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INTERACTION BETWEEN POPULAR AND ELITIST CULTURE: REINTERPRETING THE CLASSICS IN THE POST-MODERN ERA

Inna Gurova,

*Candidate of Historical Sciences, Associate Professor,
Associate Professor at the Department of Ukrainian Philosophy and Culture,
Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv (Kyiv, Ukraine)
ORCID ID: 0000-0002-9709-7405
inna_hurova@knu.ua*

Abstract. This article explores the reciprocal influence between contemporary high (elite) culture and popular culture understood not as mass culture, but as participatory and interpretive cultural practice. The study aims to analyse how meaning-making activities of non-professional audiences and forms of cultural co-creation contribute to the transformation of high culture in the twenty-first century. Methodologically, the research is grounded in an interpretive framework based on Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model, combined with comparative and semiotic analysis and supported by case studies of contemporary Ukrainian artistic projects (Nova Opera, Ukraine WOW). The findings demonstrate that contemporary high culture increasingly operates as an open system of meanings, shaped by audience interpretation, everyday aesthetics, and intergenre hybridisation. It is argued that engagement with popular participatory practices does not lead to the simplification of high culture but rather enhances its communicative flexibility and expands its cultural and symbolic productivity.

Key words: high culture, popular culture (non-mass), meaning-making, participatory practices, cultural co-creation, encoding/decoding, open system of meanings.

Introduction. The culture of the postmodern era is characterised by openness, polyphony, and the multilevel nature of meanings that emerge through continuous dialogue between the creator and the audience. The boundary between «high» and «popular» culture is no longer rigid; instead, it has transformed into a space of interaction, reinterpretation, and recoding of meanings. Whereas in previous historical periods popular culture primarily relied on the simplified reproduction of high cultural models, today it functions as an interpretive environment in which audiences not only consume cultural texts but also reinterpret, recode, and transform them. At the same time, high culture increasingly integrates techniques, forms, and symbolism associated with popular culture, which significantly alters its communicative nature.

Contemporary cultural studies demonstrate that high (elite) culture and popular culture exist in a dynamic relationship of mutual influence. Popular culture not only adapts high cultural codes but also contributes to their transformation by generating new meanings through audience participation and cultural co-creation (Jenkins, 2007a; Jenkins, 2007b; Storey, 2018). Conversely, high cultural practices, through interaction with popular culture, acquire new expressive forms adapted to contemporary social and media contexts (Stanislavska, 2009; Gutierrez-Navratil, Perez-Villadoniga, & Prieto-Rodriguez, 2024; Werber, Schirra, & Schmidt, 2023). In this context, particular attention should be paid to the ways in which audiences participate in meaning-making by drawing on their own experience to interpret complex cultural codes, as well as to how high culture, through engagement with popular culture, adapts to new modes of communication.

The scientific problem addressed in this study lies in the insufficient examination of contemporary mechanisms of this mutual influence, particularly within the context of Ukrainian culture. Specifically, it remains unclear how popular culture functions as a space for the recoding of high cultural codes and how this process contributes to the renewal of high culture.

The aim of the article is to conduct a comparative analysis of contemporary high (elite) and popular culture and to clarify how meanings are formed, transmitted, and reinterpreted within the contemporary cultural space, as well as how the interpretive activity of audiences influences the renewal of high cultural forms.

Objectives of the Study. To analyse contemporary theoretical approaches to understanding culture as an open system of meanings (Geertz, Barthes, Baudrillard, Bauman, Hall). To elucidate the essence of Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model and its applicability to the analysis of contemporary cultural processes. To identify how popular culture reinterprets high cultural models and how high culture adopts communicative strategies characteristic of popular culture.

Materials and Methods. The research material consists of theoretical works that conceptualise culture as an open system of meanings and communication (Hall, 1980; Geertz, 1973; Barthes, 1977, 1984; Baudrillard, 1994; Bauman, 2000), as well as contemporary Ukrainian interdisciplinary artistic practices (Nova Opera, Ukraine WOW) documented in scholarly publications, analytical reviews, and cultural studies research.

