

POPULAR CULTURE AS A MEDIATOR: MECHANISMS OF RECODING AND SYMBOLIC CAPITAL EXCHANGE IN THE ERA OF METAMODERNISM

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Summary

The article explores the dynamics of interaction between high (elite) and popular culture in the era of metamodernism. The author moves away from the traditional dichotomy and hierarchical opposition of these spheres, viewing them as a convergent system with a constant exchange of meanings. The methodological basis of the study relies on the distinction between "mass culture" (an industrial product) and "popular culture" (grassroots creativity, "textual poaching" according to M. de Certeau), which allows for an analysis of audience agency. The paper substantiates the thesis that popular culture performs a key mediating function: it acts as a "translator," recoding the complex aesthetic codes of high art into the language of everyday experience. Using examples from visual art (immersive exhibitions, the street art phenomenon, internet memes), the article illustrates processes of double appropriation: elite culture adopts the communicative strategies of popular culture to expand its audience, while popular culture appropriates the symbolic capital of high art for its own legitimation. It is concluded that such interaction ensures the actualization of cultural memory and the survival of classical heritage in the digital age.

Key words: high culture, popular culture, mediation, symbolic capital, recoding, textual poaching, artification, visual art.

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1. Introduction

Relevance and Context. The contemporary cultural landscape is characterized by a radical blurring of hierarchical boundaries. The traditional vertical model of culture, where "high" (elite) art was opposed to "low" art as a carrier of truth versus a surrogate, is losing its explanatory power. In this research, we interpret the cultural context through the lens of metamodernism, defined by Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker as a "structure of feeling" characterized by an oscillation between modern enthusiasm and postmodern irony (*Vermeulen & van den Akker, 2010: 2*). This theoretical framework is crucial because it explains the current refusal of binary oppositions: culture is no longer "either high or low," but exists in a state of constant fluctuation. Elite culture, striving to maintain relevance, turns to the toolkit of pop culture (irony, play), while the latter appropriates the symbolic capital of the "high" (sincerity, aura).

Scientific Novelty. The novelty of this research lies in the refusal to view popular culture solely as a product of industrial simplification. For the first time, the concept of the mediation function of popular culture is substantiated; it acts as a communicative interface, recoding complex aesthetic meanings of high art into the language of everyday experience, thereby ensuring their accessibility and survival in the digital age.

Aim of the Research. The main aim of the article is to analyze the mechanisms of interaction and mutual exchange of capitals between high and popular cultures, as well as to determine the role of popular culture as a key mediator of meanings in the contemporary socio-cultural space.

Research Tasks. In accordance with the set aim, the following tasks are addressed in the work. To theoretically distinguish between the concepts of "mass culture" (as a product of industry) and "popular culture" (as grassroots creativity), relying on the methodology of *Cultural Studies*. To investigate the mechanisms of "textual poaching" and bricolage, through which the audience appropriates and reinterprets elite cultural codes. To analyze specific practices of convergence in visual art (immersive exhibitions, street art, internet memes) as forms of double exchange of symbolic and communicative capitals. To determine the sociocultural consequences of this process for the preservation of cultural memory and the legitimation of new art forms.

Methodology. The methodological basis of the work is an interdisciplinary approach. The study employs: *Sociocultural analysis* – to examine the interaction of cultures as an exchange of symbolic capital (P. Bourdieu). *Semiotic method* – to analyze the processes of recoding ("translating") meanings between different sign systems (U. Eco). *Methodology of everyday life* – to study audience agency and consumption tactics (M. de Certeau). *Case study* – for the empirical analysis of immersive exhibition phenomena, Banksy's works, and digital folklore.

2. Theoretical and methodological foundations

The methodological lens of this research is based on an interdisciplinary approach combining the tools of *Cultural Studies*, social semiotics, and the sociology of culture. The rejection of an essentialist understanding of culture (as a fixed set of masterpieces) in favor of a processual approach allows us to view the interaction of "high" and "popular" as a dynamic exchange of meanings, rather than a zero-sum game.

