What and Why Is High-Pop? Or, What Would It Take to Get You into a New Shakespeare Today?

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A recent *New Yorker* film review observes wryly that filmmakers, desperate for more Jane Austen novels to film but having filmed them all to death, have now had to resort to her life for material in *Becoming Jane*. It's true: an awful lot of Jane Austen films have been produced in the last fifteen years. Not only that, they've been popular. Googleplex-goers just can't get enough witty, romantic Regency banter. This is one prominent current example of the phenomenon that is "high-pop"-"high culture" repackaged and resold as popular culture.

The name "high-pop" comes from a 2002 book edited by Jim Collins, *High-Pop: Making Culture into Popular Entertainment*. Collins observes in his introduction-and the book as a whole supports the idea-that high-pop has made huge gains, in both influence and marketability, in the last few decades especially. Subjective experience certainly suggests that this is so. Since my childhood (I was born in 1964), I have witnessed many groundbreaking, hugely popular instances of High-Pop: the existence and success of Masterpiece Theatre. Around-the-block lines for the King Tutankhamen museum exhibits. The Steve Martin hit song "King Tut." Smash-hit Broadway musicals adapting canonical authors' works: *Cats*, based on poems by T. S. Eliot; *Les Miserables*, based on Victor Hugo's massive historical novel; and now *The Woman in White*, based on Wilkie Collins's Victorian thriller. Movie adaptations of Shakespeare's plays, such as *Ten Things I Hate about You* (The Taming of the Shrew) and *She's the Man* (Twelfth Night)-to say nothing of the many "straight" big-budget Shakespeare film productions, by stars such as Kenneth Branagh and Mel Gibson. There have always been connections and overlaps between high and popular culture: for example, television in its early days touted itself as the way to bring great literature, higher education, and highbrow entertainment to the American masses. At least, television made this claim briefly, before, say, Uncle Milty in a dress won the day. But the great prominence, cultural power, and potent marketability of high-pop today are new and special.

That high-pop should be so prominent today-any time, really-makes no obvious sense. After all, we make an offhand distinction between "high culture" and "popular culture," and generally consider the distinction self-evident enough not to define our terms. This distinction implies-and we most often find-that that which is popular is not "high," and that which is "high" is not terribly popular. (At least, comparatively speaking. People do pay, for example, to attend opera performances; but gross ticket sales will never approach *American Idol*'s moneymaking might.) It would therefore seem futile to bring to the popular market a work of high-pop, one based on something not especially popular to begin with. "Wagner's Greatest Hits" are still works composed by Wagner; they will never sell anything like "The Eagles' Greatest Hits" (the bestselling rock album of all time). In a way, selling high-pop is like selling chocolate-covered ants from a mall kiosk: a select few may gasp with delight over every one of the product's fine qualities, but most people will not willingly give the product a try. Consider also the chain bookstore. There, in a great barn of a building, tucked into a corner (never near the door, cash register, or other high-traffic location), behind rows upon rows of "bestsellers," sits one small, lonely shelf labeled "Classics." If "classics" sold more copies-and overall they don't, despite Oprah's including *Anna Karenina*, *Night*, and the works of William Faulkner in her Book Club-then the proportions of shelf space allotted would be quite different.

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And yet high-pop is huge business, as King Tut and company illustrate. Why? Three reasons related to human nature suggest themselves, as do two reasons related to specific, recent changes in our material realities.

First, high-pop alleviates our "slummer's guilt." After we receive a certain amount of education-for example, after we complete a certain number of literature courses, and read a certain number of works approved as high culture-we develop slummer's guilt. That is, we feel guilty when we take joy from works that are not high culture; we expect our own tastes to have been refined more thoroughly. We gulp down a Harlequin

Romance, or a gritty detective story, with much the same feeling a dieter experiences gulping down a double bacon cheeseburger. We heartily believe we should consume more edifying things, but the "junk" is so enjoyable. High-pop takes the edge off that guilt. Watching a movie version of *Vanity Fair*, as opposed to reading Thackeray's novel, or reading Fforde instead of Pope, at least produces less guilt than would real slumming--e.g., reading Stephen King, who has publicly described his own books as "the literary equivalent of a Big Mac with fries." It's as if someone strongly craves a hot dog, but knows that a hot dog is something she really shouldn't eat. So, to get around the ban on hot dogs, she collects relatively high-quality, low-fat meat scraps and puts them through the standard hot dog-making process; then she eats the product, telling herself, Well, I'm not *actually* eating a hot dog. I'm satisfying my craving for a hot dog, true. And yes, this looks like a hot dog, and it is in fact made just like a hot dog. But see, it's not so bad for me! Consuming high culture in the form of high-pop works much like that. We enjoy the best of both worlds: the content of high culture (sort of-more on this below), with the accessibility of popular culture.

