

THE PRINT MASS MEDIUM, MASS CULTURE AND QUESTIONS OF AESTHETIC AND TOPICAL PUBLIC OPINION, CONSIDERED IN LIGHT OF EXTRINSIC AND INTRINSIC OBSTACLES OF ACCESSIBILITY

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Abstract

As regards the phenomenon of popular culture, opinions are divided between the Classicist school, who argue it is a cultural universal, and the Modernist camp, who argue that such a cultural form is a relatively recent phenomenon. Taking as its point of departure the work of Marshall McLuhan, this article raises the issue of whether popular culture could have been perceptible as such prior there having to any quantifiable means of assessing popularity.

Focusing chiefly upon print, the first mass medium, the author first considers such extrinsic obstacles of accessibility as would have in the past precluded “culture for the people by the people.” Of particular interest is the conditions under which both cultural producers, authors and readers could begin to conceptualize and perceive the reading public as a collective entity, with popularly representative tastes. One then goes on to examine to raise the question as to whether, in today’s “global village,” such extrinsic obstacles have not faded to insignificance, leading potentially to a greater need to consider obstacles of intrinsic accessibility in terms of public opinion.

Keywords: popular culture, Marshall McLuhan, print, accessibility, mass culture

1. THE MASS MEDIUM AS A PREREQUISITE FOR MASS “POPULARITY”

Those who write about popular culture are immediately placed in the unenviable position of having to navigate between the Scylla of anthropological universalism and the Charybdis of historical particularism. Operating from the first perspective, one broadly seeks analogies between modern “popular culture” and phenomena from past or remote societies. In contrast, the second perspective sees “popular culture” as a fairly recent phenomenon, specific to the democratic and industrialized world. The two perspectives have more or less crystalized into “schools” of thought, as is attested by *Popular Culture: An Introductory Text* (1992), wherein Jack Nachbar and Kevin Laue describe how “Classicists [...] argue that popular culture has been around as long as there have been groups of people available to be entertained and instructed by its appeal”, whereas the “Modernists [believe it to be of] relatively recent origin”[1].

Both paradigms may be presumed to have their merits. It goes without saying that, if one looks for analogies between a modern sporting event and - for instance - chariot races in ancient Constantinople, those can and will be found. Such correspondences are certainly informative, and they are by no means lacking in cultural validity. That said, the strong form of the “Classicist” position risks anachronism. If any more or less predominant cultural practice qualifies as “popular culture,” the question arises of why one ought to distinguish “popular” culture from “folk” and “elite” culture at all. Popularity is thereby simply presumed as an anthropological *a priori* – a canon of contemporaneously majoritarian cultural goods and practices, defined in terms of and delimited by the past or present historical period under consideration. Such a perspective falls short, however, when one would seek to coherently situate such intellectual currents as “Pop Art” and (popular) culture studies historically, as the intellectual articulation of these clearly occurred in the 20th century.

In contrast to Classicists, the Modernist perspective views the present-day predominance of popular culture as being a historically situated phenomenon. Marcel Danesi summarizes this school of thought in *Popular Culture: Introductory Perspectives* as considering that “[i]n the history of human cultures, pop culture stands out as atypical [...] culture by the people for the people [...] in contrast to historical (traditional) culture, [rejecting] both the supremacy of tradition and [that] of established cultural

norms"[2]. A natural task for the Modernist school of thought then becomes, naturally enough, that of convincingly explaining why popular culture should have been such a particularly wide-scale form of cultural manifestation over the course of the past few centuries.

One may adduce a variety of contributing causes, ranging from population growth to the emergence of greater political egalitarianism, yet among the most prominent must certainly figure a technical and technological factor: the emergence of mass media. The degree of ease by which a marketing survey can be carried out on a mass scale today should not obscure the past difficulty of arranging even an occasional plebiscite. For majoritarian culture "by the people for the people" to more or less spontaneously emerge, it must first become possible for mass populations to become reflexively conscious of their majoritarian tastes. The creation of such a collective experience involved a massive feat of social networking: the facilitation of mass-mediated public.

2. OBSTACLES OF ACCESSIBILITY

It is quite difficult to conceive of any mass medium such as would have allowed for this prior to the advent of typographic printing – a development for which the media scholar Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980) coined the term "the Gutenberg Galaxy." Tellingly, despite the fact that Marshall McLuhan himself appears seldom to have referred to "popular" or "mass" culture in his writings, Danesi's *Popular Culture: Introductory Perspectives* includes a section heading on McLuhan, whom he deems "the scholar most associated with linking mass communications technologies to pop culture[,] [as McLuhan] claimed throughout his writings that there existed an intrinsic synergy between mass communications media and cultural forms"[3]. The present article examines the synergy between the developing print medium and the rise of majoritarian popular culture by interrogating the degree to which "popularity" could or could have become an object of mass experience – both prior to and during the development of the print medium.

McLuhan, whose academic career began with literature, never ceases to allude to the print medium; however, his most comprehensive engagement with print tellingly occurs in his second book, *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962). This book, which McLuhan relates in his introduction was inspired by his having read Lucien Febvre's and Henri-Jean Martin's compendious *L'Apparition du Livre* (1958), thusly serves as something of a foundation and prequel to McLuhan's later investigations of electronic mass media. The present article draws heavily upon *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, subsequent works by McLuhan and, finally, *L'Apparition du Livre*, the source to which McLuhan most frequently refers when treating the print medium. As the work of academics and of cultural critics in print, both past and present, has provided much of the source material for the work, several of these are consulted in a dual aspect: as both primary and secondary sources (e.g., the work of Gilbert Seldes). Generally said, however, secondary sources include cultural studies such as Lawrence Levine's *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* as well as relevant articles from academic journals. Primary sources are largely drawn from cultural critics and intellectuals of the early 20th century whose writings touched upon the rise of mass culture and the popular readership, ranging from Walter Lippmann to Virginia Woolf.

As regards method, one has determined to focus upon an analysis in terms of accessibility, considered as broadly as possible. By proceeding in such a manner, one purports to avoid a characteristic fallacy common in considerations of popular culture and popular art – that of *a priori* conflating popularity with accessibility. Certainly that which is *inaccessible* – be that on the basis of its physical situation, innate content or the surrounding social context – is unlikely to become popular, and certainly that which is absolutely erudite, eccentric or hermetic is *quite* unlikely to become popular. Nevertheless, surprising exceptions do abound, and merely retrospectively deeming all that becomes majoritarian "accessible" to the contemporary populace merely begs the question.

Otherwise said, if one adopts a paradigm whereby one actively seeks to explain why a given cultural phenomena achieved popularity, these most often can and will be found. Although such considerations are certainly intellectual valid, and can certainly be informative, one should be aware of the tacit equivalence presumed between popularity and accessibility. The current article purports instead to apply

a different lens: rather than examining what qualities or favorable circumstances have allowed a given phenomenon to attain mass popularity, one seeks instead to describe what constraints and qualities would have hindered or precluded works from becoming recognizable as “popular” upon a mass scale. The medium to be treated is typographic print, and the period to be treated dates roughly from the invention of typographic print until the early 20th century and the advent of electronic media.

Various aspects of “accessibility” must thereby be systematically treated. For the purposes of such analysis, the consideration of obstacles of accessibility has been further broken down into extrinsic and intrinsic obstacles. By extrinsic obstacles are understood external factors such as societal or technical/technological constraints that would have prevented a phenomenon from achieving mass popularity. Intrinsic obstacles are considered to be those which result from the intrinsic content of a challenging, “difficult” or hermetic communication. The guiding concerns would be: what factors would have caused “popular” culture to be primarily an atypical, modern phenomenon? Secondly, how were such obstacles overcome, and what ensuing cultural and societal benefits, evolutions, liabilities and tensions were the result?

3. THE “GUTENBERG GALAXY”: THE CONQUEST OF ACCESSIBILITY

A useful concept in the analysis of mass culture is that of *obstacles of accessibility*. Such obstacles may be either intrinsic in character – those resulting from the inherent content of a specific phenomenon or work – or extrinsic in character - those resulting from deficiencies of informational infrastructure or societal and/or technical constraints. *Intrinsic* obstacles result from the form or content of an artwork. Works which are particularly avant-garde, erudite, “difficult” or “challenging” may be characterized as posing intrinsic obstacles to accessibility. Efforts made to popularize or translate a challenging work typically seek to overcome - (or to sugarcoat) - the intrinsic obstacles to its wider reception. Within the broad field of cultural pursuits and occupations, both critics and marketers will likely justify their respective occupations along the above line, should they be pressed to do so on idealistic rather than pragmatic grounds.

