypically associated with femininity and rock with masculinity, as Richard Middleton shows in his genre map. The gendering of those connotations suggests an exclusionary effect on a possible evaluation of women as authentic. We are not concerned here with a schematic definition, which the representation on a map might easily suggest, but rather with the awareness of questioning the lower visibility of women because "certain types of people (teenagers, females, and the middle-class) are more likely to be subjectively inauthenticated by other members and this one-sided view is objectified by the analyst" (Muggleton 2000, p. 154–55).[19]

Extreme's crossing-over from their customary sound through the highly popular ballad "More Than Words," including the articulation of love through intimacy, contributes to a discursive feminization of the band that affects their evaluation as an "authentic" rock band and their masculinity. Constructions of metal masculinities run along lines of demarcation from the feminine as well as mark stereotypical notions of (male) norm and (female) deviance at the gender level. Criticism of scholarly research's adoption of this narrative of women's exceptional status in metal is strikingly parallel to the scant attention paid to ballads. This, too, may be an indication of the interlocking construction of authenticity and masculinity: "By marking the female as male reification embodied, scholars make no effort to understand the masculinity itself. At the end of this assumption lies one conclusion: that authentic heavy metal fans and performers are male, and anything else is not real" (Clifford-Napoleone 2016, p. 42).

5. Melancholy, Femininity, and Dark Romanticism

5.1. Evanescence's "My Immortal" (2003)

Our selection of examples presents a spectrum of songs as rich in contrast as possible in order to illustrate the occurrence of ballads in hard rock and metal in the diverse references to genre conventions and modes of representation in addressing love that arise here. As we have shown in our analysis of Aerosmith and Extreme, music crisis tends to evaluate ballads either as weaker or as an exception in relation to other songs of the band's repertoire. Performing a ballad thus affects the bands' discursive attribution to genres, such as hard rock or heavy metal. Still, the male performers of these two bands could reify their rock band status by referring to the power concept of heavy metal and by showing a self-reflexive performance of such genre rules. When we now turn to Evanescence, a female-fronted metal band, performing a ballad, this initially seems to indicate a double exceptional status. Not only does the ballad mark an exception in the genre of heavy metal, but here, in addition, does the gender of the singer. The U.S. goth metal band Evanescence with singer Amy Lee released the song "My Immortal" in 2003, and it reached number 7 on the U.S. Billboard Hot 100 as well as various top 10 rankings in Europe. The single version is a piano ballad with string ensemble and electronic effects, to which the full band is added only in the bridge.[20]

In the lyrics, the protagonist describes her dark, melancholic feelings, such as fears, pain, and tiredness, which she feels due to the absence of the addressee: "I'm so tired of being here /Suppressed by all my childish fears"; or in the prechorus: "These wounds won't seem to heal /This pain is just too real /There's just too much that time cannot erase." The absent person haunts the protagonist like a ghost, robbing her of her sanity: "Your face, it haunts my once pleasant dreams /Your voice, it chased away all the sanity in me." The lyrics can be understood polysemously, as addressing a separation or the death of a loved one, and they have also been understood in both ways in reception.[21] By addressing death, mourning, loneliness, and madness, the lyrics include typical motifs of the gothic genre with its focus on the "dark sides of human nature" and "individual sensitivity" (Braudy 2003, p. 250). Such dark motifs and feelings being associated with the current of dark romanticism in terms of cultural history are also taken up in the ballad's music video.

The video was shot on site of the gothic architecture of the Barri Gòtic in Barcelona, whose canyons of houses seem narrow and hopeless and at the same time empty and deserted. That emptiness is only contrasted by children at play whose lightheartedness, however, seems more like a distant memory, while autumn leaves further emphasize this transience. This scenery forms the background against which a female character embodied by Amy Lee occurs either moving slowly or just lying statically, embodying the sung lines about injury with bandages on her hands and feet. Lying down, in a white dress, with flowing hair and pale skin, she reminds us of the figure of the reclining woman as, for example, Johann Heinrich Füssli nightmarishly depicted her in the painting *Der Nachtmahr* from 1781 (cf. Krämer 2012, p. 16) or as John Everett Millais presents her in the painting *Ophelia* from 1852. Accompanied by Ben Moody on the piano, whose posture conveys a feeling of sadness or depression, the band in the next room marks a point of difference in their powerful performance. With the references to the gothic and black romanticism, the song becomes readable as belonging to the goth genre. Yet this reiteration of genre markers updates the legibility of the genre as the song is being placed within its context (Brackett 2015, p. 195), "relying on an audience familiar with the basic aesthetic structures—the motifs, typical characters and plotlines of the genre" (Braudy 2003, p. 253).

The connection of ballad with the goth genre is of general interest with regard to relations between the ballad as a song form and diverse popular music genres, since not all genres share the same representation of emotionality and sentimentality. In that sense, a goth ballad like "My Immortal" gains an intersecting affective potential from its ballad character as well as from its references to goth. This becomes particularly clear when comparing this example to Aerosmith's "Don't Wanna Miss A Thing." While that power ballad enables Aerosmith to approach emotions such as love despite their rock band status (Metzer 2012, p. 439), such a contradiction does not apply to Evanescence due to the affective overlap between the goth genre and the ballad. The same overlap concerns Amy Lee being a female singer with the connotation of both the goth genre and ballads with femineity.

Amy Lee's role in Evanescence reflects the observation that there is a greater participation of women in bands in sub-genres such as symphonic metal or goth metal, although this usually relates to the task of singing (cf. research by Charlène Bénard described in: Jung et al. 2022, p. 270). Lee's singing is melodic, her clear, bright voice recalling operatic singing styles. This also includes the fact that in her vocal performance, Lee does not use stereotypically masculine-connoted rock vocal styles as described by Suzanne C. Cusick, who uses Eddie Vedder (Pearl Jam) as an example of "a voice with a harsh, forced timbre, a sound so rough it is often hard to distinguish whether he is in tune or not—indeed, the distinction seems not to matter" (Cusick 1999, p. 34). Although Lee does not challenge stereotypical gendered norms in symphonic or goth metal through her singing or her image, what is still not clearly visible or audible is the fact that in addition to her role as a singer with Evanescence, she is also a composer and pianist in the band. Despite rather normative stagings of femininity, as seen in Lee's performance, studies show that the performativity of hyperfemininity in goth scenes is empowering for these women: "Goth women [. . .] seem to take control of their own image precisely by projecting an excessive femininity and sexiness which invites the male gaze only to confound it and keep it at a distance" (Brill 2008, p. 65).

5.2. Genre and Gender Correspondence in the Reception of "My Immortal"

Looking at the song's reception through a music review of the album by the German magazine *Rock Hard*, "My Immortal" is discussed favorably by associating it with good songwriting. In comparison to the already cited review of Extreme's "More Than Words" in the same magazine, the author here does not comment on the ballad being an exception with regard to the repertoire of the band or the genre of their musical work. Naming the Irish New Age Singer-Songwriter Enya as a reference still puts Evanescence outside of the typical genres usually discussed in the magazine.

"On 'Fallen' irresistible hits rule, like the opener 'Going Under,' the impossible to get out of your head 'Everybody's Fool' [. . .] or the ballads 'My Immortal' and 'Hello' with typical Enya characteristics (!), where the main focus is on good songwriting and not on hip coolness. Nevertheless, there are voices that already call "Fallen" a safe album, a plastic product for the masses. And that is absolute nonsense, because ultimately the eleven pieces possess an elementary component of good music in excess: namely soul [. . .]."[22] (Kaiser 2003, *Rock Hard*)

The appearance of the album in a *Rock Hard* review indicates that the magazine's metal fan readership it supposed to accept it as metal album. Although the author mentions the accusation of commercialization and selling-out in the review, he personally rejects it. However, "good songwriting" instead of "hip coolness" and "soul" in the music evince a vocabulary that assigns quality and authenticity for "female metal" but delimits this assignment via a strict separation from male-connoted quality and criteria of authenticity. Because Amy Lee has the role of the singer and thus moves within the legitimate gender roles for women in the goth genre, does not take over any male-connoted parts of metal singing in her vocal style, and transports rather female-connoted feelings (sadness, pain) in the lyrics, she does not challenge any gender-related boundaries in the sense of a queer reading.[23] The ballad, thus, seems to be both genre- and gender-adequate in its depiction of love as melancholy.

6. Conclusions

Our guiding question was how ambivalences are aesthetically and discursively generated in relation to metal ballads and whether a devaluation is evident in the evaluations of ballads in the relevant discourses of music criticism, indicating an axiological hierarchization of metal ballads as low pop. This hierarchy implies that low pop is popular in a quantitative sense but would be considered low in a qualitative sense. Using three examples with conventions in hard rock and metal, we wanted to illustrate the tension between the popularity of ballads and their genre-related friction by looking at differentiations in the representation of love in the audiovisual performances, placing them in relation to the evaluations from the discourse surrounding the songs. It seems that not only the fact that love is addressed contributes to this friction, but also *how* love is addressed and by whom. While the handbook definition of *Grove Music Online* describes ballads simply as "pop songs with sentimental or narrative texts and (usually) a slow tempo" (Porter et al. [2001] 2013), we would add, first, a differentiation regarding the wide range of popular music genres in which ballads can be found and, second, the supplementation of different ways of addressing sentimental topics such as love. The interaction of both influences the ways those songs are valued in the discourse. Regarding heavy metal and hard rock ballads, the valuation varies according to the gender attributions of the performers as well as according to (sub-)genre rules, as the example of Evanescence has shown, but also according to the proximity to attributes such as "power" and "heaviness," as the discourse around Aerosmith reveals. The representation of intimacy in lyrics, staging, and sound seems to create a greater distance between the enormous popularity and its evaluation in metal discourses, at least in the case of "More Than Words."

The aesthetic and discursive distance from genre conventions is closely related to constructions of metal masculinities. While Aerosmith affirms their heteromasculine rock band status in the power ballad "Don't Want To Miss A Thing" with musical escalation and a superlative formulation of love as ecstasy, Extreme are discursively feminized through the crossing-over of their sound and articulation of love through intimacy. Marking them as exceptions in relation to the metal genre thus runs directly along the demarcation of the feminine. Even if this deviation is not (always) connected with a discursive devaluation, it is nevertheless connected with an exclusion from the realm of masculine-connoted quality and authenticity criteria of the genre. The fact that metal ballads achieve great chart placements and other signs of popularity seems to be equally problematic for male and female performers, with the difference that male performers such as Extreme have to

face the accusation of wanting to be attractive to "little girls" in addition to the charge of "selling-out." Whether popular metal ballads are perceived as purely "plastic products for the masses" is linked to the categorization of genre-typical quality criteria despite their popularity. Both Aerosmith's power ballad and Evanescence's goth ballad have in their notions of love sufficient proximity to (sub)genre-typical concepts, such as ecstasy and melancholy. An axiological devaluation of metal ballads is evident when popularity coincides with the most widespread lack of genre conventions, as becomes evident in the example of Extreme's exceptional song.

In the music reviews we analyzed in this article, we find evidence of the genre map modeled by Middleton, which diametrically demarcates hard rock and metal from both the very popular and pop styles. The cited critiques point to the connection in connotations of popularity with pop styles, emotionality, intimacy, femininity, weakness, and feminization. With this article, we have exemplified how exactly such connotations are constructed using the three divergent examples and their discursive evaluation.

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Notes

[1] Metallica "Nothing Else Matters": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tAGnKpE4NCI, accessed on 15 November 2022; Metallica page on Spotify: https://open.spotify.com/artist/2ye2Wgw4gimLv2eAKyk1NB, accessed on 6 December 2022.

[2] Guns N' Roses, "November Rain," 2022 version on Youtube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4_fvXrgAm1A, accessed on 9 December 2022; Guns N' Roses, "November Rain," 1992 Billboard chart history: https://billboard.elpee.jp/single/November%20Rain/Guns%20N%27%20Roses/, accessed on 6 December 2022.

[3] Strübing's formulation in his German-language text is "Kette aufeinander aufbauender Auswahlentscheidungen".

[4] For a detailed description of the research program, see: https://sfb1472.uni-siegen.de, accessed on 17 October 2022.

[5] Among Diane Warren's compositions, over 30 songs, including numerous ballads, have reached the Top 10 on the Billboard Hot 100, including nine number one songs, such as "Look Away" (Chicago 1988), "If I Could Turn Back Time" (Cher 1989), "Because You Loved Me" (Celine Dion 1996), "Un-Break My Heart" (Toni Braxton 1996), and "Have You Ever?" (Brandy 1998).

[6] Artist page of Aerosmith on Spotify: https://open.spotify.com/artist/7Ey4PD4MYsKc5I2dolUwbH; link to the music video "Don't Want To Miss A Thing," uploaded to YouTube on 22 August 2017: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bn8QPRYWAdk, both links accessed on 19 October 2022.

[7] "Cryin'" on *Kuschelrock 8* (1994), "Hole in My Soul" on *Kuschelrock 11* (1997), "Don't Want to Miss a Thing" on *Kuschelrock 13* (1999), "Fly Away From Here" on *Kuschelrock 15* (2001), and "Lay It Down" on *Kuschelrock 16* (2002).

[8] As an example, here are some excerpts from the lyrics of the duet "Endless Love" by Lionel Richie and Diana Ross: "My love, there's only you in my life /The only thing that's right [. . .]/And I, I want to share /All my love with you /No one else will do [. . .]/You will always be /My endless love".

[9] See also Amanda Howell's research on music and masculinity in *Armageddon* and other popular "Militainment" movies (Howell 2015).

[10] Walser refers to Laura Mulvey's essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in which she posits a feminist theory of the pleasure of looking in cinema (Mulvey 1975).

[11] See, for example, the concert recording of the song "Toys in the Attic" from 1975 [date not verifiable]: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U9suQV31jTI, accessed on 19 October 2022.

[12] On androgynous performances of masculinity, see (Auslander 2006; Berressem 2019).

[13] For a discussion on the diva and other images of female pop stars, see (Lieb 2018).

[14] *Rock Hard* is a German music magazine with a focus on heavy metal, which has been in existence since 1983 and is published monthly.

[15] The original German text reads: "Daß beispielsweise Steven Tyler & Gang nach der doch ziemlich enttäuschenden 'Nine Lives'-CD noch einmal eine so souveräne Performance wie bei 'I Don't Want To Miss A Thing' (bärenstarker Ohrwurm aus

der Feder von Diane Warren) [. . .] über den Deich kommen würden, überrascht wohl selbst optimistischste Mitglieder der Aeroforce [. . .]" (Rock Hard 1998).

16   At this point, it should be noted that a spatial situatedness should also be considered in such analyses.

17   With regard to auditive stagings of intimacy, some recordings of popular songs use breathing and other body sounds made hearable by use of compression effects to emphasize intimization (Dibben 2014). In contrast to these elements, the studio production of "More than Words" does neither use this effect nor does it dispense with the delay effect that auditively enhances the perceived distance from the voices. It would be beyond the scope of this article to assess the extent to which these aberrations from what Dibben frames as stagings of intimacy in her 2014 article are due to historical changes in recording technology and its use since the 1990s.

18   The original German text reads: "Das Ersatzprogramm entpuppt sich bei genauerer Inspektion zwar als überaus hörenswert, aber es bleibt zu fragen, ob sich EXTREME mit diesem Follow-Up zum großen Durchbruch nicht ihr kommerzielles Grab geschaufelt haben. [. . .] Brian May wird 'III Sides To Every Story' verstehen, but the little girls will NOT understand. Jede Wette: Diese Scheibe wird kein Smash" (Rock Hard 1992).

19   Muggleton's research draws on early punk research at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham.

20   Older versions of the song exist, the earliest dating back to 1997. One version was released on the demo album *Origin* (2000) and another on the EP *Mystary* (2003). Yet another version of the song appears on the band's fourth album, *Synthesis* (2017). The version on the album *Fallen* consists only of piano and strings; this is also the version on *Kuschelrock 18*. The single, however, is the version in which the full band enters on the bridge.

21   As an example, here is the description of the song as part of a list of sad songs by author Tom Reynolds at the *Guardian*, as well as a Reader Review of the album *Fallen* by Greg Coughlin at the video game website *IGN*: "A whimpering post-breakup tune in which lead singer Amy Lee pitifully mourns the end of a relationship over a piano accompaniment that sounds like Pachelbel after the Prozac wore off" (Reynolds 2005); "'My Immortal' is a song of pain and despair caused by the loss of a family member or very close friend and how it drove her to the edge of insanity" (Coughlin 2003).

22   The original German text reads: "Auf 'Fallen' regieren unwiderstehliche Hits wie der Opener 'Going Under', das nicht mehr aus dem Kopp zu kriegende 'Everybody's Fool' [. . .] oder die mit typischen Enya-Merkmalen (!) aufwartenden Balladen 'My Immortal' und 'Hello', bei denen das Hauptaugenmerk auf gutes Songwriting und nicht auf hippe Coolness gelegt wird. Es gibt trotzdem Stimmen, die 'Fallen' schon jetzt als Nummer-Sicher-Album bezeichnen, als Plastikprodukt für die breite Masse. Und das ist absoluter Quatsch, denn schließlich besitzen die elf Stücke einen elementaren Bestandteil guter Musik im Übermaß: nämlich Seele. [. . .]" (Kaiser 2003, *Rock Hard*).

23   What is not visible in the music video, however, is that in addition to her role as a singer with Evanescence she is also a composer and pianist.

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New Perspectives on Old Pasts? Diversity in Popular Digital Games with Historical Settings

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Abstract: With their increasing popularity, digital games have come to stage notions of history and the past for ever broader circles of recipients, thereby shaping what is understood, interpreted, and negotiated as history in popular contexts. Digital games with historical settings not only adopt already successfully popularized and widely mediated images of history. They also integrate current social debates into the historical worlds they construct and recreate. Using three highly popular representatives of the medium as examples, this article examines how the debates about diversity and the representation of People of Color, which have intensified in recent years, inscribe a particular social self-image into the mediated staging of history and thus offer new perspectives on the past.

Keywords: diversity; digital games; videogames; Assassin's Creed; Red Dead Redemption; Kingdom Come: Deliverance; popular culture; popular history

1. Introduction: Diversity in Society and Popular Culture

In the pluralistic and multicultural present of the Western world, diversity has ceased to be a phenomenon of exclusively academic research and political debate. Looking at popular media such as recent film and television series or other popular formats such as commercials and music videos shows how prominent the topic has become. For example, a commercial for a German discount grocery store displays a diverse cast in its promise of the good life for—really—everyone; a globally operating online mail order company emphasizes cohesion as a core value. Diversity as the epitome of an enriching coexistence of various identities appears here less as an appeal or moral imperative than as a reality that has long been lived and that only needs to be more consciously perceived or made visible.

Similarly, social and cultural diversity is by no means a peculiarity of modernity or especially of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. The debate about its recognition is not even limited to the recent past and present, as medieval and ancient societies discussed diversity under catchwords such as poikilia, variatio, and diversitas ([Toepfer 2020](#), pp. 131–34). From a historical perspective, then, diversity and talking about it are by no means new.

However, something is different today. In 2022, at the very latest, diversity seems to have become omnipresent and an almost universally applicable cipher in political, economic, and cultural contexts. It has demonstrably attracted attention in different spheres of society, as a normative position that is emphatically made popular, pushed by highly diverse social groups, and as an exhibition of an already popular, i.e., measurably noticed, theme in popular culture (cf. Werber et al. Arts 12: x; [Arant et al. 2019](#)).

In this context, the term and concept of "diversity" constitute an attempt to establish a certain (partial) social model, according to which the self-development of the individual can be reconciled with ideas of social justice, sometimes only after fierce resistance, if at all ([Toepfer 2020](#), pp. 139–40). In recent years, it appears, hardly any other debate has led to more conflicts and disputes at more family celebrations and company parties, to more public commentary, op-eds, and social media noise.

However, diversity as an object of intense negotiation is not limited to the present. Rather, a broader view quickly identifies past events and their cultural interpretation in

terms of a contentious politics of remembrance. This is illustrated, for example, by debates about the changing of street names with historical references that are now viewed critically or about the removal of monuments and statues that are considered problematic: Should Hindenburgstraße continue to bear this name? Should the monument to a general who represents oppression and exploitation in the contexts of slavery, colonialism, and warlike expulsion remain, or should it be removed? The tendency to give different identities (social, gendered, cultural, or religious) a greater relevance in memory and historical culture is thus bound up with conflicts and arguments in present-day debates.

As broadly effective motors and mirrors of diversity, not only but especially in historical contexts, popular media and the images of history they present take on an important role. Although still relatively small in number, more and more popular films, literary works, comics, and digital games, which often attract the attention of many across social or cultural boundaries, retroactively afford previously underrepresented groups a historical presence (Lopez 2020, pp. 17–20). As such, they have produced a representation of historical diversity that is in line with recent research in historical scholarship but that, at the same time, also opens the floodgates to confirmations of existing stereotypes as well as to new forms of stereotyping that fail to meet the complexities of historical realities and trade in established clichés. Thus, it is not surprising that popular images and interpretations of past forms of diversity often facilitate further discussion. As a result, it is primarily the popular media that reveal which historical processes, groups of people, and events a society considers relevant or conflictual at a given point in time. It is precisely the popular media, some of which are consumed by the millions and thus shape the everyday experience of broad segments of the population, that can serve as a seismograph for shifts in perspective on the past and unfold the positions from which history is considered, told, staged, or played (Luhmann 2017, p. 9; Chapman 2016, p. 7; Döring et al. 2021, pp. 4–9).

As a still relatively new but increasingly recognized element of the popular mediascape, digital games have joined the debates on diversity past and present. Digital games that make use of historical settings offer new dimensions of staging and perceiving the past through their inherent interactive access to history and their individually intensive as well as mass reception (Köstlbauer et al. 2018, pp. 7–8). Compared to games with present or future settings, historical games add another dimension to the question of whether the representation of diversity is appropriate to the context presented in each case. This is so because appropriately handling history in games is additionally charged with elements steeped in a society's cultural memory and its debate on the proper interpretation of specific historical events (Hammar 2019, pp. 33–36; Erll 2017, pp. 135–37).

The games' approaches to past worlds open a broad complex of questions that can be asked of the past represented in each case: On what kinds of diversity, e.g., ethnic, religious, sexual, do games with historical settings focus? To what extent does the representation approximate the historical reality of the staged identities? Even more important for the placement of the medium in the discourse is the relationship between currently prominent processes of negotiation and the underlying historical realities. To what extent does the digital game—as with other media—project contemporary sensitivities back onto past worlds by representing diverse identities that in the concrete historical context did not exist, as the individuals belonging to them did not enjoy the possibilities for action and freedom depicted in the game? Does diversity popularize a (new) perspective on history that undermines what we typically understand as the high-low distinction? In the case of diversity, "high" appears as a normative claim to adequately represent social realities, while "low" refers to the incorporation of the phenomenon for economic purposes, for example, in a way that neglects historical hierarchies and power structures (cf. Werber et al., Arts 12: x). Moreover, if this is so, how does this change already successfully popularized notions about the past that are at best only loosely connected to historical realities?

This article seeks to answer these questions on the basis of a selection of very popular digital games that present ethnic and racial diversity in past worlds, i.e., excerpts from the historical lives of People of Color. With the term People of Color, we refer to all groups of

people who have experienced and/or are experiencing discrimination and exclusion and who have encountered and/or continue to encounter various forms of inequality due to cultural or physical attributions assigned by the white mainstream in a society, especially in relation to skin tone and color (Lopez 2020, p. 6; Hunter 2007, pp. 237–38).

In past iterations of digital games, People of Color were at best marginalized and usually presented in stereotypically exaggerated ways, if they did appear at all (Gray 2020, pp. 243–44; Mukherjee 2017, pp. 103–5; Srauy 2019, pp. 479–81; Dickerman et al. 2008, pp. 23–26). This is even more surprising given the fact that the gaming community is by no means homogeneous or even largely white and male. People of Color make up a significant part of this community worldwide; in the USA, they even constitute the majority (Kiel 2020, p. 205). At the same time, many players have been calling for more diversity and a stronger stance on social issues by development studios and publishers for quite some time (Yee 2015; Le Ngoc 2021). This process also includes, as one example among many others, the active use of live-streaming platforms by Black gamers to expose racism in the gaming culture and community and to deconstruct hegemonic narratives in digital games (Gray 2020, p. 241).

If we look on the consumer side, it seems obvious—even if only for economic reasons—that game developers should be more and more open to the fact that players who have experienced racism or discrimination in their own lives have different approaches to the (lack of) cultural, racial, and ethnic diversity in digital games.[1] In stark contrast to this, the games industry in particular, similarly to the case of Hollywood (Erigha 2015, pp. 80–83), has also repeatedly been said to lack diversity and even to have a "diversity problem" (Ramanan 2017). Women, and especially members of ethnic and racial minorities, are significantly underrepresented on the producing side of digital games, in contrast to the consuming side (Browne 2020). For example, an international survey revealed in 2018 that only one-third of the world's game developers belong to groups that are considered non-white (Land 2020, p. 93). Finally, it can be expected that popular, i.e., broadly noticed, media products tend to be more mainstream in favor of worldwide marketability and thus use diversity less as a social challenge than as an additional representational element and feel-good factor (Hammar 2019, pp. 64–66, 81). It is precisely this multilayered tension among recipients, producers, and economic factors that is reflected in the finished product of the game and that makes a critical look at this segment of diversity representation particularly appealing.

Similar to the increasing representation of women and, more recently, queer identities (e.g., Fink 2018; Ruberg and Shaw 2017; Ruberg 2019; Schwarz 2023, pp. 155–79), this area of societal diversity in popular digital games does garner even more attention in academic analysis (e.g., Wainwright 2019, pp. 119–52, 196–206; Hammar 2019; Mukherjee 2017; Murray 2017). This has given rise to an international field of research within which this article situates itself.

The three games with historical settings selected for our purpose come from the action-adventure genre. With at the most an elaborate narrative and a visually detailed open game world, this genre offers multilayered interaction possibilities and thus provides the prerequisites for a detailed representation of diversity, which we can approach through the analytical lenses of narrative, visual design, and game mechanics, i.e., the rules of a game and the possible interactions between players and the game that result from the interplay of these rules and the players (Frasca 2003, pp. 221–37; Schwarz 2011, pp. 75–77; Schwarz 2021, pp. 567–77). Moreover, the three exemplary games chosen for our analysis cover very different historical, geographic, and cultural time periods and spaces. This range enables a comparison of historical representation and the inclusion of diversity aspects that is sensitive to the temporal distance between the present of game production and use and the staged past. The first game we examine is *Red Dead Redemption II* (2018), which sold over 45 million copies worldwide and charted at number one in Germany immediately after release, with its Wild West setting in the United States of the late 19th century dating back just 120 years (Leschnikowski 2022; Game 2018). We then turn to the content addition

(DLC) to *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* (2013), which is entitled *Freedom Cry* (2013) and addresses a culture on the threshold of modernity with the Caribbean slaveholding societies of the 18th century. In contrast to the immensely popular *Black Flag*, sold at least 15 million times, we can assume that *Freedom Cry* sold significantly less, probably a few million copies (Andric 2023). In several respects, the world of *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* (2018), our third game, which is modeled on the European Middle Ages of the early 15th century, is the furthest removed from the everyday lives of 21st-century players. In the first week after its release alone, about one million copies were distributed; by the second week, the title was among the bestselling games in many European countries, including in Germany, and had sold more than five million copies by mid-2022 (Strohhut 2022; Pinsker and Weber 2022, p. 194).[2]

These three games allow us to examine, by way of example, if and how the debate about and the claim for diversity have entered the popular medium and how this, given the analysis of only three—though highly popular— games may expand the images of history that games offer to their users, what the relationship is between representation and historical reality, and how this may modify the understanding of history underpinning the digital game worlds. By way of our approach, it is also possible to investigate potential motives for specific types of representation, which can of course be normatively based as part of high culture. Development studios may also be concerned with adopting newer, more 'appropriate' perspectives on history and, instead of exhibiting what is already popular, focus on attaining politically correct attention to diversity in the sense of, for example, Moritz Baßler's concept of the New Midcult (Baßler 2021, pp. 145–47). At the same time, however, digital games are economic goods in addition to being artistic and entertaining products. Therefore, the histories they stage must be globally connectable and broadly comprehensible, and thus saleable worldwide (Schwarz 2020, p. 27). If diversity already attracts much attention in popular culture, an indicator of its prominence in so-called low culture, this can be an equally valid reason for the producers to integrate it more substantially into the games as a means of generating additional popularity.

2. Ethnic and Racial Diversity in Popular Action-Adventure Games with Historical Settings

2.1. Object and Subject in the Slaveholding Society of Assassin's Creed: Freedom Cry

The very popular game series *Assassin's Creed* is the most successful series of historical games, with more than 200 million units sold as of September 2022 (Schwarz 2023, p. 30). It was also comparatively early in turning its attention to a highly complex phenomenon to which ethnic and racial diversity is central: 18th-century slavery in the Caribbean. Remarkably, it did so as a DLC to a main game that deliberately played with an ambience ringing with positive connotations in popular culture that it wanted to address in the gaming community.

The main title of the series is *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag*. Its Caribbean setting was so strongly marked by a modern vacation flair that the game director described the gaming experience as historical tourism (Schwarz 2019, pp. 52–53). Entering the so-called golden age of piracy at the beginning of the 18th century, players were able to sail through a Caribbean space characterized by rapaciousness and idyllic sceneries based on popular models to meet prominent pirates such as Blackbeard, and thus to live out their dreams of an adventurous buccaneering existence. The DLC *Freedom Cry*,[3] released about half a year later, presented the same green islands, palm-studded beaches, and crystal-clear turquoise seas, but it cast the world of the European colonies in a different light. Instead of the exotic pirate setting with its adventure romance from the main game, the players now experienced a moralizing mission to free slaves, attaining a completely different perspective on this particular historical period.

To support this thematic shift, a new Black protagonist was presented with Adéwalé, whose life story from runaway slave to pirate (as first mate on the protagonist's ship in the main game) to assassin in the name of justice represents a personal story of emancipation.

At the time of the game's plot, which is set in 1735, such a transformation from slave to liberator was only open to very few enslaved people and constituted a risky possibility for individual maroons, that is, runaway slaves from plantations, to change and improve their living conditions (Reeder 2017, pp. 83–87).

As the plot of *Freedom Cry* highlights the disenfranchisement, exploitation, torture, and murder of enslaved people from the 18th-century Caribbean world, any lightness of the main game has disappeared. In the DLC, the people taken from Africa to the Caribbean, or their descendants, become an important element of the game's plot, which is set in the French part of the island of Hispaniola and highlights the historical background of the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804) (Lauro 2017). In the main game, their presence was still limited to individual side characters, such as Adéwalé, the role of staffage on a plantation to be plundered by the protagonist, or as an additional element in a colorful mixture of peoples in the region. In contrast, in *Freedom Cry*, people taken from Africa provide not only the protagonist but also all of his important companions and a large part of the characters that bring life to the game world.