High-pop also appeals to the cultural snob, the smarty-pants, inside us all. We enjoy catching the high-culture references and associations. It makes us feel superior, elite, in the know. We like to imagine that we, a few standard deviations above the norm, "get" the work of high-pop in a way that others must surely not. We cling to this belief despite the fact-which we hide even from ourselves-that when it comes to identifying high-culture references, the bar is actually set pretty low. For example, when a literary work is referred to in high-pop, one generally need not even have read it; it is only necessary to have heard of it. Often one only needs to pretend plausibly that one has heard of it. I invite you to perform a little self-test here. In David Lodge's novel *Changing Places*, professors in an English department play a (disastrous) cocktail party game called *Humiliations*: they name the most canonical work of literature they have never read; the person with the most canonical work wins. Ask yourself that question: What's the most canonical work of literature I have never read? Have I ever-with a colleague, a student, a friend-allowed anyone to maintain the mistaken impression that I am intimately familiar with this work? At least passively, by not going out of my way to admit, "You know, I've actually never read that"? How can anyone not have at least one skeleton of this sort in the closet? And yet we nod and smile knowingly: "Ah yes, James Joyce's *Ulysses*…" High-pop flatters our cultural smugness-even if it's not entirely earned.

Third, high-pop sells because of the way consumers buy. Specifically, those people who do consume works of high culture-or at least, people who see themselves as loving high culture, and who *fully intend, as soon as possible*, to consume more (see the previous paragraph)-tend to buy lots of them. For example, the small percentage of the general public that actually spends ten hours or more per week reading, is the group that buys most of the books. In that way, high culture is like wealth: a tiny segment of the population owns almost everything. People tend to be heavy users or nonusers; there are relatively few users in moderation. So, while the gold mine may be small, it's rich.

These three timeless factors-slummer's guilt, cultural smugness, and in-for-a-penny-in-for-a-pound consumption-guarantee that high-pop will always remain at least somewhat saleable.

The existence and popularity of high-pop reveal, and bank on, the self-contradiction built into our attitudes toward high culture. On the one hand, we lament the fact that high culture isn't very popular-that most of the philistine world just doesn't "get it," and isn't that tragic. On the other hand, we need the same exclusivity we lament, because if everyone were as culturally hyperliterate as we (think we) are, then in what exactly would we excel?

Jasper Fforde's *Thursday Next* novels exemplify the very essence of high-pop. As even their titles suggest, they are absolutely crammed full of high-culture references and general bibliophilia: *The Eyre Affair*, *Lost in a Good Book, The Well of Lost Plots, Something Rotten,* and *Thursday Next: First Among Sequels*. This, in a highly accessible, witty, amusing series of detective novels: high-culture content in popular-culture form.

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Fforde knows his audience: the group described above, who may in fact be highly literate culturally, but who at least want to enjoy feeling so. For that crowd, if one high-literary reference is appealing, than two will be twice as good. Ten will be heaven. So he shoehorns in references to multitudes of canonical British authors: Shakespeare (who functions as shorthand for all respectable English literature), Marlowe, Byron, Coleridge, Wordsworth, the Brontes, Lewis Carroll, Beatrix Potter, Dickens, George Eliot, Milton, Dryden, and many others-in just the first two novels of the series. By the end of the series, it becomes seriously difficult to think of a (British) canonical author whom Fforde has not squeezed in. (In the third book, he

begins to run out of canonical works and authors; he commences running through "the orals," including nursery rhymes.) He panders constantly to readers' professed bibliophilia. Imagine the excitement his readers must feel when they daydream about working in an office like the LiteraTecs', where Thursday Next works:

> The room was like a library from a country home somewhere. It was two stories high, with shelves crammed full of books covering every square inch of wall space. A spiral staircase led to a catwalk which ran around the wall, enabling access to the upper shelves. The middle of the room was open plan with desks laid out much like a library's reading room. Every possible surface and all the floor space were piled high with more books and papers . . . (The Eyre Affair 130)

But then again, if everyone liked high culture, or even its cousin high-pop, where would the snob appeal go? Pleasant as it is to imagine a world in which everyone lives and breathes high culture, if everyone did, then we would no longer stand out. Our perceived superiority: pfft. In an important sense, high culture that is widely popular in the same way that, say, American Idol or Tom Cruise movies are widely popular, is ontologically different; it is not really high culture any more.