Throughout most of human history, however, one may safely presume the *extrinsic* obstacles to a work’s mass reception to have been far more significant than the intrinsic factors. Mass culture, or culture “by the people for the people,” presumes a significant amount of infrastructure and technical facilitation, whereby a given artwork’s effective range may be enhanced. In today’s world, wherein the *personal* publication of textual, graphic, audio or visual content in a digital form on a *global* scale is extensively facilitated by the electronic mass media, obstacles to extrinsic accessibility of a *technical* nature have been effectively leveled. As such one is liable to underestimate the degree to which mass communication and the mass distribution of cultural content was limited – if even *precluded* – until the most recent few centuries of human civilization.

Such “popular” phenomena as preceded the arrival of the print medium typically local in character, because the maximum range that an articulation, ritual or performance could reach *at once* was a physically-assembled *crowd*. For classical Greeks, “the regular method of publication was by public recitation, at first, significantly, by the author himself, then by professional readers or actors”[4]. So as to achieve the greatest range, one would have wished one’s composition to be *recited* publicly rather than *read* popularly. Such a “public” as then existed was therefore an *immediate* public, a specific gathering, due to there having been an extremely rudimentary mediatic infrastructure. Not every medium is amenable to becoming a mass medium. The invention of writing – for instance - had allowed for the duplication and preservation of knowledge in a visual form, but it had not provided any effective means of “duplicat[ing] visual knowledge on a mass scale”[5]. Among the most obvious extrinsic obstacles preventing this was the sheer time and personal labor involved in the manual reduplication of handwritten texts.

Save among the specialists, paleographers, classicists and medievalists, we are likely now quite prone to underestimate the laborious slowness with which written information had once to be reduplicated and disseminated. In a world replete with personal computers, word processing software and digital printers, written information passes effortlessly between manuscripts, typescripts and electronic text. One notes

that even academics tend to lump together the three under either the anthropological category of *writing*, or under the literary and human sciences broad “catch-all” - the *text*. The largest public one could typically have imagined supplying with *manuscript* copies of one’s work would have consisted of one’s immediate personal contacts and – if one were lucky – perhaps the further acquaintances of one’s patron or peers. In “Script to Print,” John T. Guthrie reflects upon how “[f]rom the invention of the alphabet [...] until about 1400 A.D. all writing, and consequently all reading, depended upon scribal labor[,] [with] monks and other scholars consum[ing] their lifetimes [...] hand copying royal edicts, papal bulls, and Homer’s *Odyssey*”[6]. Guthrie’s estimate that it would have taken a year to produce one copy of Plato’s dialogues may be slightly high or low, but the point stands that the time investment would have been considerable.

The effort and time investment involved in producing each manuscript copy of a given work would have effectively *precluded* the written word from reaching the broad *contemporary* populace in written manuscript form. It would be difficult to envision how, prior to Gutenberg, a text could have been rapidly supplied to any broad demographic of the contemporary public. Whether Cicero or Chaucer, those who wrote would typically have written for cliques. If one wished for remuneration, one could only write so as to please a patron, for one could not have viably provided copies for mass sale. Those whom one’s words reached would generally have been either those with whom one was in personal or epistolary contact, or a “friend of a friend.” McLuhan underscores that “[e]ven if literacy [had been] universal, under manuscript conditions an author would still [have had] no public” just as “[a]n advanced scientist today has no public [but rather] a few friends and colleagues with whom he talks about his work”[7]. In the latter case, that may be ascribed to the intrinsic specificity and challenge of the scientific text’s content, but in the former there is no access to a mass public simply due to the inherent unsuitability of manuscripts to found a mass medium.

Perhaps the best testimony to manuscript’s unsuitability as a mass medium is the simple fact that an immense *back demand* for manuscript books had existed, and it was this demand which spurred the creation of the printed press and kept the first printers financially solvent. Indeed, the fact that old and established works were chiefly in demand during the early decades of print attests to the fact that printed books were by no means at first intuitively perceived as a potential medium for contemporary discourse. We see it as such with the benefit of hindsight, but credible arguments can be made that “the printed book was a long time in being recognized as anything but a typescript, a more accessible and portable kind of manuscript”[8]. So as to make one’s living, printers typically elected to either: “[r]endre la Bible directement accessible à un plus grand nombre de lecteurs, non seulement en latin, mais aussi dans les langues vulgaires, fournir aux étudiants et aux docteurs des universités les grands traités de l’arsenal scolastique traditionnel, multiplier surtout[...] les bréviaires et les livres d’heures nécessaires à la célébration des cérémonies liturgiques et à la prière journalière, les ouvrages de mystique et les livres de piété populaire, rendre surtout la lecture de ces ouvrages plus facilement accessible à un très large public » (« make the Bible directly accessible to a greater number of readers, not only in Latin, but also in the vulgate languages, furnish students and doctors of the universities with the great treatises from the arsenal of traditional scholasticism, and above all to multiply[...] [copies of] breviaries, books of hours necessary for liturgical celebrations and daily prayer, works of mysticism and books of popular piety – to above all make such works available to a broader public”)[9]. Lefebvre and Martin thereby provide ample documentation that the first and the obvious role of printing was to support and to augment the essentially *conservative* activity of the scriptoriums and university copyists.

This is, of course, unsurprising, but it is worth reflecting upon the point that the tropism from traditional culture to new, contemporary culture would not have been a focal concern of early printers. One can easily conclude that there would have been *disincentives* to do so. Why, after all, should one speculate on a new work, so long as there was a backlog of classic handwritten material that had yet to be made accessible? How would the public have become aware of a trending contemporary author, in the absence of a developed journalistic or promotion apparatus? The earliest popular “bestsellers” were therefore conventional, practical or traditional in character : « [c]e que tout le monde lit : des calendriers, des almanachs, des abécédaires, des livres d’heures, des livres de piété, et [...] les vieux romans de chevalerie » (« what everyone read : calendars, almanachs, alphabet primers, books of hours, books of piety and [...] old chivalric romances»)[10]. Printing editions of unknown, contemporary manuscripts

would, after all, have been a significantly riskier and less attractive business proposition than printing works which had long been both renowned and in short supply. That there would have been a broad demand for the core canonical text of Christendom, the Bible, for instance, was a virtual no-brainer. It was a paradox of Gutenberg's historical situation that printing the Bible was at once the most *revolutionary* and the most *conventional* use to which he could have put his new technique for mass-producing books.

What printed copies of traditional works did not immediately do was to create a popular literary sphere; yet, on the other hand, what it *did* do was to provide the "kindling" for a new kind of book market to develop which, upon entering its majority, was to incentivize the surveying of and catering to the tastes and purchasing proclivities of an ever-broadening reading public. The first printing houses are better conceptualized as *book factories* than as modern publishing houses. The serial manufacture and mass produced of books had therefore had the effect of turning the book from an item of handicraft into the prototypical modern *commodity*. Each manuscript having been a unique production, each manuscript had been subject to a particular negotiation: one would either have commissioned one's copy personally or haggled for it on the second-hand market, leading McLuhan to characterize the commerce in manuscripts by drawing allusions to the contemporary commerce of (fine art) paintings and antiques[11]. Serial editions, on the other hand, would intuitively have been serially *priced*. Not only were the books of each batch virtually indistinguishable, making it understandably difficult to justify why one should have cost more than another, but, what is more, stipulating a unit price *per item* would have greatly expedited a businessman's bookkeeping and economic calculations. The printer who had itemized his inventories would have had a far easier task of determining how many copies of a work one could afford to produce – as well as how many copies one would have needed to sell in order to recoup one's investment, turn a profit and remain solvent. McLuhan even goes so far as to argue that "[p]rint [...] created the price system [...] [f]or until commodities are uniform and repeatable the price of an article is subject to haggle and adjustment [and that] [t]he uniformity and repeatability of the book [...] created modern markets and the price system inseparable from literacy and industry"[12]. This is a strong claim, but it certainly contains at least a great *element* of truth.