The usually dominant people of European descent appear solely as oppressors to be fought, such as slave traders, slave owners, and overseers, so that a mediating or otherwise positively occupied figure from this group is missing and the conflict between oppressors and oppressed is necessarily carried out violently (Hammar 2017, p. 375). Insofar as white persons appear in the narrative, they are representatives of the elites, such as the French governor of that part of the island or officers, i.e., representatives of the colonial system or persons supporting it and thus opponents of the players. This role is emphasized, for example, through racist statements put forward by these characters or acts of violence committed by them against enslaved People of Color. For example, the French governor, who is the last assassination target of Adéwalé, says in his death throes: "Those slaves . . . but they are not human" (*Assassin's Creed: Freedom Cry*). This, of course, is to enhance the legitimacy of the fight against these 'whites,' who, as a group, appear remarkably homogeneous.

While the majority of the Black population may appear as victims, as maltreated and persecuted individuals in need of rescue, other People of Color besides the protagonist have been able to establish themselves in this world of whites, especially the self-confident and educated brothel owner Bastienne Josèphe and the strong-willed and feisty Augustin Dieufort, leader of the maroons. The underground group of former slaves, which Adéwalé also joins, fights the colonial system and demands the island's independence from France. Josèphe and Dieufort, alongside Adéwalé, not only take on their roles in the plot; they also fulfill game-mechanical functions as quest givers, which provides them with a large share in the game's narrative and—within the game's ludic possibilities—with a significantly more complex personality than is the case with other characters. Both embody different facets of life at the lower end of the social scale in a slaveholding society, a runaway slave wanted by the colonial powers, on the one hand, and a former prostitute forced to cooperate with the oppressors, on the other.

This is equally true for the people they represent, namely the escaped slaves, whose freedom is always at risk and who must be ready at any time to fight for their lives. The prostitutes in Josèphe's establishment are not enslaved, but they pay for their freedom with sexual exploitation. During the game, however, hardly anything is said about either group: the players learn nothing about the backgrounds and developments that led to the social constellations depicted, nor about the exact living conditions of these men and women. What opportunities were open to them? Where did the limits of their freedom or lack of freedom lie? This and other details remain unclear. We also learn little about Josèphe's and Dieufort's individual stories, though the game's plot shows them as skillful actors in the effort to preserve and exploit an independence that was always at risk, in the game's sense of supporting the still completely disenfranchised People of Color.

The large remainder of People of Color appear primarily as targets of liberating actions on the part of the protagonist, a role in which players most often encounter them (Mukherjee

2017, p. 68). It is noticeable that the enslaved to be freed may well die during the action, which differs from the ways in which the figures are usually depicted in the *Assassin's Creed* series. This is due to the mechanics of the game, as the number of the enslaved to be freed is also a reward for successfully completing the task. The more skillfully players proceed, the more profit they will obtain from the action. In itself, this is a motivating gameplay element, if the action could not be repeated as often as desired, i.e., if the death of the unfree remained without negative consequences.

In addition, due to the gameplay, the enslaved whom players can free from plantations, auctions, or ships serve as resources for in-game progress. Progress in the game's narrative is only possible if a certain quantity of enslaved people is freed and recruited for the maroons, and improvements to the character and his ship can only be obtained in this way. Translating slaves into gameplay capital in particular, and thus instrumentalizing and quantifying them, earned the game criticism shortly after its release for its less-than-reflective portrayal of a serious topic (Görig 2014) and for the blatant contrast to *Freedom Cry*'s overarching narrative, which calls for the self-determination and independence of the Afro-Caribbean population. Here, a clear dissonance arises between the game's message and its fundamental game mechanics.

The situation is somewhat different when the liberation of the enslaved becomes the subject of the actual game narrative. The mission "Down with the ship" takes up different aspects of the topic and hints at various moral pitfalls of a fight against slavery. In it, Adéwalé must intercept a slave transport with his ship to prevent the Africans caught on the ship from ending up enslaved in Port-au-Prince. To do this, the ship carrying the enslaved must not be sunk—that would result in failure of the task—and the warships accompanying it must be destroyed before Adéwalé can free the people on the slave ship. The challenge is fairly easy to solve gameplay-wise, but the game narrative explicitly states that the military escort will begin shelling the slave ship in the aftermath of the attack to prevent the liberation of those on board. This takes place regardless of how prudently players act because a situation always arises in which Adéwalé must try to rescue those still tied below deck from the sinking slave ship. Whatever he does, whatever players achieve, only a few can be rescued. When the protagonist escapes from the sinking ship at the end and emerges, he is surrounded by the corpses of those he was unable to save. Here, despite a successful game action, the players are confronted with the failure of their actions on the narrative level, an element that exists in such a way only in the interaction of gameplay and a narrative level separate from it. In this case, the action is not without narrative consequences either, for in the concluding dialogue scene on a nearby island, where Adéwalé's crew buries the dead, the main character recapitulates what has happened to Josèphe and Dieufort. At that moment, however, it is not the protagonist who shows emotion and humanity in the face of the governor's contempt for humanity and the untimely deaths of hundreds of young Africans, but Bastienne Josèphe. She responds to Adéwalé's demand for revenge with a question: "And the death of these souls? Some barely knew life" (*Assassin's Creed: Freedom Cry*). Although a rare moment, what emerges here is the sense that the people degraded to commodities by the colonizers are individuals who, unlike their oppressors, have retained their humanity.

What also makes the scene with the sinking slave ship remarkable is the fact that only at this point in the game are (visual) insights into the transport of African slaves to the New World given. While the game depicts neither the oppressive confinement in the crowded steerage nor explicit acts of violence that might be familiar from other popular media, in films such as *Amistad* (1997), it takes pains to at least hint at them via the visualization of wooden plank beds and the people chained to them. The entertainment product does not contain any overly gruesome scenes; moreover, with a few exceptions, it stages only male disenfranchised people, thus excluding the broad field of gender segregation and hierarchization and the accompanying sexual violence against enslaved women, although sources and even popular literature provide numerous models for this (Ueckmann 2020, pp. 145–56).

As a result, it can be said that in this game of a highly popular series, People of Color are portrayed as multilayered actors within a colonial society. This is even more remarkable since *Black Flag* itself mentions slavery only briefly and since, up until then, digital games had hardly ever touched upon the topic, especially in contrast to recent popular movies (Murray 2017, pp. 83–84). After all, although diversity was discussed even then especially in an Anglo-American context, the debate about it was still far less prominent at the time of the game's development in the early- to mid-2010s than it is nowadays (Florin et al. 2018, pp. 12–18). The game attempts to offer multiple perspectives, juxtaposing the perspectives of the colonial masters with those of the oppressed people through comments by People of Color in various situations. It offers complex characters on the side of the People of Color and shows their assessments of how members of the same group can and should act in favor of those still enslaved. Thus, as early as 2013, a digital game presented 'slaves' as objects within a colonial economic system based on slave labor, devoid of options to regain freedom, yet not as a helpless and passive mass but as individuals and autonomous individuals who could pursue their own agenda and thus leave the role of the victim far behind. The fact that in the actual historical situation their options were still limited, and that the abolition of slavery was not yet possible, does not change the fact that the game represented ethnic and racial diversity in a more complex fashion than many other popular entertainment media did in the 2010s.

That being said, the game can only begin to address all of these issues or integrate them in short narrative chains of events, such as those presented in the cutscenes. Most of the time, it does so independently from its gameplay. This dissonance results from the fact that it is a game from the *Assassin's Creed* series, in which much of the gameplay involves running, climbing, fighting, and killing (Schwarz 2011, pp. 82–84). In *Freedom Cry*, these gameplay options revolve around liberation actions on plantations, slave auctions in the cities, or even privateering at sea, but the historical context informing the storyline remains rather vague. Little can be learned about the origins of slavery in the New World, its extent in terms of the number of people abducted, its duration, and its temporal and geographic framework. Nor does the game tell us anything about the broader contexts of the phenomenon, such as the lucrative transatlantic triangular trade or European colonial rule in the Western Hemisphere, which also shaped the 19th and 20th centuries (Osterhammel 2020, pp. 229–35). Even on far less complex matters, such as the situation on the plantations or the views of those who were forced to live, work, and spend their lives there, the game offers little, if anything. In effect, any adequate representation, at least in rudimentary form, of the context of the historical topic with intersectional interactions of gender, social status, political and economic influence, skin tone and color, and power is lacking (Ueckmann 2020, p. 138).

However, we must take into account that we are dealing with an example of popular entertainment and with a title in a series. On the one hand, the restrictions mentioned correspond to what players of the *Assassin's Creed* series expect, especially regarding the gameplay: mastering challenges, leveling up the protagonist and his equipment, and achieving successes. On the other hand, the story in the game must remain comprehensible to all kinds of users so that the product can sell well in an international market. The adoption of highly complex historical facts, as well as the integration of a discourse still being resolved in academic circles, would complicate these expectations.

These economic limitations may also account for the fact that *Freedom Cry* is not a title in the main series, but a spin-off. This allowed Ubisoft to minimize the potential financial risk of a game that takes on the historically 'difficult' theme of Caribbean slavery through the eyes of a Black protagonist (Hammar 2019, p. 75). The same applies to *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation* (2012), which offered with Aveline de Grandpré a woman of French and African descent and thus an "intersectional figure" (Murray 2017, p. 53) as a new protagonist to the franchise. The game was initially released in 2012 just for the *Vita*-system, Sony's handheld console, which sold only moderately, and only two years later for PC and other consoles. For these reasons, both games, which address diversity directly

and consistently, still have a niche existence in the wider context of the entire *Assassin's Creed*-franchise (Murray 2017, pp. 48–50, 86; Mukherjee 2017, pp. 63–64).

Nevertheless, the 2013 expansion *Freedom Cry* stands out in its treatment of ethnic and racial diversity in a popular medium. It gave the topic a surprisingly large amount of space at a comparatively early point in time, included different perspectives, though greatly simplified, and depicted those forced into slavery not only as victims or objects but popularized them as subjects and agents in the historical process. Crucial for this early example and the comparison of the case studies discussed here is the fact that *Freedom Cry* actually presented diversity as a given, even of past worlds, without transferring the modern perspective too much into the historical setting. It did this even before the topic received the enormous attention it does today, and it did so as part of a very popular and globally sold triple-A series. For all the limitations of what is presented, it can be considered an example of popular culture making traditionally marginalized groups visible, successfully avoiding imposing current socio-political debates on the historical setting and ignoring the historical background of the fictitious story.

As to the motives for doing so, the two narrative designers of the game, Jill Murray and Hugo Giard, emphasized in a public statement that the setting and the perspective on the staged time was a conscious decision of the development team at Ubisoft Quebec. They criticized the lack of awareness as to diversity in society prevalent in the video game industry and declared this as one of the reasons for them to choose the setting of *Freedom Cry* as they did. Their goal, they said, was to evoke strong, but not necessarily positive, feelings in players and thus raise awareness of the issue (Tito 2014). Although economic reasons cannot be ruled out, the statement of the two designers may be taken as an indication that they truly wanted to visualize the historical injustice of slavery, and in so doing sought to draw more attention to the normative and high cultural dimension. This impression is reinforced by the actual scandal Ubisoft has been facing for the past two and a half years about its toxic environment for female game developers and its deliberate exclusion and marginalization of female protagonists in its games by male executives. Here, Murray appears as one strident critic of Ubisoft (Blum 2020).

2.2. Civilizing the West and the Losers of Modernization in Red Dead Redemption II

The action-adventure *Red Dead Redemption II* (2018) is vaguely set in a fictionalized version of the midwest and southwest of the United States, and dated to the year 1899, on the threshold of the 20th century. Both aspects serve as markers for a particular phase in U.S. history in which contemporaries such as the historian Frederick Jackson Turner began to speak of the closing of the frontier, the regions defined as borderlands between 'wilderness' and 'civilization,' and which ushered in a widespread transfiguration of all areas of life. At the same time, both aspects refer to the drastic decimation of Indigenous groups to a historical low at the end of the century, climaxing in the so-called 'Indian wars' and the massacre at Wounded Knee (1890), as well as to the change in their living conditions brought about by the establishment of the reservation system (Osterhammel 2020, pp. 490–99).

With its setting in the not-so-Wild West in the decades after the Civil War, the game can also draw on the genre of the late Western and its themes, settings, and characters, as well as a rather pessimistic view of this era in U.S. history (Donald and Reid 2020, p. 20). Analogous to movies such as *Heaven's Gate* (1980) and *There Will Be Blood* (2007), *Red Dead Redemption II* views this turning point in U.S. history—not only between the 19th and 20th centuries, but also between 'traditional' and 'modern' America—ambivalently (Locke and Mackay 2021, p. 177). The old and wild times are not yet over in both the late Western and the game, but they have long been undergoing a process of dissolution.

The game's plot centers on the story of a gang of gunslingers on the run from the ever-tightening grip of the law. After a failed robbery, the gang around Arthur Morgan, the protagonist of the game and avatar of the players, plans to capture enough money in a last big coup and leave the U.S., which no longer tolerates their way of life.

Morgan embodies the widely known image of the white, male, rough-around-the-edges yet morally upright *Westerner*, a figure successfully popularized by countless films of the 20th century (Mitchell 1996, pp. 3–7). Here, the game once again popularizes cinematic tropes and makes them accessible to new circles of recipients. For the most part, the individual personas of the gang members are also based on the figure of the outlaw as formulated in classic Westerns up to the early 1960s, living outside the law according to their own rules in a community rooted in the ideal of voluntarism (Kiefer and Grob 2004, p. 22). Despite these general genre borrowings, the gang, apart from Morgan himself, is clearly more diverse in *Red Dead Redemption II* than in older Westerns such as *The Magnificent Seven* (1960) or *The Wild Bunch* (1969), revealing an increasing shift in perspective that is getting closer to the historical model. Women make up one third of the group, and it also includes Black as well as Indigenous and Mexican people. Some of these figures have complex characters and take on important narrative and gameplay functions, for example as quest-givers.

Ultimately, the gang includes the old and the young, the frail and the strong, and people from poorer and richer backgrounds. Diversity in *Red Dead Redemption II* thus already starts with the staging and drawing of its most important characters. These characters have their own identities and follow their own plans; they drive the game's narrative forward and perform an identificatory function for the players. As such, they are not constructed as marginal characters on insignificant side missions but indeed play a central role in the game. However, this diverse and positive staging of the gang does not necessarily mean that stereotypes are absent from the character construction. While no audiovisual markers that can be clearly identified as stereotypical appear, such as strong accents or typecast clothing, it is clear that the individual characters fulfill distinct roles within the gang from which they cannot break free. For example, Charles Smith, an Afro-Indigenous character, worries about the extinction of the bison herds and, as one of the more important gameplay elements, teaches players how to hunt. Both aspects hark back to popular images about the Indigenous peoples of North America. Diversity is thus built into the narrative pivot of the game—the gang—but it must fit into the genre specifications of the popular Western and the character concepts it has developed. This is especially true for the game's main character, who is surrounded by the diverse cast of other characters but is nonetheless constructed as a white heteronormative figure himself (Hammar 2019, pp. 15, 66).

Diversity does not only appear in *Red Dead Redemption II* on the level of the gang around Arthur Morgan. Rather, the genre of the Western, and here that of the late Western, offers ample opportunity to include members of the Indigenous population and to portray them in a more differentiated way than as the stereotypically belligerent 'redskin' of many early Westerns. Thus, during their escape from law enforcement, the epitome of state control and civilization, the gang encounters members of the fictional group of the 'Wapiti,' created specifically for the game. The way the game represents them is of particular relevance to the diversity discourse.

From the very first appearance of the Wapiti, the central motif is that of their disastrous situation on the brink of extinction. They eke out an existence defined by disease and hunger on a reservation far from their original settlements, harassed and monitored by the U.S. Army, which withholds vaccines and kidnaps children. When rich oil deposits are discovered on the reservation, the Indigenous group is pressured to move further north despite existing treaties guaranteeing them the land on which they live. In their distress, members of the tribe turn to the outlaw gang for help in fighting the threat of deportation. Although Morgan initially succeeds in stealing the documents on the oil discoveries from a refinery, a planned parley between the U.S. Army and representatives of the Wapiti ends in a massacre at the instigation of the Army general in charge. As a result, violence escalates continuously from one mission to the next. It ends with a failed Wapiti raid on the oil refinery, the dissolution of the reservation, and the group's escape to Canada.

Several aspects of the narrative are particularly important for the staging and representation of ethnic and cultural diversity in *Red Dead Redemption II*. First, the storyline around the Wapiti is part of the game's main missions; the sequence is thus obligatory for players if they want to finish the game. In the spirit of an open narrative structure built on the ability to choose missions freely, they can decide for themselves when to encounter the Wapiti, but the fact that they will is predetermined. There is a total of eight missions in which members of the gang, and thus players, work with the Wapiti, eight missions emphasizing the importance that representatives of Indigenous groups have been given in the game. This makes the game strikingly different from older digital games with similar settings, the first installment of the *Red Dead Redemption* series from 2010 included (Wright 2022, p. 193).

Particularly remarkable is the fact that the game plot makes the Wapiti and the outlaws allies in the fight against a common enemy. In doing so, it does not merely propose a temporary parallelism of interests but presents both groups as equals, for both find themselves on the side of the underdogs, the losers of modernization, in the process of the continent's progressive development. Both see themselves existentially threatened, and both have only the choice between adapting to modern society or fleeing, since the narrative makes it clear from the beginning that they have no alternative.

For the Indigenous group, it is the conflicts of the two main Wapiti characters, those of Chief Rains Fall and his son Eagle Flies, that foreground these issues. While the elder, scarred and disheartened by the personal losses of the so-called 'Indian Wars' of the 1880s, seeks a peaceful settlement by treaty and recognizes the hopelessness of the situation, the younger, driven by ambition and wounded pride, is bent on a military escalation of the situation, even if this action would mean the demise of the Wapiti. In the final mission involving the Wapiti, just before some of them attack an oil refinery, Rains Fall pleads with his son not to fight, saying "Maybe a world in which they [i.e., white people] came to us is a world that we cannot endure. But endure we must" (*Red Dead Redemption II*), but Eagle Flies does not listen to him. He pays the highest price and dies in his father's tent after the failed attack before a reconciliation between the two and their views can come about. Thus, the conflict remains unsolved.

In all missions, the game directs the player's sympathy primarily to the case of Rains Fall, whose motivations and goals are fleshed out in greater detail. Morgan and other central characters in the gang engage with his actions by relating them to their plans to leave the United States. This brings a much-used topos of the late Western into the game, according to which 'wild' life in the U.S. was in the process of disintegrating by the end of the century. What is remarkable is that the game uses this concept for the white Westerners and for the Indigenous characters.

Finally, the game depicts the closely interconnected processes of the expanding capitalist market economy and the westward expansion of the U.S. state as driving forces of modernization. The contemporary image of the ruthless capitalist as robber baron takes shape in the figure of the industrial tycoon Leviticus Cornwall, who wants to open up the land of the Wapiti economically on behalf of the U.S. government and for his own enrichment. He can thus be identified as the person responsible for the threatened deportation of the Wapiti. He is also the greatest antagonist of the outlaws, whom he hunts with the Pinkerton Agency (Bilansky 2018, p. 69). The army general in charge of the Wapiti, who is also white, expresses himself in an openly racist manner, considering Rains Fall's Indigenous name as "silly" (*Red Dead Redemption II*) and calling him and his people "criminals" (*Red Dead Redemption II*) who occupy land that belongs to the U.S. At the same time, the general is an opponent of Morgan's gang, so that both losers of this civilization, the Wapiti and the outlaws, once again find themselves on the same side and in conflict with the powerful proponents of national and economic expansion.

In its depiction of the Wapiti, then, the game perpetuates the popular topos of the vanishing Indian by presenting the situation of the Indigenous group as inevitable. In essence, according to this topos, the drastic decimation of Indigenous groups and ultimately their disappearance is a lamentable but necessary and natural concomitant of a progressing

(white) civilization (Dippie 1982, pp. 13–15; Fort 2013, pp. 308–21). Through the afore-mentioned shifts in perspective, however, the game does not simply instrumentalize this topos to justify the disappearance of Indigenous peoples in favor of modern civilization but rather mobilizes it in order to highlight the dark sides of this very process.

Through the close narrative fusion between the game's protagonist and his gang, as well as the Wapiti, *Red Dead Redemption II* generates sympathy and an attachment to the concerns of the Wapiti, who appear and act as representatives of the Indigenous peoples of North America. In this way, the game depicts key aspects and processes of late-19th-century U.S. history from a perspective attributed to an Indigenous group. It vividly presents land theft, expulsion, the so-called 'unequal treaties,' as well as the grievous existence in the reservations without sufficient access to food and medical care, but also the ultimately hopeless rebellion against the modern, state- and capitalist-organized world. The game even shows both groups, the Wapiti and the outlaws, as sharing a common destiny and thus clearly sets itself apart from classic Westerns and other digital games, in which Indigenous people mainly appeared as opponents or exoticized strangers and thus were misrepresented (Beer 2020). Rather, it treads the path taken by more recent Western films such as *The Hateful Eight* (2016), which deal critically with the Progressive Era and the racism prevalent at the time the story is set (Locke and Mackay 2021, p. 178).

The close narrative fusion between the protagonist and the Wapiti is also integrated into the game mechanics, making the bond between the two groups even more visible. Since *Red Dead Redemption II* is a game with an open world, it is possible for players to visit and explore the Wapiti reservation outside of the storyline. In these instances, however, the otherwise available options for action are massively limited. The avatar Morgan can only walk, run, look around, and have short conversations with individuals on the reservation, but he can no longer ride quickly, fight, or kill. These restrictions make the already leisurely gameplay of *Red Dead Redemption II* even slower and thus more focused, transforming the players from actors to passive observers of the scenery, which presents the reservation as a place of Indigenous survival (Zimmermann 2022, pp. 52–53, 59–63). At the same time, they condition that, almost throughout the entire game, players cannot physically attack or kill an Indigenous person. This circumstance is especially significant against the backdrop of the maximum gameplay freedom that *Red Dead Redemption II* otherwise offers its users, as they can ride into a sleepy village armed to the teeth and shoot every inhabitant at will. The fact that all of these violent actions are prevented only in relation to the Wapiti emphasizes the special character of the Indigenous people, who seem almost untouchable in this perspective. Accordingly, the mechanics of the game underscore the narrative that Indigenous cultures of North America were most severely wronged in the late 19th century by preventing contemporary players from participating in genocidal action.

As much as *Red Dead Redemption II* attempts to counter mainstream narratives of the historical period in which the game is set by adding an Indigenous perspective, much of the way the Wapiti are designed audiovisually is stereotypical and clichéd. The freely invented tribe can be understood as a "generic conglomerate of Native U.S. cultures" (Miner 2020, p. 129), primarily of the Sioux and other Great Plains groups. Images of feathered headdresses, teepees with smoke pouring from them, bare torsos, long black hair, tobacco pipes or face paint, sounds of war cries, and even the names of the two central Wapiti characters activate popular notions of 'Indians' reminiscent of, for example, the classic Hollywood Western from the first half of the 20th century, the German Karl May's *Winnetou* novels and films, or more recent films such as *Dances with Wolves* (1990). In doing so, they further encourage the reduction of hundreds of different cultures of the Indigenous population of North America to a few broadly familiar traits. As late as 2018, digital games such as *Red Dead Redemption II* continue to reaffirm and thus also further popularize already popular stereotypes. The function of these stereotypes lies in their immediate recognizability; a few visual and auditory clues, integrated into a new overall design, enable those who play the game to quickly read certain characters as 'Indian.' In this part of *Red Dead Redemption II*, the desire to tell a version of history that can be easily

identified and appeals to a sense of familiarity in order to attract buyers prevails over the attempt to represent historical diversity appropriately.

To illustrate this point, we may look at the mission in which Rains Fall gathers herbs for Morgan's hitherto untreated tuberculosis, bringing the two men together to talk about Morgan's past. The situation recalls the back-and-forth between a psychotherapist and his or her patient, with the Chief acting as a wise counselor. Rains Fall appears entirely in the tradition of the noble savage as it has evolved since the 18th century, first in literature and later in other media as well. According to this tradition, the Indigenous groups of North America live in harmony with nature, appear untouched by the temptations of civilization, and are therefore pristine and in possession of a profound understanding of life (Rowland 2004, p. 7).

At the same time, the game attempts to break up the stereotypical image of the Wapiti, at least in some respects. For example, some Wapiti figures, most notably Rains Fall, are depicted in thoroughly Western clothing, i.e., with coat, hat, and boots, while others, such as Eagle Flies, also appear with a naked torso and painted face. Through this visible distinction between the two main figures, the division of the Wapiti into those who propose warlike defense of their traditions and those who embrace assimilation into the majority society is presented narratively and taken up visually. The group no longer appears as a homogeneous mass but as an association of individuals, each with their own views, plans, and backgrounds.

Red Dead Redemption II thus adopts current debates about the increasing representation, visibility, and audibility of previously marginalized ethno-cultural groups in all three aspects of its historical staging: narration, audiovisual design, and gameplay. It is true that the game visually perpetuates stereotypical images of the Indigenous peoples of North America, (re)producing images that have been successfully popularized in various media for over a century and are therefore readily recognizable. At the same time, the game places the Wapiti at the center of an important part of its narrative. In connection with the restrictive game mechanics, which prohibit acting against the group, the narrative generates not only sympathy for the concerns of Indigenous groups, but history is decidedly told from a perspective attributed to these groups. Finally, the central characters of the Wapiti each have their own voice and come across as characters with whom players can identify. Thus, they transform the strongly schematized exemplariness of many Indigenous characters in Western narratives into a more differentiated, individualized portrayal, even though *Red Dead Redemption II* certainly leaves out central aspects of the Indigenous experience, such as religion, everyday life, or social interaction below the leadership level. At the same time, the game avoids granting Indigenous people greater agency than the historical setting would allow. Similar to *Assassin's Creed: Freedom Cry*, a rebellion against racist oppression and disenfranchisement in the system of colonization of the West of the U.S. is possible for the actors within narrow limits, but a reversal of the process is ultimately impossible. *Red Dead Redemption II*, as a triple-A title, follows a path—although only with one foot—that other, less popular digital games, some of which are produced by, about, and for Indigenous people,[4] have been treading for a number of years: breaking down stereotypes about Indigenous people that are still widely discussed in mainstream media and thus making the videogame industry more inclusive in terms of Indigenous narratives, stories, and representation (Land 2020, p. 92; Beer 2020).

Dan Houser, the game's executive producer, indicated in two interviews that this is not a coincidence. In one of these interviews, he acknowledged that *Red Dead Redemption II* refers to and reflects the present in some parts of its historical framework (Goldberg 2018). In the other interview, he noted that his team was constantly caught in the balancing act between history and fiction, faced with the task of finding a middle ground between what he described as an "oppressive" (White 2018) historical background and the ambition of their own narrative. This was especially true of contemporary racism and gender inequalities. Nonetheless, he hoped that he had found a reasonable way to address these issues (White 2018). Current criticism of racism towards People of Color, which constitutes

a relevant and much-noticed factor of public opinion, especially in the U.S., thus seems to have impacted the representation of the Wapiti, which is ultimately intended to consciously counteract such tendencies (Cramer 2020, p. 154). Similar to Ubisoft, the Rockstar team of *Red Dead Redemption II* was also determined to incorporate the diversity aspect into the game's historical setting, again in favor of a normative and high culture view of diversity.

2.3. Streamlining the Culturally Diverse Medieval Times in Kingdom Come: Deliverance

What unites the historical backgrounds of the digital games discussed above is their temporal location on the threshold of modernity or in the midst of this epoch, which, depending on the definition, either continues into the present or is at least close to the present. Furthermore, the characteristics of social, economic, and political diversification, social permeability, and a belief in progress are associated with this era (Dipper 2018). However, what happens when a digital game is set in Antiquity or during the Middle Ages, which, according to popular understanding, are characterized precisely not by these aspects, but by rigid hierarchies, demarcations, and a tendency to persist (Oexle 2013, pp. 1–2)? Can a diversity discourse be integrated if already popular images of this epoch do not recognize diversity?

Questions such as these are crucial for the action-adventure game *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* (2018), which is set in the late Middle Ages. This game is doubly suited for contrasting it with the representation of ethno-cultural diversity in the other two games: First, even before its release, the development studio Warhorse advertised the game as 'realistic,' 'authentic,' and 'historically accurate' (Huss 2018), insofar as it attributed to it the ability to reconstruct rather than stage the historical reality of the early 15th century. Second, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* also drew heavy criticism even before its release, from the gaming community as well as from other circles. The head of the development studio and leading developer of the game, Daniel Vávra, especially due to his statements in the context of the so-called 'Gamergate' conflict, which were considered sexist, was accused of adhering to right-wing political conspiracy theories and the ideology of White Supremacy, and of propagating a modern racist and sexist worldview in medieval guise (Sigl 2018). In the game, neither women nor People of Color were said to appear in central or in any way positive roles (Huss 2018; Brandenburg 2021, pp. 6–7). In German-speaking countries, national newspapers picked up on the accusations so that the discussion reached a broader public (Sigl 2018; Von Au 2018). Moreover, critics claimed that the game deliberately depicts the Middle Ages as an era of pure white masculinity and that it does so against the current trend of making diversity more visible across all kinds of media.

Kingdom Come: Deliverance roughly sketches the late medieval world of Bohemia at the beginning of the 15th century. The locations are the still extant town of Rataje (German: Rattay), situated about sixty kilometers southeast of Prague, the monastery of Sázava (German: Sasau), and the surrounding castles, villages, and hamlets. The background of the plot is the dynastic conflict between King Wenceslas IV and his half-brother Sigismund over the Bohemian and imperial crown in succession to Charles IV. The players take on the role of the fictional blacksmith's son Henry from the small village of Skalitz, who sides with Wenceslas and most of the Bohemian nobility during the conflict, while Sigismund acts as the antagonist.

Supporting his allies from the Bohemian nobility, Henry (and with him the players) embarks on a hero's journey through the freely accessible game world, in the course of which he hires himself out as a squire, uncovers a coin forgery ring, joins the Benedictine order in Sázava, and finally foils the conspiracy of a Hungarian nobleman in Sigismund's service. At the end of his journey, Henry finally learns that he is not a simple blacksmith's son but the illegitimate son of his liege lord and thus belongs to the Bohemian nobility.

The audiovisual design of the game closely follows the already familiar images from history that have been taken up many times in the media, whether it is the medieval architecture and town facades, the clothing of the people populating the towns and villages, or the possible social interactions between the players and the inhabitants. When, for example,

a Rataje citizen in linen clothing walks cursing over the unpaved streets of the city and complains about the hardships of his life, or when Benedictine monks in brown cowls and tonsures mutter Latin aphorisms, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* transports already successfully popularized images about the Middle Ages in a kind of further canonization loop of the popular. The production creates a cohesive historical setting that can be perceived as authentic by those playing the game because it activates existing popular knowledge about this period of European history and, due to its decades-long popularization, testifies to its recognizability, whether it is the pre-modern simplicity or the religious pervasiveness of everyday life, to name just two examples (Pinsker and Weber 2022, pp. 147–48; Schwarz 2020, p. 27).

