

The Resistance to Popular Culture

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*Highbrow / Lowbrow:
The Emergence of
Cultural Hierarchy in
America*
By Lawrence W.
Levine
Harvard University
Press, 1988

*No Respect:
Intellectuals and
Popular Culture*
By Andrew Ross
Routledge, 1989

Within the house of culture and its study, the door to popular culture is apparently now wide open. If someone sought to explain how it was that popular culture emerged within literary studies as a legitimate terrain of inquiry, here are some of the factors that would have to be mentioned: the poststructuralist interrogation of the once self-evident boundaries between literature and nonliterature, reader and writer, world and text; the excavation by recent Marxisms and feminisms of the liberatory potential of a utopian strain in popular culture; discursive critiques of how literary studies become institutionalized and transmit a canon of authorized texts; the exemplary influence of feminist film studies and British cultural studies; and finally, the (not so simple) fact that each generation of students seems more strongly affiliated with nonliterary forms of culture as the site for ideas and pleasure, framing paradigms and everyday experience. Each of these factors has played a role in working through the resistances to popular culture in the disciplines of literary study.

While some literary critics might wonder what to “do” with their new freedom of access to popular culture, perhaps annexing its study to a more catholic but essentially unmodified discipline, two recent books offer challenges to such a strategy. *Highbrow / Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*, Lawrence Levine’s account of the “sacralization” of culture in nineteenth-century America, suggests the historical shift in the idea of culture that produced terms within which the modern academic study of culture has developed. In *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture*, Andrew Ross narrates a series of twentieth-century episodes—from the debate about “mass culture” to the wars against pornography—when intellectuals’ self-definition and social role pivot upon their antagonistic relationship to popular culture. By offering historical studies of the emergence and policing of the boundary between high and low, legitimate and popular culture, both books promote reflection upon those factors that sustain resistance to, and thus mediate our approach to, popular culture and its study.

Levine's and Ross's histories of the inscription of popular culture as the negative other of legitimate culture provoke questions that complicate the assimilation of popular culture into literary studies. *The question of pleasure*: Because its currency depends upon the unconscious or preconscious popular taste of groups and individuals, popular culture provides pleasures that seem spontaneous. This disorders that independent position which has long seemed the sine qua non of the intellectual's cultural authority. *The question of knowledge*: Because it is various, unbounded, and ambient, popular culture poses a unique challenge to various academic discourses. Given the "pregivenness" of our personal and affective, discursive and institutional relationship to popular culture, how can one study—that is, produce what will pass for generally useful knowledge of—popular culture? *The question of tolerance*: Because every individual's consumption of popular culture is selective and partial, the study of popular culture quickly encounters the problem of what one might call the cold eye cast upon *other* people's pleasures. In hopes of not repeating what those they describe in their histories have done—containing and controlling, policing and purifying popular culture—both authors develop an ethos of tolerance toward popular culture.

1. The Purification of Culture

Rather than embracing the romantic organicist conception of the popular culture as the (perhaps) timeless culture of "the folk," Levine, no less than Ross, understands popular culture in an unsentimental light as that amorphous set of cultural forms and practices that most people enjoy. Integral to the workings of modern economy, media, and institutions, the spaces and vehicles for popular culture have undergone more or less constant transformation over the last two centuries. Within this dynamic matrix, Levine's cultural history traces a fundamental shift in the way nineteenth-century American culture was identified and consumed. In Shakespearean drama, opera, orchestral music, and museums, a "sacralization of culture" divided culture into high and low. Rather than being the effect of more primary causes happening elsewhere (in economy, politics, or society), this new partition of culture became one of the linchpins of a rearrangement of everything from pleasure and art to class and social space.

Levine's story begins with a figure who has long been a touchstone of cultural centrality—William Shakespeare. In ear-