Printing houses, or book "factories," would naturally have favored the gradual evolution toward a mass market, for the process was characterized by an economy of scale. Preparing the typeface for each page involved a great deal of time-consuming manual labor by the typesetters; for any future editions, that work would have had to have been repeated, as in the interim the fonts would have been needed for other projects. One would therefore have produced as many copies of a given work as one could finance and expect to sell. All things being equal, producing and selling 200 copies of a single work would have been more profitable than producing and selling 100 copies of two different works. Furthermore, if one could profitably pitch a book or calendar to the *entire* reading public, why would the printer, an artisan and businessman, have unreasonably declined to do so? The printer, after all, would often not have even been in direct contact with their buyers, and one would have been unlikely to refuse to sell a book due to social prejudices. The public with which one was concerned was simply the buying public. One did not need to know *who* was buying so much as *what* would sell. The problem faced by printers, once the self-evident demand for such works as the Bible and medieval romances had been largely sated, therefore became the problem of gaging public demand, for "[i]n 1500 nobody knew how to market or distribute the mass-produced book"[13]. Febvre and Martin relate the ensuing origins of what we today would term « market research », as "[l]es premiers imprimeurs chargèrent très tôt des hommes de confiance d'opérer ce qu'on pourrait appeler la « prospection » de la clientèle » ("the first printers very early engaged trusted individuals to perform what could be called the "prospecting" of their clientele")[14], which eventually led the regular publication of a *Catalogue of the most vendible books in England*, followed by "différents catalogues de ce genre"[15]. Elsewhere, A. S. G. Edwards notes that "[t]he markets for printed books in England were largely speculative, commercially-driven ones aimed at a generalized public rather than an individual private audience, as would [have been] the case with the audience for manuscript texts"[16].

That said, theoretically being open to the possibility of pitching one's wares to any and everyone is not tantamount to publishing books for a mass, majoritarian market *in practice*. The emergence of a *majoritarian* reading public required centuries of technical and societal progress. Lefebvre and Martin's

research led them to conclude that “[j]usqu’au XVIII^e siècle au moins, le livre resta surtout destinée à une élite relativement restreinte et fortunée” (« until at least the 18th century, the book remained above all destined for a relatively restricted and fortunate elite »)[17]. The fact is that, in the first centuries of print, although more and more households would have had access to *some* books, few would have had *many* books until the modern book market had reached a high level of development. As nothing about the book market would *formally* have prohibited the broad populace from buying books, one may consider what factors would have initially made books in print a luxury commodity.

The development of the print medium, like most other mass media, can be situated with the narrative framework of the *conquest of accessibility*. Speaking in terms of mass media, broad extrinsic accessibility firstly pertains to the problems posed by physical remoteness. McLuhan in *Understanding Media* (1966) notes that “[t]he term “communication” has had an extensive use in connection with roads and bridges, sea routes, rivers, and canals, even before it became transformed into “information movement” in the electric age” and, as such, prior to the telegraph, “messages could [not] travel faster than a messenger [and] roads and the written word were closely interrelated”[18]. What is important to note is that the very real acceleration in communication occasioned by print was occasioned by a speed-up in *production times*. Although, because standardized fonts were more legible, printed books could be slightly smaller and more portable, in terms of specific transport times from point A to point B, messages would not have been moving radically faster than during the Roman networks of “papyrus and postal roads.” The logistics of mass communication and some notion of physical remoteness and distance in the 18th century are also alluded to via the anecdote cited by McLuhan in *The Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects* (1967), whereby George Washington is said to have “once remarked, “We haven’t heard from Benj. Franklin in Paris this year. We should write him a letter.””[19]. The “Founding Fathers” of the United States, having explicitly recognized the importance of the press in their republic, effectively subsidized the print medium through “[p]ostage-free printers’ exchanges, recognized in the first United States postal laws, [which] remained the principle method of newsgathering until the invention of the telegraph and the development of press associations in the mid-1800s”[20]. Printing houses, paper mills, booksellers, canals, turnpikes, postal roads, steamboats, railroads and eventually electronic telegraphs therefore all were physical infrastructure supporting the print medium, eventually allowing entire national and international reading publics to be put “in touch.”

Logistic limitations ensured that the first mass reading publics would have grown up in cities and population centers. Once a shipment of texts had been prepared or arrived, they could be made available and disseminated rapidly due to their plentiful number. Texts that were a “hot” commodity could subsequently go viral – first, around the immediate population center and, subsequently, more widely, once they had been shipped and / or reproduced elsewhere. Even as late as the 1920s, however, the range of newspapers was still limited by physical transport, as “[t]he possible constituency of a daily paper [could] be counted as comprising every one who lives within two or three hours’ distance of the newspaper office [meaning that] [...] with [...] multiplied railroads and trolley lines, a daily paper [could] hope to have some direct popular influence over an area with a radius of, perhaps, fifty miles”[21]. Even this late, the daily readerships of metropolises thus remained largely fragmented, although the telegraph and such ventures as the many city papers as the Hearst Press had somewhat unified the daily reading public. It is also worth reflecting that the manual elements of typeface preparation effectively limited daily papers to a few pages, due to production times, until the invention of linotype. The potential for broad physical accessibility is therefore predicated upon techniques and facilities allowing for the mass production of texts, as well as the physical infrastructure for transporting and distributing them.

Another obstacle to popular accessibility would have been literacy, which would have predictably been favored increasingly plentiful and affordable texts. National education systems, such as began to be conceived of in the 18th century, would over the course of the 19th and 20th centuries serve to generalize the skill. A threshold moment in the growth of popular literacy appears to have been the supplanting of the international Latin Press, inherited from medieval and classical times, by the modern vernacular reading publics. Febvre and Martin cite approximately 77% of printed books prior to 1500 as having been published in Latin[22] — a fact which need not surprise, as writing in Latin would have initially facilitated one’s access to a fragmented but European reading public. Yet with the passage of time and

the growth of vernacular reading publics, Latin increasingly became an entry barrier rather than an international language which facilitated access to a broader public. McLuhan finds that “[i]t was inevitable that a larger market existed for the printed book within the bounds of a national speech than the international, clerical élite of Latin readers could ever muster [seeing as] [b]ook production was a heavy capital venture and needed the utmost markets to survive”[23].

It is presumably significant that Febvre and Martin’s *L’Apparition du Livre* concludes by considering the fate of Latin, which the decline of which they deem in passing to have been the “début peut-être d’une culture de masse” (“possible beginning of mass culture”)[24]. Latin would temporarily have remained the language of traditional and international communication, and its prominence in scientific and scholarly publications ensuingly would continue for some time after publications in the classical language had ceased to represent the majority press. The trend of literal *vulgarization* would lead to the elite and learned “traditional” readers becoming demographically eclipsed by the greater number of local speakers of the various vernaculars, leading it to become a minority press. Within the countries of Europe, however, the possibility of through print using one’s vernacular “as a PA system”[25] to affect society and to sway public opinion would become increasingly evident as the number of vernacular readers rose. The vernaculars provided the forum wherein arguments for progressivism, republicanism and democratization could be articulated and communicated to the populace – (as such varied figures as Voltaire, Franklin and Marat would have all been equally aware). The role played by the vernaculars in uniting nations occupies much of the second half of *Gutenberg Galaxy*, and McLuhan reiterates the point in a later work, arguing that “[p]olitical unification of populations by means of vernacular and language groupings was unthinkable before print turned each vernacular into an extensive mass medium”[26].

Turning to another extrinsic obstacle, as regards *affordability* and accessibility, in *Public Opinion* (1922) Walter Lippmann also observes how “[t]he size of man’s income has considerable effect on his access to the world beyond his neighborhood [seeing as] [w]ith money he can overcome almost every tangible obstacle of communication, [...] buy books and periodicals, and bring within the range of his attention almost any known fact of the world”[27]. Pricey reading material and limited literacy would, naturally, have tended to be mutually reinforcing in their ultimate effects. A confluence of two factors, a rising standard of living and a falling production cost of books, were to eventually allow for ascendancy of the popular or “common” reader. Technical improvements in both printing and paper making would have allowed for ever cheaper printed matter. The precursors of newspapers and topical publications, broadsides and pamphlets, had early on demonstrated their ability to “move debates from a narrow circle of peers to a broad audience, transgressing boundaries of class, rank, and even education” for, as Erik Nebeker notes, “[c]heap production [had] enabled broadside ballads to reach a large audience and thus extended the network of strangers to which they could appeal, both socially and geographically”[28]. Shorter or single-page publications were, naturally, cheaper to produce and easier to produce in mass. So as to effectively reach the broad populace, such publications could not have been priced beyond the typical citizen’s means. The conquest of financial accessibility therefore meant a business model whereby a cheap enough product could be economically viable and technically feasible.