An essential part of this "Kulissenauthentizität" (Heinze 2012, p. 182) are the characters, who either animate the world as extras or advance the narrative as agents. However, insofar as characters belong to the second group and are thus integral elements of the gaming experience, they share the same social, cultural, ethnic, and religious characterization, with a few (exclusively female) exceptions, such as Christian Catholics and white males who consider themselves 'Bohemian.' For this period, centuries before classical nationalism emerged, 'Bohemian' is mainly defined ex negativo by distinguishing it from 'Germans' and 'Hungarians,' who serve as antagonists in *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*. For example, at the very beginning of the main storyline, a 'German' and the other citizens of Skalitz argue about the present situation, in which the 'German' doubts the rightful rule of Wenceslas IV, whereupon players can decide whether Henry will throw dung at his house. Alongside this, the primary opponent of the game, Sigismund, is repeatedly reduced to being a ruler over Hungarian territories. By means of these assumed antagonisms, the game projects back into the Middle Ages nationalizing views that have shaped debates and conflicts since the 19th century, but they do not reflect the historical experience of people in the Holy Roman Empire in late medieval times (Groebner 2008, pp. 56–57).

Other existing ethnic, religious, or cultural minorities of medieval Bohemia, such as members of the Roma group or Jews, are neither visualized nor integrated into the narrative of *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* (Engel et al. 2022, p. 182). Although there is an entry on 'Jewish People' in the in-game codex, which has the same length as other entries and describes their settlement, exclusion, and persecution in Bohemia, no such mention of the Roma appears in the game. This reveals an astonishing omission, since various Jewish settlements in Bohemia, for example a Jewish community in Prague since the late 11th century, are historically attested and since the Roma are also mentioned in medieval sources, for example also for the late 14th century, i.e., for the decades preceding the time of the game's plot (Hoensch 2000, pp. 199–201; Strielkowski 2012, pp. 33–35).

Insofar as characters who assume important functions do not correspond to the consistently positive scheme described above, they are exclusively members of the Cumans. Historically, the Cumans originated from the Eurasian steppe regions and migrated to Eastern Europe, especially Hungary, due to Mongol pressure at the beginning of the 13th century. They hired themselves out as mercenaries in many European conflicts and, for the most part, adopted Christianity (Bártfei 2018). *In Kingdom Come: Deliverance*, they serve as soldiers in Sigismund's army and thus as central antagonists. It is a Cuman army that raids Skalitz at the beginning of the plot, snatching Henry away from his village and his idyllic everyday life. Already, in this first scene, the Cumans appear as the ethnic-cultural Other: as dishonorable, brutal, savage, uncivilized. After their initial action in the narrative and the open world, they appear again and again as a type of enemy to be dealt with just as brutally. In a side mission, players can even collect the ears of killed Cumans as trophies and exchange them for rewards.

In the words of Henry and his allies, the Cumans are alternately defamed as 'barbarians,' 'bastards,' 'heathens,' or 'devils' (*Kingdom Come: Deliverance*), which sets the groups apart from one another linguistically and not through references to skin color. Although the in-game codex is reticent about clear, pejorative attributions, a book titled 'The Cumans,' which players can acquire during the game, states that "many of them were of a savage

sort and cruel nature" (*Kingdom Come: Deliverance*). The text adds that, although many of the Cumans were baptized, "they still maintain some of their barbaric ways until today" (*Kingdom Come: Deliverance*), for example killing a dog and burying it to seal an agreement. The Cumans thus appear above all religiously and culturally different, alien, and hostile. Only the Cuman knowledge of horsemanship and war craft finds a certain recognition. In the game, the Cumans ultimately speak Hungarian, which is not translated but reproduced in the original wording. This once again separates them from the main characters as well as from the players.

The Cumans are visualized exclusively as male warriors in full, mostly colorful armor. Unlike the other figures, they wear pointed helmets and upturned beaked shoes. Their faces are mostly covered by metal masks, which once again makes them appear alien and difficult to fathom. Their clothing and weapons use and arguably further popularize familiar stereotypes that existed in the West in the 19th and 20th centuries of people from neighboring Eastern European and West Asian countries under Ottoman rule, graphically depicted and disseminated, for example, by Karl May in his *Orientzyklus* (1881–1888).

Thus, in the entire game, the Cumans represent the only group that does not follow the ideal of 'civilized' Christianity but rather practices to undermine it, which is supposed to morally justify fighting them to defend Bohemian nobility as the core of its society. It is a pejorative view of the Cumans coming from the 'East,' characterized by the narrative as a savage and brutal warrior horde and by their weapons and armor as alien and faceless. With only one exception of a side mission that primarily highlights the supposed traits of deviousness and cunning, no Cuman individuals appear, so that only their actions and not their motives and goals are visible. Similar to Western colonialist thought of the 19th and 20th centuries, which constructed the 'East' as a space of inequality, domination, and exoticism, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* shows the Cumans as a roughly sketched, characterless mass and as a threat to 'civilized' life (Murray 2017, pp. 62–67).

In this way, the game as a popular cultural product confirms Eurocentric and colonialist ideas about non-European societies. Some of these ideas are two hundred years old, and they have been criticized and considered problematic in research at least since Edward Said's seminal *Orientalism* (Said 1978) some forty-five years ago. Nor is there any reflection on debates about Europe's colonial heritage, which have occupied academic research for years and have, more recently, also reached the broader public, the discussion about the return of the Benin bronzes by Germany to Nigeria after decades of wrangling being a case in point (Dörries 2022).

However, it is not any reference to the skin color of the groups in the game that would serve as the dividing line between the 'us' of Henry, Bohemian nobility—and the players—and the 'them' of the Cumans. Rather, a cultural determination expressed through language, dress, and religious affiliation sets the sympathetic figures apart from their opponents. Although the underlying conflict between Wenceslas IV and Sigismund is one of power politics, the prominent position of the Cumans as the backbone of the enemy army gives the conflict a different emphasis, especially since players are rarely confronted with the person of Sigismund, while the Cumans are almost omnipresent as opponents, not only in the plot but especially in the game mechanics of exploring the game world by foot or horse and through combat. Thus, while the political conflicts serve as background patter to the game, the violent clash of different cultures is very prominent. Moreover, the borders between the cultures are not permeable, and crossing from one into the other is not possible.

In this case, too, the game presents ideas about the ethnic and cultural Other that have long been revised and criticized in academic research and even by the public at large. The popular game continues to present them as 'authentic' and historically correct European views of non-European societies. According to these views, people can be assigned to this or that culture by means of clearly and objectively determinable parameters, whereby diversity expresses the potential for conflict. The game therefore tends to reflect the widely received theses of the U.S.-American political scientist Samuel P. Huntington, who attributes

a fundamental role to cultural rifts in order to explain how international conflicts of the 21st century have emerged (Beer 2013, pp. 54–55; Salzborn and Stich 2013, pp. 171–73).

This is all the more remarkable since some of the game designers responded to criticism of the game's historical oversimplifications and distortions by pointing to the expertise on which they had drawn in creating the game. They had worked extensively with twenty experts from universities and various disciplines, among others, during the production process, so they said (Inderst 2020, p. 21). Furthermore, in an interview, studio head Vávra referred to the historical sources used to construct medieval Bohemia for the game. He said that *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* is not limited to one ethnic group, as other ethnic groups, especially the Cumans, appear in the game, just as historical sources describe it (GameStar Redaktion 2018). Thus, in response to criticism of the game, the Warhorse team used references to scientific expertise and specific sources as an authentication strategy of their own construction, without addressing the selectivity of their choices.

By adopting these ideas about culture and history, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* projects the image of two culturally homogeneous, closed, and complementary collectives back into the medieval era, reflecting nationalist, geopolitical, and Eurocentric discourses rather than the debate about diversity. Coupled with the nationalizing antagonisms and the omissions of religious and ethnic minorities, the game paints a streamlined picture of the late Middle Ages with religious and ethnic uniformity and cultural devaluation of the Other. In other words, the time knew nothing or little of diversity.

Is there a connection between this return to traditional stereotypes, the streamlined images, and the choice of a medieval setting? Do clichés still dominate popular conceptions of the Middle Ages to such an extent that they can be easily (re-)activated and without consequences, i.e., without rejection and boycott of a media product? This seems to be exactly the case with *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*. The nonchalance with which it ignores members of religious and ethnic minorities and People of Color as well as their perspectives, while still claiming historical accuracy, is striking. It reproduces images and ideas about cultural and ethnic diversity in the Middle Ages that have been handed down for two hundred years, thereby popularizing what has already been popular for centuries. That this need not be becomes clear when we consider the strategy game *Age of Empires II: Definitive Edition* (2019). This game demonstrates that the culture of the Cumans of the Middle Ages can be represented in a much more differentiated way, at least in a game's plot.

3. Conclusions

Debates about diversity in Western pluralistic societies, diversity at all levels, diversity as a discourse that, on the one hand, should attract attention and, on the other, evidently does attract attention, in that sense experiences a double popularization: How does this trickle down into the digital game? How does this change the images of history that popular games with historical settings transport and make accessible to millions of people?

First of all, although whiteness is still the norm in most digital games with and without historical settings (Hammar 2019, p. 15), it is blatantly obvious that the representation of ethnically, racially, and culturally heterogeneous groups in games with historical settings has been receiving greater space for some years now, i.e., that it has quite fundamentally attracted more attention. In this respect, the medium participates in the visualization of a diversity that for a long time had to take a back seat, especially in popular representations, in favor of 'whitewashing' or, if members of different groups appeared, of stereotypes and exaggerations.

This visualization, however, by no means necessarily represents a situation as differentiated as would befit the historical facts. The three action-adventure games we have analyzed in this article go some way to prove this point, not only staging different contexts, eras, and ethnic, racial, or cultural groups but also reflecting arguments and demands of current debates about diversity to varying degrees.

Assassin's Creed: Freedom Cry and *Red Dead Redemption II* vividly demonstrate how far debates may be incorporated into and negotiated in highly popular games. With the

Caribbean pirate setting and the gunslinger West, both games evoke familiar and popular topoi prone to embellishment through stereotypical representations. Yet, both titles place other themes, elements, and, above all, modes of representation at the center. Within the (especially economic) limits of a popular entertainment product, they offer a new perspective on the respective historical situations. For example, the expansion *Freedom Cry* uses the picturesque and idyllic landscape of the main game *Black Flag* to tell a story of Afro-Caribbean resistance against the European colonial system through the eyes of the Black protagonist. *Red Dead Redemption II* puts the struggle of Indigenous groups against the modern U.S. on the same level as that of white U.S.-Americans, so that entirely new communities become visible in the midst of a narrative otherwise closely aligned with the Western genre.

Diversity can be found in both titles in that the players either slip directly into the skin of members of a marginalized group or that their interests, fears, and actions are directly related to those of the avatars. People of Color no longer function as exoticized strangers, enemies, or only roughly sketched supporting characters in either title but rather take on important roles in the plot with even detailed personas in some cases. Nor are they victims or impotent diehards bulldozed by history, but individuals endowed with a certain agency who try to assert themselves in situations of historical upheaval. In keeping with the historical process, both titles avoid placing too strong a focus on the individual actors' powers to overcome acts of injustice or even the socio-economic system it supports. Neither can they abolish the Caribbean slaveholding society nor prevent the displacement and resettlement of Indigenous groups. Nonetheless, and this is the medium's big step toward current demands for a more appropriate representation of diversity, they stage diversity with a depth and differentiation long absent from popular digital games. They do this for the historical contexts—again, measured against older examples of digital games as well as other popular media—in a representation of historical conditions that largely manages to avoid transferring present-day attitudes unfiltered to past life.

Nevertheless, we must not overlook the fact that both games work with stereotypical attributions and clichés in their visual and auditory design. Such images have become too influential and attractive through decades of repetition in popular culture. For example, the depiction of the Wapiti in *Red Dead Redemption II* follows the familiar images of Indigenous groups in North America including feather adornment and war cries; *Freedom Cry* orients itself on simplistic models from the medium of film, which have had a lasting influence on the ideas of the Caribbean island world of the 17th and early 18th centuries with plantations, slavery, and pirate adventures. The function of these images lies in their recognition value across cultural and national boundaries (Schwarz 2023, pp. 28–29, 93–105). After all, players worldwide can clearly and quickly identify Rains Fall and Eagle Flies as 'Indians' due to their design and locate the characters and their position in the virtual world. For its part, the permanently visible presence of Black slaves in the streets of Port-au-Prince serves as a marker of recognition. This is where the limits of the medium can be found with regard to a differentiated representation of history. First and foremost, digital games are entertainment media and commodities that must be accessible to large audiences and potentially marketable worldwide. Both aspects encourage a simplistic representation of history without, as shown, already comprehensively characterizing the digital game and its possibilities.

The staging of history in both games thus incorporates two strands that simultaneously contrast and complement each other: These are, firstly, images of history and historical actors that have been handed down for centuries, incorporated into numerous media formats, popularized and thus reduced to recognizable markers. There is, secondly, a contemporary, normatively charged discourse that is far from a consensus, which impinges upon popular notions of the past and thereby transforms and diversifies these very images without completely dissolving them.

In contrast, the third case study demonstrates that digital games can still keep well away from current debates and demands for diversity. *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* is

neither about filling previous gaps, as evidenced by the lack of consideration of Jews or members of the Roma living at the time, nor about an at least rudimentary multi-perspective representation of other ethnic-cultural groups of late medieval society, such as the Cumans. Rather, the game narrows down the historical reality of this time and space, which was characterized by a coexistence of different religious, ethnic, and cultural groups, to a near exclusive white, Christian world. Anyone who did not fit this prerequisite must be, the message goes, an implacable and brutal enemy.

Game designers, then, can specifically opt for one or the other variant. For some, it may be a serious concern that they are consciously working to obtain more and more attention, for others, an economic decision to more efficiently address wishes or expectations on the part of the players. For yet another group, it may be a resolute and self-confident rejection of trends in modern society and recent academic research. However, when studios decide to incorporate diversity into their games, we can observe various reasons underlying this decision: the fulfillment of a normative, high cultural claim and the low-based incorporation of diversity due to economic considerations (Srauy 2019, pp. 493–94).

Although current opinion polls show that the majority of players, as a reflection of broad sections of society, also demand more diversity in games, the popular medium nevertheless opens up the option for such a commitment as well as the conscious renunciation of it. Considering the fact that *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* was the product of an independent, comparatively small game design studio, its popularity is all the more remarkable. The sales success of a title that deliberately refuses to adopt diversity shows that there is a market for this kind of history production and players who buy and use the game either despite or precisely because of its omissions.

How much the choice of a historical period plays into the decision to create a more diverse environment or to deliberately exclude still remains uncertain. The sample we have used for our analysis is too small to produce widely applicable insights. Whether we can confirm that a medieval setting gives more room to classic stereotypes than a modern one, for example, because it is still perceived as more stereotyped and template-like, will have to be ascertained in future studies based on not only more action-adventures but also on games of other genres, from construction simulations to first-person shooters. There is undoubtedly a great diversity in the wide range of digital games that is still waiting to be discovered.

Notes

[1] Although several studies have already been conducted on the question of how ethnic and racial diversity in digital games with historical settings is received (e.g., Hammar 2019, pp. 17–20; Aguirre Quiroga 2018), there is still a great need for research. For this reason, at present a large-scale reception study is taking place in a sub-project of the Collaborative Research Center 1472 "Transformations of the Popular" at the University of Siegen, supervised by Angela Schwarz. Initial data from this interview study conducted with German-speaking players suggest that the more prominently the respective game highlights diversity, the more clearly it is received by players; i.e., it takes larger space in the narrative interviews and is mentioned more often. In addition, the interview data provide initial evidence that individuals who classify themselves as belonging to a particular social, ethno-cultural, racialized, gendered, or sexual orientation-based group are more sensitive to the staging

of these same groups in digital games and give them greater space in their playing experience. For example, female players criticized stereotypical and sexist portrayals of female characters in games more often and intensely than male players did. Given the early stage of the project, however, this must still be considered a first tentative assessment. Further information can be found here: https://www.uni-siegen.de/phil/geschichte/neueregeschichte/forschung/forschungsfelder/forschungsfeld_1_geschichtspopularisierung.html?lang=de#12 (12 January 2023).

[2] It goes without saying that sales figures and other data issued by software publishers and taken up in other media such as game magazines have to be viewed with caution and need contextualization. Publishing sales and usage figures always serve an economic, usually promotional, purpose, as they are goods in themselves. They exhibit popularity to generate more of it (see, among others, Power 2004; Beer 2016). On the other hand, they are also a mark of popularity that indicates at least some degree of intensity with which certain games are being noticed. As such, they offer a basis for our remarks in this article (see also Werber et al., Arts 12: x).

[3] The DLC was also sold as a stand-alone game. Apart from the Discovery Tours (since 2018), this was the only instance in which a DLC to an Assassin's Creed game was released separately.

[4] One example is *Thunderbird Strike* (2017) by Elizabeth LaPensée, who has written and/or produced more than a dozen digital and analog games about Indigenous self-determination since 2007 (Beer 2020; Land 2020, pp. 96–99).

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Article

Now It's My Time! Black Girls Finding Space and Place in Comic Books

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Abstract: This essay examines how Black girl narratives are finding and making space and place in the arena of comic books and television. With the rise in Black girl (super)hero protagonists on the comic book pages and adapted television shows, it is essential to explore the significance of their rising inclusion, visibility, and popularity and understand how they contribute to the discourse surrounding the next generation of heroes. Guided by an Afrofuturist, Black feminist, and intersectional framework, I discuss the progressive possibilities of popular media culture in depicting Black girlhood and adolescence. In Marvel Comics' "RiRi Williams/Ironheart", DC Comics' "Naomi McDuffie", and Boom! Studios' "Eve", these possibilities are evident. Blending aspects of adventure, fantasy, sci-fi, and STEM, each character offers fictional insight into the lived experiences of Black girl youth from historical, aesthetic, and expressive perspectives. Moreover, as talented and adventurous characters, their storylines, whether on the comic book pages or the television screen, reveal a necessary change to the landscape of popular media culture.

Keywords: Black girlhood; superheroes; popular culture; comic books; Marvel Comics; DC Comics; Boom! Studios; Black girls; Black girl joy; imagination

1. Why Black Girls?

In the winter of 2020, *The Black Scholar* featured a Special Issue on "Black Girlhood" (Lewis 2020, pp. 1–3) that shined a light on the significance, challenges, and beauty of Black girls. This Special Issue covered an array of topics that include analyzing representations of Black girls in the 2020s protest movement, musical theater, literature, Black girlhood personified in digital communities and new media technologies, Black girls in the Marvel Universe, as well as testimonials of Black girls sharing their own girlhood experiences. As a collection of articles, testimonials, and book reviews, "Black Girlhood" builds on the established work of literary writers, playwrights, and scholars such as Ruth Nicole Brown, Toni Cade Bambara, Nazera Sadiq Wright, Kristen Childs, Bettina Love, LaKisha Simmons, Venus Evans-Winters, and Monique W. Morris. Tapping into the literary and political authority of these authors, the issue at the same time answers the question why Black girls matter and offers another platform for Black girls to be seen and heard. Additionally, this issue delivers several interdisciplinary conversations around the intersectionality of Black girls, incorporates a global focus, and serves as a motivation for this article.

Black girlhood has a very layered and complex past. Whether we are talking about the recorded experiences of enslaved Black girls,[1] about centering Black child/girlhood in photographic form,[2] the 1940s Kenneth and Mamie Clark doll studies, the threat of loss of black girls' life and innocence in the 1960s, or the report "Girlhood Interrupted: The Erasure of Black Girls' Childhood" (Epstein et al. 2017) produced by the Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality, Black girlhood remains a heavily discussed topic. For more than 20 years, multi-disciplinary scholars of Black girlhood have identified the ways in which these girls have been disproportionately represented (based on race and gender), their marginalized status, educational inequity, the violence directed towards them, and

recently the ways in which they embody traits of #BlackGirlMagic, joy, and empowerment. However, while there are discussions of Black girlhood experiences within the academy and the larger landscape of popular culture, what is not discussed in great detail is the specific way in which comic book storytelling contributes to the Black girlhood narrative. Thus, the question is further expanded to *why Black girls in comics?*

In this article, I seek to see Black girls as a whole through the lens of three fictionalized comic book characters, Marvel Comics' RiRi Williams ("Ironheart"), DC Comics' Naomi McDuffie, and Boom! Studios' Eve. Bridging my wide interest in Blackness and popular culture with my personal and professional passion for comic books, I aim to respond to the call for a critical analysis of Black girlhood while establishing more lanes of inquiry. A larger set of thoughts that I want to explore is the dynamics of Blackness in comics, particularly Black girlhood, and what is necessary for it to have more academic representation. Additionally, it is necessary to explore these characters' existence and representation in popular culture (particularly around defining and maintaining popularity in the sense of being widely read, bought by many, maintaining a regular viewership, and generating ongoing online discussions), while achieving change in people's conceptions of these characters. When thinking about Black girlhood, I do not see it as experiences defined by one meaning but as an illustration of a variety of emotions, experiences, and personalities. There is a constant push–pull and complex relationship that Black girls have with society, media, and their own identity formation. Historically, Black girl characters have been repeatedly neglected, adultified, and written as one-dimensional compared to their male and white counterparts (Edwards 2016). This is especially visible in the comic book narrative. Moreover, their growing existence in comic book narratives is a success considering they were not common characters.

As a Black woman who was once a Black girl, I see this article as part of an ongoing investment in the futures of Black girls and teens. Furthermore, as a Black female scholar in Africana Studies who is both a researcher and fan of comic books, I view this article as an academic social experiment of cross-disciplinary collaboration (Africana Studies, Black girlhood Studies, and comic books studies). I fully take up the responsibility, personal passion, and sense of urgency to recognize the need for Black girls to have a voice (whether fictional or reality) and to be normalized within the popular comic book narrative. Moreover, engaging in the narratives of RiRi, Naomi, and Eve provides an innovative opportunity to create new ways of understanding how Black girls question the status quo and create change where their voices have been systematically excluded. With the work that I do as a teacher and researcher, my personal and professional passion involves creating curriculum and spaces that offer healing, transformation, critical thinking, and problem-solving. It is essential that not only scholars conduct the research, but that students, particularly Black girls, see themselves in the literature and popular culture so that they can achieve a multitude of Black girls' perspectives. Additionally, it is just as important that these comics find a space outside the classroom as they have the potential to appeal to a mass of new and seasoned readers and fans from all ages, genders, nationalities, and backgrounds. The works in question tell stories in a conventional, serialized format while also highlighting different types of Blackness, working towards some level of commercial success and popular recognition.

My argument in this article is guided by a triple-point of view framework of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991), Black feminism (Collins 2000), and Afrofuturism (LaFleur 2011; Womack 2013). I try to shed light on gender, race, class, and the imagined futures of Black girls simultaneously, via popular culture and the comic book medium, in order to highlight Black girl experiences. Each of these frameworks offers an opportunity for Black girl superhero characters to become an integral part of the comic book narrative, which has been traditionally owned by adult white men. Bridging these frameworks also creates conversations past and future between Black feminism, Afrofuturism, Girlhood studies, and comic book studies. These lines of intellectual inquiry can also create possibilities for establishing a space to interrogate and move beyond academic borders. As Paula

Giddings argues, Black feminist narratives seek to address past and present oppressions, stereotypes, and controlling images to be subverted and corrected so that new forms of activism can emerge to tell the stories of Black women and girls (Giddings 1984). Thus, when an Afrofuturist framework is added, an examination of belonging, healing from oppression, re-writing past and present scripts, and taking hold of the future particularly in this case of the Black female ensures another avenue to facilitate new stories of Black girls within the comic book narrative. Using Afrofuturism also empowers Black girls to employ their creative imaginations, which allows for further exploration of how Black girlhood experiences are not monolithic. Through these frameworks and the characters in question, using a popular[3] medium such as comic books, their narratives explore transformation, reclamation, #BlackGirlMagic, Black girl joy and empowerment, resistance, and perseverance, which are key elements of Black feminism and Afrofuturism.

2. Black Girl Representation in Comics

Being Black and a girl in today's U.S. society is an involved action that is filled with racial and gender biases and is often met with adversity (Gipson 2022). When you factor in representation in pop culture and comic books, Black girl experiences become part of an unfortunate imbalance. As noted by Ruth Nicole Brown (2009), a celebration of Black girlhood and her many experiences centers on the everyday achievements that are in actuality not so commonplace. Nevertheless, there is a rising class of Black girl characters who are tipping the scales and making their presences known. A recent and consistent example that places Black girlhood at the center can be found in the all-ages comic book series *Princeless* from Action Lab, by creator and writer Jeremy Whitley. Inspired by his own daughters to change the narrative of young girls waiting to be saved or rescued by their "prince", Whitley, through a Black girl lead, created a story that disrupts gender binaries, challenges and questions the expectation and stereotypes associated with being a princess. Another example of a Black girl protagonist can be seen in *Milestone Media*'s[4] Raquel "Rocket" Ervin. Rocket's storyline adds another layer of sophistication as her story deals with issues of police violence, income inequality, and a rare occurrence in comic books, teen pregnancy. What makes her narrative compelling is that her storyline as a teen mother becomes an example of persistence and perseverance. A final example can be seen in Robert Garrett's *Ajala: A Series of Adventures*. As an independently published coming-of-age sci-fi series, it tells the story of a pre-teen budding superheroine, Ajala, from Harlem, New York, who is on a mission to protect her community from looming crime and vice. Through her story, readers go on a journey with Ajala as she navigates her high-school, family dynamics, and friendships, along with issues of gentrification. Each of these characters, as well as the ones to follow, invoke what it means to be different, have a sense of pride in being a Black girl, and what a future looks like when they are seen in it.

With a gradual rise in consistent mainstream Black girl comic book depictions (Marvel Comics' Moon Girl/Lunella Lafayette [2015] and Shuri [2018]; DC Comics' Thunder/Anissa Pierce and Lightning/Jennifer Pierce [2018] and Sojourner "Jo" Mullein/Green Lantern; Milestone Media Rocket [2021]),[5] it becomes necessary to highlight the significance of the above-mentioned characters, as well as others, in order to combat the lingering stereotypical representations and imbalances. For many fans, "female comic book representation is something that creators have been slowly inching towards, giving us diverse women something to look up to" (Dominguez 2022). Grounded by my personal and academic interest in exploring the representations of race and gender in comic books, it was important that the characters selected for my analysis spoke to the need to address a lack of representation and that I would also acknowledge existing Black girl characters in comics and popular culture, including the notion that there have been limited viewpoints for Black girls. Centering Black girl narratives in comics contributes to and allows for, the opportunity to build and embrace more diverse representations. If Black girls are only relegated, in the white imagination, as one-dimensional, as being loud, troublemakers, sassy/having an attitude, othered, seen as inhuman/monstrous or as an enemy/villain, their existence in and out of

reality is simply a dream deferred or snuffed out (Evans-Winters 2005; Morris 2007, 2016; Wright 2016; Kelly 2018; Halliday 2019; Thomas 2019; Hines-Datiri and Carter Andrews 2020). Images over time can become tools of empowerment, change ideologies, and even dismantle tropes, all of which speak to the work and efforts of intersectionality, Black feminism, and Afrofuturism. If youth grow up without diverse images and depictions, whether in books, television, and films, they are, as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie argues, confined to the dangers of a 'single story'[6] ultimately affecting their imaginations of the world around them (Thomas 2019). For this reason, highlighting an array of Black girl experiences in comic books (mainstream works from Marvel and DC and independent publications from Boom! Studios) can play a role in breaking the status quo, while giving Black girls a chance to evade social, civic, and imaginative death (Brown 2013). If these Black girls (whether fiction or reality) and their narratives are to garner attention and hopeful popularity, they have to be given a chance to exist.

3. The Art of Storytelling through Marvel Comics RiRi Williams/"Ironheart"

I am a firm believer in the idea that everyone has a story to tell and that it is just a matter of people tuning in to listen to this story. One's story has the ability to shape opinions, reinforce or disrupt stereotypes and biases, and highlight a world that had never been imagined. Such stories have the power to "sustain us through oppression, transmit our ancient and precious traditions through all kinds of adversity . . . stories that move beyond the shadows to become known across the world are always connected to power, positioning, and privilege" (Thomas 2020, p. 2). And stories like that of Marvel Comics' RiRi Williams ("Ironheart") can inspire and formulate a sense of normalcy (especially in the STEM fields) and social acceptability, while also contributing to filling the "imagination gap" of youth literature.[7] Created by comic book writer Brian Michael Bendis, RiRi makes her first comic book appearance in *Invincible Iron Man* Vol. 2 #7 in May 2016. Growing up as a child genius, RiRi is able to home in on her science and technological skills and talent and take up the mantle of continuing the Iron Man legacy as "Ironheart." Breaking into the comic book scene during Marvel Comics' move toward broadening their audience (tapping into the pre-teens and adolescent fanbase) and creating more diverse characters, RiRi presents a brilliant Black STEM girl who is a Tony Stark fan but has also created her own suit. RiRi's actions receive the attention of Tony Stark. They lead to a meeting of the two characters and the establishment of mutual respect. While this is a part of her story, it is just the beginning. Because she is popular, the RiRi character is useful for "what Marvel has always done over the course of their history: creating a diverse universe of characters that appeal to people from all walks of life" (Tapley 2016). In the sections to follow, I want to share numerous perspectives of RiRi's story, which include her redesigned appearance in Eve Ewing's *Ironheart* series, a special appearance in a live-action video short for the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) Admissions department, and appearances in film and television.

3.1. Flexing the Pen to Write Black Girl Intelligence

To be young, gifted, Black, nerdy, and female is an identity that taps into this notion of standing out and being different. As a newer character in the comic book medium and Marvel universe as well as a superhero genius, RiRi creates a lane for young girls to simply show up, to maintain their youth, and see themselves as part of the script without having to picture themselves as adults. As adventure-seekers and scientists, it is important to have these visible representations. RiRi's entrance into the Marvel Comics universe was even praised and endorsed by the MCU's Iron Man actor Robert Downey Jr., who announced: "*Get ready for a new generation of Marvel BAMF . . .* " (Figure 1). This tweet is doubly significant in that it helps to ease the minds of many fans who are attached to the classic version while also offering a sense of applicability for the entrance of a teenage Black girl superhero in a large, mainstream comic book universe. The tweet was liked more than 11,000 times, quote-tweeted more than 1300 times, and retweeted 28,500 times, which

indicates both Downey's reach as an actor from the MCU and the willingness of a sizable segment of Marvel followers to recognize these new Black Girl characters.

Figure 1. Tweet from Iron Man actor Robert Downey Jr. in support of Riri Williams taking over for Tony Stark in the *Iron Man* comics (7/7/16).