ly and mid-nineteenth-century culture, Shakespeare was widely known and constantly performed; his plays also became the object of irreverent parody and spoofs. This mid-nineteenth-century Shakespeare was fashioned to realize the florid rhetoric, vivid characters, tempestuous gestures, and moral design so dear to the American stage of the period. But by the end of the century, "Shakespeare" began to change: a new restraint came into the preferred acting styles, greater fidelity to the text was attempted, and Shakespeare began to circulate in arduous and improving scholarly editions. At the same time this new "Shakespeare" became much less popular. A similar change overtook orchestral music. Earlier in the century, thousands of voices could join hundreds of mallet-wielding firemen in a huge musical extravaganza that met the popular appetite for spectacle and blurred the boundary between performers and audience. But gradually orchestras were distinguished from bands, and their professionalization allowed a more ambitious European level of performance. Everywhere there was an unmixing of types and genres: the monkey show was separated from the performance of *Richard III*, the old popular ballads were removed from programs which featured works by the peerless German composers. Museums evolved from being places where diverse "curiosities"—from stuffed animals to plaster replicas of famous statuary—were displayed to educate or amaze, to being those hushed and gleaming vaults where earnest but insecure gallery visitors might gape at precious originals, in hope of aesthetic epiphany.

The conscious agents of this transformation of culture in America—critics and orchestra directors, enlightened patrons and committees of responsible citizens—invariably represented their efforts and expenditures as attempts to recover "true" culture. This meant distinguishing this rather elusive essence from whatever faulty native product was then seeking to pass for culture. Levine links this project of cultural "sacralization" to the mobilizing of high culture as a symbolic capital that secured upper-class position for the socially insecure; moreover, as an enclave against ethnic pollution, true culture could become a fount that might trickle down to improve the lower orders of society. Levine's history suggests that the decline in the broad popularity of Mozart, Shakespeare, and Verdi since the mid-nineteenth century is less a result of whatever formal qualities we might ascribe to these cultural texts than what has been done to them by those institutions, styles of entertainment, and canons of taste that define the terms of access to these cultural products. Since the new forms of art were expensive,

they could no longer be supported by entrance fees, but required deficit spending, made up through the support of rich patrons. What passed as culture changed from public event to profound personal experience, from collective possession of popular taste to a remote form to which an insecure taste was obliged to adjust. The raucous and unruly audiences of early century became polite and disciplined. The new practices of (high) culture helped to erect a certain idea of culture as purifying and pure, somber and serious, for the few rather than the many. A hush fell over the now sanctified ground of culture, a culture now understood to exist as much for improvement as entertainment.

Throughout Levine's history, the terrain of culture is represented as a contested one, where divergent types of cultural practice and divergent concepts of what culture is and should be contend. This contest could take rather benign forms—like the *New York Times's* crusade to get the Metropolitan Museum of Art to stay open on Sundays so that working men and women could be given greater access to the new temples of culture. Or it could require the aid of the militia. On 7 May 1849 there were rival performances by two leading American and British Shakespearean actors. While the American, Edwin Forrest, gave a successful performance at the Broadway Theatre, the performance of the British actor, William Macready, at the Astor Place Opera House, was silenced by boos and “an avalanche of eggs, apples, potatoes, lemons, and ultimately, chairs hurled from the gallery.” Macready was ready to leave the country, but he was petitioned by persons of “highest respectability,” including Washington Irving and Herman Melville, “not to encourage the mob by giving in to it” (64). Through the “quick arrest of the voluble opponents inside the theatre,” the second performance, on 10 May, was successfully completed. However, the large and angry crowd of ten thousand “outside—stirred by orators’ shouts of ‘Burn the damned den of the aristocracy!’ and ‘You can’t go in there without . . . kid gloves and a white vest, damn ’em!’—bombarded the theater with paving stones, attempted to storm the entrances, and were stopped only after detachments of militia fired point blank into the crowd. In the end at least twenty-two people were killed, and over one hundred and fifty were wounded or injured” (64–65). Later rallies and newspaper accounts helped to tell the lesson of this bloody riot. Some took heart in the principle of law and order being maintained, while others regretted that New York City now appeared a place divided by “a high and a low class.” The rivalry of two actors and their divergent styles of acting had become, in Levine's words, “a clash over questions of cultural

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values, over the role of the people in culture" (66). The effort of the upper classes to produce a higher strain of theater in their lavish new opera house had met the determined resistance of the working class opposed to this remapping of their cultural space.