Although by no means an exhaustive elucidation, as paper represented a large part of the cost structure of a printing venture, a series of “base readings” of the growth of the popular readership may be derived simply from the cost of paper. Febvre and Martin open *L’Apparition du livre* by considering “l’apparition du papier [...] ne va certes pas [...] remplacer le parchemin, mais l’épauler, le relayer et permettre, à côté de la production de luxe ou de demi-luxe, l’introduction sur le marché de livres moins chers, [...] et produits en plus grande quantité » (« the appearance of paper [...] certainly was not going to [...] replace parchment, but would second and support it by permitting, alongside the luxury or semi-luxury production, the introduction on the market of cheaper books [...] in larger quantities »)[29] — thereby treating the paper industry as integral to the Gutenberg explosion, and no less important than the press itself. Paper and print allowed for ever-greater affordability. In the case of both books and periodicals, the moment when printed matter had unambiguously become *generally* affordable clearly occurs between the 19th and early 20th century. Danesi concludes that “[b]y the time of the Industrial Revolution vast numbers of books could be published at a relatively low cost, as printing and paper technologies became highly efficient[,] [attesting to the fact that] [t]he book had become an item of mass

consumption”[30]. This process of depreciation at such a historical moment culminated in the rise of new publication formats, which, both in terms of content, cost and business strategy, were pitched to a mass public. If the median citizen could afford a printed work at a price that would ultimately prove profitable to both publisher and bookseller, it was only to be expected that *some* commercial entrepreneur on the book market would eventually tap into that clientele. Tellingly, although prefigured in the universalist appeals of Franklin’s newspapers, Paine’s *Common Sense* and *The Federalist* at the time of the American Revolution, in the United States an unambiguously popular press arises roughly in the era of Jacksonian “Common Man.” Danesi observes how “[u]ntil the 1830s newspapers [had been] concerned almost entirely with business and political news, appealing primarily to the privileged classes[,] [yet] [a]ll that changed in 1833, when Benjamin Henry Day published the first issue of the *New York Sun*, creating a “press” revolution.” Day’s paper and its successors, which “included reports of crime and violence and entertainment all in the same issue” were examples of “[a] modern newspaper, designed to appeal to a mass audience[,] [which] cost a single penny”[31]. The mass audience was a “new consumer market [based on] the revolutionary idea in publishing that a workman getting a dollar a day could pay 1 per cent of his income for a newspaper”[32] As regards accessibility, the *psychological* effect of the penny press can likely not be overstated. Priced at a margin for the lowest *unit* of currency – (and almost certainly at a loss, had the *Sun* not been subsidized by its advertisers) – the only way to undersell the *New York Sun* would have been by literally giving one’s paper away.

The nineteenth-century tellingly also saw the phenomenon of cheaply produced novels, priced to such a margin as allowed them to reach a popular readership among the working classes and broad population. The longer-format cousin of the penny press newspaper would be the fiction genre of the *dime novel*, yet another 19th-century literary/journalistic phenomenon. Although retrospectively one can certainly carry out a narralogical and typological characterization of *dime novels* in terms of their typical *content*, what initially defined them as such was simply their accessibility in terms of *price*. Michael Denning notes in “Cheap Stories: Notes on Popular Fiction and Working-Class Culture in Nineteenth-Century America” that such novels were “inexpensive, written fictional narratives which flourished in this country between the 1840s and the 1890s [...] one of several ‘cheap’ entertainment forms during an age of Anglo-bourgeois hegemony in American culture [...] the bulk of [whose] audience consisted of workers”[33]. The same affordable pricing and broad appeal would by the end of the 19th century be characteristic of *pulp fiction*, which Danesi classifies as “stories published in inexpensive fiction magazines in serial form [the name of which derived from the fact that] the magazines and derivative novels were produced with cheap paper made from wood pulp” ; citing Frank Munsey’s *Argosy Magazine* of 1896 as the first example of the format, Danesi notes that these existed in contradistinction to the differentiated “*glossies* or *slicks* [and were] successors of the *dime novels*”[34].

In *Popular Culture: An Introductory Text*, Jack Nachbar and Kevin Lause briefly summarize Russell Nye’s theory that “masses, money and mechanics” had been necessary for (modern) popular culture to arise. The gist of the argument is that popular culture requires a wide populace with the financial resources to patronize culture, and the corresponding production and distribution infrastructure to service that demand with supply. At such a moment, “popular” culture can begin to spontaneously arise alongside more traditional “top-down” forms of culture. In this view, a mass culture demands the existence of: “a *mass* of people whose way of life it reflects and shapes [such as that caused by] [t]he rapid increase in population during the late eighteenth century produced [...] and the rise of cities[,] [which] gathered them together into groups”; “a new middle class—a group neither peasant nor aristocrat but somewhere in between”; and “[a] *means* of communicating it to the monied masses[,] [which] [i]n the late eighteenth century this meant the spread of high speed printing presses”[35]. Nye’s formulation corresponds fairly closely to that carried out on the basis of accessibility above, yet one would remark that at many times in history sufficient masses have existed to allow (in potential) for a popular culture to emerge. The mechanics of making cultural artefacts and phenomena popularly accessible do not, however, appear to have existed until fairly recent centuries.

One notes that the earliest popular “bestsellers” – the aforementioned almanacs, spelling primers, calendars, books of hours, etc.[36]) — would not particularly have allowed for the reading public to reflexively perceive *itself*. Such works, although common culture, did not effectively provide a milieu for demographic self-perception. For that to occur, the print medium had first to provide a public forum,

whereby the mass readership could learn of its own tastes and opinions by having them reported or relayed back to the readers. The mass readership cannot, otherwise said, *consciously* participate in the mass culture of print until they have some concrete, mediated idea of what the average person likes, and of what is contemporarily trending. The bestseller becomes a social phenomenon only once the reading public is *aware* of which books are selling well – once sales numbers, correlating to popularity, diffuse into the wider society. Popular culture, otherwise said, can become more than simply the collection of a culture's most predominant customs, preferences and practices once the potential arises for it to be viewed as *representative* culture which is emblematic of a given society upon a (more or less) majoritarian basis. For this to happen in a manner which circumvents the traditional hierarchy, at least one highly developed mass medium appears the necessary prerequisite, wherein the commercially expressed preferences of the population can be rendered reflexively perceptible to them.

The perception that, up through the medieval era, there was “no reading public in our sense”[37] serves to contextualize why it should not have been until the 18th century that “the press [would become] able to constitute a sustained medium for critical engagement of political issues”[38]. What would one underscore is that private epistolary contacts are quite different than the publication of a letter on the “Letters to the Editor” page of a serially published periodical. The consciousness of a reading public in the writer and the reader are two sides of the same coin, and one ought not to presume that the experience of writing for oral publication among one's acquaintances, or for one's patron, would have necessarily been the same as those of writing for the mass-mediated reader. Febvre and Martin argue for the modernity of the *professional* writer, as « on ne pouvait guère [...] [i]maginer [le métier d'auteur, au sens moderne] avant l'apparition de l'imprimerie » — as it would be impossible to financially compensate the publisher or author “d'un texte dont ils n'avaient pas le monopole — et que tout le monde, après tout, avait le droit de copier ? » (« One can scarcely imagine [the profession of author in the modern sense] prior to the appearance of printing. How could the copyists of the Middle Ages have possibly remunerated the author of a text to which they themselves had no monopoly — which everyone, after all, had the right to copy? Under such conditions, authors had no recourse but to appeal to the protection of a grand personage – of some Maecenas or other.”)[39]. One can carry this somewhat further and observe that, in the absence of such remuneration, one would hardly have had any *tangible* experience of one's being widely read. There would not, in turn, have been much self-consciousness of addressing a broad readership through the printed vernacular's P.A. system.