While RiRi's character makes her debut in May 2016, her story and personality take flight when University of Chicago sociology professor/poet Dr. Eve E. Ewing takes over the writing reigns after the departure of Brian Michael Bendis in 2018.[8] It is also important to note that 2016 serves as a #BlackGirlMagic[9] year for Marvel Comics when they hired three Black women writers (Eve Ewing, Roxane Gay, and Yona Harvey). This hiring of Black and queer women, invoking #BlackGirlMagic, is noteworthy and historical as it had not been done before. Black women are making space not just as characters, but as writers of the "comic script" (we would also see a rise in Black female illustrators during this time as well). With a revised series title, *Ironheart* went from simply being a "girl Iron Man" to teen student, inventor, and superheroine. As the lead writer, Ewing personalizes and humanizes RiRi's story to include the loss of her stepfather and best friend and a necessary narrative of her Chicago origin story. As a result of Ewing's revision and as a departure from Bendis's caricature-like presentation, RiRi is given some humanity as a Black teen and becomes what Deborah Whaley calls a "sequential subject" (Whaley 2016, p. 8). Her character is not a diversity-checked box, but a representation of real and imagined Black girlhood.

Through Ewing's writing, readers are able to take in Black inner-city Chicago life as personified by a teenager, without it being overrun by trauma and violence as portrayed in the previous *Invincible Ironman* series. In the opening pages of *Ironheart* issue #5, we see present-day Chicago on a summer day. Organized in two-tier columns with a total of six panels, the comic offers a range of scenes with a diverse cast, including a police car driving in front of a liquor store with a group of men engaging in conversation outside of the store; a small business owner setting up his 'Tamales Café' stand; a group of young men drumming on paint buckets; a group of kids playing in the water of an exposed fire hydrant; a homeless man digging through a trash can. Closing out the page is Riri's mother, who appears stressed working as she going through some important budgeting or accounting documents. What makes the series of panels personable is Riri's voice as she narrates each scene. Her thoughts range from how her city is perceived: "*I live in a city that people call dangerous*"; to finding the small wins of Chicago: "*the place that makes other people feel good about where they lay their heads at night*"; to the realization that "*people here are struggling to survive . . . and a wise person once told me that the business of survival ain't always pretty*" (Ewing 2019b, Ironheart #5). This panel highlights RiRi's vulnerability

and her inside perspective into the Chicago she knows. She describes the adversity, the joys, and the stress and conveys an understanding that how one sees something depends on one's own vantage point. Although a native of Chicago, RiRi can provide an outside perspective without being voyeuristic, still giving it some sort of identity. Her awareness of the perception of others (a subtle jab towards Bendis's controversial interpretation)[10] is narrated in her own voice. Through each of these panels, Ewing provides a reclaiming of her voice and a sense of authority to RiRi to critique outside depictions and celebrate the strengths of her home city. The issue opens with working in the importance of a Black child's innocence and perspective. Ewing's personal connection as a Black woman from Chicago who also has an academic background (as a trained sociologist) offers a shift in the comic book narrative, where the majority of writers (and artists) have been white and male, such as Bendis.

In addition to RiRi recognizing and celebrating Black life, we also get to see her step outside superhero mode and bond with fellow Black girl peers. While RiRi normally operates as a solo hero, in issue #10, "The Enemy Within," RiRi teams up with fellow Black girl Marvel heroines Shuri and Silhouette. Ewing writes the script for this issue from a team mindset that is full of laughter and action. As RiRi walks into the group meeting with Shuri and Silhouette, a playful back and forth takes place, with Silhouette assigning a cute nickname: "*Finally the gang's all here. So listen here's what we need to do Shuriri . . . .*" Taken off guard, Shuri replies, "*Silhouette did you just call us Shuriri?*" To which RiRi quickly quips, "*That's a NO. Hard Pass.*" The humor builds as Silhouette continues to try and sell the name to RiRi and Shuri: "*Oh come on. It's an adorable nickname, like Brangelina*" (Ewing 2019a, Ironheart #10). The childlike banter between the young ladies becomes a way to transition into a more serious conversation about family and legacy. Showcasing these friendships and relationships is important and necessary, as readers and fans "will have the ability to absorb the imagery and portrayals in the comics they read, subconsciously referring back to them" (Schwein 2020).

Due to RiRi's loner status, she often does not get to cultivate friendships beyond linking up with other superheroes. So, in the next moment, she capitalizes on being transparent and opens up about the impact the loss of her stepfather has had on her. The conversation begins with RiRi asking Silhouette why she is helping her and Shuri in this latest mission. The conversation quickly shifts to Shuri sharing her appreciation of the relationship she has with her father: "*[M]en always think they know what's best. My father was different. He treated me like I always knew things. But he also always had wisdom to share*". Noticing that RiRi is being quietly observant, Shuri shifts the conversation: "*You're awfully quiet, RiRi. What about you? Do you have a good relationship with your father?*" This triggers a shaken pause for reflection, with RiRi responding, "*Hm? Oh. He's dead. But I had a pretty special relationship with him. My stepfather, I mean. I had a pretty good relationship with him*" (Ewing 2019a, Ironheart #10). With each panel, the reader gets a back-and-forth close-up shot of RiRi, then Shuri, and back to RiRi. In between, RiRi further acknowledges that her biological father is dead as well but that she never met him so there was nothing to miss. Shuri attempts to wrap up the conversation with a closing thought: "*It seems like . . . you've been through A LOT*." And in a semi-sarcastic response, RiRi replies, "*Yeah, well it be like that sometimes*" (Ewing 2019a, Ironheart #10). In this tense but candid exchange, the young women bond over their paternal connections, and RiRi finds herself being receptive to sharing her grief. Even in their youth, they affirm each other, while understanding the need to be a listening ear for each other and grasping that they can collectively come together as a sisterhood to support each other.

3.2. A Decision to Reach beyond the Page

Not only has RiRi's story made an impact on the comic book pages,[11] but it has also become a part of the culture beyond comics through Massachusetts Institute of Technology's (MIT) recruitment and admission. On March 2017, MIT Admissions released a student-made short film based on the debut of the Marvel Comics character in order to inform

prospective students of the university's decisions announcement.[12] The short film starred real-life MIT chemical-engineering major Ayomide Fatunde (MITbloggers 2017). Describing the film, MIT Admissions noted that "although Riri Williams is a fictional MIT black woman, she's played by a real MIT black woman, directed by a real MIT black woman, and 'lives' in a real MIT black woman's dorm room, something I thought was pretty awesome" (Gano 2017). This becomes a significant moment as MIT uses the character of RiRi, a Black young woman, to usher in future MIT students. With the tagline *not all heroes wear capes, but some carry tubes*, MIT was not only signaling the significance of Black girlhood to the incoming class; it also recognized the potential of women in the STEM field. As a creative recruitment tool, the action video follows RiRi (Ayomide) as she goes from sitting in class to designing and building her own super suit in her dorm room (Figure 2) and eventually heading to the office of Stu Schmill, Dean of Admissions, to help him carry out the important task of making some future incoming MIT students' dreams come true.

Figure 2. Still shot of MIT student Ayomide Fatunde as RiRi Williams/Ironheart for Pi Day 2017.

The 'what-if' style film "shows that all of Riri's characteristics can be found, collectively, among all of the black women at MIT, and I'm glad that there's now an additional story among all the fictional stories where people can witness this identity" (Gano 2017). Thus, the decision of the students and MIT to incorporate both RiRi and her alter-ego "Ironheart" in their decision process is notable, given the prestigious status of MIT and the current Hollywood climate of emerging Black female superheroes. Seeing Ayomide, a real-life STEM student, RiRi enables young Black women, whether in high school or on the MIT campus, to imagine themselves as future engineers. The creators also tap into the "interesting ways in which Black folks use fiction [ex. comics] in its various forms to free themselves from the bounds of fact" (Young 2012). Thus, as a short film, it also serves as a tool to explore the ability to use the creators' voices and talents to create change. "People were excited about RiRi because she opened up the spectrum of imagination—for people in and outside of the demographic of black women . . . It makes you think, I can imagine a black, female, mechanical engineer—because I've seen one. It allows people of that demographic to imagine themselves that way, too" (Gano 2017). Fantasy may become reality if Black girls have appropriate role models.

While RiRi has had a fairly consistent showing in the comic book medium, which indicates her popularity among Marvel followers, her story has recently been translated into several other media. In 2018, RiRi starred in her own animated television special *Marvel Rising: Heart of Iron* (voiced by Sofia Wylie), where she teams up with the "Secret Warriors" to disarm a doomsday device and save her city. *Marvel Rising: Heart of Iron* serves as one of the three characters of color to a *Marvel Rising* special (the other characters are Shuri and America Chavez/Miss America). RiRi/Ironheart also expands her reach appearing as a playable character in several video games (*Marvel Puzzle Quest*, *Marvel Future Fight*, *Marvel Avengers Academy*, *Lego Marvel Super Heroes 2*, and *Marvel Strike Force*). And before making

her series debut on Disney+ (Ironheart, fall 2023), we have seen her show off her skills in live action in the Marvel Cinematic Universe film, *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* (2022). All of these media appearances are important because her character is establishing a future legacy and becomes a part of laying the groundwork for the next chapter and phase in the ongoing Marvel Cinematic Universe. Riri's comic book popularity is not only validated but also extended through these transmedia adaptations.

In light of the long history of Black girls being victims of erasure in fiction and reality, Riri's multiple appearances across the pop culture landscape, her apparent rise in popularity, and her attachment to STEM are noteworthy and important to acknowledge. With little representation of Black girls in the Marvel Universe, as well as in the larger comic book universe, Riri further confirms that not only does *representation matter* but it is necessary. Seeing superhero stories like RiRi as Ironheart disrupts the established narrative that Black characters lack nuance or must appear as tokenized characters. As noted by one comic book fan, "It's super dope to see these two young black girls (Lunella Lafayette and RiRi Williams) out here dominating and becoming the future of a field where middle-aged white men have been the standard" (More Street Art 2017). Additionally, seeing a Black girl have a presence in multiple popular media lets fans and consumers know that they are worthy of being seen, which can also translate into reality and future possibilities. Ewing speaks to this notion of being seen: "I feel like for years a lot of black kids in fantasy culture have had to compromise, so it was important to show them they can be the hero" (Murphy 2019). The inclusion of her character, especially in the Marvel Universe, adds to the growing popularity and legacy of younger heroes like Kamala Khan, Miles Morales, and Sam Alexander.

4. DC Comics, "Naomi" Port Oswego's Environmental/Geo-Engineer

The year 2022 was a busy one for comic book representations on television, ranging from Marvel's *Moon Knight*, *Ms. Marvel*, and *She*-Hulk to Image Comics' *Paper Girls* and *Tales of the Walking Dead*, to Vertigo's *The Sandman* and *DMZ*. From the DC Universe, we saw #BlackGirlMagic play out in the superhero drama series *Naomi*. Created by Academy Award and Golden Globe-nominated director Ava DuVernay and television writer Jill Blankenship, *Naomi* is based on the 2019 comic book of the same name co-written by Brian Michael Bendis and David F. Walker and illustrated by Jamal Campbell. Premiering in January 2022 on The CW, *Naomi* is a coming-of-age drama that follows a Black teen girl's journey (played by Kaci Walfall[13]) after a supernatural event from a small Pacific northwestern town to a massive multiverse.

4.1. Who Am I?

The *Naomi* series is one that I would describe as self-exploratory. From the opening of episode #1, "Don't Believe Everything You Think," we are looking through the literal lens of Naomi's glasses as she is preparing to attend a friend's house party. This is an episode that can be likened to an origin story and one that sets the tone for the entire season. Upon first glance, we see a fusion of Naomi's style and personality as a skater girl, a military brat, and a huge Superman fan who caters her style to an amalgamation of 1990s fashion (Poetic Justice braids, baggy overall jeans, Nike Air Force Ones). We also learn that she is adopted (by a mother of color and a white father), which speaks to the importance that not all Black girls have the same experience and family dynamics. Moreover, the fact that her parents are not Black could be seen as a strategic mainstreaming move to make her character more palatable to white audiences. As part of this episode, viewers also get to see how the creators offer a freedom narrative where Naomi is open about whom she chooses to like and flirt with, whether it is her comic book buddy Lourdes or two male friends Nathan and Anthony. According to co-creator Ava DuVernay, the show overall is an example of normalizing the types of stories they want to see in the world. She explains: "We show a different hero, a black girl, and we're making it normal and that's radical/revolutionary" (Bennett 2022). An immediate engagement with Naomi's sexuality

is extremely noticeable and refreshing and a nod to this current generation's attitude toward the fluidity of sexuality. Showrunner Jill Blankenship shared that they looked to this generation to influence the tone and approach to telling Naomi's story (Bennett 2022). For Naomi is constantly trying to uncover the truth about who she is while simultaneously navigating her newfound identity as a superhero and accepting it as something positive and empowering. But just like any other teenager, she constantly desires to be normal and to fit in. This can be complicated even in reality, when Black girls are seen as threats, problematic, or someone who needs to be tamed.

4.2. F.I.A.R. (Face the Fear, Identify, Acknowledge, Release)

Another common theme that frequently occurs in the series is Naomi's management of self-care. Not only is she committed, but her parents and mentors play a role in making sure it is a priority. In one of their many conversations, Naomi's mentor Dee wants to make sure she moves away from striving to be "normal." As part of this self-reflection, in episode #3, "Zero to Sixty", Dee offers a series of thoughts and questions about "who determines normalcy?" Having powers, she suggests, does not mean you're ready to use them as a threat, the power of words, and embracing change. Over the course of the series, Naomi will incorporate a mantra, *F.I.A.R. (Face the Fear, Identify, Acknowledge, Release)* to help with personal relationships with friends and family, navigating school and preparing for college, and the way she deals with accepting her additional identity as a superhero. The mentorship and guidance given to Naomi can be seen as a luxury since not every young girl is afforded this opportunity. For Black girls, mentorship becomes vital to avoid being thrust into the criminal justice system at an early age (Brown 2013; Morris 2016). Channeling an Afrofuturist spirit, ultimately, Black girls need space to simply exist not just in the present, but the hopeful future.

4.3. Who Gets to Save the World . . . A Black Teen Girl

What is also important to note, much like the significance of Eve L. Ewing writing the *Ironheart* series, is that the majority of the directors for each episode are Black (a total of 8 out 13, with 4 being Black women [DeMane Davis, Neema Barnette, Angel Kristi Williams, Merawi Gerima]). With film and television having very little minority representation among top management and boards, and a need to advance racial and gender equity, concerted action and the joint commitment of stakeholders across the industry ecosystem is essential (Dunn et al. 2021). The "Naomi" script with its diverse casting of characters and directors speaks to the efforts of rendering Black girls visible and redefining who gets to save the world. These efforts also channel the work of Black feminists as they work towards giving agency to Black women's experiences, changing societal systems, and dismantling racial and gender inequities. In essence, Naomi serves as a radical act of transformation that DuVernay explains moves beyond representation: "[I]t's not about representation, it's about normalization . . . The more you can portray images without underlining or highlighting them and putting a star next to them. By showing a different type of hero that centers a girl, a Black girl, that centers different kinds of folks. We start to make that normal and that's a radical and revolutionary thing" (Steiner 2022).

Unfortunately, Naomi's story is cut short, and the series was canceled after only one season due to a struggling viewership and the recent Discovery and Warner Bros. merger (Oddo 2022). Along with premiering in the midst of a merger, *Naomi* also fell victim to not being marketed properly, with commercial considerations potentially overriding the wish for more and better representation. Instead of pushing stories like Naomi's that feature forward-thinking visuals of Black girlhood to the margins (Hooks 2014), producers need to be enticed to create more narratives that speak to various lived experiences. While the cancellation of the show can be seen as a failure, the existence of her character has left a mark that can live on beyond the show. As proclaimed by *Book Riot* journalist Aurora Lydia Dominguez, Naomi's character "represents a powerful Black teenage superhero, one that young Black girls can look up to and feel represented by" (Dominguez 2022). She goes on

to argue: "it's not just about this female superhero having unique superpowers, it's about what this symbolizes: that diverse women can truly fulfill their destiny, find strength within themselves, and showcase their strengths in front of their male counterparts" (Dominguez 2022). Others have also noted that Naomi's story and the series can be likened to this notion of a Black Girl transforming the superhero space. The series is representative "of those historically marginalized by major superhero stories; *Naomi* is for the people who are usually excluded from representation of this kind but know they're badass enough to be the stars of their own universe" (Andrea 2022). Thus, with this quick cancellation, we are left to wonder about the potential popularity and what might have been further developed in Naomi's television comic book narrative.

5. Adventures of a Pre-Teen Explorer in *Boom! Studios' Eve*

When thinking about the representation of Black girls in comics and popular culture, I want to make sure to include experiences before adolescence. In my research, most of the characters that are explored vary from teenagers to young adults. Thus, I feel that it is necessary to include BOOM! Studios' *Eve*, which offers an under-researched perspective into Black girl middle childhood. Debuting in May 2021, *Eve* is an original five-issue series by award-winning author Victor LaValle and rising artist Jo Mi-Gyeong. It tells the story of an 11-year-old Black girl named Eve, who embarks on "a dangerous journey across a future dystopian America to save the world." As a departure from the larger two comic book publishing companies, the character of Eve in many ways creates her own path because she does not have to come from behind the shadows of existing, long-standing characters. Her series is another example of the future possibilities of Black girls as main protagonists not just in comic books but within genres like science-fiction, fantasy, or magical realism, where they are still not featured or seen as much.

"*What kind of planet are we leaving to our kids?*," LaValle asks at the end of *Eve* issue #1. This is a poignant question that also serves as a motivation for the creation of this comic book and one that he is constantly wrestling with through his own personal life and work. Through this question, LaValle explains the importance and necessity of telling a story like Eve's:

> "Many generations have wrestled with it, but the question has never been as immediate . . . But I didn't want to write some grim story about how this joint went to hell. Instead, I wanted to write a story about how we let the planet fall apart and left it to younger generations to fix it. So, this is a story, inspired by young folks like Mari Copeny, Else Mengistu, Greta Thunberg and so many more, of how an eleven-year old girl, Eve, and her android teddy bear try to do the seemingly impossible: save the planet, save us." (Broken Frontier Staff 2021)

Here, LaValle addresses a societal need for change and how a younger generation is stepping up to the task to get the job done. Taking it a step further, LaValle is giving this responsibility and power to an eleven-year-old Black girl. But what does it mean to write a story about a young Black girl, like Eve, who holds so much responsibility?

Picture this, a young precocious Black girl navigating a dense mangrove tree landscape maze filled with wooden bridges and crabs climbing the branches. With a walkie-talkie in her hand, this eleven-year-old named Eve is embarking on a utopian journey where she is the lead explorer. As she leaps from tree to tree, talking to herself, a voice comes through the walkie-talkie: "*[Y]ou finished with the perimeter sweep?*," asks her father. She then races back home to her father to have dinner, recap from her adventure, and discuss plans for the future. What follows their conversation is a walk to a mysterious doorway and a shocking revelation for Eve. Before opening the door, Eve's father shares with her, "*you've made this place feel like a home. It won't be the same without you.*" To which Eve replies, "*Daddy I don't understand . . . you're scaring me.*" In this moment, Eve realizes her playful adventures were actually training sessions, as her father was preparing her for journey of self-discovery and survival. In his last words to his daughter, he is essentially passing the torch for her to jump into an unknown reality: "*[Y]ou have to open this yourself, little one. I can't do it for*

you" (LaValle 2021a, *Eve* #1). This opening begins Eve's mission to get back to her father and save the world. At a young age, Eve is given tremendous responsibility, designed for a superhero even though she is not one. In the first issue, we see how Eve handles her new reality guided by an android teddy bear named Wexler, programmed by her father. Readers early on see her fears, frustrations, and how she struggles with the destruction that has taken over her Jackson Square community. In spite of the dystopian reality and her imperfections, Eve is still motivated to take on the mission as a way to possibly reconnect with her father.

Eve's story is not only about self-discovery but an example of how children operate through life when faced with ongoing obstacles. Even at a young age, Eve understands that she has to be her own champion. Very early on we see how Eve is very transparent with her emotions. In one panel, we see her looking up toward the sky talking to her mother, who has passed away, assuring her that she is ok. "*Are you there Mom? It's Me. Eve . . . You're probably worried about me, but I know how to pilot that craft below*" (LaValle 2021b, *Eve* #2). In this moment, Eve is confident in her ability to navigate this part of her mission. And even though Eve's mother is not alive to physically protect her, Eve still offers this reassurance. This is also an example of how kids operate without fear, while adults typically operate in protection mode. In this same issue, we also see Eve's burgeoning curiosity. As she continues to escape what's left of New York City, accompanied by her companion Wexler, Eve encounters a team of mutant stalkers. Staying one step ahead of them, Eve begins wondering how they came to be mutants. Communicating through a crown helmet, Eve asks Wexler, "*How did it work? Did people get sick one day and turn into . . . those things?*" To which he explains that they were consumed by a virus. This response leads to a further inquiry from Eve: "*[S]o we're making this trip because the danger hasn't passed right? The virus remains active?*" (LaValle 2021b, *Eve* #2). Eve does not want simple answers; she would rather be told the hard truth versus be pacified. As noted by the author in the issue's closing notes, a lesson he learned while attending a writing conference was that when writing YA stories like Eve's that tackle tough problems, "don't write for adults, write for the reading audience" (LaValle 2021c, *Eve* #3). In essence, be honest, and truthful, and trust that kids know the world can be a vicious place. Thus, through Eve's confidence and curiosity, the above-noted examples serve as teachable moments in which we see how one should not underestimate how much children are able to handle.

Operating through an Afrofuturistic lens, the *Eve* series engages with technology, speculative, and reclamation. Eve uses VR and AI tools left by her father; she runs from supernatural beings and uses her imagination to create a future new normal. This latter sentiment is something of which she constantly reminds herself: "*Instead of thinking about what went wrong in the past, I want you to imagine how you can do some good during what comes next*" (LaValle 2021d, *Eve* #5). Eve's bravery, much like RiRi's and Naomi's, is a reminder that when given an opportunity to be heard and seen, Black girls' stories have the possibility to change the media landscape and the way they are perceived in society. In the end, despite the spreading of the virus, Eve is successful in her pursuit to save the world even when others have lost hope. For Eve, "we found love in a hopeless place" (LaValle 2021d, *Eve* #5). themes like fear, parent loss, climate crisis, references to COVID-19, and survival, *Eve* offers the possibility that even in reality the world can still be saved. This possibility is revisited as Eve's story continues with Wexler and her sister in the latest series *Eve: Children of the Moon* (debuting in October 2022).

6. The Rising Possibilities

As the comic book landscape continues to expand and grow, diversity still remains a heavily discussed topic. As noted by comic book creator C. Spike Trotman, "diversity of every sort—racial diversity, gender diversity, acknowledging minority sexualities—is experiencing an explosion of recognition and representation in comics" (Hudson 2015). This is especially significant in the case of the Marvel and DC publishing companies adding teen characters to their roster. The past 10 years have seen a steady increase in the number

of young characters of color entering the comic book landscape as main/central characters, whether via comic books, television, and/or film formats (see Table 1). This increase in young characters of color, particularly in works by Marvel and DC, is significant and note-worthy considering how a character builds popularity if they are included. Furthermore, including characters like the ones mentioned above, especially for young readers who match their identities, is relatable and can be viewed as inspirational and aspirational.

Table 1. Mainstream New Class of Young Characters of Color.

Character Name	Race	Publishing Company	Comic Book Appearance	Film/Television
Miles Morales/Spider-Man	African American/Puerto Rican	Marvel Comics	August 2011–present	Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse (2018)
America Chavez/Miss America	Latin-American	Marvel Comics	September 2011	Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness (2022)
Kamala Khan/Ms. Marvel	Pakistani-American	Marvel Comics	August 2013	Ms. Marvel [TV Series] (2022)
Lunella Lafayette/Moon Girl	African American	Marvel Comics	November 2015	Marvel's Moon Girl and Devil Dinosaur [TV Series] 2023
Shuri	African/Wakandan	Marvel Comics	May 2005; 2018 (solo series)	Black Panther (2018); Marvel Rising: Operation Shuri [TV Series] 2019
Raquel Ervin/Rocket	African American	Milestone Media	May 1993, February 2021	Young Justice [TV Series] (Season 4) 2021–2022
Static Shock/Virgil Hawkins	African American	Milestone Media	June 1993, 2021	Static Shock [TV Series] 2000–2004

Diversity and inclusion, especially in younger characters, also open doors for new genres or genres that have been ignored but are getting more attention in comic books. These characters, as well as the ones explored in the article, offer a relatability that is not primarily relegated to hetero-white men. More diverse characters can also enable stories that engage with different walks of life. For example, Ms. Marvel's (Kamala Khan) story (both in her Disney series and the comic book) taps into the role of religion and faith through the lens of social justice. She's a Muslim and a Pakistani-American teen living in New Jersey who goes to parties, deals with disappointments and heartaches, has crushes and insecurities. Ms. Marvel highlights a story that is universal while also being specific. Considering the one-dimensional narratives often associated with Muslim people, including terrorism and orientalist tropes, it is crucial to re-condition and provides a more relatable and empowering reflection. Another prominent character is Static Shock (Virgil Hawkins) of Milestone Media. While he has one of the earlier appearances in comics and television, pre-dating Miles Morales by many years, Static Shock offers a perspective from a Black teen boy who is a highly gifted student with interests in science-fiction, technology, comic books, and role-playing games. As an animated television series that premiered in 2000, *Static Shock* was unapologetically political and engaged with a variety of heavy topics, such as homelessness, mental health, racism, gangs, and gun violence. Compared to other kid and superhero shows of that time, *Static Shock*'s cultural and political commentary was integral to the show's DNA (Dominguez 2020). All in all, just because these characters are young does not mean they are oblivious to what is happening in the world around them. If anything, their stories as well as others offer a beacon of hope of what is to come in the future.

Not only do we see the rising possibilities of young characters of color in the Marvel and DC universes, but we are also seeing an influence on a global scale, particularly in Africa. While there have been locally produced African superhero comics from Africans

since 1980s, this popularity increased in 2016 due to the rise of Marvel Studios superhero films (Wangari 2022). Embracing an Afrofuturist framework and an exploration of diasporic Blackness and girlhood, an example of this impact can be seen in the newest Netflix series *Mama K's Team 4.* As an original and the first animated series from Africa, *Mama K's Team 4* follows four teenage girls who live in a futuristic Lusaka, Zambia, and are recruited by a retired secret agent to save the world. Inspired by creator and Zambian writer Malenga Mulendema to change the way cartoons have been portrayed in her home country, Mulendema wanted to see herself in a medium that often left her out. She aimed at "creating a superhero show set in Lusaka, I hope to introduce the world to four strong African girls who save the day in their own fun and crazy way . . . and most importantly, I want to illustrate that anyone from anywhere can be a superhero" (Vourlias 2019).

In addition to the debut of Netflix's *Mama K's Team 4*, Africa has also contributed more specifically to the comic book and graphic novel genre with the work of Marguerite Abouet. Her *Aya* series depicts the normal life of residents of the Ivory Coast as seen through the eyes of a Black/African teen girl named Aya. Abouet's depiction of daily African life disrupts the western viewpoint, which primarily focuses on famine, civil war, and unhinged wilderness. As an award-winning comic book/graphic novelist, Abouet, as a writer, is very intentional with her characters' portrayals, highlighting them going to school and work, having fun with family and friends, and planning for their futures. The *Aya* series also gained global popularity as it has been translated into 15 languages and turned into an animated film ("Aya of Yop City") distributed internationally by the *Institut Français*, and it also received the 2018 Prix des jeunes cinéphiles francophones (Prize for Young French-Speaking Film Enthusiats). All in all, both African creators, much like their U.S. counterparts, are contributing to the global popularity by telling stories that invite their African readership into the genre while simultaneously yearning for more diversity, representation, and authenticity in their stories.

When we consider comics as a quantitative phenomenon, we can note that comic book sales reached USD 2.075 billion (the largest in the industry) in 2021, with 13–29-year-olds buying 57% of all comics (Clark 2022; Georgiev 2022). Comic books continue to be a thriving business with collectors and fans still making the financial investment. A part of this success is attributed to a few factors: rediscovering hobbies during the COVID-19 pandemic, increased popularity in certain genres, and streaming services like Amazon Prime Video, Netflix, HBO Max, and Disney+ featuring new shows and movies (Marvel Cinematic Universe and DC Comics). Consumers are obviously seeking out the source material. Additionally, children's comics and graphic novels have become increasingly popular because parents are seeing them as a "gateway into reading" (Clark 2022). While some fans and consumers may view RiRi, Naomi, Eve, and other diverse stories as manufactured diversity (Cain 2017),[14] their narratives explore why their inclusion and range are necessary while also serving as a turning point in American visibility. With each month, these stories and others are becoming more commonplace and accessible to consumers. According to one retailer, increased diversity has brought a new clientele to his store, as the diverse comics "do bring in a different demographic, and I'm happy to see that money in my store" (Griepp 2017). Furthermore, with the existence of movies and series/shows like Disney's *Ms. Marvel* and *Marvel Rising: Operation Shuri* (voiced by Daisy Lightfoot), The CW's *Black Lightning*, and the upcoming Disney Channel animated series *Marvel's Moon Girl and Devil Dinosaur* (voiced by Diamond White) to complement the digital and physical comic books, Black girls are continuing to make space, imagine alternative futures, and exemplify that being a Black girl is something to be proud of.

Girlhood, in particular Black girlhood, in comics is expanding beyond just the comic book page and steadily branching into more media (mainstream and independent). While the increase in mainstream recognition is not always massive, although steady, there is a popularity of Black female character storylines in the independent space, which contributes to their overall representation. For many, success and popularity are not solely based on the validation of dominant publishers. As noted by veteran comic book editor Joe Illidge,

"I don't think the goal should be to try and break into DC and Marvel . . . I think the goal is we have to build our own houses and then in time be as big as DC and Marvel" (Lynn 2018). This is important to recognize as it can help to reconsider and redefine what is deemed popular and to whom. Even in spite of cancellations, the opportunity for a show to exist, or a comic book series to hit bookshelves, is an accomplishment on its own, especially when considering the lack of exposure in the past.