To address the stated research problem and achieve the aim of the study, an interpretive method grounded in Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model (Hall, 1980) was employed. This approach made it possible to analyse the processes of reinterpretation of high-cultural meanings within popular and participatory forms of creativity, as well as the role of the audience as an active co-creator of cultural meaning. The comparative method was used to juxtapose the characteristics of high and popular culture in contemporary artistic practices in order to identify the directions of their mutual influence and the transformation of the traditional hierarchy between the "elite" and the "non-elite." Semiotic analysis enabled the examination of artistic projects as cultural texts in which the hybridisation of sign systems, styles, and modes of expression takes place. A case study approach was applied to analyse specific Ukrainian examples illustrating the transformation of high culture under the influence of popular practices and audience co-creation. General scientific methods of analysis, synthesis, and generalisation were used to systematise theoretical approaches and formulate general conclusions regarding the contemporary model of interaction between high and popular culture.

Theoretical Framework of the Study. Zygmunt Bauman (2000) emphasised that in the condition of «liquid modernity» no cultural content retains a fixed form; instead, it is constantly changing and adapting to the expectations of audiences. In this sense, popular culture functions not only as a «bridge» between complexity and everyday experience, but also as a laboratory for new forms of symbolic experience. At the same time, this process has a reciprocal character. High culture increasingly integrates elements of popular aesthetics not merely as quotations or allusions, but as fully developed artistic strategies. This tendency is manifested in the emergence of "hybrid forms," which combine academic aesthetics with elements of mass culture – from the use of video game mechanics in contemporary theatre to the quotation of pop music in symphonic works.

As observed by Roland Barthes (1977, 1984), such strategies reveal the principle of intertextuality – the ongoing dialogue between texts belonging to different cultural levels – which makes the complete autonomy of any cultural form impossible. Within this interaction, the role of the interpreter becomes central, as the interpreter simultaneously occupies the positions of consumer and creator. It is important to emphasise that popular culture is not the cultural product itself (a film or a song), but rather what consumers (viewers, listeners) do with that product: recoding, re-signification, and the attribution of personal meanings. In the contemporary digital environment, this process acquires new dimensions, as users create memes, fan videos, and remakes that represent individual interpretations of works of high culture. In this way, popular culture becomes a space of co-creation in which the boundaries between «creator» and «audience» are increasingly blurred.

From the perspective of Jean Baudrillard (1994), the symbolic interaction between high and popular culture produces a simulacral field in which authenticity loses its privileged status. The copy

may possess no less significance than the original, since its value is determined not by its source but by its capacity to generate emotional and communicative effects. This approach makes it possible to speak of a new aesthetics of interpretation, in which cultural production becomes an act of collective participation rather than the outcome of individual genius alone.

The British cultural theorist Stuart Hall, in *Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse*, formulated one of the key models of contemporary cultural theory, arguing that communication is not a linear process of message transmission but a complex structure of encoding and decoding in which meaning is produced through audience interpretation rather than solely at the moment of production (Hall, 1993).

«Decoding is not the mirror image of encoding; the message is never transparent» (Hall, 1993:514).

This implies that any cultural product may be interpreted in different ways – dominant, negotiated, or oppositional – depending on the experience, social context, and cultural mentality of the consumer. Within the context of contemporary culture, this theory acquires particular relevance, as popular culture functions not merely as a sphere of consumption but as a space for the production of new meanings.

The further development of Stuart Hall's ideas can be observed in contemporary media studies, where particular emphasis is placed on the role of the active audience. Thus, Y. Li et al. (2023) analyse content on the YouTube platform and demonstrate how users, when engaging with aestheticised videos of everyday life, construct their own interpretations of cultural codes, thereby transforming traditional notions of beauty, nature, and harmony.

«Audiences are not passive recipients but active meaning-makers who negotiate cultural and aesthetic values through their comments and remixes» (Li et al., 2023 : 62).

In this sense, popular culture emerges not as a lower level of culture, but as a communicative form in which ordinary individuals participate in the «decoding» of high cultural meanings, adapting them to their own lifeworlds.

In contemporary cultural theory, popular culture is increasingly understood not as mass-produced or low-quality culture, but as a form that adapts high cultural codes while creating a space for co-creation and active audience participation. Drawing on the encoding/decoding framework (Hall, 1993), it can be argued that audiences actively decode products of high culture, attributing new meanings to them and integrating these meanings into everyday life.

The understanding of culture as an open system of meanings (Bauman, 2000; Geertz, 1973) reveals the dynamic nature of cultural processes, in which traditional codes of high culture are subject to continuous interpretation and transformation under the influence of popular practices. Popular culture thus becomes an environment in which traditional meanings are reactivated and adapted for contemporary audiences seeking both aesthetic and transcendent experiences within everyday life.