While the new division between legitimate and popular culture might occasionally require the active force in evidence at the Astor Place riot, the increasingly vocal improvers of culture more often pursued their reforming project with that "hectoring from on high" (Ross, *No Respect* 9) which is a fixture of the cultural supplement of Sunday newspapers to this day. When, from the vantage point of high culture, popular culture becomes vulgar and menacing, the purpose of the critic's enlightened judgment must be censorial. When in 1898 W. J. Henderson, the *New York Times's* music critic, was asked how to improve the standard of music of the US, he replied: "First of all, abolish the music halls in which vulgar tunes set to still more vulgar words provide the musical milk upon which the young of the masses are reared. Abolish the diabolical street pianos and hand organs which disseminate these vile tunes in all directions and which reduce the musical taste of the children in the residence streets to the level of that of the Australian bushman, who thinks noise and rhythm are music" (Levine 216–17). For Henderson, the people's "vulgar tunes" become the "vile" adulterated cultural "milk" that threatens to draw American culture down to the level of the Australian bushman. This cultural catastrophe can be avoided only if those of enlightened taste, like Henderson, function as the cultural SWAT team that will sound the alarm and prescribe the brutal remedy. The very distinction between those with highbrow and lowbrow taste, as it began to win currency at the turn of the century, derives from the effort to align a phrenological distinction—where differences in the height of the brow suggest differences in the cranial capacity of different races—with a person's intellectual power and cultural inclinations (221–22).

Central to Levine's project is the effort to relativize, by historicizing, concepts of cultural hierarchy and difference that determine what constitutes culture. Out of this history Levine develops what might be called an ethos of cultural tolerance. Regretting the separations that mean Beethoven and Verdi are no longer accessible to popular taste, he polemicizes against the contemporary high cultural posture that fails to apprehend the value of popular cultural forms like jazz, musical comedy, movies, radio, popular comedians. Levine finally urges cultural consumers to cultivate "their ability to discriminate independently,

to sort things out for themselves and understand that simply because a form of expressive culture was widely accessible and highly popular it was not therefore necessarily devoid of any redeeming value or artistic merit" (233).

For Levine, tolerance guarantees the freedom to choose the popular culture that lies accessible before us. Surpassing the tendentious old division of culture into high and low would mean we could live with a degree-zero of resistance to popular culture. But here I detect a marked discrepancy between what his history shows—episodes like the Astor Place riot of 1849—and the ethos of cultural tolerance he urges upon his reader. Levine's pluralistic, reasonable position assumes that his reader, armed with the insight provided by this history, will eschew the intolerance so central to past and present struggles around cultural production and consumption. What are the factors that sustain resistance to popular culture? Both Levine's and Ross's histories are full of examples of the way groups and individuals mark their distinction from other groups by developing styles and drawing boundaries that put other forms of culture out of play. Pierre Bourdieu's work suggests that these distinctions, while partly conscious, are also unconscious; they receive their power from appearing as self-evident matters of taste.¹ Levine's final liberal pluralistic settlement of cultural differences ignores the ongoing cultural strife analogous to that recorded in his history: the scandal for Evangelicals produced by the representations of sex and drugs in rock 'n' roll, for the Women Against Pornography by porn, for almost every cultural critic by the popular slasher films. The rather upbeat close of Levine's history does not find a way to account for the intensity of the feminist debates around pornography that Ross chronicles or for the surprising popularity of Allan Bloom's antipopular counteroffensive on behalf of high culture, which Levine so vividly critiques in his own epilogue. In the late twentieth century, the same assumption that underlies W. J. Henderson's proposal to improve American music is still current: "You are what you consume." This assumption unleashes what one might call the battle to control (cultural) consumption by the (social) body. Little wonder that particular groups still battle to shape the channels and media, the markets and values that structure what others may consume.

2. Respecting Popular Culture: Or the Right to Be Bad

By reading Levine and Ross in tandem, one can see that the nineteenth-century division of culture into high and low