Once the mass population had been put in touch, however, its majoritarian preferences could be tangibly experienced as - (and by) - a *collectivity* of readers. So long as authoritarianism and censorship did not curtail its spontaneous expression via purchase and selection, such a popular readership was then able to discover spontaneously what “it” liked. Because expressed upon a more or less free cultural marketplace, these choices could be felt as inherently representative of the median cultural consensus and taste, and a modern democratic public, predisposed to egalitarianism, would have intuitively felt the merits of such a claim. In the course of time, such a situation was to allow for a *popular* canon to be articulated – collectively possessed culture “by the people for the people,” articulated in contradistinction, in conjunction or in opposition to the *traditional* canon. In *Popular Culture: Introductory Perspectives*, Danesi briefly summarizes McLuhan's theories whereby “[e]ach major period in history takes its character from the medium most widely used at the time” and his ensuing delineation of “the period from 1700 to the mid-1990s the “Age of Print,” and the “Gutenberg Galaxy”—after the inventor of print technology, Johannes Gutenberg (c. 1395-1468)—because in those centuries cheap printed books were the chief means through which mass communications took place”[40]. Plentitude and cheapness, which in a market economy tend to run hand-in-hand, were what allowed for typographic print to do what manuscripts could not: namely, to found a mass medium. As printed matter becomes progressively cheaper, it increasingly can be made affordable and (potentially) available to the entire mass public, allowing for the majoritarian buying preferences of that culture to be registered and realized as demographically and collectively representative of the *popular* taste.

By the time of the Enlightenment, self-aware writers and publishers had been actively taking advantage of the “broadcast” potentiality of the print medium, both to finance their lives and activities and also in hopes of converting others to their ideas and of somehow bettering society. The argument that such communication was not immediately intuitive or natural largely rests upon the emergent consensus style

of Equitone prose. McLuhan opines thereof that “Addison and Steele, as much as anybody else, had devised this novelty of maintaining a single consistent tone to the reader[,] the auditory equivalent of the mechanically fixed view in vision [and a] break-through [...] which suddenly enabled the mere author to become a “man of letters[,]” [...] abandon his patron and approach the large homogenized public of a market society [...] the mass public”[41]. The Equitone convention, as employed in literary discourse as a common norm and practice, would have allowed the prose author and prose reader an immediate *familiarity*. It concurrently creates a tacit norm of written address and explains our retrospective experience of the *eccentricity* of such very early authors as Cervantes and Rabelais – (who were by necessity experimental as the nascent prose genre had few precedents or reference points). A significant amount of societal authority was thereby attributed to the public intellectuals and writers in print.

In “Literary Criticism and the Public Sphere,” Peter Uwe Hohendahl observes that the self-understanding of “[the] literary public sphere, which evolved into a basis for the political emancipation of the middle class, [...] presupposed general accessibility”. Via the public sphere, occasional aristocrats with egalitarian sentiments, the gentry and the emerging bourgeoisie would be able to argue for human equality – most conspicuously, in the context of the Enlightenment. The implicit presumption would have been that, although perhaps distinguished by education, cultivation or taste, men of letters and public intellectuals in print could speak for everyone; what was more, “[a]uthoritarian, aristocratic art judgments [were being] replaced by discourse among educated laymen.” Critics and intellectuals were expected to steer the public taste. Popular culture, otherwise said, would have involved cultivation for rather than of the populace. However, “by the end of the eighteenth century the assumption that the literary public consisted of a homogenous circle of informed laymen was being exposed as fiction[,] [due to a fragmentation of the public sphere which had resulted from] the spread of education.” This meant that, “in the course of the eighteenth century, in England as well as on the continent, there was a steady growth in the number of readers (that is to say, the potential audience for literature) [which] led to loosening of the bond between the leading intelligentsia and the broad reading public”[42].

Commercial factors implied that accessibility on the (supposed) basis of reason would eventually be supplanted by accessibility in terms of broad appeal and ease-of-access. Denning observes that, in contrast to those who deem them mere escapist fiction and diversion, dime novels can be situated in the context of “a larger conflict over [...] working-class reading, one which was in turn connected to an even larger conflict over the relations between the dominant genteel culture, relatively autonomous ‘foreign’ working-class cultures, and commercial culture”[43]. Both interpretations are true, for popular fiction *had* to be both intrinsically and extrinsically accessible to the broad demographic for which it was intended. Accessibility was predicated both upon affordable pricing and attractive content. One also sees such a natural confluence attested in Levine’s work, as “[i]n 1895 the *Independent* urged its fellow “quality magazines” not to compete with such periodicals as *Cosmopolitan*, which had just reduced its price to ten cents, but instead to maintain their “higher, purer” literary standards”. Popular content and accessible pricing naturally converged in dime novels, the penny press and pulp fiction, on a burgeoning market for what we now term *popular culture*. Levine finds that “highbrow” was “first used in the 1880s to describe intellectual or aesthetic superiority, and “lowbrow,” [...] shortly after 1900 to mean someone or something neither “highly intellectual or “aesthetically refined,” and that the two terms derived from the obsolete pseudoscience of phrenology[44].

By the early 20th century, one sees the natural result of the “conquest of accessibility”: a readership for supposedly “high” culture, which had theretofore been the dominant demographic, had clearly begun to sense its being demographic and commercial eclipse by (what it considered) a “lower,” broad reading public. The demographic split would come to be exemplified by what one of the earliest defenders of the popular arts, the critic Gilbert Seldes, would term in *The Seven Lively Arts* (1924) “two of the most disagreeable words in the [English] language: high- and low-brow”[45]. The demographic split that had occasioned this dichotomy, destined to gradually disappear over the course of the 20th century, nevertheless persists somewhat in the contemporary culture wars and occasional flare-ups between a more critical/(rationalist) prescriptive and a more expansionist, *descriptivist* literary canon. One should bear in mind that a measured agonism between the two poles is likely salutary. In *The Lively Arts: Gilbert Seldes and the Transformation of Cultural Criticism in the United States*, Seldes biographer

Michael Kammen notes that in the 1920s, *The Dial* - (of which Seldes was then the editor) – “deliberately aspired to be a highbrow publication and *Time* swiftly became, perhaps, the ultimate middlebrow magazine.” Both magazines had just debuted, and were operating with an eye towards their target readership. Kammen notes how “*Time* magazine[...] [had] launched its career on March 3, 1923, with a jibe at *The Dial*” – in which T. S. Elliot’s “The Wasteland,” which Seldes had been eager to publish, was ridiculed[46]. Kammen’s biography of Seldes includes a lengthy excerpt from *Time*’s review, but also notes how the magazine would have needed to dissociate itself from overly “highbrow” content to ingratiate itself with middle America. *The Dial* now rests immortalized in literary history; *Time* magazine remains with us to this day, and has even since “gone global.”

The emergence of mass culture, mass readerships and mass art, mediated via commerce, does imply a truism: that which was published for commercial distribution to a mass public cannot be offputting to that readership, if the act of publication is not to be (financially) self-defeating. On the other hand, there is certainly something to be said for minority and underground phenomena as well. As an increasing numbers of publications had to compete for limited public attention and market share, the conquest of accessibility largely transformed into a *contest* for accessibility. The era of the bestseller inaugurates an ever-greater incentive to exert *broad appeal* – which journalist Walter Lippmann described in *Public Opinion* as “[taking] account of the quality of association, and [being] made to those susceptibilities which are widely distributed[...] [whereas] [a] “narrow” or a “special” appeal [was] one made to those susceptibilities which are uncommon”[47]. Lippmann’s formulation, taken out of the wider context of his book, is obviously something of a truism; nevertheless, it seems clear that a work which aspires to broad, popular appeal cannot typically be too eccentric, erudite, offensive or hermetic vis-à-vis the average reader in said populace. Couple that with a situation in which the “financial investment in each film and in popular magazines [was] so exorbitant as to require instant and widespread popularity”[48], and the need to please the average reader and meet them on their own terms becomes a pressure quite difficult to resist. Under manuscript conditions, although it might not be financially remunerated, it was natural to write to please a coterie. With the print medium reaching its zenith, as electronic media began to debut, the professional writer’s professional and societal success was ever-more predicated upon one’s having produced a *bestseller*.

Broad appeal to the “middlebrow” is a complex phenomenon, which resulted both in an explosion in new forms and readers and in both outstanding and mediocre art. What is undeniable is that the proliferation of printed matter led to increased competition for readers and the possibility of *popular* literary success. The professional writer, in contrast to the aristocratic man of letters, is a working professional, conscious of the need to please and interest his readership. The editor, publisher or producer tends to be both conscious of the aesthetic predilections of the author and of those of the target readership; inasmuch as print remains a business activity, they must negotiate and navigate between those interests, which do not necessarily coincide. Lippmann observes that “the pioneering artists and critics [were] naturally depressed and angered at managers and editors who protect their investments”, and were therefore prone to wage “[an] unceasing war with Philistia”. On the other hand, Lippmann’s sympathy for such aesthetic absolutists is considerably qualified by his awareness of the novelty of such a situation, for these frustrated souls were “[expecting] circulations and audiences that were never considered by any artist until the past few generations”[49].