Participation and co-creation in contemporary culture highlight the active role of audiences (Jenkins, 2007a; Jenkins, 2007b), who are no longer passive consumers but co-producers of meaning. As Jenkins notes:

«Media scholars draw an important distinction between mass culture and popular culture. Mass culture is mass-produced for a broad audience. Popular culture is what happens to those cultural artifacts at the point of consumption, when we draw on them as resources in our everyday lives. Many scholars have focused on how the same mass-produced artifacts take on different meanings for different consumers» (Jenkins, 2007b : 65).

Research by N. Werber et al. (2023) indicates that the contemporary era increasingly blurs the boundary between «high» and «low» culture, shifting this opposition into the sphere of aesthetic interaction. High culture more frequently incorporates elements of popular genres – mass media, visual clichés, and digital formats – not as a compromise, but as a strategy for expanding its audience.

«The distinction between high and low culture becomes a matter of perspective rather than hierarchy» (Werber, Schirra, & Schmidt, 2023 : 5).

Thus, popular culture functions not only as an adapter of high culture but also as an active space for the renewal and transformation of cultural codes.

Current Practices of Interaction between High and Popular Culture in the Global Cultural Space

The contemporary cultural process is characterized by an intensive interaction between elite (high) and popular culture. On the one hand, high culture increasingly integrates elements of popular and amateur practices, using them as a means of renewing form and strengthening communication with audiences. On the other hand, popular culture itself increasingly becomes a platform for representing aesthetic and philosophical meanings traditionally associated with classical art. Contemporary scholars describe such forms through the concept of *classical crossover*, understood as an intergeneric combination that creates new modes of representing classical heritage without diminishing its semantic depth (Prickett, 2013). This trend demonstrates a growing interest in dialogue between high and popular cultural levels as a way of expanding cultural communication.

One of the most illustrative examples of the interaction between elite and popular culture can be observed in contemporary opera. In particular, the work of Polish countertenor Jakub Józef Orliński is notable not only for his performances of Baroque arias but also for the active incorporation of popular dance forms, especially breaking, into his stage performances (Lech, 31 October 2025). In numerous interviews, the singer emphasizes that combining classical opera with street hip-hop movement represents a form of «re-encoding» the operatic genre – not its simplification, but an expansion of its aesthetic field. This case illustrates how high culture creatively appropriates forms originating in popular culture. Within Stuart Hall's encoding–decoding model (Hall, 1993), Orliński can be seen as re-encoding a «high» cultural message and adapting it to the perceptual horizon of the contemporary viewer, who experiences music not only aurally but also as a bodily and visual phenomenon. As John Storey notes,

«the status of opera as the pinnacle of high culture is changing as opera increasingly becomes part of everyday cultural life... Opera performers are increasingly marketed in ways similar to pop stars» (Storey, 2003 : 74-75).

Thus, opera undergoes a participatory transformation of perception: it ceases to be an exclusively elitist event and becomes accessible to broader audiences.

Another expressive example is the integration of academic ballet with street dance forms. Institutions such as the Dutch National Ballet and the Royal Ballet have produced performances in which classical ballet technique is combined with elements of breaking, popping, or locking. Major ballet companies increasingly invite choreographers from the hip-hop scene or stage productions that merge classical technique with street dance vocabulary. A notable example is the collaboration between ISH Dance Collective and the Dutch National Ballet, as well as the involvement of choreographers who introduce hip-hop aesthetics into the programs of the Royal Ballet and the New York City Ballet (Winship, 2026). In addition, Sadler's Wells has launched educational programs in hip-hop theatre and annually hosts *Breakin' Convention*, the largest hip-hop dance and theatre festival in the United Kingdom (Schnater, 25 May 2023). These practices demonstrate institutional legitimation – the recognition of street practices as acceptable material for classical stages. In this case, high cultural institutions do not merely transmit amateur elements but actively contribute to forming a new canon. According to Zygmunt Bauman (2000), this reflects a shift from stable hierarchical cultural structures to fluid ones characterized by the interpenetration of meanings. Contemporary ballet thus functions as an open system that responds to cultural impulses «from below» while simultaneously producing new aesthetic experiences.