offers intellectuals the terms for showing “no respect” for popular culture in the twentieth century. In Andrew Ross’s *No Respect*, intellectuals function as the frontline of a culture’s resistance to popular culture. Like certain cells in the human immune system, intellectuals seek out and destroy any agents deemed foreign to the health of the cultural body. The original focus of Ross’s book enables him to contest this concept of the intellectual’s hygienic social function. Ross does not chronicle what various intellectuals “thought about culture”—what it is, what it should be, how it is being transformed by the “culture industry.” In other words, he does not dilate on the questions addressed by T. S. Eliot, Dwight Macdonald, Theodor Adorno, Daniel Bell, and Raymond Williams and summarized in Daniel Brookeman’s *American Culture and Society Since the 1930s*. Ross does not bemoan the “decline of public man,” nor regret the loss of the intellectual’s “political responsibility.”² Ross resists the impulse to fashion a role for the intellectual that enables him or her to stand apart from popular culture and articulate a correct or enlightened attitude about it. This is why Ross does not even advocate the solidarity with popular culture he clearly often feels. Instead, this book focuses on episodes in the history of how intellectuals have responded to, and participated in, various specific cultural movements, forms, and practices: the Popular Front, media culture, jazz, pop, and porn. In his history, two themes recur: the intellectual’s inevitable entanglement with the popular culture he or she only pretends to stand outside, and the ambivalence of intellectuals’ response to popular culture. When intellectuals show “no respect” for the popular culture they consume, eschew, translate, and repress, they are feeling the allure of popular culture at the same time that experience unsettles their vocation. The intellectual’s resistance to popular culture becomes a way to sustain the moral claim to stand above the unmanageable flows of the popular.

Ross’s revaluation of popular culture leads him into conflict with those cultural critics on the left who see modern cultural forms as the false fabrication of a “culture industry,” the guiding purpose of which is to accelerate the purchase of “the Spectacle.” Rather than accepting the notion that modern systems of production, marketing, advertising, and consumption turn audiences into pliant subjects of “mass culture,” Ross critiques this very theory as the instrument by which a group of intellectuals represents others as degraded victims of media manipulation. Ross’s study develops a series of arguments to challenge this influential perspective on popular culture. First, he notes the irony that condemnations of popular culture by

both the right and left share the sort of hierarchical division of culture described so vividly in Levine's history. Second, Ross urges a new assessment of the crucial role played by the market and consumerism in new cultural formations. In place of that fiend "Capital," the protagonist in so many of the cultural histories of the "paranoid left," Ross insists upon the plural effects produced by the market: "the creation of new sexual identities (women, gays and lesbians) in the liberation movements was partially achieved through the agency of consumer capitalism which stood to profit from the exploitation of markets formed around these identities" (189). Here the capitalist quest for profits can function on "the side of" the invention of new identities. Finally, against the tendency to describe the effects of media as totalizing and unidirectional (from the producers to the consumers), Ross argues for the possibility of a "creative consumption" that would "be posed as a way of explaining how people actually express their resistance, symbolically or otherwise, to everyday domination, by redefining the meanings of mass-produced objects and discourses in ways that go against the 'dominant' messages in the text" (53).

The legitimation of popular culture Ross urges is predicated upon a decisive shift, familiar in the work of the Birmingham School, from culture determined by the producer's system to culture refashioned by the standpoint and agency of the consumer. Here are four examples of the way this shift engages prominent theories of culture. In each instance Ross insists that anything aspiring to popularity and cultural influence carries a secret dependency upon the needs of those who appropriate it, sometimes quite actively, for their own purposes and pleasure. To Guy Debord's way of representing "the Spectacle" as the sole agent and effect of the culture of advanced capitalism, Ross argues that "in fact, the power of the 'spectacle' depends upon its success in addressing and intersecting with deeply felt everyday needs and anxieties, and its articulation of an incomplete circuit of desire is one in which we recognize ourselves and which we therefore want to complete by acknowledging its power" (111). To Susan Sontag's description of the usefulness to capitalist society of the image—which allows an aestheticizing of the commodity which can "subjectivize reality" and "objectify it" at the same time—Ross points to the participatory dimension of cheap cameras, which allow "family snapshots" to "be exchanged as a way of repairing the social injury of fragmented communities" (113). To the behaviorist and homogenizing tendency of Marshall McLuhan's "global village," Ross points to the way the left in the sixties began to make

media events an essential aspect of politics (123). Finally, to the gloomy predictions of an international media empire devised by the West to replace its old commercial and military empire, Ross points to the way an expanded access to media has sometimes empowered groups, like the Quebecois, to counter the hegemonic designs of the official media of nation-states (131).³