What is more, even those to enjoy more quantitative readerships than could have a writer in the past might still be left with a feeling of demographic submersion, and a nostalgia or envy for the “men of letters” of the early days of print. “Jahrhunderte lang lagen im Schrifttum die Dinge so, dass einer geringer Zahl von Schreibenden eine vieltausendfache Zahl von Lesenden gegenüberstand“; in the modern era, however, as “die Tagespresse ihnen ihren „Briefkasten“ eröffnete, und es liegt heute so, dass es kaum einen im Arbeitsprozess stehenden Europäer gibt, der nicht grundsätzlich irgendwo Gelegenheit zur Publikation einer Arbeitserfahrung, einer Beschwerde, einer Reportage oder dergleichen finden könnte. Damit ist die Unterscheidung zwischen Autor und Publikum im Begriff, ihren grundsätzlichen Charakter zu verlieren“ („For centuries the situation with writing had been that a small number of writers stood before several thousand readers“ [...] „as the daily presses opened their letters pages to the public, however, as it remains today, there is hardly a working European who couldn’t find the possibility of publishing a work experience, a complaint, a report or something of that

ilk. The distinction between author and public is therefore becoming less fundamental”)[50]. The prestigious calling of author had become the day job of the professional writer. Writers had become professionals and jobbers: columnists, screenwriters, teams of writers, writers with portfolio clients, writers who dabble in journalism or screenwriting, etc. On the other hand, writers concurrently retained something of the authority of the men/women of letters. The marketplace of print having reached a high level of commercial sophistication, secondary mediation has become extremely important, via professional editors, critics and reviewers and the commercial artists who worked on images, spreads and layouts for the various magazines. On the creative side, this resulted in a myriad of new forms of expression, both literary and otherwise; on the other hand, it initiated a paradigm with a greater and greater incentive to favor and spotlight broad appeal.

Intrinsic accessibility can be considered in the context of attention. Attention or active interest is both an individual phenomenon, and a broader social phenomenon, and one ought to consider both: the attention of the reader, and the attention of the media, mediators and milieu. In his critical dissection of public opinion, Lippmann was perceptive in placing stress upon the importance of active interest and concentration/care. For Lippmann, the root of the problem of public opinion was that the “pioneer democrats” had not taken into account “the conflict between the known range of man’s attention and their illimitable faith in his dignity”[51] – that is, a tacit presumption was that the average citizen would be rational, educated and conscientious enough to turn their attention to crucial issues and information for determining the course of public affairs. That which may be said for public affairs may also be said for public taste. The “problems” of public opinion are only exacerbated by the (natural) tendency of the mass media to give the people what they want, for “a press is bound to respect the point of view of the buying public”[52]. Broad appeal may, of course, involve heartwarming romance or bone-chilling horror; it may involve fact or sensational fiction, current events or fantasy; it may be excellent or peurile. It may involve nothing more than lasciviously reporting the lives of the rich and famous, fanning political spats and living vicariously through the simulacra of canonical celebrities. Nevertheless, achieving mass circulation tends to imply that one’s content be one thing: if not necessarily affable, at least *fascinating*.

One thereby returns to intrinsic accessibility. Toward appraising objectively the phenomenon of popular literature, one might now seek to describe such factors as would favor or hinder a work’s *broad appeal*. One means of treating intrinsic accessibility while controlling somewhat for one’s personal predilections and biases is to consider the phenomenon of apprehension and interest broadly – once again, within the aesthetic phenomenology of *attention*. Attention is a phenomenon that can be conceptualized as a continuum, extending from absolute *concentration* and effort to a contrary pole of *diversion* and relaxation. It should be noted that aesthetic perception and experience is complex, and individual aesthetic experiences vary widely. It should be noted that concentration is not *better* than relaxation, and that only rarely will an aesthetic experience involve exclusively concentration or relaxation of the senses, body, and/or one’s mind and perceptual faculties. It is not, however, *entirely* arbitrary that so many criticisms of popular culture and literature have focused upon its lack of seriousness. Denning notes that “[f]or the most part, mainstream interpretations of the function and meaning of dime novels, and popular fiction generally, can be summed up in a single word – escape [and] standard critical works repeatedly define these narratives as subliterate - as daydreams, wish fulfillments, and narcotics, brief distractions from a life of work”[53]. Denning himself takes an opposite stance, yet the interpretations he references are not entirely baseless. Even Danesi, whose intellectual stance staunchly legitimizes popular culture, readily concedes that there is “little doubt that pop culture trends and products have largely entertainment value” (although he emphasizes this as true of much culture in general)[54]. Among the earliest to have recognized this trait, as well as the fact that it does not implicitly devalue or discredit popular culture, was Seldes, with his postulate of the “lively” arts. Adopting a middle road, Seldes declared “while the part of humanity which is fully satisfied will always care for high seriousness, it will be quick to [also] appreciate the high levity of the minor arts[and] [t]here is no conflict”[55].

A second factor that favors intrinsic accessibility is *familiarity*. The progressively and democratically-minded are increasingly likely to fasten upon such barriers as regards ethnicity, race, gender, etc., whereas conservatives are more likely to notice them as regards knowledge of the traditional canon and erudition. At any rate, as McLuhan observes, “[s]ince readers are as vain as authors, they crave to view

their own conglomerate visage and, therefore, demand the dullest wits to exert themselves in ever greater degree as the collective audience increases [with] [t]he “human interest” newspaper [being] the ultimate mode of this collective dynamic”[56]. This largely explains the formulaic nature of popular narratives, in which the reader can situate oneself with little effort – (which, it must be noted, does not preclude either a masterful realization or *subversion* of the formula). Protagonists with which one readily identifies, familiar surroundings, worlds and aspirations (whether from everyday experience or in the sense of a characteristic genre setting) all help to facilitate a reader’s situation without too much difficulty, allowing them to “lose themselves” in a tale.

If extrinsic accessibility largely concerns technical, logistical and financial limitations, intrinsic accessibility concerns the *interest* or *disinterest* a given cultural artefact or phenomenon tends to arouse in a particular individual, society or subculture. One useful lens for gaging intrinsic accessibility is therefore the phenomenology of *attention* -- considered both in the aesthetic sense of perception and *beholding*, and also in the wider societal sense of *promoting* or *criticizing*. In his final work, *The Global Village* (published post-humously and co-authored with Bruce R. Powers), McLuhan invoked Edgar Rubin’s gestalt psychology, observing that “[a]ll cultural situations are composed of an area of attention (figure) and a very much larger area of inattention (ground)[...] [which] are in a continual state of abrasive interplay”[57]. Majoritarian and popular culture/popular literature maybe be considered as a particular ground of attention, transcended by the wider anthropological field of culture, and co-existing with various contemporaneously extant fields of tradition, of elite culture, of subculture and of folk culture(s). The unfamiliar, the erudite, the eccentric and the hermetic are very unlikely to be elevated from the *ground* to the *figure* of popular culture and of popular literature.

4. THE COMMON READER AND POPULAR READERSHIP

The question of social hierarchy remains every bit as topical today as in the 1920s. Lippmann, as a societal critic, explicitly presumes a social hierarchy, which is “bound together by the social leaders[...] exceptional people”. Authority and social cohesion ultimately depend upon the “powerful, socially superior, successful, rich, urban social set” as “the social superior is likely to be imitated by the social inferior, the holder of power [...] by subordinates, the more successful by the less successful, the rich by the poor, the city by the country”[58]. Whether one is considering political or aesthetic opinion, this outlier class of whom Lippmann speaks are in a very real way the successors of the “[Chaucer’s] Host and Wyf of Bath [...] [who] are the “outsiders” of their society[...] [and] belong to the international set [...] who w[ould] become the middle class in the Renaissance”[59]. This demographic, once in limited epistolary contact and among the few to have had access to scarce manuscripts, would have broadened gradually into the first, core reading public of the age of print; most of the early men and women of letters would have originated among them, and it would be they who largely presided over the beginnings of popular education and of representative democracy. Most 18th and 19th century critics, reviewers and journalists would have appertained to such an “elite” group.