This sort of "book porn" permeates the series. But everyone in this readership knows its inherent problem: it's lonely at the top. So Fforde has created a world much like ours in most respects, except, significantly, that everyone is simply mad about canonical literature. Thus he fulfills the fantasy for which we often pine: if only everyone loved high culture as much as we do! For example, in Fforde's world, Shakespeare's Richard III is as popular, and as inspiring of audience participation, as The Rocky Horror Picture Show. People go out to see "R3," as they call it, multiple times per week. Regulars go hundreds or thousands of times. There is no permanent cast: the parts are all played by audience members, who all know all the lines. As in Rocky Horror, there's a long series of gags the audience performs; for example, when Richard limps onstage and opens his mouth to speak, the audience yells, "When is the winter of our discontent?" The actor's answer: "Now is the winter of our discontent…" When Richard says the word "summer," "six hundred people placed sunglasses on and looked up at an imaginary sun" (The Eyre Affair 183). Later in the show, "'I that am rudely stamp'd . . .' muttered Richard, as the audience took its cue and stamped the ground with a crash that reverberated around the auditorium" (184). In Fforde's world, one need not even go to the theater (stage or cinema) to hear Shakespeare performed. In super-busy places such as train stations and airports, one can find and operate a WillSpeak machine. Insert a coin, and inside a little enclosed bubble like a gumball machine, a steel mannequin comes to life and starts spouting a famous soliloquy, gesturing with its little mechanical body.

Not only academics, but everyone in Fforde's world loves literature passionately. Whole societies go door to door, like Jehovah's Witnesses or Mormon missionaries, evangelizing people to believe that Francis Bacon or Christopher Marlowe actually wrote Shakespeare's plays. And rabid fans legally change their names to those of poets by the thousands: "Miltons were, on the whole, the most enthusiastic poet followers. A flick through the London telephone directory would yield about four thousand John Miltons, two thousand William Blakes, a thousand or so Samuel Coleridges, five hundred Percy Shelleys, the same of Wordsworth and Keats, and a handful of Drydens" (106). In Lost in a Good Book, an ordinary sale at a bookstore quickly becomes a bloody free-for-all: the masses literally beat each other senseless for their chance at cut-rate classics.

Furthermore, in Fforde's world, it's not only adults who love high culture. The love begins early:

> [A] couple of young Henry Fielding fanatics were busy swapping bubble-gum cards.
> "I'll swap you one Sophia for an Amelia."
> "Piss off!" replied his friend indignantly. "If you want Sophia you're going to have to give me an Allworthy plus a Tom Jones, as well as the Amelia!"
> His friend, realizing the rarity of a Sophia, reluctantly agreed. (31-32)

We lonely high-culture lovers love to daydream, wistfully, of the day when such a proper state of things might exist.

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Culture can only be "high" if it is perceived to stand "above" other forms of culture. If high culture were really popular, and popular culture were really high, then the categories would no longer be called by those names, because the distinction would no longer exist. In other words, there never can be a world like the one Fforde describes: the moment high culture becomes that popular, and/or popular culture becomes that high, is the same moment in which the desire for the (personal) distinction which originally made us imagine this wonderful highbrow world disappears. The daydream must always remain unfulfilled. High-pop keeps the daydream both alive and unfulfilled-just the way we need it.

These are the complex reasons why high-pop will always flourish. But there are two reasons why high-pop flourishes now specifically: recent changes in the status of art objects, and recent changes in the way business is conducted generally.