7. What These Black Girl Superheroes Taught Me

So, what did these Black girl superheroes teach me? These characters as well as others provide a change in my thinking. I am becoming less surprised when I see them in a comic book, leading a television series, or making a stand-out performance in a Hollywood blockbuster film; instead, I am more encouraged. Revisiting RiRi, Eve, and Naomi's stories transports me back to my own childhood while giving me the confidence to declare that Black girls are the future, whether locally, nationally, or even globally. Comics are widely accessible, e.g., online sites such as *Comixology* (https://support.comixology.com/hc/en-us, accessed on 14 March 2023), *Comic Book Plus* (https://comicbookplus.com/, accessed on 14 March 2023), *DriveThru Comics* (https://www.drivethrucomics.com/, accessed on 14 March 2023), *Digital Comic Museum* (https://digitalcomicmuseum.com/, accessed on 14 March 2023), and *Libby* (https://www.overdrive.com/apps/libby, accessed on 14 March 2023) or in local libraries. They are being taught in K-12 and collegiate classes, and their characters are featured in television and film. Having such a wide-ranging impact, comics offer Black girls and teens the opportunity to not only imagine who they could be but also act on it. As the comic book superhero narrative gradually includes younger voices, especially Black girls, we as scholars and fans can consider the ways in which their stories can be utilized as a valuable tool not only to teach but also to facilitate critical conversations around popularity, power, race, class, gender, privilege (Dallacqua and Low 2019) and their relationship with popular culture. These stories make statements and serve a purpose in which their popularity is within a particular space. For example, PBS Media founder and engineer Naseed Gifted notes that he creates and uses comics with Black stories "to get students interested in STEM" (Lynn 2018). Here, the comic book becomes a vehicle to reach audiences of fans and introduce them to others. While characters like RiRi, Eve, and Naomi exist in a fictional comic book and television show landscape, their narratives resonate with an array of Black girl realities. I can even remember as an eight-year-old Black girl reading the latest *X-Men* series, watching *Transformers* and *Scooby-Doo* as part of my Saturday cartoons routine, and anxiously awaiting getting my copy of the Sunday Funny Papers. During each of the 30 min syndicated programs, I would escape my reality and transport myself into a colorful fantasy. Now what would have made this an almost utopian experience would have been the opportunity to see more characters that looked like me or shared my reality. As more stories of Black girls like RiRi, Naomi, and Eve are created and presented in multiple formats, in comics, popular culture more broadly, and the academy, their presence becomes a game-changer and works toward filling the gaps in existing genres and narratives.

Each of their narratives provides new representations, new voices, and redefinitions of Black girlhood, creating new worlds while "dismantling problematic and artificial boundaries obstructing Black liberation" (Moore 2017). It is crucial to have a wide range of images and possibilities for Black girls so that as they grow up their imaginations do not have to be stifled or diminished based on preconceived notions. Their narratives, whether in the comic book or television format, also create discourses on the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, religion, etc., and on how those identities navigate "living in a racialized society" (Kirkpatrick and Scott 2015, p. 120). Especially in the portrayal of the classroom space, regardless of age, all three girls manage to find ways to define themselves for themselves. It was necessary to analyze more than one Black girl experience across a range of ages so as not to limit the Black girl voice to a single iteration. RiRi, Naomi, and Eve are inventive examples of adventure-seekers, innovators, and freedom fighters

who encourage Black girl empowerment. They challenge oppression, push back against the labels placed on Black girls, refuse restrictions, and make meaning of their identities. Ultimately, RiRi, Naomi, and Eve are not only trying to save their communities and the world. They are also contributing to revising the future Black girl script, in and outside of popular culture. The greater the access and representation are, the more opportunities arise to make space for other Black girls and teens to imagine the possibilities of seeing themselves in a world where they are not normally seen or represented.

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Notes

1. See Phillis Wheatley's *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (Wheatley 1793) and Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Jacobs 1861).

2. See W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Brownies' Book* (Du Bois 1920).

3. I define popular as being regarded with favor, approval, or affection; and popular culture as the collection of arts, entertainment, beliefs, and values that are shared by large sections of society.

4. Milestone Comics was renamed Milestone Media in January 2015.

5. These are representations in comic book, television, and film formats.

6. This is in reference to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's (2009) TEDTalk on "The Danger of a Single Story".

7. In Ebony Elizabeth Thomas's text *The Dark Fantastic: Race and the Imagination from Harry Potter to the Hunger Games* (Thomas 2019), she addresses several conversations surrounding the lack of diversity in children's stories and how they promote an imagination gap in youth literature, media, and culture. More specifically, these disparities are argued in two 2014 *New York Times* op-ed essays from notable Black children's author Walter Dean Myers and his son Christopher Myers, "Where Are the People of Color in Children's Books?" and "The Apartheid of Children's Literature".

8. Ewing's arrival can be attributed to a variety of reasons including fans petitioning Marvel to give her authorship of *Ironheart* in 2017, their disappointment in Bendis' aesthetic portrayal of RiRi Williams, as well as his departure to DC Comics. Ewing's hire is also part of another trend to give a voice to Black women writers with university affiliations. Nnedi Okorafor, the author of Marvel's *Shuri* series, is another example in this context. [https://www.change.org/p/marvel-hire-eve-ewing-for-marvel-s-invincible-iron-man-comic-book] (accessed on 10 November 2022).

9. As a hashtag that celebrates beauty, power, and resilience of Black women and girls, it also celebrates their work and contributions to a field dominated by white men. Connecting it to the writers also shows how the hashtage can translate beyond a social media illustration.

10. Bendis was highly criticized for his marginalization of RiRi and lack of outside input regarding her experiences as a Black girl (https://geeksofcolor.co/2017/06/23/comics-riri-williams-and-the-limits-of-representation/) as well as the sexualization of how she was drawn in a variant cover (https://www.dailydot.com/parsec/riri-williams-variant-cover-iron-man-campbell-controversy/) (both accessed on 10 November 2022).

11. Since the publication and appearance of Ironheart in comics, she would be ranked 4th in CBR.com's 2021 "Marvel: 10 Smartest Female Characters" list, just under *Athena* (#3), *Brainstorm* (#2), and fellow Black girl superhero *Moon Girl* (#1). Then, in 2022, Screen Rant included her in their "MCU: 10 Most Desired Fan Favorite Debuts Expected In The Multiverse Saga" list, as one of only two women included.

12. Annually, MIT debuts a creative video that informs prospective students when the school's admissions are released, which is on March 14th (Pi Day . . . 3.14). This creative video would continue in the legacy of MIT using pop culture figures to bring in students to the university. In 2016, they featured a computer-generated version of BB-8 from *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*.

13. Kaci Walfall is only the second Black woman to lead a DC superhero show on The CW; the first is Javicia Leslie, who played Batwoman/Ryan Wilder.

14. Manufactured diversity is defined as media products that have a superficial use of inclusion. As noted by Arizona State University professor Michelle Martinez, "diversity is manufactured if the characters have no nuance or specificity, no relationship to their home communities, are written as caricatures or stereotypes and are portrayed as in need of or dependent on the white main character" (Robbins 2019).

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Article

Pop/Poetry: *Dickinson* as Remix

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Abstract: In its meticulous, freewheeling adaptation of the life and work of celebrated poet Emily Dickinson, the television series *Dickinson* (Apple TV+, 2019–2021) manifests a twenty-first-century disruption of high and low culture afforded by digital media, including streaming video and music platforms. This article argues that the fanciful series models a mixed-media, multimodal aesthetic form that invites a diverse range of viewers to find pleasure in Dickinson's poetry itself and in the foibles of its author, regardless of their familiarity with the literary or cultural histories of the US American 19th century. *Dickinson* showcases creator Alena Smith's well-researched knowledge of the poet and her work, while simultaneously mocking popular (mis)conceptions about her life and that of other literary figures such as Walt Whitman and Sylvia Plath, all set to a contemporary soundtrack. This analysis of *Dickinson* proposes to bring into conversation shifting boundaries of high and low culture across generations and engage with critical debates about the utility of the popular (and of studies of the popular) in literary and cultural studies in particular.

Keywords: television; poetry; multimodality; intertextuality; popular culture; high/low divide; gender; anachronism

1. Introduction

In the episode "There's a Certain Slant of Light" of the television series *Dickinson* (AppleTV+, 2019–2021), it is Christmas morning, 1854, in Amherst, Massachusetts, and a cheerful young Emily Dickinson (Hailee Steinfeld) steps up to host her family's Christmas dinner party after her mother suffers an emotional breakdown. When her neighbors bring an unannounced guest, the writer Louisa May Alcott (Zosia Mamet), aspiring poet Emily bonds with her immediately and, typical for this show's glee in anachronism, the two women go for a run together as they discuss the 19th-century publishing industry, female authorship, and reader expectations. Mamet brings to the role of Alcott, the author of *Little Women* (1868), the same fast-talking, frantic, and pragmatic qualities that she perfected playing the New Yorker Shoshanna on *Girls* (HBO, 2012–2017). Young Emily is portrayed by Steinfeld, known for the role of Mattie Ross in the cult Western *True Grit* (2010, dir. Ethan and Joel Coen). Across its three seasons, the television series *Dickinson*, produced for AppleTV+, features carefully cast cameos of literary luminaries, historical figures, and activists whom Emily either meets in person or encounters in dreams, fantasy sequences, or time travels, including Henry David Thoreau (John Mulaney), Edgar Allan Poe (Nick Kroll), Frederick Law Olmstead (Timothy Simons), Sojourner Truth (Ziwe Fumudoh), Walt Whitman (Billy Eichner), and Sylvia Plath (Chloe Fineman).

The encounter between these two literary New Englanders is entirely fictional—they moved in the same social circles, but there is no evidence that they ever met. Nevertheless, *Dickinson* credibly establishes their different orientations toward their writing (Alcott's commercial motivation and Dickinson's striving toward aesthetic perfection) as well as their shared experience of gendered discrimination as women writers. During their run,

they refer to their contemporary Nathaniel Hawthorne's notorious letter to William Ticknor in 1855—a year after Alcott published her first book *Flower Fables*—in which he opines, "America is now wholly given over to a damned mob of scribbling women and I should have no chance of success while the public taste is occupied with their trash—and should be ashamed of myself if I did succeed" (Woodson 1987, p. 304). This comment presents popularity as a threat because it legitimates otherwise marginalized and illegitimate voices. It anticipates the perennial distinction between highbrow and lowbrow culture that links popularity and purported aesthetic deficiency—parallels that are gendered, racialized, and classed. Hawthorne distinguishes between "the trash" of mass-market production and his own literary endeavors. Through his reliance upon a gendered rhetoric of commodification, Hawthorne casts popular works of successful female authors as aesthetically inferior commodities, products of a newly emerging consumer-led, feminized culture. Mamet's Alcott quickly dismisses such sexist and elitist arrogance; she quips to Emily: "Hawthorne can eat a dick, am I right?" In this scene, the series not only explicitly raises the gendered ideologies about art and commerce at the heart of highbrow/lowbrow distinctions, but it also produces comic delight by puncturing those distinctions in an anachronistic frank conversation between two young women writers in the mid-19th century using 21st-century slang to decry overt sexism. In this article, rather than merely reinforce binary distinctions between high and low culture for analytic purposes, we argue that the series itself foregrounds and complicates the way that high and low culture binaries are constructed and thus subject to change across historical periods.

As this outburst of contemporary profanity demonstrates, *Dickinson* playfully interjects current sensibilities around gender and other power relationships into its 19th-century storyworld. Code-switching between the lexicon of today's trash-talking youth and mixed-media excerpts from Dickinson's poems, interleaving hip hop music with period costumes, the series manifests the disruption of high and low culture afforded by digital media, including social media and streaming video and music platforms. The show combines poetry and popular culture as well as highbrow canonical literature and lowbrow teen television. As such, it exemplifies the critical dissolutions of high/low distinctions that this Special Issue spotlights. *Dickinson* rejects traditional literary expectations of how a female author's life should be portrayed. Instead, the show presents a kind of remix to its viewers, often for comic effect that, in its jarring dissonance, challenges the reverence often reserved for esteemed cultural figures.

In its casting, too, the series makes the most of its actors' star images such that, for example, Jane Krakowski as Emily's goofy, unpredictable mother embodies an intertextual link to the famous (and quite similar) characters Krakowski brought to the screen in shows such as *30 Rock* (2006–2013) and *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* (2015–2020). Like Mamet's and Krakowski's intertextual casting, Billy Eichner as Walt Whitman is still clearly Billy Eichner, the fast-talking gay New Yorker of *Billy on the Street* (2011–2017) and *Difficult People* (2015–2017). Casting recognizable actors who import many traits from their more contemporary roles into the 19th-century milieu of *Dickinson* contributes to the remix sensibility of the series, which draws on not only viewers' (perhaps sketchy) cultural knowledge about the life and work of Emily Dickinson, but also on their likely more extensive familiarity with contemporary pop culture such as television and music.

We draw on the notion of multimodal aesthetics as a way to analyze cultural artifacts that span different types of media, in order to highlight similarities and specificities of different media modes. In her work on poetry interpretation in digital environments and on social media, Hessa Alghadeer (2014) demonstrates how multimodality complicates and enhances diverse processes of meaning-making (87–96), and we find that such multimodal interpretive and communicative practices are actively evoked through *Dickinson*. The terms multimodality and remix are not interchangeable but are intimately related to one another as well as to practices of intermediality, a term used to describe the relationships among different media. While each of these terms has been the subject of extensive debates in media studies and narratology, for our purposes, we employ the term remixing.

However, we agree with Mary Simonson's conclusion that "intermediality is most potently generated in performances that challenge—and at times confound—the audience's expectations and understandings of media" (Simonson 2021, p. 27). Related to this is our understanding of remixing as an active storytelling practice that draws on different cultural archives. Contemporary practices of remixing are ambiguous: "sometimes respectful of the past, sometimes insulting, sometimes uncaring, [their ambivalence] needs to be taken into consideration as participatory and access-oriented archival projects proliferate" (Waysdorf 2021, p. 1142). Arguing that remix is ubiquitous in contemporary media but also that remix culture has changed considerably over the years, Abby Waysdorf advocates for that we should "move beyond debates around the legitimacy of remix and instead focus on the contemporary state of remix as a concept" (1130). Remixing Emily Dickinson's poetry, biography, and literary and cultural 19th-century context with contemporary popular culture, youth culture, and Internet culture, *Dickinson*'s intermedial remixing occurs through modes of dissonance and anachronism.

This article argues that the fanciful series models a multimodal aesthetic form that invites a diverse range of viewers to find pleasure in Dickinson's poetry itself and in the foibles of its author, regardless of their familiarity with the literary or cultural histories of the US American 19th century. Each episode loosely adapts one or more of her poems but also serializes them by visually and thematically providing continuity and making them a part of a season's larger concerns. The first season has Emily grapple with her calling as a poet seeking to claim ownership over her poetry. The second season leads her to question whether she should publish her work, what impact it may have in the future, and if she should crave recognition or even celebrity. Finally, the third season portrays the Civil War and Emily's ongoing queer love for Sue (who is married to her brother), both of which inspire her artistic interrogation of the role of art in a brutal environment. *Dickinson* showcases showrunner Alena Smith's—and her writer's room's—well-researched knowledge of the poet and her work, while simultaneously mocking popular (mis)conceptions about Emily Dickinson's life and that of other literary figures such as Louisa May Alcott, Walt Whitman, and Sylvia Plath, all set to a contemporary soundtrack.

A popular television series about a poet who struggles with the significance of popularity that draws on popular culture, *Dickinson* was well-received among television critics and academics. The series tends to lead "best of Apple" lists—for example, by *Paste Magazine*, *Esquire*, and *Screenrant*—and was frequently discussed on Twitter and other social media platforms. As such, the series complicates the understanding of quantitative and qualitative popularity that this Special Issue is interested in. *Screenrant*'s David Mello finds that through *Dickinson* and the sports-comedy *Ted Lasso* (2020–), "Apple TV+ has established a reputation for itself as a streaming service that prioritizes quality over quantity. The two series most emblematic of that motto [. . . have] amassed sizable audiences and fervent fan followings, while also managing to be entirely different in terms of form, tone, and story" (Mello 2021). On Twitter, *Vulture*'s Kathryn VanArendonk jokes about the show's cachet with younger viewers: "My favorite imagined scene of the last few weeks is a bunch of execs at apple tv+ huddling over the data and conversation around *Dickinson* and wondering what the hell lessons they are supposed to learn from its success . . . . 'Is it girls having orgasms? Is it Wiz Khalifa?'"[1] One comment that *Vanity Fair*'s Laura Bradley picks up is: "Perhaps the best thing about *Dickinson*—and the thing that made it a success in the first place—is that it's so abjectly weird that anyone would be hard-pressed to replicate it" (Bradley 2019).

Within the context of television, such highlighting of "quality" recalls the similar slogan that another television newcomer had employed to distance itself and its productions from the "usual", mass-oriented fare of television. Between 1996 and 2009, HBO branded its uniqueness and exceptionality through a paradoxical refusal of the medium itself: "It's not TV. It's HBO". HBO sought to set itself apart from television as a "guilty pleasure" and did so in ways that were distinctly gendered, as Elana Levine and Michael Newman have demonstrated (Newman and Levine 2011). The distinction between prestigious "quality

TV" and mainstream TV's mass appeal distanced HBO's brand from the female-associated lowbrow pleasures of television storytelling and, instead, aligned it with modernist, male-associated art forms. Yet today's serial television landscape is almost unrecognizably altered from those early days of "quality TV" (Lagerwey et al. 2016; Sulimma 2021).

We argue that *Dickinson* invalidates such distinctions, despite critics' continued reference to them. Not only is "quality TV" no longer a male-dominated category, with contenders such as *Homeland* (Showtime, 2011–2020), *The Handmaid's Tale* (Hulu, 2017–), *Orange Is the New Black* (Netflix, 2013–2019), *Euphoria* (HBO, 2019–), and *The Crown* (Netflix, 2016–) gaining critical recognition over the past two decades, but, as *Dickinson* demonstrates in its thematics and its form, "quality" is also not inherent in genre or mode. A conventional historical television series might be concerned with period details and accuracy, as in *The Crown*, or it might instead seek to instantiate another kind of truth about a historical figure while rewriting familiar yet unverifiable cultural narratives associated with her, as does *Dickinson*. Examining how the show's deep dive into the renowned poet's oeuvre and milieu is strengthened by its deployment of 21st–century youth and Internet culture's attitudes, language, and music, this analysis of *Dickinson* brings into conversation shifting boundaries of high and low culture across generations. We argue that *Dickinson* achieves its comic and critical success through literary cameos by well-known and widely recognizable actors, critical anachronism, echoes of social media tropes and memes, and frequent affirmations of queer and feminist politics.[2] Our article seeks to explore some of the narrative and aesthetic strategies the series employs through its remixing of Emily Dickinson's life, poetry, and milieu with the archives of contemporary Internet culture and popular culture. This remixing thrives on dissonance and anachronism, as we will demonstrate in two different sections, with readings of individual episodes in which Emily encounters famous literary contemporaries such as Louisa May Alcott, Walt Whitman, and Sylvia Plath. The following sections demonstrate the extent of the show's remixing, which encompasses visuality, musical choices, characterization, and diction.

2. Anachronistic Stories about Emily

Whereas "presentism" may serve as a death sentence for period pieces and academic writing alike, *Dickinson* demonstrates no hesitation in appropriating historical materials and personalities for storytelling purposes. Rachel Vorona Cote (2021), Stephanie Russo (2021), and Shirley Li (2021), respectively, argue that *Dickinson* is part of a trend of intentionally anachronistic period pieces, which also includes films such as *A Knight's* Tale (2001, dir. Brian Helgeland) and *Marie* Antoinette (2016, dir. Sofia Coppola), or television shows such as *The Great* (Hulu, 2020–) and *Bridgerton* (Netflix, 2020–). Cote aptly describes these artifacts as a subgenre she calls "feminist anachronistic costume drama", which seeks to "exploit the artificiality of any history we attempt to reconstruct and envision alternate realities in which the women we're focused on are granted more agency than is strictly accurate [. . . in order to] illuminate the lives of historical women and the patriarchal pressures to which they were subjected" (Cote 2021, p. 148; see also Russo 2021).

Cote's observation plays out clearly in *Dickinson*'s characteristic anachronistic mash-ups, such as in episode 2.1, "Before I Got My Eye Put Out", which depicts a soiree where the crowd twerks to the song "Pink Hat" (2019) by electronic music duo Sofi Tukker. However, Li points out that, unlike other films and series, the anachronism of *Dickinson* delivers much more than a "gimmicky take on the life of the poet Emily Dickinson". Instead, the show confronts viewers with the paradox of the poet's historical persona: that "a woman who so vividly captured the spectrum of human emotion with her words came to be known only as a depressed shut-in". Other recent imaginings of Emily Dickinson have already pushed back against some of these myths; the romantic comedy film *Wild Nights with Emily* (2018, dir. Madeleine Olnek) lays the groundwork for the series with its humorous take on the poet, the depiction of Emily's romantic relationship with Sue, and the use of special effects to inscribe calligraphy of her poems on the screen.

Dickinson depicts glowing, golden handwritten lines of poetry superimposed over the images onscreen in crucial moments, which create an interesting tension between poem, accompanying music, and visuals, as will be discussed in the next section. The unfurling lines are read in voiceover by Emily or other characters with whom she has shared her work, remaining visible only briefly, denoting the ephemerality of the written word (Figure 1). In practical terms, such a combination of animated calligraphy and voiceover aids contemporary audiences who may be unaccustomed to the relatively old-fashioned cursive. The series' inclusion of lines of poetry in a mixed-media format thus affirms the beauty and artistry of Dickinson's poetry, while at the same time, its audiovisual representation also parses the poetry for today's viewers as a kind of less accessible, antiquated high culture.

Figure 1. Handwritten lines of Dickinson's poetry denote the ephemerality of the written word.

Many critics note approvingly that the show not only portrays queer desire but expands the previously reductionist view of Dickinson as an isolated, reclusive figure constantly clad in white dresses. *The Mary Sue*'s Stefania Sarrubba finds that the show "has been working relentlessly to do right by Emily Dickinson, leaving some of the most outdated, sexist myths about her behind" (Sarrubba 2021). Academic viewers tend to agree. Writing for *Slate*, literary scholar Johanna Winant explains that the show's "version of Dickinson is pretty close to my Emily Dickinson: the one I know not through her biography but through her poetry. The show isn't entirely accurate, but that doesn't mean it's not truthful" (Winant 2019). Indeed, we argue that *Dickinson* must be understood as a mediation of the poems and the poet's biography, filtered through contemporary popular culture, social media-informed humor, and celebrity feminism, which makes it more accessible and entertaining for a wider audience. Such an understanding of the show answers the question of how a canonized poet and her work can be popularized via televisual adaptation and become a part of popular culture.

A show such as *Dickinson* envisions a 19th-century Amherst much more suited to the vivid poetry of Emily Dickinson. In her research on the existing lore about anarchist writer Emma Goldman, feminist theorist Clare Hemmings develops the notion of an imaginative archive:

"[I]t foregrounds the gaps and fissures in the existing archives and positions the historian as a deeply serious writer and reader of fiction. That archive represents the straining to hear the voices that have never been heard, the attachments that cannot be given meaning, [. . .] it grapples with the relationship between the

dead and the living in order to enact the future one wants to bring about in the present." (Hemmings 2018, p. 8)

Hemmings highlights that fictional stories and storytelling offer modes of analysis and engagement for the making of alternative historical meanings that speak to contemporary audiences. Whereas showrunner Smith and the *Dickinson* writers' room incorporate meticulous research and archival work in their creation, their reimagining of Emily Dickinson also draws on an imaginative archive of popular culture.

This resonates with how current literary criticism, media studies, and popular culture studies are approaches that understand popular culture as an archive. For instance, Abigail De Kosnik explores the archiving and remixing practices of media users as a "rogue archive" that thrives under conditions of availability, accessibility, and Internet affordances. Such media users (re)create "content that has never been, and would likely never be, contained in a traditional memory institution", such as museums, libraries, and literary canons (De Kosnik 2016, p. 2). Such practices transform

"'archives' and 'archiving' from terms that signify exclusivity into terms that signify commonness, so that instead of locked rooms, the word 'archives' connotes websites that operate as information commons, and instead of the concealed workings of a rarified circle of experts, 'archiving' refers to acts of database design and maintenance that 'anyone can do', that are commonplace." (De Kosnik 2016, p. 3)

Whether described as "common" or "rogue", the everyday, digital archives that De Kosnik describes operate along similar lines as Hemmings' imaginative archive. Both conceptions allow for an understanding of how a popular show such as *Dickinson* approaches a historical author such as Dickinson and her literary legacy.

The show consciously crafts an irreverent, at times ludicrous, version of Dickinson and her family, signaling this artistic freedom in storytelling to its viewers and asking them to take pleasure in it. *Dickinson* exemplifies this Special Issue's definition of the popular as a question of attention; to be popular is to be noticed by many (Werber et al. in this issue), for instance on social media. "*Dickinson* appears to know exactly how Twitter will respond", writes critic Laura Bradley, and continues, "more importantly, the series wants its viewers to know that it's in on the joke—that it's always, always on the joke" (Bradley 2019). The show's engagement with the imaginative archive of received wisdom about Emily Dickinson, combined with its winking mobilization of anachronism to foreground ideological shifts between past and present, constructs a knowing viewer ready to laugh at the incongruities and paradoxes inherent in the very idea of the great American poet twerking.

Perhaps the necessity for such critical anachronism becomes most obvious in the episode "The Future Never Spoke" (3.7), when Emily and her sister Lavinia accidentally travel to the future (through a magical gazebo) and find themselves in 1955—terrified of cars, lawn sprinklers, and airplanes. The simple fish-out-of-water anachronistic humor quickly complicates, however, as the two women are astonished to find their home turned into a museum dedicated to the memory of Emily as "the great American poet". They meet a local Smith College student in scarlet lipstick and saddle oxfords who sneaks them into the house, even though she takes them for wacky method actors (Figure 2). This student quickly reveals that she is also a poet: Sylvia Plath (Chloe Fineman). Plath expounds on her fascination for Dickinson and her feeling of "kinship" with the poet, and the sisters are awestruck by the contradictory ways that Emily is remembered. Yet, despite her admiration, Plath also becomes a mouthpiece for the many myths that accrued around her over the hundred years or so since Dickinson's life, some of which seem suspiciously parallel to Hawthorne's disdain for women writers:

Lavinia: Look, in the future, you are actually famous.

Sylvia: Well, not that famous. More of a local legend. An obscure, strange female poet who lived a sad, miserable life [. . .] The only thing Emily Dickinson did was wear white and cry.

Lavinia: That's not accurate. She almost never wears white.

Emily: Emily Dickinson is not depressed. She does not want to die. She wants to live and connect with the world through her words.

Sylvia: Nah . . . . I would argue she died alone in her bedroom.

Emily and Lavinia challenge many of her assertions about the historical Dickinson, "Where do you get your information?!" to which Plath replies, "It's common knowledge". The preposterous device of time travel allows two of the most famous US American women poets to meet and, as with Emily's encounters with Alcott, discuss writing and disagree frequently. With its anachronistic humor, too, this scene is rescued from being too didactic as Plath dramatically intones, "Emily Dickinson was the original Sad Girl!".

Figure 2. Emily and Lavinia Dickinson time travel to 1955, where they meet young Smith College student Sylvia Plath at their former home, now the Emily Dickinson Museum.

Plath enjoys the argument and reveals to the sisters the "scandalous" interpretation of Dickinson as a lesbian—an unfamiliar word to the 19th-century women ("No, she was an American", insists Lavinia). The Plath interlude doubles down on the series' interrogations of popular literary biography by presenting yet another famous US American woman poet whose personal life—in this case, her mental health and suicide—have deeply influenced how her work is remembered and taught. Seeing young Plath as a college student, honing her own intellectual and aesthetic talents, extends the work of the series as a critical intervention into what we think we know about famous women writers and what might be missing from that knowledge. The episode also ominously underscores the continuing relevance of feminism for both women's timelines in Plath's closing warning: "Don't you know? The future never comes for women".

Interestingly, unlike the series, the site of the fictional conversation between Emily and Sylvia Plath (the Emily Dickinson Museum) itself remains curiously silent on queer framings of Dickinson. Bartram, Brown-Saracino, and Donovan explore the contradictory ways cultural institutions such as museums manage the gendered histories and sexual orientations of historical figures. Through participant observations of tours, they find that the Emily Dickinson Museum supports three different narratives about Dickinson's sexual orientation: as lesbian in a relationship with Sue, as heterosexual romantically involved

with men, and as the asexual "Virgin of Amherst". While disregard for her potential bisexuality goes unchallenged in these narratives, Bartram et al. find that the museum presents "Emily's same-sex relationships as speculative, while offering evidence for her (also uncertain) heterosexual relations" (Bartram et al. 2019, p. 8). Overall, the museum depicts Dickinson as a remarkable, "unusual woman" transgressing gender norms; a depiction conflating gender identity and sexual orientation, the museum employs "the unusual woman as a categorizing schema, aimed at rendering uncertainty manageable" (Bartram et al. 2019, p. 13). Rather than employ silence as a means to manage unverified sexual orientations and omit potential queer histories, *Dickinson* unambiguously depicts Emily's queerness. Interestingly, Plath's gossipy comment about lesbianism leads Emily to come out to her sister, who reacts with understanding and support. Although, by the end of the episode, the time travel is revealed to have been Emily's dream and thus not shared by her sister.

3. Of Cottagecore, Mermaids, and Suffering

In the third season, Emily and her family try to cope with the Civil War that, despite geographical distance, dominates their lives and thinking. In a subplot, Emily's acquaintance Henry (Chinaza Uche) makes his way south to join the First South Carolina Regiment comprised of African American soldiers, the so-called Beaufort Boys, led by Colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson (Gabriel Ebert). Based on their actual historical correspondence, Emily writes letters to Higginson, who became a kind of editor and mentor for her. The season raises the question of whether Dickinson can be remembered as a war poet, considering how her poetry resonates with the traumatic experience of the war in complex ways. Emily grapples with the question of what role art, specifically poetry, can play in hard times. In the fourth episode, "This is My Letter to the World" (3.4, 2021), Emily's anxiety about the war and feelings of inadequacy about her role as a poet lead her to escapism, and she retreats to her conservatory with a book of poetry, Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (1855) (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Emily immerses herself in her newly arrived copy of *Leaves of Grass*, ensconced with her blue and white teacup and saucer in the conservatory surrounded by plants, including a 2020 pandemic favorite, the fiddle-leaf fig.

Surrounded by greenery, velvet pillows, blankets, and equipped with a steaming cup of tea, Emily's reading session looks remarkably like current social media posts by influencers celebrating self-care and bookish retreatism. However, this mise-en-scène revels in an alternative Internet aesthetic: "cottagecore": "an aestheticized, nostalgic yearning for a life of contained coziness, accented with vases of wildflowers, doilies, long flowing dresses, and delectable desserts" (Schollaert 2021, n.p.). Like dark academia, popular memes valorizing cottagecore tend to be understood as a Western European visual tradition, rightfully criticized for its white-centric focus.