Such figures would have been accustomed to steering public opinion and mass taste. In a prior epoch, when “the only characters one needed to know [had been] the characters of men in the ruling class”, it would have been “visionary to suppose that [...] distant and complicated events could conceivably be reported, analyzed, and presented in such a form that a really valuable choice could be made by an amateur”. The emergence of a mass medium and the political evolution towards representative democracies after the republican revolutions (two trends which were implicitly intertwined) for the first time implicitly postulated implied that amateurs were capable of making such choices. This is, of course, the postulate of the Humanist and Enlightenment faith in the inherent rationality of the average human being. Lippmann does not appear to have explicitly contradicted this, in the strict sense. He does, however, pose the problem of attention as deeply important in the mass media. For Lippmann, the “the range of attention [was] the main premise of political science”, and he reproached the “pioneer democrats” their tacit utopianism: they had “possess[ed] [no] material for resolving the conflict between the known range of man’s attention and their illimitable faith in his dignity”[60].

The confidence which the “elite” appears to have possessed in the rationality and taste of the general populace was not, by any means, total or unambiguous. One strongly suspects that part of what rendered “highbrows” anxious was a sense of humanist taste being demographically eclipsed by popular taste, in the course of a demographic shift in the wide public of culture-consumers. Lawrence Levine’s research in *Highbrow/Lowbrow* leads him to attest in the United States of the late 19th century “[a] sense of anarchic change, of looming chaos, of fragmentation[...] [had] seemed to imperil the very basis of the traditional order, [which] was not confined to a handful of aristocrats [but] [t]o many of the new industrialists as well as many members of the new middle classes”. Levine tacitly ascribes this to angst, largely correlated to social class, that “culture [was] something which need[ed] to be conserved against the incessant Philistinism that threatens it”[61].

Gilbert Seldes had in 1924 opined that there was “a ‘genteel tradition’ which [had prevented] any just appreciation of the popular arts”, which he justifiably excoriated, posing the rhetorical question of “[w]hat, in short, is vulgar?”[62]. The derivation of the term vulgar from the *vulgate*, the vernacular language of the crowd, implicitly posed in contradistinction to the Latin, has evidently slid into the pejorative. A different trend may be observed with *popularity*, however, which with time sheds its negative connotations. The networking of populations via mass media (firstly print) allowed for representative democracy and the sounding (and shaping) of public opinion on a scale beyond the immediate city or region. In both political and cultural life, this allowed for and spurred a shifting of authority, which had until Gutenberg been largely traditional and hierarchical in character. Traditional authorities were first questioned by contemporary authorities, arguing for and before the reading public in the public sphere of a new mass medium. With time, as contemporary writers and publications became generally affordable and proliferated, the problem of contemporary authority could only be founded in two ways—either according to idealist rationalism, or according to pragmatic efficaciousness, in the sense of that which could become subject to mass consensus. What became possible and intuitive for intellectual judgments became so as well for aesthetic preferences: “[à] mesure que les citoyens deviennent plus égaux et plus semblables, le penchant de chacun à croire aveuglément un certain homme ou une certaine classe diminue [et] [l]a disposition à en croire la masse augmente, et c'est de plus en plus l'opinion qui mène le monde” (« in the measure that the citizens become more equal and similar, the penchant of each to believe a particular man or class blindly diminishes [and] [t]he disposition to believe the mass grows, and it is ever more opinion that guides the world »)[63]. Those who railed against the success of « lowbrow » culture may indeed have envied its popular success, at least subconsciously, yet it also appears that elites were often less against culture for the populace than they were against the aesthetic *self-determination* of the populace. Otherwise said, the literary intelligentsia appear rather to rather expected to popularize (what they considered) Culture among the population than that popular consensus would found its own cultural canon. The popular, which had once represented the out-group, has since come to represent the ultimate *in-group*.

The nature of public opinion, including that related to the aesthetic canon, is ambiguous. One does not find Walter Lippmann at his most ingratiating when he claims that “[t]he mass of absolutely illiterate, of feeble-minded, grossly neurotic, undernourished and frustrated individuals, [was] very considerable, much more considerable [...] than [was] generally suppose[d]”, and the contemporary reader is similarly inclined to balk at Lippmann’s caution that “a wide popular appeal is circulated among persons who are mentally children or barbarians”[64]. The aspersion is, of course, qualitative rather than quantitative in character, but it should not be categorically dismissed. An intriguingly even-handed look at the emerging popular readership occurs in Virginia Woolf’s two volumes of essays, *The Common Reader*, the title of which references the unifying thread of the books. Woolf opens the first book with a profile of the reader who does not belong to the literary intelligentsia, citing Samuel Johnson and noting that “[t]he common reader [...] differs from the critic and the scholar [in being] worse educated, [and he] reads for his own pleasure rather than to impart knowledge or correct the opinions of others”[65]. The characterization is that of a casual reader who reads eclectically and eccentrically – often for diversion and relaxation, but also due to periodic but unsystematic bursts of curiosity. Woolf’s essays thusly constitute a critique of the median reader, albeit one without any particular scorn or rancor.

One problem likely derives from the fact that the rift between the literary intelligentsia and the popular readership was (and is) in fact more complex than it initially appears. On the one hand, there is certainly

a specific merit to Levine's analysis, whereby "[a]ccessibility [...] becomes a key to cultural categorization and thus a key to help us comprehend how the [aesthetic] categories [of high and low] functioned and what they signified"[66]. Denning, for example, notes that "the bulk of the dime novel audience consisted of workers - craft workers, factory operatives, domestic servants, and domestic workers", and it is unsurprising that the sort of reading which would have been particularly accessible to such people in the 19th century would have consisted of "sensational fiction" tailored to them as an audience and reflecting their situations, fantasies, educational level, upbringing and aspirations[67]. That such reading would be considered less serious by the literary intelligentsia than what *they* read is also quite intuitive in historical context. That in-group preference, respectively against perceived demotism or snobbism, can and has played a role in cultural categorization does not bode contradiction: it clearly has and does.

The case which Seldes had to argue in 1924 has since become our aesthetic common sense. Writing in 1959, pop art critic Lawrence Alloway attested to the change which had occurred as Culture gradually became culture. Noting the growing influence of the human sciences on the humanities, Alloway opined that the "developing academic study of the "literary audienc[e]" [...] takes literary criticism out of textual and interpretative work towards the study of reception and consumption". The role of the humanist, who had in the past acted as "taste-giver, opinion-leader, and expected to continue to do so [was] now clearly limited to swaying other humanists and not to steering society"[68]. Researchers such as Levine and Denning serve as examples of the new approach, whereby researchers focus less upon intrinsic meaning and transmitting a set canon of literary heritage, and more upon researching and contextualizing past and present literary culture as regards its significance among the contemporary society. The move reflects a tropism from a prescriptivist to a descriptivist view of culture, as well as a significant deconstruction of cultural authority. One suspects that it would extremely difficult to find a contemporary who would argue categorically against Levine that "the moment an expression form becomes accessible to large numbers of people it loses the aesthetic and intellectual criteria necessary to classify it as culture"[69].

On the other hand, humanists and advocates of the traditional canons have by no means entirely conceded the field of debate. Examples of works by (comparatively) recent academics to have reiterated the case for Culture over culture(s) include *La défaite de la pensée* by Alain Finkielkraut (1987) and *The Closing of the American Mind* by Allan Bloom. Arguing in favor of humanist "Great Books" canon. Bloom argued in 1986 that "[t]he great democratic danger, according to Tocqueville, is enslavement to public opinion" [for] "[f]lattery of the people and incapacity to resist public opinion are the democratic vices, particularly among writers, artists, journalists and anyone else who is dependent on an audience"[70]. Finkielkraut warns of the fears of having elitism be attributed to one, as well as of the heft and inertia of the culture "industry": "de peur de tomber dans l'élitisme et de manquer ainsi aux principes élémentaires de la démocratie, l'intellectuel contemporain s'incline devant la volonté de puissance du show-business, de la mode ou de la publicité" (« out of fear of falling into elitism and not conforming to the elemental principles of democracy, the contemporary intellectual bows down before the will to power of show-business, fashion and publicity »)[71]. It is notable that Levine's *Highbrow/Lowbrow* concludes with fairly strong critique of Allan Bloom's "Great Books" approach to culture, admonishing the reader that the age of cultural ecumenism cannot yet be presumed. Levine's critique of Bloom is justified in many aspects, but in reading it, one cannot but feel Levine is neglecting one very important fact: that the humanist perspective expounded by Bloom is by far the *minority* view, whereas the popular canon is now largely paradigmatic.