The tendency toward synthesizing high and popular culture is also evident in contemporary musical practices. Symphony orchestras increasingly collaborate with DJs and electronic producers, creating remixes of classical works through «orchestra + DJ» concerts, EDM-orchestral projects, and popular albums that reinterpret classical themes. Young DJs remixing Mozart, Vivaldi, Bach, or Beethoven attract large audiences on social media and fill concert halls (Garcia, 21 February 2024). Projects such as *BBC Symphony Orchestra meets DJ Yoda* or *Metropole Orkest x Skrillex* have received wide media attention as attempts to rethink classical music canons through contemporary sound technologies. This large-scale wave of *classical crossover* and remix practices demonstrates how professional musical institutions adopt productive techniques from popular music – electronic sound and remixing – in pursuit of new audiences and renewed semantic resonance.

Another relevant example is the broadcasting of opera and theatre performances in cinemas (Radigales, 2013), which enables audiences not only to consume high cultural products but also to decode them through personal experience shaped by comfort, collective viewing, and digital environments. Gutierrez-Navratil, Perez-Villadoniga, and Prieto-Rodriguez observe that opera has «undergone dramatic changes as a form of mass entertainment due to cinema and the development of social networks, websites, forums, chats, and blogs provided by opera houses and opera-supporting organizations» (Gutierrez-Navratil, Perez-Villadoniga & Prieto-Rodriguez, 2024:160).

Through such hybridization—combining music, visual imagery, and new technologies – opera ceases to be an art for the selected few and becomes a source of creative interpretation for a wide audience.

Visual arts likewise demonstrate a tendency to incorporate amateur practices into the sphere of high culture. The Metropolitan Museum of Art (USA), for example, organized the exhibition *Fanmania* (2021), dedicated to fan art as a contemporary form of dialogue between artists and audiences. In Ukraine, similar initiatives have been implemented by regional contemporary art museums that involve visitors in shaping exhibitions (ContCulture, 2022). Within Henry Jenkins's concept of participatory culture (Jenkins, 2007a), fan art functions as a form of active meaning production in which audiences not only interpret works but also create new cultural products and meanings. By integrating such practices, high culture develops an open dialogical model aligned with the principles of cultural communication in the digital age.

Overall, these examples demonstrate that contemporary high culture not only preserves its autonomy but also actively renews itself through engagement with popular forms of creativity. The incorporation of amateur and street practices represents not merely genre mixing, but a rethinking of the very nature of cultural production. By adopting the language of popular culture, high culture expands its communicative capacity, while popular culture, entering professional formats, enhances the level of aesthetic reflection.

The Ukrainian Context of Co-Creation: Integrating Popular Practices into High Culture

In the cultural space of twenty-first-century Ukraine, a noticeable tendency toward the blurring of boundaries between «high» and «popular» culture can also be observed. This phenomenon is related not only to global processes of cultural hybridization but also to an internal need within Ukrainian culture for dialogue and co-creation. In this context, it is important to examine cases in which high culture actively incorporates elements of popular creativity, amateur initiatives, or practices of mass participation that transform the very structure of cultural production. K. Stanislavska has explored the specific features of opera functioning in cinematic and television formats. She analyzes how opera, historically a stage-based art form, is transformed under the influence of screen arts, contributing to its democratization and popularization. The author records a fundamental change in the social status of opera: in the seventeenth century it functioned as an aristocratic courtly entertainment, whereas in the twenty-first century opera, mediated through the screen, becomes accessible to mass audiences (Stanislavska, 2009). In this sense, high culture, while preserving its aesthetic complexity and profes-

sional quality, moves beyond traditional elitism and opens itself to the energy of collective creativity rooted in popular culture and everyday experience.

One of the most expressive examples of contemporary Ukrainian synthetic art is the activity of the Nova Opera formation – an independent musical collective that combines elements of classical opera with electronic music, video art, post-minimalism, and contemporary dance techniques. As stated on the collective's official website, «the musicians create new synthetic genres, experiment with unconventional musical and stage solutions, combining the academic tradition with VJ technologies and live electronics» (Nova Opera, n.d.). In projects such as *ARK*, *IYOV*, *GAZ*, and *Opera Lingua*, the religious and philosophical depth of classical music is combined with the energy of performance, video installations, and digital sound. These practices do not undermine high culture; rather, they reveal its potential for new forms of dialogue between professional art and contemporary audiences.