In a tweet, Alison Herman even coins the expression "Dickinson-core", which Jeannette Schollaert expands to describe how the biographies and scholarship of the poet emphasize her domesticity, her long flowing dresses, gardening, and flower-pressing—all of which lend themselves to this feminized aesthetic appreciation: "The phenomenon of idealizing and romanticizing an aestheticized version of quaint cottage domestic life is not new, but the most recent #cottagecore trend bears striking similarities to the life and leisures of Emily Dickinson" (Schollaert 2021, n.p.; Herman 2021). Cottagecore flourished during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, coinciding with the release of *Dickinson*'s second and third seasons. Hence, when the show visually references the cozy aesthetic in this scene, it not only hyperbolizes the stereotypes of Dickinson's biography, but also participates in a meme aesthetic of spectacularized self-care and self-soothing widespread in pandemic popular culture. Emily's retreat from a family argument about the war into her new book initially conforms to the recent social media conventions of what comedian Bo Burnham gently mocked as "White Woman's Instagram".[3]

However, instead of consoling and distracting her from the tumultuous world of war and her questioning of artistic motivations, reading *Leaves of Grass* transports her in her imagination from her cottagecore conservatory to a field hospital in New York City where she is overwhelmed with the many suffering soldiers. Here, Emily meets a bearded white man nursing the injured: Walt Whitman himself, played by comedian Billy Eichner, whose performance lends the poet a rambunctious and unruly quality. Eichner's Whitman is fast-talking, esoteric, and all over the place bordering on barely coherent, yet firm in his connection to space: "I am everywhere. I am everything. I am the paving-man, the canal boy, the deck-hands, the clean-hair'd Yankee girl, the conductor, the s****. I am the rattlesnake, the alligator, the panther, the black bear. I am Walt Whitman, cosmos, democracy, Manhattan. I am New York". This list is loosely paraphrased from sections 15 and 33 of Whitman's poem "Song of Myself"—which is part of the collection that Emily is reading. It recalls the poet's penchant for anaphora and lists, and the mystical multiplicity of his famous poems. Surprisingly, the series does not employ its characteristic anachronism in one moment of this scene. *Dickinson*'s Whitman reproduces a racist and misogynist ethnic slur for Indigenous North American women from his poem, without pausing to reflect upon the inappropriateness of the usage (for contemporary audiences), despite the show's seeming self-awareness of contemporary discursive norms.

Emily identifies herself as a poet to Whitman right away. She asks him about the question of artistic production that she struggles with: "someone told me that if I want to write great poetry, then I need to be like you, and I need to go out into the world and confront its pain". Offering little concrete advice, Whitman points to their surroundings, the injured soldiers: "what is pain to me but just another side of pleasure? What is a poet but just one facet of the all-powerful universe itself? You are not just Emily Dickinson, you are everyone. You are every man here. So you must not just ask the wounded person how he feels. You yourself must become the wounded person". Humorously, Emily oscillates between fangirling disciple eager for advice and dead-pan New Englander sarcastically responding to Whitman's exaggerated enumerations and puzzled by his cryptic exclamations.

While Emily is following Whitman around the hospital, they encounter yet another literary figure even more sarcastic and pragmatic than Emily in response to Whitman's ramblings. Again, there is Louisa May Alcott in a return performance by Zosia Mamet.

Like Whitman, Alcott too volunteered to serve as a nurse in a field hospital. And in contrast to Whitman, the novelist offers a different take on artistic production. While Whitman treats the injured men around him as an esoteric inspiration, highlighting their cosmic interconnectedness and generalizing from their lives as yet another point in his many lists, Alcott leans into the specificity of their situation. She explicitly expresses her pragmatic writerly motivations: "I get so much great material from doing this [. . .] great fiction is always based in fact, and this place is chock-full of specificity and detail, [. . .] how wounds actually smell bad. Honestly, when some of these guys show up here, it is the vilest odor that has ever assaulted the human nose. It's kinda gross, but, you know, facts are facts". Neither Alcott's obsession with facts and the materiality of the war, nor Whitman's cosmic connectivity confirm Emily's suspicion that she needs to experience suffering in order to produce art (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Emily meets her literary hero Walt Whitman and her previous acquaintance Louisa May Alcott in a New York City field hospital. Neither of her fellow writers' approaches to artistic inspiration and suffering satisfies her questions about art in times of crisis and war.

Sensing her confusion, Whitman takes her on an escapade to the city: "Ah, so you're into pain, huh? Um, yeah? Well, then you've come to the right place! This is New York City, baby. The Bronx is up, the Battery's down, and pain is everywhere. Follow me, Emily Dickinson. Let's go hurt ourselves". He leads her to one of Greenwich Village's most iconic subcultural spaces in the 19th century: Pfaff's beer cellar. In the 1850s and 1860s, this vaulted-ceilinged saloon was a meeting spot for the literary, artistic, and bohemian scene, especially for queer men such as Whitman. At Pfaff's, Whitman and Dickinson encounter a roaring party with a diverse crowd of different body types, gender identities, and sexual orientations drinking, dancing, and flirting. In this setting, Emily discloses her deep romantic and sexual love for Sue and realizes that this love may serve as much better artistic inspiration. In an emotional confession, she yells at the excited Whitman: "I love Sue! And I . . . I want her and I can't get enough of her. And if I was on my deathbed right now, all I would want is Sue!" While Emily is still trying to understand the implications of this revelation, she is pulled onto the dance floor by a mermaid played by Beth Ditto, the glamorous queer performer known for her work with the indie rock band Gossip. At the bar, Whitman marvels at the sight before joining the dancing crowd himself: "Drink with the drinkers. Dance with the dancers. Come on! New York is back!" Whitman's declaration

is a clear allusion to the declaration resounding around the city after COVID-19 killed almost 44,000 New Yorkers in 2020, signaling not only an affirmation of life emerging from the horrors of the Civil War, but also the contemporary reality of the show's viewers and their desire for a return to a pre-pandemic dance floor amid their own twenty-first-century grief over such staggering loss of life.

Although, visually, Ditto's golden mermaid costume, topped with an extravagant crown, stands out on the dance floor, she does not perform in the scene, and the characters dance to another song. Acoustically, the scene layers Dickinson's poem 441 with the lyrics of the deep house song "One More Time" (2021).[4] The song was the much-awaited collaboration by two of the most prominent commercial German EDM DJs and musical producers, Robin Schulz and Felix Jaehn, featuring the voice of Norwegian singer-songwriter Alida. The song has been extremely popular, as the 13 million clicks of the official video on YouTube indicate. Though the series also features lesser-known independent musical artists, the inclusion of such a popular song in this scene is remarkable. Dickinson's elaborate poetic voice stands in stark contrast to the song's straightforward, repetitive, and clichéd lyrics. Yet both reinforce the sentiments of the other, demonstrating the possible affective connections between something as "lowbrow" as commercial electronic dance music and as "highbrow" as Dickinson's poetry. The following quotation demonstrates how the scene weaves the lines of the poem 441 (left column) and song (right column) into one another.

This is my letter to the World	
	You can shut the light
	But you can't take the sunshine from me
That never wrote to Me—	
	I'll be up all night
	Making fire with every heartbeat
The simple News that Nature told—	
	Dancing
	Watch me dance the night into the morning
With tender Majesty	
	Darling, hold me
	Like it was forever, darling, hold me
Her Message is committed	
	This is our last song,
To Hands I cannot see—	
	last night, last sunset
	Last kiss goodbye ain't done yet
For love of Her—Sweet—countrymen—	
	Last song, last night, last sunset now
Judge tenderly—of Me	
	Then we'll do it one more time

Dickinson's poetic voice laments the lack of response of the world that she writes to; her letter is as easily understandable as the poem itself. And yet the lyrics of the song insist that such a lack of response would never diminish the speaker herself, as evident in the sunshine that cannot be taken from her. While the poem's "letter" is inspired by the "News" told to the speaker by "Nature", the song's lyrics are addressed to a beloved "darling" with whom the singer's poetic persona shares a "last song" on the dancefloor. The notion of this being the "last sunset" projects an impression of carpe diem or YOLO (you only live once), while as a punchline, the song's last line betrays this last song to not actually be the last ("we'll do it one more time"). Meanwhile, the poem's request to be judged tenderly by the members of one's community ("sweet countrymen") hence becomes situated in the present

and allows Emily to express herself free of the consideration of others, both in her own poetry and there in the queer space of the club dancefloor.

4. Conclusions

By examining the popular television show *Dickinson*, this article explores how contemporary television may exceed distinctions between "highbrow" and "lowbrow" cultural productions—as well as previous valorizations of specific television shows as "quality TV"—through a particular remix aesthetic form. This remixing practice develops through dissonance and anachronism. It strengthens the cultural understanding of the life, oeuvre, and milieu of Emily Dickinson through overlapping it with contemporary popular culture, Internet culture, and youth culture. Such remixes range from visual overlaps (such as the cottagecore aesthetic) to sound (the use of contemporary commercial music such as EDM) to characterization (through the paratextual star texts of actors performing as literary or historical celebrities in the cameos) to language (current slang or profanity employed by 19th-century characters). These remixes appear to selectively modernize the 19th-century poet and her oeuvre, hence updating a literary history and group of poems deemed high culture and making them appealing for contemporary audiences. However, what *Dickinson* undertakes is much more than a mere update of Emily Dickinson's life and poems to didactically make them palatable for a new generation of readers.

Understanding such remixes as what Clare Hemmings calls an "imaginative archive" and Abigail De Kosnik, a "rogue archive", we have argued that the series remixes Emily Dickinson's biography and poems via social media memes, celebrity culture, and feminist popular culture, allowing viewers of *Dickinson* to question the ways the famous poet is remembered and appreciate alternative stories about her. Looking at episodes in which Emily Dickinson encounters other prominent literary figures, such as Louisa May Alcott, Walt Whitman, and Sylvia Plath, our readings tease out some of the show's deliberate anachronisms. These encounters enable deeply gendered conversations about memory, collectivity, artistic production, and commercial reception. The series *Dickinson* imagines its viewer as in the know, if not necessarily about the particulars of literary figures and their work, then about how gender and race will impact how we remember famous historical figures and what might be missing from that memory.

Notes

[1] The rapper plays the personification of Death, who literally "kindly stopped for" Emily several times over the three seasons. Death whisks her away on glamorous carriage rides to discuss her life, art, and his at times frustrating profession.

[2] The show equally affirms antiracism through its representation of abolitionism, black characters like Henry (Chinaza Uche) and Betty (Amanda Warren), as well as the depiction of white characters' inability to fully understand and appropriately respond to racism. For instance, in one of the episodes discussed in this article (3.4. "This is My Letter to the World"), abolitionist Henry has a job interview with Union Army Colonel Higginson (Gabriel Ebert) to teach the members of the African American regiment that Higginson oversees to read and write. The white man Higginson is eager to be an "ally" to Henry and the other African American soldiers. He goes on a rant employing current social justice and critical race terminology to a humorous extent in this Civil War context: "the standards that are being applied, well, obviously those are the standards of white supremacy, the very system we're trying to dismantle. [. . .] I'm really trying to police my language. Not 'police!' . . . patrol . . . No, that's problematic as well. Damn! I'll do better . . . " Higginson's absurd performance of white allyship leaves Henry bewildered and confused, yet accepting the position that he is offered.

[3] Part of his comedy special *Inside* (Netflix 2021), the song "White Woman's Instagram" by comedian Bo Burnham evokes common visual motifs of cottagecore: "An open window, a novel [. . .] Latte foam art, tiny pumpkins/Fuzzy, comfy socks/Coffee table

made out of driftwood/A bobblehead of Ruth Bader Ginsburg/A needlepoint of a fox". As the song title indicates, Burnham ridicules these elements of a particularly gendered and racialized social media performance enacted so repetitively to have become a cliché—yet also poignantly providing the women enacting them with a means to express feelings of loneliness online. In the second half of the song, Burnham describes the consolation or self-soothing that such social media posts create for their originators even as they flaunt white privilege. *Dickinson*'s visual enactment of cottagecore can be understood to allow for similar affective communication with the audience through the easy recognizability of Emily's cozy self-care reading session.

4   Emily Dickinson not only published none of her approximately 1775 poems, except a few anonymously, but also did not title them. Her poems are generally known by their first lines or by numbers assigned to them by editors to describe an assumed chronology. For example, "This is my letter to the World" is referred to as either poem no. 441 in the collection *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* (1955) edited by Thomas H. Johnson (Dickinson and Johnson 1955) or as poem no. 519 in *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* (1998) edited by R.W. Franklin (Dickinson and Franklin 1998).

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Article

This Country Ain't Low—The Country Music of Dolly Parton and Johnny Cash as a Form of Redistributive Politics

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Abstract: This article examines how the country music styles of Dolly Parton and Johnny Cash serve as a form of redistributive politics in which ideological struggles are engaged in ways that dissolve low/high culture distinctions and instead offer a mass-accessible avenue through which cultural recognition is conferred to marginalized identities. This ranges from class-based social critique in Dolly Parton's song "9 to 5" to the condemnations of the carceral state in Johnny Cash's work. Engaging country music as an arsenal for social progressivism is not only an underexplored topic in pop cultural studies, but it also provides fertile ground for illuminating how perceptions of the genre are impacted by stereotypical images drawn from the "culture wars" and how these images interrelate with implicit low/high distinctions. For instance, what does the commercial success of Parton's and Cash's works say about the low/high distinction? In what ways do their songs, lyrics, aesthetics, and public personae offer a distinctive space for a type of discourse that affords recognition to oppressed communities? Through addressing these questions, I seek to illustrate how prominent segments of country music are resistant to the mere reproduction of cultural hegemony. In doing so, they actively disrupt widespread conceptions of low culture as reactionary.

Keywords: country music; progressive; protest music; culture wars; popular music; popular culture

1. Introduction

Within the larger landscape of what can be termed "popular culture"[1] in the United States, the country music genre occupies a prominent place, with a number of artists counting among the bestselling musicians in the nation. However, scholars and journalists have continuously observed that, at least since the 1970s (Martinez 2020, pp. 128–41), the genre has been frequently subjected to clichéd characterizations that often mirror the concept of "low culture" as postulated by the Frankfurt School (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, pp. 94–137).

These two-dimensional understandings appear to reflect the biases of a "bourgeoisie subjectivity" (Štrajn 2015, pp. 5–6; Montgomery 2020, p. 113) in that they conceive of country music—including its origins, content, artists, and listeners—as the exclusive domain of a socially conservative, white, rural, and blue-collar cultural sphere. In this framework, the high sales figures of certain country music records would appear to affirm Horkheimer and Adorno's contention that popular culture reinforces social hegemonies and serves to keep mass audiences complacent and politically resigned.

Numerous scholarly analyses have already engaged the aforementioned prejudices by highlighting the works of country music artists who have either challenged or critiqued established hierarchies pertaining to class, gender, race, space, and heteronormativity. What is still missing from broader discussions on this subject is an exploration of how country music with anti-oppressive themes also dissolves the low/high distinction and instead offers a symbolic politics through which recognition and agency are conferred to oppressed groups. This calls for an exploration of the output of commercially successful and culturally

resonant country music artists who reallocate cultural value to marginalized segments of society and call established power structures into question ("redistributive politics"), thereby disrupting widespread conceptions of low culture as conservative and/or reactionary.

In my analysis, I will discuss the works, aesthetics, and public personae of two highly influential country music artists: Dolly Parton and Johnny Cash. Their status as two of the bestselling country musicians in the United States offers fertile ground for painting a more heterogenic picture of country music as a pop cultural phenomenon. Especially in the context of the increasingly polarized "culture wars" and amplified social fissures between the college- and non-college educated, it is vital to reflect on "bourgeoisie subjectivities" and illuminate how popular music can serve as a mass-accessible vehicle through which poignant and subversive commentary is articulated.

2. Theoretical Frameworks and Contexts

2.1. Cultural Dimensions of Country Music within the Broader Landscape of U.S. Popular Culture

The term "country music" serves as an umbrella for a range of musical styles, arrangements, and topoi that have evolved in different parts of North America since the first half of the twentieth century. It is beyond the scope of this article to offer a detailed genre theory on the constituent characteristics of the style and content of country music. However, what is relevant in the analysis of the symbolic politics and low/high qualities of country music is the socio-cultural location of the genre in the wider landscape of U.S. popular culture.

Nowadays, country music represents a multi-faceted phenomenon in which numerous sub-genres display the tremendous impact which gender, race, space, class, and regional distinction have exerted on this potpourri of styles. This diversity is manifested in sub-categories such as indie folk, bluegrass, country-pop, cow-punk, and hick hop. Country music thereby resides at the core of critical developments within larger U.S. society that heavily impact popular understandings about the origins, trajectory, and contemporary outlook of the genre. The question of who creates country music and who listens to it plays an important role in dissecting larger narratives on where to locate this style of music within the context of U.S. popular culture (Rehm 2015, p. 15).[2] The analysis of country music as a multi-dimensional phenomenon offers gateways toward a clearer delineation of how popular culture and identity-building interrelate and how the "culture wars" (Jackson 2017, np) express themselves through mass-accessible products in which contradictory meanings are often submerged in questions of socio-cultural affect.

Continuous scholarship indicates that widespread prejudices and simplistic categorizations of country music prevail in the United States. Very often, these categorizations mirror the discursive contours of spatial, racial, gendered, and socio-economic divides (Martinez 2020, pp. 128–31). The main tropes of these clichéd understandings include (but are not limited to) the following:

- Viewing country music as the exclusive domain of a white, heteronormative, patriarchal, and mainly rural, non-college-educated constituency; both artists and audience are often drafted into this imaginary (DellaPosta and Shi 2015, np; Long and Eveland 2021, pp. 479–500; Shi and Mast 2017, pp. 231–14);
- Stylistically, the music of the genre is imagined as static and monolithic; there is a widespread perception that it sounds "white" (Mann 2008, pp. 78–82) and is inaccessible to hybridity, fluidity, or ethnomusicological heterogeneity (Le Vacon 2018, p. 11);
- The lyrical content and ideological subtext of country music largely reifies established social hierarchies and cements a reactionary worldview (Meier 2018, pp. 3–4).

These "middle-class overwritings" of country music (Hubbs 2018, p. 170; Montgomery 2020, p. 113) overlap with key elements of the low/high culture distinction (Feiler 1996, np; Mann 2008, pp. 73–100; Drew 2011, p. 50). While a number of scholarly works have rightly staked out that many country music songs and artists have critiqued established social hierarchies (Geary 2013, pp. 64–72; Hubbs 2014), no precise explorations into the workings of the redistributive politics of country music in conjunction with the high–low distinction have been undertaken.

This is, however, of critical importance, as clichéd understandings of country music are frequently nurtured and structured by a "low culture" discourse evocative of the notions articulated by the Frankfurt School (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, pp. 94–137). With the recent rise of "credentialism" as a bourgeois form of moral prejudice against the non-college-educated in the United States (Sandel 2020, pp. 81–11), there is an implicit danger that country music might even further fall prey to two-dimensional characterizations in which country artists and listeners are imagined as lacking a specific type of academically inflected cultural capital (Bourdieu 1987, p. 29)[3], thereby also lacking the capacity for perceived moral fortitude or improvement (Sandel 2020, pp. 95–96). Pierre Bourdieu explains how bourgeois cultural power is self-perpetuating through steering paradigms on morality and social value:

> "The privilege of the dominant classes is that they possess social legitimation which is based on the power of the dominant to impose, by their very existence, a definition of what is valued and authorized which is nothing other than their own way of existing—they are at ease in the social world because they determine the legitimated way of existing in it—it is a self-affirming power." (Hubbs 2016, p. 246, in Pecknold and McCusker)

Bourdieu's words, in this context, point to questions about who can confer recognition to whom and how. According to the Frankfurt School, the culture industry sustains existing social structures, which can barely be subverted, as virtually all culture is effectively commodified. However, numerous scholars have pointed out over the decades that Horkheimer and Adorno's conception rests on a "bourgeois subjectivity" that idealizes a recipient of a "high-brow" art (Štrajn 2015, pp. 5–6). The implied connection between cultural refinement and morality in the low/high distinction indeed obfuscates the subversive potential of alternative cultural practices. A more heterogenic picture of the country music genre is, therefore, warranted.

2.2. Redistributive Politics

As part of my analytical framework, I intend to furnish two combined arguments: (a) that the works of Dolly Parton and Johnny Cash disrupt clichéd understandings of the genre and engage in the redistribution of social recognition toward oppressed groups; and (b) that, in doing so, they disconfirm the "low/high" culture distinction through disseminating egalitarian and/or subversive messaging in a mass-accessible way. A principal concept for this examination will be "redistributive politics." Kenneth J. Meier writes in an essay on country music and the politics of identity that

> "country music can be considered a form of symbolic politics [. . .] seeking to define what is 'America' and what it means to be a true American. It is an effort to proclaim and endorse a set of values that are reflected in country music. As such it should be considered a form of redistributive politics—the effort to establish that these values are the important American values." (Meier 2018, p. 2)

Meier describes country music as a cultural mode through which meanings regarding national, collective, and personal identity are conveyed and negotiated. The argument that "it is an effort to proclaim and endorse a set of values" implies that these values are not necessarily self-evident but need to be constructed as central. The question of what exactly constitutes "American values" lends itself to different (competing) ontologies, a consideration of which goes beyond the scope of this paper. This is why I seek to sharpen the concept of "redistributive politics" for the purpose of my analysis. The primary anchor for my usage of this term resides in questions of socio-cultural recognition for marginalized communities rather than a more abstract conceptualization of "American-ness."

In line with Nancy Fraser's distinction between "misrecognition" and "maldistribution", I intend to expand Meier's notion with an anti-oppressive layer built around notions of conferring dignity, respect, and social affirmation through certain elements in the country music styles of Dolly Parton and Johnny Cash. Fraser writes that while

"misrecognition can assume a variety of forms [. . .], the core of the injustice remains the same: in each case, an institutionalized pattern of cultural value constitutes some social actors as less than full members of society and prevents them from participating as peers." (Fraser 2000, p. 114)

The aforementioned stereotypes concerning country music imply a refusal to extend cultural value to its audiences and subjects. This might stem, e.g., from cultural disdain for the perceived constituency of country music or from thought patterns operating on the premises of the low/high culture distinction. In either case, presenting a more nuanced picture of the genre requires disassembling notions that country music only "distributes upward" (e.g., by centering white supremacy, heteronormativity, capitalism, and toxic masculinity). As Fraser notes, "misrecognition" can and should not be divorced from "maldistribution" (Fraser 2000, pp. 116–19), which is why I seek to identify tendencies in Parton's and Cash's works that address larger socio-economic causes. Admittedly, my analysis does not offer a prescription through which country music can engage in actual economic redistribution, but it will highlight that Dolly Parton and Johnny Cash were/are cognizant of the systemic character of oppressive mechanisms in the United States.

In this sense, Parton's and Cash's country music can serve as a platform through which knowledge and consciousness surrounding the social order can be conveyed and disseminated. This echoes Walter Benjamin's take on the potentially progressive dimensions of mass media, as postulated in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (Benjamin 1969, pp. 13–14). In this book, Benjamin posits that the rise of mass media signals an epochal shift, which also entails an opportunity to cultivate a greater number of individuals than ever before. While still steeped in "bourgeois subjectivity", Benjamin's point offers a perspective on how the distribution of knowledge, respect, and cultural centrality can work toward social change. Form this angle, the works of Parton and Cash serve as an example for how the "popular" can be understood as both a hegemonic as well as redistributive force; a force that is always conversant with shifting social trends in the United States.

However, this does not mean that I claim that no "conservative country" exists or that country artists with known right-wing leanings do not find commercial success or large audiences (Schmidt 2016, pp. 147–67). Historical and contemporary examples abound, such as the early works of Merle Haggard or the chart-topping post-9/11 output by Toby Keith and Darryl Worley.[4] However, the scope of this paper is unsuitable for making vast claims on the totality of country music and its societal impact. The point is not to argue that this genre overwhelmingly reproduces one specific ideology or another, but rather to explore explicit or subtle pockets of resistance, which the low/high distinction would seduce potential audiences into overlooking. Building on this angle of the "popular" as a multi-layered and multi-directional type of mass-accessible discourse (O'Brien and Szeman 2004, pp. 95–97, 125), the works of Dolly Parton and Johnny Cash can be examined as prisms for a larger collective sub-consciousness in which cultural negotiations are subject to fluidity and epistemic shifts. A specific focal point will be the lyrics of selected songs, which I will read through various socio-political lenses. As the country music genre encompasses sonic, aesthetic, and performative layers, I will flank my readings with forays into the role of sound, music videos, gendered performativity, and also public self-stylization.

2.3. The Popular, the Progressive, and the Populist

Throughout my analysis, I will utilize the terms "progressive", "populist", and "popular." The term "progressive" is to be understood as a political and ideological moniker, denoting "opposition to systemic forms of oppression, exploitation and environmental degradation" (Moran and Littler 2020, pp. 858–67).[5] This understanding of progressivism can also be linked to what Nancy Fraser terms "progressive populism", which privileges equality over meritocracy and combines the emancipation of marginalized groups with an emphasis on social protection (Fraser 2017, np). This informs my use of the word "populism", which is, therefore, not fully congruent with the usage of the term in much of

contemporary political science, which seeks to explain the rise of a particular style of political communication built on an "us versus them" dichotomy (De la Torre and Mazzoleni 2019, pp. 79–95). A principal caveat to the use of "progressive" and "populist" is that these terms need to be read within the specific historical context in which the respective analysis part operates (largely the late 1960s to the 1980s). Nevertheless, it can be safely assumed that certain progressive impetuses articulated in Parton's and Cash's works still reverberate today. The meaning of "Jacksonian populism" will be briefly sketched in the analysis part below.

With regard to the term "popular", it is acknowledged that the term has been subject to much conceptual drift and debate in the sphere of cultural studies. As my inquiry rests heavily on the parameters staked out by the low/high distinction, I largely approach the "popular" from a positivist perspective, i.e., focusing "on the quantitative aspects and view[ing] popularity as high degree of dissemination measurable for example in air play statistics or sales figures" (Heuger 1997, np). However, I will consciously acknowledge the limitations of this approach by not losing sight of questions on the acceptance of widely disseminated cultural products and the underlying mechanisms that "effect the popularity of artists and records rather than express it" (Heuger 1997, np).

3. The Redistributive Politics in Dolly Parton's and Johnny Cash's Works

Both Dolly Parton and Johnny Cash can aptly be described as ranking among the bestselling and most influential country music artists of the past decades. Undoubtedly, the output of both can be termed "popular" in the sense that it was commercially very successfully and reached millions of listeners across the country and beyond. According to a listing in the magazine *Work + Money*, Johnny Cash ranks as the 18th bestselling country musician of all time, while Dolly Parton ranks almost tied for first place with Garth Brooks (Gillespie 2019, np). Moreover, Parton and Cash are known for their larger-than-life public personae, which became fixtures of television, film, and music for decades. What is particularly interesting in the composition of these personae is that they are undergirded by a combination of numerous, sometimes divergent, identities, often merging established rural imagery with a decidedly individualistic and avant-garde streak (Edwards 2009, pp. 1–26). Dolly Parton's longstanding career, which stretches from the 1960s until the early 21st century, exemplifies the semiotic and ideological flexibility of country music stardom (Wilson 1995, pp. 3–12). Pamela Wilson writes in her essay on Parton that

> "[she] has fashioned her star image visually to accentuate a voluptuous, ample, overflowing body, with particularly large breasts, which she has embellished with showy, garish costumes and an exaggerated sculptured blond wig. This persona is a caricature of both the most outlandish country singer (in a predominantly male tradition of gaudy costuming) juxtaposed with the stereotypical 'painted woman' or prostitute whose sexuality is on display. In ironic contradiction to the parodic nature of her visual style, the articulate Parton has perpetuated and maintained a respected image as a wholesome, sincere person with traditional rural values." (Wilson 1995, p. 2)

This postmodern pastiche illustrates how a conscious play with gendered signifiers can be used to subvert established heterosexist beauty standards. Through over-performing within the constraints of Southern beauty culture, the singer's image amplifies the workings of discursive power relations, thereby exposing "the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core, an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality", as Judith Butler writes in the book *Gender Trouble* (Butler 2002, p. 173). Societal conventions surrounding feminized beauty are, therefore, driven to a visible extreme that disrupts the patriarchic objectification of the female body, while simultaneously allowing Parton to perform within a tongue-in-cheek framework. At all times, she can claim that her portrayal of the so-called "country doll" is simply the result of her dedication to her Appalachian and working-class roots. Judith Butler writes in this respect that

"parodic proliferation deprives hegemonic culture and its critics of the claim to naturalized or essentialist gender identities. Although the gender meanings taken up in these parodic styles are clearly part of hegemonic, misogynist culture, they are nevertheless denaturalized and mobilized through their parodic recontextualization." (Butler 2002, p. 176)

Butler's observation points to the potential for subversive discourse on gendered identities to be articulated even within the paradigms of a hegemonic culture industry. The economic imperative for the culture industry to entertain—and, e.g., produce humorous diversion—makes it susceptible to the multi-layered semiotics of innuendo, satire, and parody. The fabricated nature of the sexual order serves as a backdrop through which pleasure can be generated in deconstructing the gendered performances that undergird this very order. This can serve to expose the mechanisms through which key pillars of social hierarchies are maintained. The role that parody inhabits in Parton's persona illustrates a key element through which the low/high distinction achieves its limits. Parodistic exaggeration can put key aspects of hegemonic culture into such an extreme spotlight that inherent contradictions and instabilities of the constructed social order become impossible to overlook.

This points to a critical insight for the study of pop culture in that Parton's example of over-performativity allows for an understanding of parody as a destabilizing agent within the social structure and, concurrently, as a form of self-immunization. Reigning cultural hegemonies can be immunized against critique by incorporating their own subversion into popular culture. And artists with an implicit or explicit oppositional tendency can immunize themselves by claiming fealty to the socio-cultural status quo while chipping away from it. This observation also has ramifications for the aspect of redistributive politics, as parody offers distinctive tools for decentering hegemonic practices associated with more affluent and culturally dominant classes. Pierre Bourdieu writes in this respect that

"[t]he sense of the value of one's own linguistic products is a fundamental dimension of the sense of knowing the place which one occupies in the social space. One's original relation with different markets and the experience of the sanctions applied to one's own productions, together with the experience of the price attributed to one's own body, are doubtless some of the mediations which help to constitute that sense of one's own social worth which governs the practical relation to different markets." (Bourdieu 1991, p. 82)

Parody can thereby open up spaces through which sanctions can be circumvented and self-worth reaffirmed when the symbolic order is disrupted. In this sense, Parton broke ranks with the very-often top–down nature of a male-led country music industry, not by venturing out of traditional gender performativity, but precisely by banking on it in a most flamboyant way. This echoes the potential for country music to act as redistributive discourse, as she came to exemplify a type of pop cultural practice through which the symbols and motifs of perceived low culture could be recast as a form of subversive confidence. For instance, Parton herself commented on the artificiality of her buxom, ultra-blonde and make-up-heavy physical appearance, saying that "it takes a lot of money to look this cheap."[6] This quip also exemplifies how linguistic markers play an important role in maintaining a rapport with the larger country music audience. The juxtaposition of the words "a lot of money" and "cheap" in this context illuminates how the workings of self-constructed identities within the linguistic regime of the bourgeoisie can imbue pejorative language with new meanings. In this sense, Parton performs from a position that semiotically embeds her in the dominant conceptions of Southern femininity (O'Connor 2017, pp. 54–75), while simultaneously redistributing meanings within this framework. This is critical for understanding the progressive layers in her persona, as her disruption of gendered oppression does not stem from open rebellion but from the parodic effects nested within her apparent fealty to hegemonic concepts.