5. CRITICAL AND PUBLIC OPINION; TRADITIONAL AND POPULAR AUTHORITY

While one can certainly advance arguments for the universalist position as regards popular culture, the scale of the changes set in motion by print and the subsequent electronic mass media yield suggest a form of culture radically different than that which had come before. Mass media allowed for an increasingly generally accessible sphere of public commerce, both of opinions, information and cultural artefacts. McLuhan argues how typography "created a medium in which it was possible to speak out loud and bold to the world itself,"[72] first via the printed book and later via the collective "mosaic"

from of the newspaper. The cliquish, limited literary communities of manuscripts and handwritten epistles had thereby given way to collective reading habits and mediated, collective experience. Under conditions of relative liberalism, whereby the choices of the population were (largely) unconstrained by authoritarian controls or force, an a-hierarchical, majoritarian cultural canon could thereby emerge. The mass media allowed for the perception of popular preferences and trends on something greater than the immediate, local level. Namely, the mass medium was to allow for the perception of quantifiably popular literature, of a collective reading public, of popular writers and of popular consensus (the popular canon(s)).

This, necessarily, had implied and supported a deconstruction and reconstruction of the social hierarchy. Aside from such social institutions as the church and monarch, intellectual and cultural authority had typically lain with tradition: “pisarz[y] mając[e] najwyższą powagę [...] poświadczona przez tradycję” (“[those] writers [whose] high seriousness [had been] attested to by tradition”). Władysław Seńko, studying the philosophy of the Middle Ages, observed a “charakterystyczną cechą postawy umysłowej oświeconych ludzi tej epoki[:] [...] przepisywanie specjalnej roli autorytetowi”, with “autorytet [będąc] gwarantem wszelkiego ładu” („characteristic feature of the intellectual attitudes of enlightened people in that epoch[:] [...] ascribing a special role to authorities [...] as the guarantee of order”). Against this could be pitted not Reason, but everything new and every breach with tradition[73]. Renaissance Humanists and subsequently Enlightenment-era intellectuals would to a degree inherit and to a degree break with this source of authority. Typography had, after all, allowed for the political unification of populations and, in turn, allowed a tacit hypothesis of universal, humanistic Reason to disseminate. The hypothesis of a general rationality was, as Lippmann tellingly observed, integral to the political reformulation of the nations as representative democratic republics, maintained by a broad base of popular/public support. . As the speed and range of communication increased, contemporary authors whose works had become widely known also began to be heeded, leading to the “man of letters” – a stylistic master of “literate *equitoné*[,] [a stylistic device which] enabled literate people to maintain a single “high tone” in discourse that was quite devastating [and] nineteenth-century prose writers to assume moral qualities that few would now care to simulate”[74]. What, however, happens when access to print publication becomes more generally accessible, and the title of “author” becomes merely a vocational designation? The implicit egalitarianism in the new 18th century political revolutions could not but have spread to every field of social experience. Popular reviewers and the literary intelligentsia were not necessarily differentiable to the common reader, and, even if they had been so, one might have individualistically declined their tutelage. Yet, despite the course of societal democratization, those who considered themselves “highbrow” and “cultivated” appear to have clung to hopes they might yet manage to stultify and steer the public taste.

Towards the end of the 19th century, the (extrinsic) commercial accessibility of printed texts had reached such a level that this intelligentsia was posed with a dilemma: at least in terms of quantitative commerce, they were no longer the preeminent demographic. By virtue of their being outliers, they had previously presumed themselves outstanding representatives of “the best of” the population. It was increasingly clear, however, that the population could choose its own bestsellers, which were a priori more representative of its interests and tastes. The readers, otherwise said, were not always going to heed the critics and suffer the experiments of authors. Whether from distaste for, disinterest in or incomprehension of highbrow opinion, the ordinary reader would not wade through “serious” reading simply because respected critics and intellectuals had. Levine’s work amply documents the polemics. Some turgidly decried the populace’s tastes as trite and irrelevant; others, such as Seldes, embraced and championed the idea that the popular or “lively” arts possessed real worth. Rather than being inherently “low” or lacking seriousness, they were highly representative of their times. \

Virginia Woolf duly pondered in 1932 the fact that “we [might be] on the edge of a greater change than any the world has yet known”, raising the question as to “[what] [t]he art of a truly democratic age [would] be”[75]. Time would, in fact, tell. Our thinking about (C)/culture(s) is highly democratized. As Levine notes, “[t]he anthropological notion that culture encompasses all genres and modes of a people’s expressive life has since the Great Depression and the Second World War become familiar throughout our society”[76] – popular culture has become *a*, if not *the*, normative form of culture. Such an evolution is by no means to be regretted, as the proliferation of cultural works and forms has been so rich as to

overwhelm. Popular aesthetics and popular reviews provide a forum for the plethora of the topical and trending. There does, however, remain the question of that which has been either deemphasized or marginalized by such a cultural evolution. One suspects that that is, paradoxically, both the highly individual and a significant amount of prior, deemphasized cultural heritage. Commercial culture tends to, at least in the short run, privilege that which possesses broad appeal, as well as that which is timely and topical. The question of what has fallen from the figure to the ground to make way for this is also worthy of consideration.

Since the earliest days of the printing press, the culture industry has had to look to its bottom line; this implied, in the earliest days, that it had to cater to the book-buying public. When the popular readership became the majoritarian readership, the popular readership became the target market for publishers. The fact that popular fiction is popular means neither that it is intrinsically good nor intrinsically bad. Popular fiction and popular art is, however, strongly pressured and conditioned toward broad accessibility, meaning it is likely to be formulaic and familiar. It may then subvert expectations or twist the formula; it may also perfect or encapsulate the formula. When at its best, it is in fact the peer of “fine art.” Charles Dickens’ serially published novels, the affable comedic genius of Mark Twain, the science fiction of Jules Verne, Hemmingway’s novels and a myriad of other works testify to the fact that popular and critical consensus can, and does, concur. Accessibility has little, therefore, to do with quality. What accessibility does have to do with it, tautologically enough, *accessibility*.

Albeit not anti-*intelligence*, one may advance the argument that the popular canon is implicitly somewhat anti-*intellectual*, inasmuch as the intellectual asserts their claim to appraise them irrespective of mass consensus. Criticism becomes the preeminent cultural taboo, as venturing to pronounce aesthetic judgment against mass taste leaves one strongly exposed to accusations of being a “highbrow.” As Lawrence Alloway observed in 1956 that “the mass arts are anti-academic[...] [because] [t]opicality and a rapid rate of change are not academic in any usual sense of the word”[77]. They are faddish, but they are faddish because quick to respond, and they are exquisitely adapted to the *topical*. Furthermore, ever since the printer with his book factory, a simple truism has been likely to exacerbate the drive toward *broad appeal*. Namely: the owners of the media “always endeavor to give the public what it wants”[78]. What the public wants in commercial culture, under conditions of ample choice, is always what it wants *now*. In turn, the owners of the media are ever more able to survey at least what the public *thinks* it wants.

Under such conditions, traditional heritage and rationalist discipline may, paradoxically, offer a font of resources for cultural *spontaneity*. Leaving such speculations aside, the issue of popular versus expert opinion in the sphere of literature bodes no *categorical* opposition. In closing, one might return to the “common” reader of Virginia Woolf. Woolf must have been aware that much of her work, such as the experimental *The Waves*, would not have been particularly popularly accessible. Nevertheless, her musings on the “common”, popular reader read less as an expression of discontent that one of interest and cultural co-determination. After all, “if [the common reader] has [...] some say in the final distribution of poetical honours[...] it may be worth while [sic] to write down a few of the ideas and opinions which, insignificant in themselves, yet contribute to so mighty a result”[79]. Woolf’s fascination with the common reader shows through. In the distribution of poetical honours, one supposes the popular readers and literary intelligentsia are interpenetrating demographics. Whether as allies or agonists, the casual consumer and the rationalist aesthete ultimately concurrently serve as custodians and transmitters of literary heritage. Even Alloway, whose entire expansionist canon implicitly questioned the expert and aesthete as law-giver, did nevertheless accord academics the role of the “keeper of the flame”[80]. Coming from the chief early critic of Pop Art, one might argue this role, involving contemporary marginalization vis-à-vis the purchasing populace, to be only a small concession. Yet in the grand scheme of things culture has often been described as a pendulum, and humanist keeper of the flame is perhaps a role not *entirely* insubstantial.

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