Ross's defense of a broad band of popular culture allows him to investigate the subtle interrelation of apparently diverse cultural articulations. In a chapter entitled "Containing the Cold War," Ross explores the symmetry between the containment of Communism and popular culture, between McCarthy's efforts to control the Red menace and science fiction films about invading "aliens, bugs, pods, microbes, germs and other demonologies of the Other" (47). In "The Uses of Camp" Ross offers a genealogy of gay camp—from the idolizing of certain female film stars like Bette Davis and Judy Garland, to female impersonation and drag performance. Ross then develops Sontag's hint about the importance of gay camp to later feminist critiques of femininity: "the 'corny flamboyance of femaleness' in certain actresses helped to 'undermine the credibility of certain stereotyped femininities—by exaggerating them, by putting them between quotation marks'" (161). In a complementary fashion, the gay ultramacho black-leather style lives a fantasy exaggeration of masculinity which may be in covert "dialogue" with the concerted feminist critique of masculinity developed in the same period (163). The wit and inventiveness of the culture Ross depicts, presented in quick and vivid "takes" from the terrain of culture, may convince intellectual readers to befriend the popular culture they have previously distrusted. At its best, his criticism makes popular culture a complex but legible tableau. By offering a release from the seriousness so customary in talk about culture, *No Respect* invites the reader to consume a representation of popular culture that is rich with examples, informative, and fun to read.

Ross's defense of popular culture climaxes with a gutsy and provocative challenge to those forms of leftist political correctness which would banish various forms of popular culture—whether porn or macho or camp gay styles—for promoting the degrading or unenlightened views of others. His narrative of the debates around pornography, in a chapter entitled "The Popularity of Pornography," allows us to see the antiporn movement as one more instance of the intellectual's effort to contain popular culture. Ross attributes the resilient popularity of pornography—as it has assimilated some feminist critique and

turned toward the women's market—to the conservative quality of unconscious fantasies and the pleasures produced by allowing its consumers to be “bad.” Out of his polemic with the antiporn movement, Ross develops a more general credo for accepting popular culture, which he labels a “bill of rights for a new social contract between intellectual and popular culture” (12). This includes the need to consider “the liberatory uses that might be derived from the personal pleasure” invested in popular culture; “an extended tolerance for and solidarity with the pleasure of other users, not always shared,” especially among “marginal, persecuted constituencies”; “the need for self-criticism” most especially by questioning “the privileged voice of the universal, vanguardist intellectual in hot pursuit of his or her own model reforms.” Such a “bill of rights” might construct “a more popular, less guilt-ridden, cultural politics for our time” (12–13). Like Levine's closing argument for cultural pluralism and tolerance, there is much to recommend Ross's “new bill of rights” for popular culture. It reminds us that groups and individuals—especially those who resist hegemonic values like heterosexuality or domesticity—inhabit the popular culture they consume and enjoy. They might resist the attempts to control their popular culture the same way Ralph Ellison imagines African Americans enduring the “prefabricated Negroes” constructed by “writers and scholars” until finally “someone thrusts his head through the page and yells, ‘Watch out there, Jack, there're people living under here’ ” (qtd. in Levine 256).

Ross's summary of the feminist critique of the *Women Against Pornography*, and his case against schemes for state censorship of pornography, is deft and convincing. But by focusing his critique of the antiporn position upon a few theorists like Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon, Ross fails to link that movement with a host of other political movements, cultural currents, and media events that have worked, over the last decade, to reform a sexuality supposed to be too free: the New Right's “family agenda,” the herpes scare, the Meese Commission on Pornography, the policing of the “AIDS crisis,” the “new sobriety,” the recent vogue for describing “love” or “sex” as damaging “addictions.” Ross's isolated polemical engagement with the antiporn position discourages exploration of the subterranean affiliations among these apparently diverse cultural movements. That polemic also means Ross fails to credit the popularity and righteous pleasures of the various antisex positions. Thus Ross can call for tolerance of popular culture only by restricting his understanding of popular culture so as to exclude the intolerant social movements he would censor. If

these social movements are seen as part of popular culture, then Ross fails to do the “self-criticism” he has called for in his “bill of rights.” Such “self-criticism” would lead to reflection, somewhere in his porn chapter, upon the asymmetry of men’s and women’s relation to porn, his own male positionality, and what might therefore be useful, but nonetheless problematic, about his joining what he calls the “anti-Anti-Porn” side in the porn wars.

3. Journalism and Cultural Studies

By returning to Ross’s account of the camp versions of masculinity, I can distinguish Ross’s cultural criticism from other approaches to the study of culture. Ross’s discussion of camp masculinity culminates with a contrast of the styles of different bands and performers:

[I]t is clear that heavy metal today is as much an assault on middle class masculinity as it is an affirmation of sexist working-class bravado. What is also at stake, I think, is the international balance of patriarchal power. The brashness associated with heavy metal drag speaks, like Rambo’s caricature of the he-man, to the legitimate power of American masculinity in the world today. By contrast, the jolly decorum of Boy George bespeaks the softer European contours of a masculinity in the twilight of its power. One is emboldened and threatening, the other is sentimental and peace loving. (165).