A similar logic of openness is demonstrated by the interdisciplinary media art project *ARTEFACT*, which integrates digital art, music, VR technologies, VJ installations, and elements of social activism. In the exhibition project *ARTEFACT: Chernobyl 33*, the aesthetics of contemporary technologies are combined with cultural memory and scholarly reflection on catastrophe, creating a space in which the viewer becomes a participant in the interpretation of meanings (ARTEFACT, 2019). Such practices bring the audience closer to the role of interpreter and co-creator – what Stuart Hall (1993) described as the process of «decoding» a cultural message, in which audiences assign their own meanings to the work.

Interactivity and participation have become defining features of contemporary Ukrainian art. In the field of theatre, participatory practices are actively implemented by independent stages. The *PostPlay* Theatre and *Wild Theatre (Dykyi Teatr)* experiment with interactive performance formats in which spectators do not merely observe but help shape the outcome of the performance or participate in content creation through social media. According to Yu. Moroziuk and L. Stepanenko, the contemporary Ukrainian art scene increasingly demonstrates not hierarchical but horizontal communication between creators and consumers, forming a new type of cultural environment – one of co-creation, where «interactivity becomes a key element of communication» (Moroziuk & Stepanenko, 2025:135).

An important direction in the popularization of high art has been the activity of Ukrainian cultural institutions that integrate digital technologies. The exhibition project *Ukraine WOW (2025–2026)*, for example, employed interactive formats – workshops, virtual tours, and VR/AR exhibits – that enhanced memorability and motivation for learning (Varenysia, 4 December 2025). Within the project, visitors were offered a participatory experience: through augmented reality, they could interact with artworks and become co-authors of meaning, reproducing a type of cultural interaction characteristic of popular culture. As O. Marynych notes, the contemporary cultural space generates diverse ideas and transmits artistic meanings that sustain traditions, reactualize values, or introduce new meanings that guide Ukrainian society toward awareness of its cultural-historical roots and contribute to the formation of national consciousness (Marynych, 2023). Contemporary Ukrainian art thus demonstrates a shift from hierarchical relations toward partnership-based interaction between artists and audiences, resulting in a cultural environment grounded in the principles of co-creation.

Giovanni Ercolani, in his study *The Maidan Museum: Preserving the Spirit of Maidan. Art, Identity, and the Revolution of Dignity*, demonstrates that the museum functions not only as a repository of materials but also as an active space for shaping civic consciousness. The author introduces the concept of *anthropological security*, whereby visitors, upon entering the museum, engage not merely in observation but in an act of self-identification. They must «decode» artistic artifacts – painted helmets and shields – not as debris or mere historical evidence but as sacred symbols of dignity. In this way, the visitor becomes a co-author of the «myth» (in the positive scholarly sense, as a value-based foundation of the nation). Participation occurs at the moment when the viewer mentally connects personal experience with the collective narrative of the exhibition, transforming a «history of revolt» into a «history of the birth of identity» (Ercolani, 2023). Without this active internal work on the part

of the visitor, the museum remains merely a storage space; it is the visitor's interpretation that effectively «activates» the museum.

Thus, contemporary popular culture functions as a space of adaptation, re-encoding, and co-creation that influences high culture and stimulates its renewal. The mechanisms of interaction include digital platforms, interactive formats, performativity, and everyday practices, all of which demonstrate the close interconnection between elite and popular cultural codes.

Conclusion. The comparative analysis of contemporary high (elite) culture and popular culture has demonstrated that their relationship in the present cultural landscape is no longer structured by rigid opposition or hierarchy. Instead, both cultural domains increasingly function within a shared communicative space in which meanings are continuously formed, transmitted, and reinterpreted. High culture, traditionally associated with professional authorship and institutional authority, now operates as an open system of meanings that is receptive to audience interpretation and participatory engagement.

The study has shown that popular culture, understood not as mass-produced entertainment but as interpretive and co-creative practice, plays a significant role in the renewal of high cultural forms. Through processes of decoding, recontextualisation, and symbolic appropriation, non-professional audiences actively contribute to the reconfiguration of aesthetic languages, narrative structures, and modes of presentation within high culture. This interaction results in hybrid cultural forms that preserve artistic complexity while enhancing communicative accessibility and relevance.

It is concluded that interpretive activity and participatory practices do not lead to the simplification or devaluation of high culture. On the contrary, they expand its meaning-making potential, reinforce its social embeddedness, and enable its adaptation to contemporary cultural conditions. The reciprocal influence between high and popular culture thus represents a key mechanism of cultural dynamism in the twenty-first century.

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