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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.

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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-Martin 2018; Dittmer and Bos 2019; Houlden and Atia 2020).

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