The sweeping scope of this narrative of popular culture, and its venturesome development of ideas, is enabled by a series of negations. Ross declines to let his reader know where he is “coming from”—either politically or discursively. Through the omniscience of Ross’s global narrative, with its tolerant and dispassionate commentary upon the “sexist” bravado, “patriarchal power,” and “the legitimate power of American masculinity in the world today,” Ross’s cultural criticism disengages itself from those values and critical perspectives—on patriarchal culture, advanced capitalism, empire—that enable feminist and Marxist cultural criticism to intervene in popular culture and resist certain tendencies. Although he favors the word “contestant” to describe his own political stance, it becomes difficult to find what in culture (besides modernist formalism or intolerance of popular culture) he would contest. Thus he finds

occasions to applaud much of what Marxists have traditionally critiqued in capitalist cultures: consumerism, the market, the cultivation of distinct styles. Ross's determination to show respect for popular culture blurs the political stakes of his cultural criticism. Ross makes an approving aside about the ecology movement, but he sees no need to reconcile this position with his enthusiastic endorsement of consumerism. Lastly, while *No Respect* offers a cogent political critique of what might be called "the performative effects" of the intellectual's disrespect for popular culture, such an analysis brackets any consideration of the truth-value or pertinence of what these intellectuals said or did: opposing Stalinism, going on the road to do an ethnology of America, developing innovative interpretations of the influence of media upon culture.

Ross's cultural criticism not only deflects traditional expectations of political legibility, it also refuses the coordinates for academic study. The sheer speed of Ross's survey of culture, exemplified in his disinclination to do more patient readings of the styles of Boy George or Rambo, means that he cannot pause to elucidate the antithesis between "legitimate American power" and "the softer contours of European masculinity." Perhaps Rambo is more a symptom of American weakness than strength; perhaps Boy George helps invent the terms for the renewal of European strength in a postimperial epoch. But to develop this line of thinking, one would need to clarify the imprecise terms in the passage above: what is the "international balance of patriarchal power" or the concept of masculinity being engaged here? Ross's cultural criticism refuses the protocols of various academic disciplines for producing knowledge: literary criticism, history, sociology, media studies. For those studying popular culture within these disciplines, the claim to produce a knowledge of popular culture depends upon a certain analytical leverage (and distance) secured by concepts or techniques their study turns to use—from the "unconscious" to "ideology"; from the audience survey to the interview; from close readings to labor in the archive. Thus, for example, Levine's remembering of a shift in nineteenth-century American culture depends upon archival work, an interpretation of findings, and the way both are woven together by a narrator of history who sustains a conventional separation from the terrain he studies and represents.

For Ross, any ethical, political, or academic discursive distance from popular culture betrays that "disrespect" which cripples efforts to know popular culture. Ross's solution is to write a cultural criticism that attempts an alliance of purposes

with journalism. He casts his history into a politically alert, theoretically informed journalistic narrative, exploiting several qualities of the most culturally ambitious journalistic writing since Addison and Steele. By offering his readers thoughtful summaries of modern thinkers on culture (from Antonio Gramsci and McLuhan, to Bourdieu and Sontag), Ross pursues journalism's educational program without losing his readers to the unwieldy problems and jargon of academic discourses. Ross shares with journalistic writing a preoccupation with the everyday, the modern, and the contemporary. Thus there is remarkably little reference in *No Respect* to the role of the intellectual and popular culture in the nineteenth century, though books from Levine's *Highbrow / Lowbrow* to Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* suggest the possible usefulness of a historical perspective on these questions. Finally, *No Respect* features what journalistic cultural critics from Addison to Sontag have always cultivated—that urbane wit and tolerant catholicity of a metropolitan sensibility, which suffuses its representation of the cultural terrain with a delicately balanced play of irony.