Fundamental to our analysis is the distinction between the concepts of "mass culture" and "popular culture," established by representatives of the Birmingham School. If mass culture is defined by economic indicators, popular culture is an act of creativity. John Fiske clearly formulates this distinction:

"Popular culture is made by the people, not produced by the culture industry. All the culture industry can do is produce a repertoire of texts or cultural resources for the various formations of the people to use or reject" (Fiske, 1989: 24).

According to the concept of "semiotic democracy," the audience actively processes mass media texts. This idea is deepened by the theory of Michel de Certeau, who introduces the metaphor of "textual poaching". Users "encroach" upon the territory of elite property and snatch fragments for their own use. De Certeau describes this poetically and aptly:

"Readers are travellers; they move across lands belonging to someone else, like nomads poaching their way across fields they did not write, despoiling the wealth of Egypt to enjoy it themselves" (de Certeau, 1984: 174).

To analyze hierarchical relations, we turn to the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu. High culture possesses legitimacy, while popular culture possesses mass reach. Bourdieu notes that our preferences are a marker of social status:

"Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make" (Bourdieu, 1984: 6).

However, modern convergence testifies to interdependence. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, in their work on transgression, prove that elite culture is psychologically dependent on the "low":

"The 'top' attempts to reject and eliminate the 'bottom' for reasons of prestige and status, only to discover, not only that it is in some way frequently dependent upon that low-Other... but also that the top includes that low symbolically, as a primary eroticized constituent of its own fantasy life" (Stallybrass & White, 1986: 5).

The technical process of translating meanings occurs through bricolage – the recombination of existing objects. Dick Hebdige describes this process using the example of subcultures, but it is universal for all pop culture:

"The most mundane objects... were taken over [by the subculture] and converted into icons of the new style... Together they form a 'bricolage', a new chaotic whole" (Hebdige, 1979: 103).

In the digital age, this process is amplified by cultural convergence. Henry Jenkins emphasizes that this is not purely a technological process:

"Convergence does not occur through media appliances, however sophisticated they may become. Convergence occurs within the brains of individual consumers and through their social interactions with others" (Jenkins, 2006: 3).

3. The expansion of the popular: transformation of elite culture forms

Modern institutions of high culture (museums, galleries, opera houses) find themselves in a situation of fierce competition for audience attention in the "experience economy." To avoid marginalization, elite culture resorts to borrowing the communicative strategies of popular culture. This process can be characterized as a transition from the paradigm of *distanced contemplation* to the paradigm of *immersive participation*.

Technological Attraction: From the "Aura" of the Original to Immersive Experience. The traditional model of the "White Cube," which dictates distance, gives way to sensory saturation. A vivid example is the phenomenon of immersive exhibitions *Van Gogh Alive* (Pfeifer, 2021). Van Gogh's immersive exhibitions, spanning Europe, North America, Asia, and the Middle East, have transformed art into a popular phenomenon, attracting millions of visitors, including those who had no previous interest in painting. In these projects, static canvases become a dynamic environment.

"Art-themed immersive exhibitions such as the Van Gogh immersive experiences exemplify habits of digitally-mediated, 24/7 immersive attention and consumption in art and in everyday life" (Mondloch, 2022).

From a theoretical perspective, a transformation of the "aura" (according to W. Benjamin) occurs here. Immersive exhibitions create a *new, technogenic aura*, offering a unique bodily experience. Elite content is "packaged" in a popular form (light show), which lowers the entry threshold for the mass viewer.