The impact of Parton's visibility in the national country music scene over decades has taken on many dimensions. However, her physical attributes are often foregrounded,

as evidenced by the fact that the first cloned sheep "Dolly" was named after the country singer in reference to the mammary glands of the original sheep from which the stem cells were taken (Kevles 2002, p. 205). This example underscores how her body is viewed in transgressive terms. Maigen Sullivan writes in this context that, in the world of phallocentric heteronormativity, "[n]ormal, valuable, able bodies do not leak, they do not fluctuate, they do not spill over corporeal limits. Women's and disabled bodies defy all of these forms" (Sullivan 2011, p. 71). Another example of Parton's socially progressive image is the theme park Dollywood, which opened in 1986 and attracts up to 3 million visitors per year. Leigh H. Edwards writes in the book *Dolly Parton, Gender, and Country Music* that

> "press coverage of the park has emphasized the progressive affiliations and gay camp Parton brings to Dollywood. In reporter Kim Severson's New York Times travel article, Dollywood: A Little Bit Country, a Little Bit Gay she describes as 'the place on a Venn diagram where gay camp and Southern camp overlap.'" (Edwards 2018, p. 233)

Parton's type of stardom also brings LGBTQ+ fans under her umbrella, a fact that clashes with the clichéd conception of country music as a cultural sphere dominated by heteronormativity (Barker 2022, pp. 143–53). Parton's support for gays is further demonstrated in her 1991 song "Family" from the album *Eagle When She Flies* in which she sings: "Some are preachers, some are gay, Some are addicts, drunks and strays, But not a one is turned away, when it's family." While these lyrics could be read as a form of "conditional acceptance" dependent on belonging to a family, James Barker points out that "[f]amily, one of the most recognizable and stereotypical themes of country music, is represented as a place of belonging and compassion. For Dolly, the family is not about conformity, in fact the role of the family is to provide a radical space for inclusion" (CountryQueer n.d., np). From the vantage point of redistributive politics, Parton does gesture to a sense of cultural parity, and she does so in an accessible way, using a metaphor recognizable to millions of country fans.

Johnny Cash expresses a different type of country progressivism. His performance as a hardened and traditionally masculine "outlaw" connected his public image with mythologies of "frontier individualism" (Zehelein 2007, np), which Cash directed toward social issues surrounding inequality, minority rights, and mass incarceration. His deliberately crafted image as the "Man in Black" showcases his concern for the marginalized, both lamenting and lambasting racial discrimination as well as society's treatment of the poor. In his 1971 protest song "Man in Black", Cash stated his reasons for donning this type of dark outfit, which stood in contrast to the rhinestone suits and cowboy boots worn by many major country acts in the 1960s and 1970s:

> "I wear the black for the poor and the beaten down
>
> Living in the hopeless, hungry side of town
>
> I wear it for the prisoner who has long paid for his crime
>
> But is there because he's a victim of the times
>
> [. . .]
>
> I wear it for the sick and lonely old
>
> For the reckless ones whose bad trip left them cold
>
> I wear the black in mourning for the lives that could have been
>
> [. . .]
>
> But 'til we start to make a move to make a few things right
>
> You'll never see me wear a suit of white."

These straight-forward lyrics reflect a form of political consciousness that is tied in with a visible activism on behalf of marginalized groups (Huss 2011, p. 187). In the song, Cash not only calls out society's disregard for the downtrodden, but he also voices a larger diagnostic critique in which he disentangles the fate of the poor from capitalist/conservative

mythologies of "personal responsibility" ("But is there because he's a victim of the times"). The repeated use of the lyrical I underscores that this message is personal. Yet each line in the first few stanzas effectively centers the experiences of people who do not share the same fate as Cash. The singer oscillates between societal observations and a personal response, evoking a sense of solidarity and self-reflection. By referring to structural causes for incarceration, the singer opens the door for a class-conscious reading of this song in which the coercive mechanisms of the prison-industrial complex illustrate the exploitation of the working poor—most notably African Americans (Chomsky 2018, p. 34).[7] When put into historical context, these lines constitute a clear rebuke of some of the coded racism implicit in Richard Nixon's "law-and-order" campaign (Geary 2013, p. 67; McCoy 2021, np).

In tandem with left-wing protest movements of the time, Cash thereby linked questions of poverty and social inequality with racism at home and militarism abroad (i.e., the Vietnam War). Cash's lyrical statement is semiotically interwoven with his choice of wearing black, which leaves room for symbolical interpretations associated with color metaphors for race in the United States. Cash was acutely aware of the highly disproportionate numbers of African Americans among the poor and incarcerated (Geary 2013, pp. 70–71). It can, therefore, be safely ascertained that race forms an important element in Cash's fashioning as a contrarian who refused to celebrate the status quo. By wearing black and making this a centerpiece of his stage persona, Cash turned around the coded racism of white supremacists in a subtle but unmistakable manner. Parallel to Paula M. L. Moya and Hazel Ros Markus's notion of "doing race", Cash's outfit exposes how "whiteness is consistently associated with privilege and represented by positive images while blackness is associated with disadvantage and represented by negative images" (Moya and Markus 2010, p. 88). This affords a subversive quality to Cash's image in that it merges subtle solidarity with the civil rights and anti-war movements with an aesthetic "country counterculture feel." The music indicts and mourns, and the outfit indicts and mourns. Redistribution, in this case, takes the form of acknowledgement and empathy, conveying "a left-oriented Southern politics" (Hubbs 2014, p. 67). Cash symbolically reshuffles the status-quo allocation of cultural centrality and dignity by joining those whose voices generally are not amplified in societal discourse.

The song proved to be a hit on the country music charts, reaching No. 3 on the Billboard Hot Country Songs in 1971 (Billboard n.d.). The large-scale resonance of the song exemplifies the accessibility and resonance of Cash's unrelenting advocacy for the poor. This disconfirms one of the key axioms of the high/low distinction in that the underlying message of this song activates public consciousness with regard to social issues, despite its relatively simple composition with minimal instrumentation.

Unlike Parton, Cash could operate within the mainstream parameters of heteronormative rural masculinity to make his point by wearing a simple black suit instead of having to resort to flamboyancy. In this sense, the popularity of Cash's protest on behalf of the oppressed intersects with notions of a "rugged masculinity." His straight-forward "blue-collar talk" is intricately tied to performances of "white rustic masculinity", which are conversant with traditionally heterosexist notions of "hillbilly and honky-tonk" that arose in the 1940s (Fox 2009, p. 73). The popularity of Cash's oeuvre, therefore, is informed by his ability to furnish mythical images of the Southern/rural "hard man" without disrupting or calling them into question. This echoes the notions articulated by subcultures scholar Dick Hebdige, who writes that the folk music of poor whites in the United States often displays "a disposition toward revelation and strategic concealment" and a subaltern "strategy for having your say while remaining out of range" (Hebdige 2007, pp. 98–99). Expressing frustration, pain, and discontent comes from a certain distance, combining direct confrontation and a desire to avoid pain. In this context, Michael Stewart Foley posits that this "walking contradiction" myth, which was often applied to Cash, in fact opens up new epistemic spaces for conceiving political struggle: "The difficulty in discerning Cash's politics, then, is similar in that the framework of accepted political intelligibility has, so far, been applied to his work only in terms of partisan politics and ideological world-view" (Foley 2014, p. 340).

While this line of argument makes a very salient point, it is important to acknowledge that questions of popularity also concern questions of mass readability and mass accessibility. As Tim Delaney states, popular culture includes pathways through which "prevailing sentiments and norms of behavior" can be changed (Delaney 2007, np). It is critical for popular culture to impart some sense of participation and thereby tangibility. From this angle, the "Man in Black" image at least partially connects with dominant concepts of a traditional Southern white masculinity (McCusker 2017, p. 2021).

A different observation can be made about the line "You'll never see me wear a suit of white." In the context of "doing race", Cash reveals the workings of racial privilege by vocally and visually declining to perform within racial color metaphors. From the vantage point of country music as a form of redistributive discourse, Cash's effort to disrupt coded racism acquires a distinctly instructive quality. "The Man in Black" image, therefore, not only teaches audiences about U.S. values, but it also serves as a reminder how these efforts remain unfulfilled. It should also not go unmentioned that Cash dedicated himself to highlighting the plight of Native Americans and embedding it in a broader review of national mythologies. For example, John Edward Huss offers a reading of the song "The Ballad of Ira Hayes" from Cash's 1964 concept album *Bitter Tears: Ballads of the American Indian*—a work inspired by the experiences of Indigenous communities. Huss notes that the song's subtexts address ideological juxtapositions between individual justice versus social justice (along the lines of John Rawls's concept of distributive justice) and that capitalist mythologies are insufficient to resolve these (Huss 2011, pp. 189–92). While Cash's populism might have "emphasized class injustices at the expense of racial ones" (Geary 2013, p. 70), it should be acknowledged that his works, which explicitly addressed themes of racial injustice, did reach a large audience. For instance, *Bitter Tears: Ballads of the American Indian* reached number 2 on the Billboard country charts. Cash's social positioning as a hardened, white, rural Southerner might explain why his brand of social advocacy for the oppressed managed to storm the charts at a time when Richard Nixon and George Wallace were among the most popular politicians in the country.

Nevertheless, Cash's audiences were not necessarily defined along racial lines, as his performances in Folsom Prison and San Quentin evidence. In the essay "The Way I Would Feel About San Quentin: Johnny Cash & the Politics of Country Music", Daniel Geary notes:

> "Cash implicitly rejected the racial politics of white backlash, especially in his prison albums. His rock and roots influences more openly displayed their debt to African American musical traditions than did most country music. At Folsom and San Quentin, Cash performed before prisoners of all races. One scholar estimates that when Cash played San Quentin in 1969, 30 percent of prisoners were African American and 18 percent were Hispanic. Photographs of the audience included with the LPs advertised this fact by showing faces of many colors." (Geary 2013, p. 70)

Coupled with Cash's own advocacy for prison reform, it becomes clear that his country-jeremiads not only spoke to large parts of the nation but constituted an accessible arsenal for rethinking questions of social justice and the common good. David Kyle Johnson writes in analysis of Cash's commitment to prison reform that "[he] detested the fact that San Quentin doesn't change the inhabitants in a positive way. What it should be doing is *benefiting its inhabitants* and in turn society" (Johnson 2008, p. 7). A sub-textual layer in terms of redistributive politics comes to the surface, with rehabilitation forming a key part of a shared communal dignity.

With regard to the low/high distinction, this type of country music activism rattles notions that anti-hegemonic critique must be nested within bourgeois sensibilities. Cash's indictments could not easily be cast aside as the outgrowths of what Nixon and his acolytes decried as a "liberal cultural elite" (Cowie 2010, p. 127). This observation offers fertile ground for dissecting Cash's stylization as a rural underdog in terms of an indebtedness to the populist roots of country music. Andrew Boulton refers to Walter Russell Mead in

this context, who suggests that "country music is the quintessential 'product of Jacksonian culture' (Jacksonianism being a populist, patriotic, and self-reliant political tradition)—a product that, rather like this 'Jacksonian populism,' has expanded significantly beyond its original spatial limits" (Boulton 2008, p. 376; Mead 1999, pp. 5–30). Whereas Sadie Rehm traces the roots of country music back to the failed "modest Jeffersonian ideal", which was not attainable for most people in either ante- or post-bellum South but later became romanticized by the country music industry in the twentieth century (Rehm 2015, pp. 6–7).

What both of these historical trajectories have in common is the underlying intertwinement of class and race issues in an industrializing United States. Rehm notes that "prominent industrialists sought to encourage the identification of poor white workers with racial, rather than class-based consciousness" (Rehm 2015, p. 9). Johnny Cash's implicit endorsement of racial equality not only reinvigorated a sense of universal class-consciousness, but also reconnected his style of music with its multi-racial origins. In this sense, Cash's prison albums were also engaged in a form of redistribution of historical narratives by reinscribing his style of country music in an origin story that had been largely overwritten by "broader ideological projects" serving capitalist and right-wing interests (Citations Needed 2020).[8]

But also in stylistic terms did Cash break new ground with these LPs. Cash and his fellow musicians promoted and successfully implemented the idea of performing live in a prison. In a 1968 interview, after performing live in Folsom, Cash stated:

> "[T]he first time I played a prison I said this is the only place to record an album live, because I never heard a reaction to the songs like the prisoners gave. They weren't ashamed to show their appreciation or their enthusiasm for anything that we did." (Azpiri 2019, np)

A subtext of catharsis permeates his words, as he outlines that a prison offers a unique space for reinvention, free from implicit societal inhibitions ("they weren't ashamed"). By performing in front of those who have nothing left to lose, Cash not only contributed to a cathartic experience for the incarcerated, but also underlined the widespread appeal of his sound and delivery. He showcased that his music is indeed heard everywhere and not just the prerogative of a white, Southern, conservative constituency. Redistribution acquires a near-universal quality in that the emotive need for a socio-cultural valve overrides boundaries of class, race, and space. The effects generated by the perceived passion and dedication in Cash's prison performance provides a discursive framework in which opposition to social hegemonies cannot be adequately mapped by the low/high distinction. Instead, questions surrounding perceived "authenticity" and "credibility" come to the forefront. In this paradigm, resistance to the reigning powers is also subject to communication strategies that convincingly transmit an emotionally reverberant image of the "inner self." Arguably, this image also had a liberating effect on Cash, who felt inspired and encouraged by the reaction of this audience. The Folsom Prison album received an overwhelmingly positive reaction from audiences and critics alike, with Richard Goldstein writing that the album was "filled with the kind of emotionalism you seldom find in rock" (Streissguth 2007, p. 151) and Country Music Television (CMT) naming it the third greatest album in country music in 2006 (Rateyourmusic).

A more clear-cut country music statement with class-based undertones is Dolly Parton's highly popular 1980 single "9 to 5." The song accompanied the release of the comedy film *9 to 5*, in which Dolly Parton, Jane Fonda, and Lily Tomlin portray three working women who rise up against their sexist and exploitative male boss. Aside from the film's progressive messaging on sexism in the workplace, the eponymous song has acquired notable cult status among the socialist left in the United States for its explicit embrace of class-conscious rhetoric. In an article for the leftwing magazine *Jacobin*, journalist Marianela D'Aprile writes:

> "I love '9 to 5.' I've sung it at karaoke countless times, despite its basic incompatibility with my voice. I've put it on at Democratic Socialists of America

meetings. It's one of the greatest musical odes to class struggle in American history." (D'Aprile 2021, np)

The song lyrics provide easy access to D'Aprile's interpretation. In the chorus, Parton castigates the repetitiveness and exploitative nature of modern work life:

"Workin' 9 to 5

What a way to make a livin'

Barely gettin' by

It's all takin' and no givin.'"

Parton then doubles down by describing how common ground can be found among workers and that upheaval is imminent:

"In the same boat

With a lot of your friends

Waitin' for the day

Your ship'll come in

And the tide's gonna turn

And it's all gonna roll you away."

And in the final stanza, she issues an unmitigated and uncompromising verdict on the system, specifying the capital class as the antagonist and linking it with a feminist consciousness:

"It's a rich man's game

No matter what they call it

And you spend your life

Putting money in his wallet."

What these lyrics have in common is that they ground class-consciousness in the experience of working people. Much of this is evocative of orthodox Marxism. The exploitative system, based on wage labor ("barely gettin' by") and the extraction of surplus value through capital ("Putting money in his wallet"), creates a social dialectic. This inevitably leads to class-consciousness among the proletarians ("in the same boat with a lot of your friends") and the eventual overthrow of the social order ("And the tide's gonna turn").

Of course, viewing these lyrics solely through the lens of orthodox Marxism eclipses other contextual layers that can place this work in the realms of redistributive politics. When it comes to the music itself, it is notable that this song somewhat departs from Parton's usual fare. "9 to 5" is an upbeat, fast-paced composition; "[t]he finished melody borrows from the East Tennessee folk traditions of Parton's childhood and highlights her understanding of poetic meter" (Dowling 2020, np). Clearly written as a promotional device for an easily digestible Hollywood comedy, the song makes use of dance-pop elements, such as seawind horns, which are reminiscent of the sounds of Quincy Jones-produced Michael Jackson albums of the time (Dowling 2020, np). This showcases the interfaces between country music, which is often seen as exclusively "white", and other music genres that are conventionally coded as Black. The pop-oriented sonic layers of this song envelope the lyrics in a rather ironic and playful mood, allowing the listeners to hear this song as more of a tongue-in-cheek jab rather than a purposeful, radical statement. Moreover, the music video appears to frame the song's lyrical content in rather playful terms, with Parton smiling brightly while performing with her band in a studio. Interspersed clips from the film *9 to 5* add to the entertainment feel of the video, where stressful office situations in a high-rise office building are seemingly played for laughs. The song and its video clearly oscillate between condemning the capitalist system and simultaneously "enticing its audience to participate in the culture of capitalist consumption" (Wilson 1995, p. 18).

However, it is precisely this hybrid between a country singer image and a more pop-oriented instrumentation that illustrates the fluid and mutually permeable connection between the different types of popular music that dominated the Billboard charts in the late 1970s (e.g., dance-oriented disco tracks, funk, and country music). Parton's inscription in this canon points to a conscious play with genre expectations. Yet she remains on-brand by employing her characteristic Southern twang and intonation throughout the song and using her long acrylic fingernails (part of her country woman image) to produce a clacking beat during some of the live performances of the song (Liptak 2021, np).

Parton may have well intended for this song to be accessible to a larger, urban and non-Southern audience. Yet, certain key themes that speak to the travails of blue-collar communities are cleverly maintained within this song's urban-inflected setting—showcasing how it is possible to connect the experiences of the rural working class to a more professional city-based setting. In interviews, Parton emphasized how her working-class upbringing was somewhat remote from, but still distinctly connected to, the industrial big city:

> "I can think like a workingman because I know what a workingman goes through
> . . . . Where I came from, people never dreamed of venturing out. They just lived
> and died there. Grew up with families and a few of them went to Detroit and
> Ohio to work in the graveyards and car factories. But I'm talking about venturing
> out into areas that we didn't understand." (Wilson 1995, p. 16)

The experiences described by Parton offer insights into a larger pattern of a "socio-cultural commute" between rural and urban spaces in the second half of the twentieth century. Parton's appearance in the *9 to 5* film and her accompanying song shed light on how spatial interrelationships for rural whites were affected by deindustrialization and professionalization. A continuous back-and-forth between rural and urban spheres opened up possibilities through which new types of cultural transfers were effectuated. In an essay on rural–urban return migration, Jill Ann Harrison underscores the importance of this "boomerang migration" for "boosting or buoying populations in places struggling with population loss, especially in rural and deindustrialized areas" (Harrison 2017, p. 2). By injecting the plain-spoken experience of the working class into a wider pop cultural sensibility, Parton offers an avenue through which recognition and relatability can be redistributed to the rural poor, who often find themselves to be the target of derision and ridicule from the professional–managerial class.[9] This indicates that one part of the redistributive politics in Parton's country music is the reframing of socio-cultural hierarchies, which have exacerbated an antagonism between a college-educated, coastal, professional–managerial class and a non-college-educated, rural population. In the pop-country parameters of "9 to 5", both social strata constitute the "working poor" who are putting money into the wallet of "the man." Coupled with a feminist reading, Dolly Parton's anthem provides a gateway toward directing the rural and urban poor against a patriarchal capitalism that not only undergirded the country music industry in which she operated, but also shaped the wider world of popular culture. Parton's oeuvre, therefore, remains daring and biting in an entertaining manner.

4. Conclusions

It is noteworthy that the progressive layers of Parton's and Cash's output and self-stylization broadened the scope of country audiences and showcased the genre's wider potential as a form of counter-cultural discourse. This does noes necessarily imply that these musicians made conscious attempts at abandoning their class or spatial origins in favor of a glossy mainstream appeal. To differing degrees, Parton and Cash organically weaved progressive undercurrents and messaging into their work without drastically converting from one type of habitus or socio-cultural affect to another.

For instance, Dolly Parton's subversion of dominant gendered beauty conventions was shown to be closely linked to her self-understanding as an Appalachian, Southern, working-class woman. Overperforming within these parameters exposes the liminalities

and instabilities of white heterosexism in a Butlerian sense and thereby opens up spaces for a form of "progressive kitsch" that uses parody to undercut and denaturalize hegemonic gender meanings. The underlying mechanisms of (self-)parody offer a promising avenue for diving deeper into how popular music can actively deconstruct oppressive hegemonies.

Johnny Cash's reappropriation of rugged masculinity to fashion a "Man in Black" image, through which he highlighted the plight of the poor and the incarcerated, provided insights into the confluences between counter-cultural movements and mythologies of the "Western/rural outcast." This public persona demonstrates how certain tropes associated with the rural working class can serve as a semiotic vehicle for a transformative message that resonates across racial, spatial, and class boundaries. In particular, Cash's plain-spoken style underlined that "progressive populism" could reach audiences that were often beyond the purview of more academically inflected liberal discourse.

This also ties in with observations pertaining to the role of social class in building alliances through popular music. Dolly Parton's song "9 to 5" serves as an illuminating example of how the experiences of working people encapsulate a narrative terrain, which can connect the experience of urban professionals with those of the blue-collar rust belt (Edwards 2019, p. 181). The upbeat sound delivers key tenets of socialist philosophy in an infective and poignant manner. Nevertheless, the interplay between sound and lyrics and the immersion of this song in a Hollywood merchandise/soundtrack does not fully absolve this work of art from associations with commodity consumerism. This illustrates the necessity for further research into the political economy of cross-media works of arts that display different levels of intertextuality.

Overall, it can be surmised that the redistributive quality of Parton's and Cash's works is strongly shaped by accessibility and relatability. Horkheimer and Adorno's contention of an obfuscating culture industry bent on "defrauding the masses" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, p. 106) does not hold up in this analysis. Neither does the widespread myth that country music is a cultural expression exclusive to reactionary, lower-class, rural whiteness. Instead, this multi-faceted genre contains a diverse mosaic that illuminates and mirrors many of the contradictions of contemporary U.S. society.

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Notes

[1] In this article, the term "popular culture" rests on the definiton given by Tim Delaney, who writes that popular culture presents "the products and forms of expression and identity that are frequently encountered or widely accepted, commonly liked or approved, and characteristic of a particular society at a given time [. . .]. Further, popular culture, unlike folk or high culture, provides individuals with a chance to change the prevailing sentiments and norms of behavior [. . .]. So popular culture appeals to people because it provides opportunities for both individual happiness and communal bonding" (Delaney 2007, np).

[2] Sadie Rehm notes in the article "Country Music and the Construction of the Southern White Working Class" that "[t]he construction of country music as the music of the southern white working class obscures its diverse origins and influences, serving to legitimize the history and privilege of white racial identification. The appropriation of country music as 'white' defines it against 'black' music, naturalizing racial distinctions by assuming that genre labels arise spontaneously out of the separate musical traditions of different racial and ethnic categories" (Rehm 2015, p. 15).

[3] My usage of the term "class" is largely informed by Pierre Bourdieu's writing on social class, i.e., a social category impacted by access to economic, social, and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1987, pp. 1–17).

[4] Geoff Mann suggests that nostalgia in country songs, for instance, genereally revolves around the valorization of "simplicity", social stability, and cohesion: "with its musical and vocal qualities, the temporal orientation is thoroughly conservative: there is nothing of Benjamin's messianism or his openness to revolutionary immanence, merely the adopted pose of rustics resigned to the march of time" (Mann 2008, p. 87). In my analysis, I will illustrate how Johnny Cash's work engages in a form redistributive politics in terms of historical narratives, keeping the door open for Benjamin's revolutionary immanence.

[5] Simultaneously, the term "conservative" in this anaylsis refers to the tendency to naturalize and defend status-quo social hierarchies in regard to class, race, gender, space and to view these hierarchies as integral to personal and collective identity.

The term reactionary is used to denote a particular form of conservatism characterized by a retrospective gaze (Capelos and Katsanidou 2018, p. 1273) and much more virulent opposition to social change.

[6] In the dissertation *From Countrypolitan to Neotraditional: Gender, Race, Class, Region in Female Country Music, 1980–1989*, Dana C. Wiggins offers a different take, writing that "Parton's emphasis on virtue combined with a more mature look provided a nonthreatening and passive way to appear sexual but simultaneously powerless. In this time period, country music women constructed both sexual and wholesome images; they manipulated social standards to gain sexual power and still seemed submissive" (Wiggins 2009, p. 62). This observation demonstrates how conflicting social ideologies can be combined into and projected Parton's stardom.

[7] Aviva Chomsky writes in "Histories of Class and the Carceral State: A Response to Paul Durrenberger and Dimitra Doukas" that "[g]iven its disproportionate impact on the poor and people of color, virtually all studies of the carceral state see the intersections of race and class as central to its nature" (Chomsky 2018, p. 34). In other words: Talking about the prison system and its inceracerated is a way of talking about race and class in the United States.

[8] In the podcast *Citations Needed*, Nima Shirzai and Adam Johnson point out that "country music [is] a descendant of the blues, folk, Tejano, and other genres, with connections to labor organizations like the Industrial Workers of the World" and mention that later "popular conceptions of country music have long been deliberately shaped by a series of broader ideological projects. Throughout the 20th and early 21st centuries, conservative politicians and other right-wing forces have exploited the genre to promote illiberalism, racism, revanchist white grievance identity politics, and runaway anti-intellectualism."

[9] Nadine Hubbs comments on this social dynamic in the book *Rednecks, Queers, & Country Music*: "Country is a rarity on the American media landscape inasmuch as it addresses working people and their lives, and not for laughs or in an objectifying frame. As a cultural symbol, country music not only sonically evoked a certain type of social persona—usually figured as working-class, white, and provincial—but often stands as proxy for that persona" (Hubbs 2014, p. 13).

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Apopcalypse: The Popularity of Heavy Metal as Heir to Apocalyptic Artifacts

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Abstract: This paper examines the heavy metal genre as a popular form of apocalypticism, i.e., as a warning reminder or "premediation" of potentially (large-scale) lethal crises. By confronting the audience with disturbing, seemingly exaggerated scenarios of disease, chaos, war, and horror, heavy metal builds barriers in popular culture against what philosopher Günther Anders has called "apocalyptic blindness." The genre, then, offers a kind of "aesthetic resilience training" particularly in relatively stable and peaceful times, when large-scale crises seem unlikely or, in the case of global nuclear war, exceed in their sheer dimension the human imagination. What connects traditional religious apocalyptic artifacts such as the *Book of Revelation* with heavy metal is a specific appeal to the popular. Apocalyptic artifacts and their contemporary secular heirs lend themselves well to popularization because of their strong affective and aesthetic sides, as the *Revelation* and its many ramifications in popular culture, not least in heavy metal, demonstrate.

Keywords: heavy metal; pop; popular culture; apocalypse; religion

1. Introduction

In this article, I will discuss the popularity of heavy metal with respect to one of its key sources: religious apocalyptic texts and imagery in general (for the sake of simplicity in the following: apocalyptic artifacts), the *Book of Revelation* in particular (Malkinson 2022). The popularity of apocalyptic artifacts within the heavy metal genre seems to stand in stark contrast to an empirical finding discussed in the next section: Heavy metal has emerged in relatively (!) pacified, wealthy, liberal western consumer societies and is currently expanding around the globe in the footsteps of growing prosperity, liberalization, and social security. I will argue that precisely under these circumstances, what could be termed "aesthetic resilience training" is needed to avoid posthistoric self-sufficiency or what philosopher Günther Anders called "apocalyptic blindness," and to prepare oneself, at least mentally, for large-scale crises to come. Heavy metal thus is not only a medium of premonition or prophecy, but also an instance of "premediation" (Grusin 2010).

Proceeding from this assumption, I will first outline the popularity of heavy metal and apocalyptic artifacts, respectively, and then explore heavy metal as a modern heir to religious apocalyptic artifacts. My focus is on 'classic' heavy metal, i.e., on the genre-defining European and American bands, songs, and cover art from the late 1970s and early 80s from which contemporary metal bands still draw inspiration, either through affirmation or critical distancing (Scheller 2020, p. 41). My remarks also apply to parts of extreme metal and crossover, which I will not go into, however. Discussing extreme metal and crossover, which in fact are extremely diverse, also in terms of social and even more so political milieus, would require considerably more space than given in this article. Classic heavy metal from the late 1970s and early 1980s is certainly diverse as well, yet mostly male, European-American, time-critical, and not activist. A significant expansion of the scene occurred through mixing with activist practice-what-you-preach milieus (punk, hardcore), which was not the case with, e.g., Black Sabbath, Iron Maiden, Metallica; through mixing with, e.g., rap music and the concomitant social groups (Body Count et al.); through mixing with

extra-European, extra-American cultures in the course of globalization (cf. e.g., the blending of Scandinavian black metal and native Taiwanese traditions by Chthonic), and through the opening-up to more (overt) diversity in terms of sex and gender (cf. e.g., Amber R. Clifford-Napoleone's treatment of metal as "queerspace", Clifford-Napoleone 2015). With respect to religion, discussing more forms of metal would have to take into account discussing more religions than only Christianity, e.g., the treatment of Buddhism in the death metal of Dharma (Taiwan) or the treatment of Islam in the crossover of Voice of Baceprot (Indonesia). Satanism, in turn, understood as an ideology rather than as a provocative gesture, only occurs with the emergence of extreme metal (e.g., Gorgoroth, Deicide), whereas a clear Satanist creed is absent in classic metal, as theologian Sebastian Berndt states: "[in classic metal there] are no elements that can be clearly described as Satanic. Neither in the popular nor in the theological sense can one speak of Satanism" (Berndt 2012, p. 113). Speaking with Kahn-Harris: "The extreme metal scene is characterized by a far more sustained engagement with occult ideas. Whereas heavy metal musicians generally denied being Satanists or tried to evade the question, some extreme metal musicians claim to be committed Satanists. Early extreme metal bands, such as Venom, were fascinated by the occult, but for the most part, the scene avoided wholeheartedly embracing its philosophy or practice. This changed in the early 1990s when the black metal scene emerged" (Kahn-Harris 2007, p. 38). With that said, doing justice to all of these aspects in one article is not possible. A precise focus on the early days and their echoes in the present is more promising.