Ross describes the exigencies that encourage his alliance with journalistic writing by analyzing a special issue of *Time* devoted to popular culture. “No savvy culture critic can afford to disagree outright” with the “assertions” and “observations” of the *Time* article. Why? Because *Time*'s overview of “what America does right” and its description of the enormous influence of American popular culture around the world “bear the mark of common sense.” Although he intends to deploy a concept of “common sense” first developed by Gramsci and subsequently elucidated by Stuart Hall, Ross's extension of the idea of common sense to the language of the *Time* special issue goes much further than they in annulling critical resistance to popular culture and its sense. “To contest that ‘common sense’—with its exhilarating language of consensus, its fast and loose logic, its rhetoric of comfort—always involves taking it seriously in the first place, and then learning how to fit in what it does not say, without pricing one's discourse out of the market of popular meanings” (8). This single sentence suggests the basic strategies of Ross's book. He would first “take seriously” the “common sense”—that is, the current meanings and the popular logic—that culture circulates, but he will also add, or supplement its meanings by adding, “what it does not say.” This kind of intimacy with the common sense of popular culture requires that his own prose engage in a risky rapprochement with the “exhilarating,” comfortable, and “fast and loose logic” of journalistic writing. Only by doing this will he prevent his

own discourse from being “priced” out of “the market of popular meanings” within which he hopes his own book will circulate. Ross understands the risks this strategy entails—especially as he eschews the procedures of the cultural criticism he would supplant: “[T]hat often means putting aside the big social picture, forsaking polemical purity, speaking out of character, taking the messy part of consumption at the cost of a neat, critical analysis of production; in short, all the occupational hazards and heresies of cultural criticism that eschews the intellectual option of hectoring from on high” (8–9). By rejecting a cultural hermeneutics that seeks to unveil “a truth beyond the ideological facade of popular ‘sense,’” Ross hopes his cultural criticism can “engage with the concrete effects of that sense in the everyday culture at large” (*Universal Abandon?* xvii). Ross’s project—organized as it is by the impulse to overcome distance and win proximity to popular culture—aspires to make knowledge, market strategy, and political efficacy one.

How are we to understand Ross’s intervention in the cultural terrain he describes? His revaluation of popular culture vestigially supports a procedure of Marxist cultural studies: the popular culture of the workers is especially valuable because of the workers’ special historical role. For Ross, the cultures of certain groups—not the workers, but African Americans and gays—are extended privileged attention. Others are not. Ross neglects, and therefore implicitly depreciates, cultural icons of working-class popular culture from Frank Sinatra to Sylvester Stallone. Of course his history does not claim to be anything but selective. But the “bill of rights” he extends to all popular culture does not conceptualize his own acts of selection. He, like all critics, by selecting some cultural products to foreground and value and others to ignore or play down, functions as an amplifier of (some) culture. Other culture becomes indecipherable background noise. Such a role for criticism may be no less crucial to culture than the amplifier in any electric sound system.

Though they may appear inconsistent with Ross’s general ethos of tolerance, his scathing comments about modernism make it the anathematized other of popular culture, and exempt it, as well as “legitimate culture” and its consumers, from protection under Ross’s “bill of rights.” While there is no explicit place in Ross’s scheme for “false consciousness,” that space would be occupied by what he calls “legitimate culture.” Perhaps for Ross, “legitimate” culture is no longer a site of pleasures broad or egalitarian enough to be valued; it may appear to him politically compromised by its appropriation by high-brow critics, the classes they represent, and the national ide-

ologies furthered through them. Ross's remapping of culture effects what might be called the implicit depreciation of canonical writers who now bear the stigma of what might be called a "bad legitimacy." However politically progressive Ross's motives, Levine's study of Shakespeare's nineteenth-century popularity suggests the perversity of Ross's redivision of the cultural field. Many writers now deemed canonical were part of the popular culture of their own day: not just Shakespeare but also Richardson, Byron, Scott, Dickens. One promising project of cultural studies is descended from traditional literary history: the investigation of the covert affiliation between culture called "high" and culture dubbed "popular," between, for example, Henry James and melodrama. Such an affiliation has always destabilized the opposition popular culture/high culture. Ross's spirited defense of popular culture may have the ironic effect of reaffirming an opposition that Levine's history so usefully complicates.