"Instagrammization" and Algorithmic Aesthetics: The Museum as a Phygital Space. Another vector of influence is the fundamental restructuring of museum space under the dictates of the visual logic of social networks. Lev Manovich defines this phenomenon as "Instagramism" – a new aesthetic form where composition, lighting, and space design are subordinated to news feed algorithms (Manovich, 2017: 45). This forces institutions of high culture to transition to a "phygital" strategy – a combination of physical and digital experience. A striking example is the work of Yayoi Kusama, particularly her "Infinity Mirror Rooms." These installations are high conceptual art that, however, perfectly resonates with selfie culture by allowing the viewer to place

their own body at the center of the artwork (Yoshitake, 2017: 21). Researcher Kylie Budge notes that taking photos in a museum is not an act of vandalism, but a form of "visual colonization": the visitor appropriates the elite object, inscribing it into their own digital narrative (Budge, 2017: 67). Museums respond to this institutionally: for instance, the Louvre developed a special visitor trail following the release of Beyoncé and Jay-Z's music video "Ape\$hit," which led to a record number of visitors (Grant & Kee, 2020: 15). High art agrees to fragmentation in exchange for virality, recognizing that in the modern world, invisibility on the web equals non-existence.

4. The legitimation of the popular: appropriation of symbolic capital

The movement of popular culture into the sphere of the high is dictated by a striving for status. The process of filling the deficit of symbolic capital can be defined as "artification."

From Vandalism to Auction: The Institutionalization of Street Art. The most striking example is the evolution of street art. The case of the artist *Banksy* demonstrates a complex dialectic: his stencil works end up in elite auction houses. The incident with the self-destruction of the painting "Girl with Balloon" (*Love Is In The Bin*, 2018) during the auction illustrates the moment of collision of two logics. Banksy performed an act of institutional critique, but the market appropriated this gesture, transforming the destroyed painting into a new, even more expensive masterpiece. This confirms Stallybrass and White's thesis that high culture feeds on transgression, turning the "filth" of the street into the "gold" of the gallery.

Blurring Boundaries: KAWS and the "Art Toy" Phenomenon. Kaws figures are a contemporary phenomenon in the context of pop culture, street art, and collectible sculpture, created by Brian Donnelly (Kaws), combining images of famous characters with urban aesthetics (Meyer, 2024). Their appeal lies in the combination of art and commerce, limited editions and influence on pop culture through collaborations with brands, transforming the figures into cultural icons and collectibles. The evolution from graffiti to various media has led to global recognition and a significant impact on contemporary art, fashion and the auction network. Artist KAWS works at the intersection of vinyl toy design and monumental sculpture. Transferring the image from cheap plastic to bronze and collaborating with elite brands allow popular culture to appropriate the status of "high art." Popular culture proves its ability to create objects of investment value.

5. Popular culture as a mediator: recoding meanings

The central thesis of the research is that popular culture takes on the function of the main mediator. It fills the communicative gap between elite art and the experience of the average person.

The Mechanics of "Poaching": Desacralization as a Method of Communication. The audience's interaction with masterpieces is an act of *productive consumption*. The internet phenomenon "Classical Art Memes" demonstrates how the visual form of high art is combined with text about everyday problems. The religious plot is ignored, and the expression of suffering is used to illustrate the emotional state of a modern person (deadlines, fatigue). The "domestication" of the elite occurs: the distant becomes close.

Popular Culture as an Interface to the "Cultural Archive". Popular culture acts as an interface, lowering the "entry threshold." Umberto Eco aptly noted regarding the role of mass genres:

"The comic strip... operates as a mechanism of mediation, reducing the complex to the simple, the tragic to the grotesque" (Eco, 1994: 30).

This is the only way to actualize cultural memory. Popular culture transforms museum exhibits from "dead objects" into "living" ones.

Recoding Values. When popular culture appropriates high culture, it "grounds" it. The aesthetic object is transformed into a tool for social adaptation and psychological relief, validating the viewer's personal experience.

6. Conclusions

The conducted research allows for the following conclusions:

Symbiosis instead of Conflict. In the metamodern era, "high" and "popular" form a single convergent ecosystem with constant osmosis. **Exchange of Capitals.** Elite culture borrows *communicative strategies* (immersiveness) and *audience*, while popular culture appropriates *symbolic capital* and *status*. **Mediation.** Popular culture is a necessary mediator. Through the mechanisms of "textual poaching" and bricolage, it recodes complex aesthetic codes, making them suitable for communication "here and now." **Vitality.** Processes of "instagrammization" and memetization are mechanisms for the actualization of cultural memory, preventing the transformation of high art into a dead archive.

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