Walter Benjamin's concept of the "aura" helps explain the first of these two reasons. In his famous essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," he writes:

> In the case of the art object, a most sensitive nucleus-namely, its authenticity-is interfered with whereas no natural object is vulnerable on that score. The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced. Since the historical testimony rests on the authenticity, the former, too, is jeopardized by reproduction when substantive duration ceases to matter. And what is really jeopardized when the historical testimony is affected is the authority of the object.
>
> One might subsume the eliminated element in the term "aura" and go on to say: that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art. This is a symptomatic process whose significance points beyond the realm of art. One might generalize by saying: the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced. These two processes lead to a tremendous shattering of tradition . . . (221)

In other words: each work of art-of high culture-possesses a special aura of authenticity. It is an original, unique, *physical* object. Copies of that object will never possess the unique importance, authority, and history of the original. In modern times we have perfected techniques for making good copies; consequently, we have destroyed the aura around original works. There is no longer anything sacred about original works of art.

High-pop exists and flourishes now in particular because the cultural conditions are now right for it to exist and flourish. In the last few decades, the processes of mechanical reproduction have made incredible advances, to the point that now we can lay hands on a copy of almost any work of art in the world, almost instantly. In the early 1980s, the VCR gave every household, even non-affluent ones, the ability to watch their own copies of movies on demand. In the 1990s, the DVD player dramatically improved the quality of copies again. The computer and the rise of the Internet in the 1980s and 90s, respectively, conferred the ability to transmit text and visual images quickly, faithfully, and cheaply. Digital cameras, which constantly improved in those decades also, have considerably enabled the process. Consequently, in Benjamin's terms, the aura has virtually disappeared from works of art, in both senses: virtually disappeared, and virtually disappeared.

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This is a fundamental change in the cultural status of art objects. Before the modern disintegration of the aura, art had a quasi-religious aspect, or what Benjamin calls a "cult value" (224). In early human history, reproducing sacred statues or paintings would have constituted sacrilege. But now we feel differently: why in the world should we not copy a work we like? Why should the "work of art remain hidden" (224) when it's essentially just another object, when we can send it all over the globe instantly, and when we can make a buck on it, as well?

Still, even now we can recognize traces of art's original cult value still lingering. In auctions, original paintings

and manuscripts command record high prices. Tourists with cameras perennially form long lines in front of the *Mona Lisa* in the Louvre in Paris; they want proof for their friends that they have stood in the original sacred presence. It's telling in this regard, too, that in Fforde's world, most of the LiteraTecs' time is spent locating and exposing forgeries of literary masterpieces. The main plot of *The Eyre Affair,* for example, revolves around first the original manuscript of Dickens's novel *Martin Chuzzlewit*, and then of course the original manuscript of *Jane Eyre*. Authenticity and the continuing safety of "national treasures" are of the greatest concern. The intensity with which we protect and celebrate the tattered remainder of art's aura points up just how degraded is its state.

This set of circumstances, again, allows high-pop to flourish. We feel few qualms about, say, turning Beethoven's Fifth Symphony into a disco song, produced in the 1970s, called "A Fifth of Beethoven." It doesn't strike us as sacrilegious to transform Dickens's gloomy, last, unfinished novel *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* into a comic musical that invites the audience to vote on whodunnit. High culture is no longer sacred, so why not mess around with it? Why not turn high culture into high-pop? Pre-twentieth-century art is especially useful this way, because most of it is in the public domain. One need not haggle with Charles Dickens, say, for the rights to his work.

The final reason for high-pop's recent success has to do with new economic realities. As a recent New Yorker-article-turned-book shows, the "long tail" is rapidly becoming a viable new model for many kinds of businesses. As Chris Anderson explains in *The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business Is Selling Less of More*, the "blockbuster" has long been the standard product offering and marketing goal. That is, businesses would try to sell millions of copies of a few carefully chosen items. The general public had few choices, and throngs of people would make the same choice. (For example, think of television before the widespread adoption of cable: in each major market, viewers had only PBS and a couple of privately owned channels to choose among.) But now, Anderson argues, the rules are changing radically and quickly. Business such as Amazon.com now use the "long tail" model: instead of selling lots of a few different things, they sell a few of lots of different things. Blockbusters-bajillion-selling books, movies, albums, etc.-are no longer needed or expected. Instead, the plan is to identify and exploit every possible niche in a splintered marketplace-to sell a thousand copies each of a thousand different books rather than a hundred thousand copies each of ten books. (Think of today's highly specialized cable offerings.)

High-pop is just such an exploitable niche. For reasons discussed above, high-pop will never be the most popular pop culture. But its consumers will always be a distinct, attractive, and relatively affluent niche in the marketplace. That is why high-pop does big business now specifically. It will continue to do so until and unless our fragmented, computer-saturated, hypercapitalist way of life changes radically.

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