4. The Essential Minimal Resistance to Popular Culture

These studies of Ross and Levine help to legitimate the study of popular culture within the academy. But if cultural criticism is to avoid being a camp updating of the taste-making function of the most traditional criticism, then how is one to study popular culture so it produces knowledge of what we do not already know? Ross's explicit case against the censorial intellectual is fully compatible with the implicit critique Levine makes against those indignant guardians of high culture who compared street organs to the music of the Australian bushman. But Ross's history also suggests the following definition of the intellectual—one who feels uneasy with popular culture. It is difficult to imagine, given only tolerance and pleasure and none of that unease, how there would come to be reflection and inquiry, critical writing or teaching about popular culture. In the disciplines of literary study, making distinctions and choices, if not between "good" and "bad" then at least between "interesting" and "uninteresting" literature, is so fundamental to the ways of knowing that it is difficult to imagine the complete overcoming of this impulse and procedure.

How could it be different? How might a critic of culture become utterly tolerant? To offer no resistance to whatever passes as popular culture might mean, for example, that a teacher would simply situate students before 35 TV monitors, each set at a different, locally available cable channel, or each playing

one of the 35 most popular current video rentals. I suspect that one of the attractions of studying popular culture is the way it can provoke complex articulations of pleasure and resistance. Whether one makes a study of romances or action films, the student of popular culture always seems to be indulging in a pleasure-laden affiliation with the popular culture under study, while subjecting that affiliation to defamiliarizing critique.

The resistance to popular culture does not issue only from the one who would study it. There is also that *within* popular culture that resists any ready appropriation and critique by intellectuals or academics. Popular culture resists its study by its violence and sentimentality, its (apparently) conspicuous circulation of ideologies, its tolerance of repetition, its astonishing variety, its unboundedness, its novelty and sameness, its blatantly compensatory function, and so on. Anyone lulled by the apparent familiarity of popular culture, or determined to annul the resistance to popular culture with a doctrinaire tolerance, will underestimate the resistance within popular culture and thereby simplify what he or she seeks to study. The criticism, history, and study of culture, whether "high" or popular, implies the delineation of a difference between what is generally understood to pass as sense within culture and what the critic, historian, and theorist of culture (using whatever method) has found. This difference between is the essential minimal resistance to popular culture necessary to any knowledge of culture. Such resistance cannot be attributed solely to the critic of popular culture, or to the plural and opaque texts and practices of popular culture. Instead, the resistance to the comprehension and recuperation of popular culture appears in the relationship between popular culture and its would-be knower. As in psychoanalysis and electricity, so too in cultural studies, it is along the path of resistances gradually (but never completely) overcome that knowledge about popular culture can flow.

Resistance to popular culture is not only a central feature of the way culture circulates within society or a constitutive dimension of the position of the intellectual, but it is also essential to the project of developing knowledge of popular culture. Anyone who would efface the resistance to popular culture with tolerance risks erasing the pathways for "knowing" (both experiencing and studying) popular culture. This leads me to my final, somewhat paradoxical thesis: Those who would produce knowledge about popular culture will find themselves thrown into an odd double relationship to popular culture—cultivating tolerance as well as disrespect, being vulnerable and standing apart, one feels impelled to overcome the resistance

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to popular culture (in others and one's self, as well as within the odd and plural forms of popular culture), yet one realizes that such an effort can only partially succeed and that, indeed, critical rearticulations of popular culture inevitably carry forward resistances to the very culture the critic seeks to understand.

Notes

1. See Bourdieu, esp. chapter one.
2. For consideration of these issues, see Posnock's essay-review of recent books by Jim Merod, Russell Jacoby, and Thomas Bender.
3. Ross's polemic against interpretations of popular culture as controlled from above develops one side of a debate central to contemporary cultural studies. One might pose the pivotal issue of this debate in the following way: who or what controls culture—the consumers or the producers, the people or “the system,” pleasure or knowledge, specific contingent practices of historical agency or those discourses that produce effective knowledge (and thus control) of culture? To observe every aspect of this debate posed and developed in an entirely different fashion from Ross, one could not do better than to consult Mark Crispin Miller's *Boxed In: The Culture of TV*. *Boxed In* offers a skeptical critique of the liberatory potential of consumption and a strong updating of the Frankfurt School interpretation of contemporary American culture. Reading Ross and Miller against each other convinces this reader that there is much to be said, and valued, on both sides of the debate. Rather than adjudicating this debate through abstract theses, cultural studies, I suspect, will work through these questions by evaluating what the diverse framing assumptions of different forms of cultural studies allow us to understand.

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