As far as methodology is concerned, this article decidedly refrains from a clear methodological or disciplinary classification. It is neither firmly situated "in sociology", nor "in theology", nor "in musicology", nor in any other discipline. It is rather situated in the liminal spaces between disciplines and methods and *discusses*, in the basic philosophical sense of the word, a tripartite problem: In what sense is classic heavy metal popular (Section 2), in what sense is the biblical apocalypse popular (Section 3), and what social function might the metal-specific combination of popularity and apocalypticism have in the context of the postindustrial, relatively peaceful and relatively (!) prosperous Western societies in which metal emerged (Section 4)? The partially speculative nature of the answers given in chapter four, among others that classic heavy metal provides aesthetic resilience training through popularizing apocalypticism in secular times and premediating major crises, is intentional. With a view to the series "new perspectives on pop culture", it proceeds from the assumption that "newness" is found by moving out of established domains and admitting a certain degree of transparent, self-conscious idiosyncrasy—not for the sake of idiosyncrasy as such, but to allow unforeseen encounters.

The article thus makes no claim to a definite conclusion (therefore the open, rather poetic ending that invites (further) associations). Instead, it sets, or, more precisely, keeps in motion the process of truth-seeking (if one pardons the somewhat solemn term "truth"). It is conceived as a door-opener in the tradition of scholarly essayism (from Montaigne through Leslie Fiedler to Donna Haraway and beyond) and what philosopher Paul Feyerabend termed "theoretical anarchism". Feyerabend was convinced "that anarchism, while perhaps not the most attractive political philosophy, is certainly excellent medicine for epistemology, and for the philosophy of science" (Feyerabend 2010, p. 51). The prestigious Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich and the University of California, Berkeley, hired Feyerabend in 1980 precisely because his way of thinking would bring about rupture and challenge what physician and biologist Ludwik Fleck called the harmony of "thought styles" (Fleck 1980, pp. 40–53) and "thought collectives" (Fleck 1980, pp. 52–70). Science, of course, requires formalization and epistemological rigor, but it does not start there.

2. Heavy Metal as Popular Anti-Pop

Notwithstanding the self-perception of significant parts of the international heavy metal scenes as "underground" and a carefully cultivated anti-pop rebel image, classic heavy metal (e.g., bands and musicians such as Judas Priest, Metallica, Megadeth, Iron Maiden) and younger bands continuing this tradition (e.g., Night Demon, Halestorm,

Haunt, Blade Killer) is clearly a popular music genre (cf. Marshall 2022). It emerged in the music industry of England as a post-punk, post-hard rock form of guitar-centered pop music and youth culture in the late 1970s. The term "heavy metal" was coined by the popular music press and was only later adopted by the respective bands themselves (Scheller 2020, p. 40). Even though heavy metal radicalized the sonic, visual, and performative aesthetics of rock music and shared the D.I.Y. ethics of punk and hardcore, the genre (i.e., not sub-genres such as garage black metal, grindcore, funeral doom, etc.) is firmly rooted in the pop music industries. Small businesses have always been a driving force of heavy metal (cf. Section 4), but Metallica's album *Master of Puppets* lifted the metal brand to unforeseen commercial heights as early as 1986—only eight years after the release of the album that, musically as well as visually, transformed hard rock into heavy metal: Judas Priest's *Stained Class* (Keller 2018, pp. 46–47). As of 2023, *Master of Puppets* has sold almost eight million copies in the US alone (Young 2023). Heavy metal thus contributed to the popularity of anti-pop.

"Anti-pop" refers to the fact that many heavy metal bands attempted to set themselves apart from the light-hearted image of the pop music of their time, particularly of the disco wave of the late 70s, but also from fashionable punk rock, through playing heavier, harder, faster, louder, and tackling controversial or taboo issues. This process started already with Black Sabbath's proto-metal: "Previous rock stars had enchanted pop consciousness with flowers, parades, and promises to change the world. Black Sabbath strode at the end of that procession, still preaching the need for love but warning stragglers there was no return to a naïve state of grace. While most popular contemporaries stuck to 'girl bites man' territory, Sabbath sang of fatherless children and the wickedness of the world" (Christe 2004, n.p.). Of course, Black, Sabbath entered the pop charts as early as 1970, and, of course, Iron Maiden performed on Top of the Pops only ten years later (Christe 2004, n.p.). Looking back at this time in his autobiography, Bruce Dickinson, the singer of Iron Maiden, states not quite convincingly: "Above and beyond pop music, fashion, and the detritus and useless decadence of 'reality' celebrity, Maiden was hard work and tangible, substantive and complex, but also visceral and aggressive" (Dickinson 2018, p. 272). As an act of subversive affirmation, the metal band Suicidal Tendencies pointed to the popularity of anti-pop in an ostentatiously easy-going pop-punk song entitled "Pop Songs" (2000).

It was arguably aesthetic radicalization that, only seemingly paradoxically, facilitated the popularization of heavy metal in the postmodern era, when permanent boundary-pushing, the diffusion and extension of aesthetic domains became the new normal (Vattimo 1990; Michaud 2011). Even extreme metal, e.g., black metal, has long entered the charts, starting with Venom as the figurehead of the first wave of black metal in the early 1980s, continuing with the second wave of black metal bands such as Dimmu Borgir and Cradle of Filth in the early 2000s (Scheller 2003). However, aesthetic extremes do not necessarily mirror extreme societal conditions; they may as well compensate for what societies (feel they) lack in extremity. It is telling that heavy metal, which was considered extreme before the advent of extreme metal, initially was played by the sons of industrial workers in England but developed in parallel to the emergence of, by international comparison, relatively (!) wealthy, relatively (!) peaceful, and relatively (!) liberal post-industrial consumer societies. Since heavy metal requires expensive technological equipment, it is not surprising that a high level of material wealth facilitates the thriving of heavy metal scenes. A study conducted by the management professor Richard Florida in 2014 shows that "the number of heavy metal bands per capita is positively associated with economic output per capita" (Florida 2014). Heavy metal, the author concludes, "springs not from the poisoned slang of alienation and despair but from the loamy soil of post-industrial prosperity" (Florida 2014).

Like Western pop culture as such, heavy metal benefits from constant "over-production" (Engell 2004, p. 192) in mass consumption societies. While the genre has never produced genuine super- and megastars such as Beyoncé or U2, it is not only "getting noticed by many" (Döring et al. 2021, p. 1) all over the world, but has been, from the very beginning,

also measured, compared, and displayed in the charts as well as further statistics (Werber et al. in this volume).[1] If the music as such is not getting noticed, then certainly the cultural phenomenon or selected aspects thereof are. As Motörhead, one of the trailblazers of heavy metal music, put it in their song "We are Motörhead": "We are the ones you heard of, but you've never heard" (Motörhead 2000).

To give just a few examples of metal being noticed by many across the globe, when Motörhead's Lemmy Kilmister passed away, Germany's most-viewed news show (Redaktionsnetzwerk Deutschland 2023), the *Tagesschau*, broadcast an obituary on prime time. Indonesia currently (as of 2023) has—unthinkable in the past—a 'metal president' (i.e., the acting president Joko Widodo is an outspoken metal fan, NPR 2018), and Taiwan has had its first black metal member of parliament (Freddy Lim, Strittmatter 2016). In Scandinavian countries like Sweden or Finland, heavy metal has become a sort of state-subsidized form of folk music and a significant export sector (Karjalainen and Kärki 2020; Feeney 2013); Sao Paolo, Mexico City, and Santiago have been labeled as "metal megacities" (Marshall 2022). The Ruhr region in Germany has discovered and advertised heavy metal as a cultural asset (Scheller 2020, p. 182). Popular events like the Eurovision Song Contest or America Got Talent regularly include heavy metal or metal-inspired performances (e.g., Lordi, Lord of the Lost).

The popularity of heavy metal can be further substantiated empirically and quantified. From an economic point of view, heavy metal forms a stable, albeit not dominant backbone of the pop music business and inspires mainstream pop acts such as Lady Gaga for her 2011 song "Heavy Metal Lover," or Jay-Z who collaborated with Linkin Park for the 2004 album *Collision Course*. The various metal scenes and subgenres profit from loyal fanbases and small companies run by idealists (see below). While streaming services prosper at the cost of the artists (as music critic Tobi Müller put it: "Streaming is social progress for the majority of users, and regression for the majority of makers"; Müller 2022), heavy metal bands continue to sell, and metal fans continue to buy physical products, thus benefiting the artists (Marshall 2022). Metal magazines such as *Rock Hard* or *Metal Hammer* even continue to include CDs. A sprawling metal merchandise sector has evolved over the decades with labels such as Nuclear Blast in provincial Southern Germany (estimated annual turnover: 25 million € (Nuclear Blast GmbH im Lexikon der Weltmarktführer 2023) becoming global players. Heavy metal festivals attract large audiences (e.g., the Wacken Festival with circa 85,000 visitors in 2022), and even heavy metal boat cruises are routinely organized these days (*70.000 Tons of Metal*). Although it is difficult to obtain reliable figures in terms of market shares, representatives of the music industry confirm the relevance of heavy metal in the light of its specificities. Martin Koller from SPKR Media, an independent media group that serves as the umbrella company for boutique record labels such as Prophecy Productions, Dependent, and Magnetic Eye, told in an interview that

> "what I know from my consulting activities with competitors and from public sources [e.g., Bundesanzeiger D/Firmenbuch Austria, etc.] is that the metal sector differs from other music styles in that a not insignificant share is generated by small companies that do not have professional structures and whose data is therefore not available. The big players do not have the market power/market domination as in other genres and the larger ones are almost all associated with major labels, be it participation, distribution or as licensors."

(Koller 2023)

Hence the metal sector can be described as heavily diversified. This portrait could be continued for many pages, but it is high time for the apocalypse.

3. The Biblical Blockbuster

Before discussing heavy metal as an antidote to "apocalyptic blindness" in the next section, some remarks on the Bible and apocalyptic artifacts with respect to popularization are indispensable. It goes without saying that the Bible is a popular book. To date, it is the bestselling book of all time. Worldwide, to be exact (Statista 2023). However, if we

see the Bible not as a monographic book, but as what it actually is, namely a collection of books, some of them are more popular than others. The *Book of Revelation*, the last part of the New Testament, enjoys great popularity not only in religious circles, but in popular culture at large, from horror movies such as *The Seventh Sign* (1988) through novels such as Robert Schneider's *Die Offenbarung* (2007), to hip hop albums such as Busta Rhymes' *Extinction Level Event: The Final World Front* (1998), country music songs such as Johnny Cash's "The Man Comes Around" (2002), and, as will be shown below, heavy metal in particular. Hollywood screenwriter Brian Godawa has described the *Book of Revelation* as a "literary masterpiece of epic horror fantasy. [. . .] Christians who appreciate the horror or fantasy genre have much to delight in since they are God's favorite genres when giving prophecy to his people (Revelation, Daniel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos, Micah)" (Godawa 2017). At Yale Divinity school, the book is introduced by stating that "its graphic visions and peculiar symbolism have made it one of the most popular books in the canon, influencing generations of artists, writers, and filmmakers who have been captivated by its powerful imagery" (Yale Divinity School n.d.).

This popularity comes as no surprise. The *Book of Revelation* is full of sensational drama, esoteric horror, fantastic creatures, and mysterious numbers. It stems from the late first century A.D. Probably against the background of monotheistic Christians feeling marginalized in the polytheistic Roman Empire, the unknown Christian author writing in exile on Patmos uses dazzling, almost psychedelic metaphors to encode his concerns:

> "Then the angel carried me away in the Spirit into a wilderness. There I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was covered with blasphemous names and had seven heads and ten horns. The woman was dressed in purple and scarlet, and was glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls. She held a golden cup in her hand, filled with abominable things and the filth of her adulteries. The name written on her forehead was a mystery: babylon the great, the mother of prostitutes and of the abominations of the earth."

> (Rev 17,3–5, NIV)

The proximity between the "vast image reservoir" (Tilly 2012, p. 51) of biblical apocalypticism and the vast image(ry) reservoir of heavy metal cultures is obvious. Already the proto-metal cover art of Black Sabbath's 1973 album *Sabbath Bloody Sabbath* and Judas Priest's 1976 album *Sad Wings of Destiny* ecall the aesthetic of John's visions, not speaking of then and future song lyrics (e.g., "they smashed through the clouds into the light of the moon/Their steeds were full charging, called destruction and doom"; Judas Priest, "Island of Domination," (from Judas Priest 1976)): "A significant part of metal mythology revolves around the more apocalyptic strain of Christianity, especially the Book of Revelation" (Weinstein 2009, p. 129). I will elaborate on this mythology in the next section.

If popular culture is roughly understood as that strand of culture which, in a given period, factually gets noticed by quantitatively broad audiences rather than only by in-groups, the *Book of Revelation* can be considered as the blockbuster finale of the Bible. It appeals to a readership that is not only interested in intricate moral or theological ponderings, but also in entertaining "special effects," as it were. John means showtime: "The message of the first apocalyptic visions, particularly that of John's Revelation, would not have had such a long-lasting impact, had the prophecy of decline and deliverance not been shrouded in dramatic scenes of unheard events, in horrifying, mysterious, and magnificent images" (Vondung 2008, p. 187). The New Testament thus closes with an implicit prophecy of the popularization of Christianity through means that have not much in common with the asceticism, also aesthetic asceticism, typical of the early Christians.

Always contested in theological circles, the pompous last part of the New Testament not only echoes the prophetic finale of the Old Testament but also anticipates the evolution of Christianity: From ascetic faith in the Roman Empire to caesaropapistic political theology with global outreach and—important for any enterprise that seeks to expand across cultures—diversified discursive, aesthetic, affective means. Accordingly, and irrelevant to the author's intentions, the *Book of Revelation* also prepares Christianity for the advent of

Western modernity. In Western modernity, the stratified society of the Middle Ages gives way to democratic consumer societies in which everything formerly confined to small, elitist circles, sooner or later becomes popular, that is, in one way or another, known to, loved or hated, used or owned by the population at large.

4. Heavy Metal as Popular Philosophizing about the Apocalypse, Premediation, and Aesthetic Resilience Training

Against the background of what has been said so far, it is plausible to attribute the popularity of heavy metal not only to the often-mentioned need for catharsis, i.e., the release of negative energies, e.g., at concerts (Dawes 2012; Rose 2022; Wieland 2022). Nor should heavy metal be idealized as a medium of nonconformism, given its quick rise to international popularity, its economic significance, and its social substrates as outlined above. Instead, it is plausible to argue that in—by historical standards—relatively peaceful, prosperous, and liberal times, there is a need for popular cultural content that reminds audiences of and (mentally) prepares them for the possibility of major crises.

It is significant that already John wrote his *Revelation* on the remote island of Patmos while, as described above, heavy metal was emerging along with the post-industrial economy and the new middle classes who resided on socio-economic islands, so to speak. Judas Priest's Rob Halford, who has his stage name "Metal God" officially protected under trademark law, personifies the transition from industrial to post-industrial and proto-metal to metal: Whereas Black Sabbath' Tony Iommi actually worked in a factory, Halford, who is strongly inspired by the Christian religion, already earned his money in a theater and a men's clothing store (cf. Halford 2020). John, in turn, probably did not suffer persecution from Roman authorities, as overcome research has assumed. The *Revelation* was most likely written during the reign of the Roman emperor Domitian, who "was a problematic ruler but not a persecutor of Christians" (Karrer 2010, p. 2). In a similar vein, the classic heavy metal songs were composed, recorded, and played by a generation that had not directly experienced the sublime catastrophes that were the focus of their art. They mostly knew them from the media. War. Nuclear strikes. Hunger. Disease. Terror. Hence, heavy metal may be situated in the tradition of the distanced prophecy as typical of the *Book of Revelation*, but also of memento moris such as the medieval "Dance of Death," a topic that has been recurring throughout heavy metal history).

Already on Black Sabbath's genre-inspiring album Black Sabbath (1970), we find plenty of allusions to the *Book of Revelation*. If Jesus has "eyes like flames of fire" in Revelation (Revelation 2:18b), Satan appears on Black Sabbath "with eyes of fire" (title track). The album *Paranoid*, released in the same year, is full of apocalyptic terms, which, however, refer to earthly disasters, primarily wars and dehumanization through mechanization: "Now in darkness, world stops turning/Ashes where their bodies burn/No more war pigs have the power/Hand of God has struck the hour/Day of Judgement, God is calling/On their knees the war pigs crawl" ("War Pigs"); "And so in the sky shines the electric eye/Supernatural king takes earth under his wing/Heaven's golden chorus sings, Hell's angels flap their wings/Evil souls fall to Hell, ever trapped in burning cells!" ("Electric Funeral"). Cladding inner-worldly events in such mythological, religious language distinguishes classic heavy metal from punk, which favored bluntness and calling things by their names.

Iron Maiden even introduce one of their most famous songs, "The Number of the Beast" (Iron Maiden 1982), with original quotes from Revelation 12:12b and 13:18, spoken by actor Barry Clayton: "Woe to You Oh Earth and Sea/For the Devil sends the beast with wrath/Because he knows the time is short/Let him who hath understanding/Reckon the number of the beast/For it is a human number/Its number is six hundred and sixty six". On Metallica's debut album *Kill 'Em All* (Metallica 1983), the song "The Four Horsemen" also refers directly to Revelation: "You know it has all been planned/The quartet of deliverance rides/A sinner once a sinner twice/No need for confession now/Cause now you have got the fight of your life/The Horsemen are drawing nearer/On the leather steeds they ride/They have come to take your life". In 1987, Brazilian speed metal band Viper summon

up "four rider beasts [who] ride the sky" ("Knights of Destruction", Viper 1987). Many contemporary examples could be listed as well, such as Behemoth's song "We Are the Next 1000 Years" (2018) or the four zombie horses on the cover of Kreator's album *Phantom Antichrist* (2012).

Especially the German thrash metal band Kreator, who returned to their classic metal roots in the 2000s after a phase of experimentation, is a good example of the eminent role of the *Book of Revelation* in the heavy metal genre. Like prophets, who offered their criticism of the times in a language that was difficult for censors to see through, the band often remains in the realm of the vague and ciphered. In an interview, Kreator's bandleader Mille Petrozza said in 2017: "I'm all about people being able to relate to an experience without having had it themselves. Apocalyptic vocabulary lends itself very well to that in metal, because those are powerful words and images" (Scheller 2020, p. 180). One could paraphrase the latter half-sentence as: "because they are noticed by many," or simply: "because they are popular." And Petrozza added: "We [as a band] tend to generalize things and try to metaphorize them rather than attack any political groups and explicitly name things that are happening in politics or world events. I'm often inspired by political events, but you won't know it. The lyrics of "Phantom Antichrist" [2012], for example, are also politically inspired, but it doesn't give that away. You have to decipher it" (Scheller 2020, p. 204). In a similar way, the *Revelation* can be seen as a covert, metaphorizing critique of the Roman Empire, as mentioned above. In the sense of the Greek "apokalypsis" ("revelation", "unveiling"), a hidden truth is expected to appear and end the corrupted present. Hence, this truth brings about significant change, a "crisis" in the literal sense of Greek "krisis" and Latin "crisis": "decisive turning point." In John's *Revelation*, a New Jerusalem descends, which later socialist and communist movements sought to turn from metaphysical head to materialist feet. While at first glance many heavy metal songs simply exploit suffering and hardship, the cruelty of death by war, and the end of the world, they simultaneously promise empowerment, change, and renewal.

Kreator points to this Janus-facedness in their song "Your Heaven, My Hell" (Kreator 2012): "Let us celebrate the apocalypse/[. . .] Let this last farewell resound across all lands, all cultures, no more cholera messiahs/Embrace the dawn of a new earth, different from the first, so let it bleed while a new light shines/Let's kill all gods, let's shatter hypocrisy/My eyes are wide open/My eyes are wide open/Your Heaven, My Hell. I, destroyer/Your heaven, my hell. I Creator." Traditional religious and popular secular apocalyptic artifacts, then, do not entice passivity or even fatalism. On the contrary—the impending Last Judgment or inner-worldly apocalypse, painted in drastic images, may also make believers/fans rethink their lives and try to become better people. The apocalypse serves, as does heavy metal, in the words of Hans Magnus Enzensberger, both as an "aphrodisiac" and as an "anxiety dream" (Enzensberger 1978, p. 1). Just as John's *Revelation* has been controversial as part of the Bible, so too is heavy metal often controversial as part of popular culture. Is heavy metal still "pop"? Isn't it too weird, too crass, too extreme? Such questions pertaining to exaggeration also play a central role in philosopher Günther Anders' reflections on "apocalyptic blindness" in his book *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen* (Anders [1956] 1961).

Anders wrote about "apocalyptic blindness" (Anders [1956] 1961, pp. 234–63) with regard to the reluctance of post-Second World War populations to acknowledge the possibility of a nuclear apocalypse. Against the backdrop of this reluctance and the sublime, unimaginable dimension of the possible large-scale crisis, he argued that "trivialized subjects require exaggerated formulations" (Anders [1956] 1961, p. 235). Only through exaggeration "towards truth" (Anders [1956] 1961, p. 175) could they be re-introduced into the public consciousness. Hence, for Anders, exaggeration is not opposed to popularization:

> "If there is any chance at all of reaching the ear of the other person, it is only through sharpening one's speech as much as possible. This is the reason for the exaggeratedness of my formulations. The happy time when one can afford not to exaggerate and not to overstate: this time of sobriety we have not yet reached.

What matters, then, is to find a tone that could be heard in a wider circle, that is, to philosophize popularly."

<div align="right">(Anders [1956] 1961, p. 237)</div>

What if heavy metal stood in this tradition?

In a sense, heavy metal can be considered as such an exaggerated form of "popular philosophizing" about the apocalypse and the crises (e.g., floods, fires, wars, etc.) connected with it ("apocalypse" understood not in a purely theological and metaphysical sense, but more generally as a major crisis that massively disrupts the prevailing order and brings about change). This "philosophizing" is not only popular in the sense of "a popular science book" or "a popular theory," but part and parcel of popular culture itself and thus of entertainment, mixed with prophecy as a method of warning and of (allegedly) revealing truth. In fact, "war, particularly nuclear war, has long been an obsession in all forms of metal" (Kahn-Harris 2007, p. 36). War is often summoned as a fascinosum in metal, but not necessarily as what it is veneered as in propaganda, e.g., as a series of calculated "precision blows," as a moral necessity, or as a "heroic fight" against evil. War is also portrayed as chaos, pain, suffering, as cynical and nihilistic—this is the "revealing" part, as it were: "I march before a martyred world, an army for the fight/I speak of great heroic days, of victory and might/I hold a banner drenched in blood, I urge you to be brave/I lead you to your destiny, I lead you to your grave/Your bones will build my palaces, your eyes will stud my crown/For I am Mars, the God of War, and I will cut you down" (Motörhead 1986). "War is hell" (Toxic Holocaust 2008)—especially for ordinary soldiers: "The day not half over and ten thousand slain/And now no one remembers our names/And so it is for a soldier" (Motörhead 1991). Many more war songs from classic era bands and beyond could be listed along these lines, from Megadeth's "Peace Sells" (1986) to Body Count's "Shallow Graves" (1994) to System of a Down's "B.Y.O.B" (2005). Other metal songs deal with pandemics (e.g., Overkill's "Elimination," 1989), nuclear accidents (e.g., Cytotoxin, "Redefining Zenith," 2017), floods (e.g., Wolfheart, "The Flood," 2017), famine (e.g., Asphyx, "Three Years of Famine," 2021), terror (e.g., Testament, "Evil Has Landed," 2008). Hardly any of these musicians had directly, personally, or physically experienced the crises they sang about.

With that said, heavy metal, or more precisely its apocalyptic strands, can be interpreted as a particular instance of "premediation" within popular culture, and thus as a secularized form of "prophecy". In the words of media scholar Richard Grusin, premediation can be explained via Steven Spielberg's movie *Minority Report*. The plot revolves around a technology that "captures 'precognitions' of the future for playback in the present—for the purpose of preventing the recorded events from becoming actual history, to prevent the future from becoming the past" (Grusin 2010, p. 39). Rather than being a disinterested, self-centered practice, premediation "entails the generation of possible future scenarios or possibilities which may come true or which may not, but which work in any event to guide action (or shape public sentiment) in the present" (Grusin 2010, p. 47). In this vein, many classic heavy metal songs or cover artworks—and arguably apocalyptic artifacts in general—capture precognitions of the future not only to feast on the envisioned large-scale crises in a sensationalist manner, although this is certainly the case as well. They also "shape public sentiment" and hence the present; albeit not in an activist manner. As I have argued elsewhere, classic heavy metal rather pertains to consciousness-raising that precedes direct action, whereas punk and hardcore tend to prioritize the latter (Scheller 2014). The phrase "to shape sentiment" is therefore adequate in the context of classic heavy metal, also with regard to the above outlined affective side of metal. According to Grusin's concept of premediations, the latter "contribute to the production of a collective affective orientation both towards particular futures and towards the future or futurity in general" (Grusin 2010, p. 48). In this respect, the proximity to prophecy becomes clear.

With Anders and Grusin in mind, it would be misleading to view the above-mentioned songs as nothing but sensationalist ghost trains rolling through the most vulgar fields of pop culture, drawing coaches filled with comic books, fantasy literature, horror movies,

and commodified apocalypticism. There is more to it than that. As I have argued above, religious apocalyptic artifacts such as the *Book of Revelation* also have a strong entertainment side, and this entertainment side bespeaks the need to gain the attention of the general public, to become popular, i.e., to be "noticed by many." Precisely through exaggeration, they can serve as entities of premediation and as prophetic mementos—memento mori, memento belli, memento crisi. Accordingly, John's fantasy-movie-like descriptions of bloody excesses preceding the revelation of divine truth take up considerably more space than his descriptions of the Last Judgment and the New Jerusalem. This is exemplary of the aesthetic profusion and exaggeration in apocalyptic artifacts in general and classic heavy metal in particular. In the sense of Anders, this feature can be understood as a dialectical counterpart to "apocalyptic blindness"; a blindness that is especially prevalent in relatively peaceful, stable times, and/or in times when the dimensions of the possible catastrophe are beyond imagination (e.g., with regard to global nuclear warfare). Put simply: the less tangible and/or imaginable death and disease, pain and decay, misery and chaos become in everyday life, the stronger the need to create an aesthetic residuum for them. Heavy metal can create such a residuum.

Against this background, Rolf Nohr and Herbert Schwaab are right to state: "To dismiss metal lyrics as eternally rigid and infantile overlooks the fact that metal made the nuclear apocalypse an omnipresent permanent topic at a time when Wolfgang Niedecken's BAP still claimed a monopoly on the political disarmament song" (Nohr and Schwaab 2011, p. 389). While BAP may have addressed the nuclear apocalypse in their songs, they have not attempted to find an adequate, content-specific aesthetic form for it. Heavy metal, in turn, is all about creating an apocalyptic medium for apocalyptic messages. The genre keeps the possibility of major crises in the public consciousness not only through naming but also by premediating them, mimetically, as it were, with adequate aesthetic means (high volume, distortion, heaviness, comic-like imagery, etc.). The medium thus becomes the message.

It is precisely in aesthetic terms that heavy metal offers something such as "resilience training"; "aesthetics" here is understood as the simultaneity of sensory perception and sense-making (cf. Welsch 2003, p. 48). If "resilience" is basically defined as the ability to go through crises unscathed, then heavy metal can be understood as a form of aesthetic expression that attempts to counteract the repression of frightening thoughts and to push people out of their (aesthetic) comfort zones in order to raise awareness and build mental strength. The frequent depictions of apocalyptic violence in heavy metal are telling in this connection. Over longer periods of time, they lead to habitualization among the recipients, which can be, and has been, criticized as a trivialization of violence, but can also be interpreted as a prerequisite for techniques of psychological coping, as Berndt argues: "The habitualization thesis assumes that the reception of depictions of violence leads . . . to the acceptance of violence as a means of conflict resolution. The approval of violence through the reception of depictions of violence has not yet been proven beyond doubt, but at least the habituation to depictions of violence is indisputable. This is a necessary psychological adaptation mechanism that reduces emotional arousal in favor of mental processing" (Berndt 2012, p. 191).

The attempt to push people out of their comfort zones through heavy metal works on (at least) two levels at the same time. On the level of somatic experience and emotion through the cultivation of loudness, harshness, intensity, distortion, etc. (with ballads reinforcing these qualities dialectically via contrast); on the level of cognition and imagination through apocalyptic scenarios, virtuosity, and unusually intricate song structures (Elflein 2010, pp. 255–61). The aesthetic "overkill" typical of apocalyptic artifacts thus continues in the aesthetics of the heavy metal genre: "Iron Maiden seemed to be playing ten times as many notes as anyone else, and its dazzling compositional approach elevated the musicianship of heavy metal for decades" (Christe 2004, n.p.). This applies not only to the compositions but also to the lyrics. Iron Maiden's song "Two Minutes to Midnight" (Iron Maiden 1984), for instance, references the year 1953. Back then, the "Doomsday

Clock" of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists stood at 11:58 o'clock because the Soviet Union and the USA carried out hydrogen bomb tests. The cover of the single record shows a zombie warrior in the foreground, national flags in the midground, and a mushroom cloud in the background. In the lyrics, various entities from an apocalyptic chamber of horrors and curiosities line up: a "golden goose," an ominous "killer's breed" and some "demon's seed," an "unborn killed in the womb," "napalm screams," the concentration camp Bergen-Belsen, "children torn in two," "madmen," "starving millions" This comic-style exaggeration, this aesthetic hyperbole, and the distancing effects that go along with them can easily be ridiculed, as mentioned above. To some, they appear as utterly irrational and pubertal. However, it is they who ensure popularity and attest to the popular side of apocalyptic artifacts like the *Revelation*. Hence, they can as well be viewed in the light of Günther Anders' writings and understood as a—prophetic—aesthetic resilience training for large-scale crises to come.

5. By Way of a Conclusion

Those who confront themselves with heavy metal implicitly confront themselves not only with what is neglected and repressed in times of (relative) peace, but also with the dark fascination that war, disease, suffering, and their, at times revealing and transformative consequences, wield. That way, heavy metal continues the apocalyptic project of premediation in secular times and puts, in the sense of Günther Anders, aesthetic and contextual exaggeration in the service of popularizing what is repressed, downplayed, and trivialized. It thus may help to build mental resilience—if not prophetically, then at least presciently. In this connection, the apocalyptic popularity of heavy metal recalls what author Szczepan Twardoch wrote about the meaning of war in his personal life:

"War has dominated my imagination ever since I was a child. As a ten-year old, I idolized books about tanks and battle ships, was fascinated with their technical characteristics, and yet I never wanted to be a soldier because I always despised hierarchical structures, I didn't even feel like joining the boy scouts. However, war never left me in peace, it fascinated me and continued to move me as a grown-up, remained a constant topic of my readings, my intellectual work and my novels, and as it suddenly came so close [Twardoch refers to the war unleashed against Ukraine by Russia in 2022]—it was just as if I was ready for it, as if I had been preparing myself for it my entire life, and believing this is easy for me, because no bombs are being thrown on my house."

(Twardoch 2023)

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

1   Since heavy metal is a relatively technical and calculating form of pop music (e.g., regarding speed and loudness records, or rigidly laid down compositions), measuring metal is not necessarily an act of encroachment (cf. Scheller 2022, pp. 53–54).

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