

*The Myth of Popular
Culture
from Dante to Dylan*

Perry Meisel

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Praise for *The Myth of Popular Culture*

“Perry Meisel’s study of popular culture is a surprising enhancement of received opinion and common wisdom on that vexed subject.

Moving from Shakespeare through Freud on to Bobby Dylan would seem something of a descent, yet Meisel provides a perspective that has its own descriptive justice.

Even if I am not wholly persuaded that Dylan’s ultimate importance is as sublime as Meisel ventures it to be, I am given much here to intrigue me.”

Harold Bloom

“Perry Meisel has written a boundary-smashing critique of the myth that popular culture is distinct from and inferior to the fine arts ... Many critics have traced the demotic roots of American musical, literary, and visual style, but not with the freewheeling familiarity that Meisel brings to the task. His broad range of knowledge enables him to move fluently from form to form, and to dig beneath the self-conscious democratic ideology of American literary rhetoric. Few critics fully comprehend the implications of this shift in the way we experience culture. Meisel does – and *The Myth of Popular Culture* is as contemporary as it is contentious. It is part of what it describes.”

*Richard Goldstein, Hunter College of the City
University of New York*

“*The Myth of Popular Culture* is simply brilliant. Turning Adorno’s criticism of pop as non-dialectical against itself by showing that pop is indeed dialectical has never been done before and is in itself a major accomplishment. But Meisel has gone further in writing a book that is stunning in its originality, breadth, erudition, and in its understanding of the transatlantic evolution of popular culture.”

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from Dante to Dylan*

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Preface: The Resistance to Pop

The Myth of Popular Culture is a history of popular culture, a theory of popular culture, and a critical account of three popular traditions – the American novel, Hollywood, and British and American rock music. It concludes with a historical and critical account of Bob Dylan, the figure who best summarizes “popular culture” and who, in the process, vividly erases the distinction between “high” and “low.” America’s historical anxieties about British influence provide this book with its context, and the history that rock music resolves. An anxiety about British culture motivates American culture as a whole and underwrites the historical creation of American pop from the canons of British art. When the British Invasion reverses this process in the early 1960s by canonizing American pop, particularly the blues and rock and roll, this history comes full circle. It completes a dialectic more than 500 years in the making, from Dante to Dylan.

Part I, “The Battle of the Brows,” is a history of high and low from Dante to Theodor Adorno. It rebuts the durable belief that, in Adorno’s words (1962), “high” culture is “dialectical” and “pop” is not by showing that “pop” is also “dialectical.” It is Adorno who most readily exemplifies the resistance to pop, and who serves as its historical center more clearly than does any other thinker. He gives us the reasons for it. The difference between high and low art, says Adorno, is the difference between a dialectical art in conversation with its past – this is “high” culture – and a non-dialectical or formulaic artisanship – this is “pop.” Adorno’s contention and its mazy error are this book’s own dialectical source. *The Myth of Popular Culture* proposes to replace

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Adorno's position with a more responsible history, theory, and critical account of the "popular." Adorno challenges us to hold popular culture to the standard of dialectic. It is a more useful challenge than holding it to the standard of a worker's art, as do other Western Marxist critics, chief among them Stuart Hall. For all of his sensitivity to later changes in Marxist method, particularly the taking of ideology more seriously (1980), Hall's position never really changes, particularly the distinction between "folk" and "popular" art (Hall and Whannel, 1964). Hall devalues pop unless it is regarded as a form of insurgency on the part of a suppressed proletariat. Pop is neither dialectical nor non-dialectical. To the extent that it is good, it is a guerilla art; to the extent that it is not, it is neither here nor there. Adorno, even negatively, is more helpful in constructing a positive history of pop.

The myth of pop culture – Adorno's myth – is that it is not dialectical. The truth is that it is. Like high art, pop, too – *contra* Adorno – has a conversation both with its sources, which it revises and transforms, and with cultural authority as a whole, which it also revises and transforms. In Part II, "Dialectics of Pop," I enlist three representative pop traditions to prove this contention: the American novel, from its popular origins in James Fenimore Cooper and Mark Twain to its popular zenith in the capacious humility of Raymond Chandler; the history of Hollywood; and the history of jazz and rock music. Each tradition has a conversation with a different set of sources, and a different way of addressing cultural authority. American fiction converses with cultural authority through its conversation with the literary past, particularly the history of English poetry and politics. Hollywood converses with cultural authority through its conversation with the history of the image, particularly the photographic image and the history of silent film. Rock and roll converses with cultural authority through its conversation with the history of music, particularly jazz, which does the same through its conversation with classical music. My history of the American novel shows how plainly American fiction thematizes this transformation and the anxieties that accompany it. My history of Hollywood includes a history of stars as a way of gauging dialectic even more plainly than an auteurist approach can do, particularly because Hollywood's stars are a surrogate aristocracy for an America

still nervous about its relation to British precedent. In pop music, the dialectical dynamic is the call-and-response of generations of musicians over time, in jazz, urban blues, folk music, and rock and roll, as each new wave sweeps away the one before it. How wrong Adorno is. Within the real cosmogony of jazz, be-bop dialectically overturns swing, and rhythm and blues does the same to bop. Urban blues misreads swing in a different way – by electrifying it to frustrate our assumptions about what is “natural” and what is not. The scrim here is the mythology of authentic black rural or “folk” culture against which the shrewd Muddy Waters trades upon his arrival in Chicago from the Delta. This moment constitutes the epistemological break that rock and roll is in cultural history. With electric guitar, it completes the philosophical work that begins with Dante.

Part III, “The World of Bob Dylan,” focuses on the figure who, more than any other, shows what it means to synthesize and revise all traditions – music, poetry, iconography – and transform them completely. No single cultural figure since Shakespeare, except perhaps for Freud, is as “dialectical” a figure as Dylan. Dylan is all dialectic. I examine Dylan’s reception over the years in “Dylan and the Critics” (Chapter 7), and show the relation between Dylan’s music and his lyrics in Chapter 8, “Words and Music.” “Dylan Himself” (Chapter 9) takes up the question of identity. Dylan is both the cause and the effect of the histories to be traced in these pages. His career begins in 1961, before, or just as, our widespread appreciation of pop begins, and is among the chief reasons for it. Still in process, the influence of Dylan’s work continues to be felt today.

If one adds Dylan’s iconography to the mix, Dylan’s synthesis of pop history is complete. My concern with Dylan and iconography leads to a final chapter, “The Three Icons,” which presents Dylan, Elvis Presley, and Frank Sinatra as the grand dialectical trio of pop at the crossroads. Dylan’s revision of his great precursors erases not only the difference between high and low, power and the people, spectacle and spectator. It also erases the difference between the sexes. Dylan reinvents masculinity by abolishing it, too. Sinatra’s masculinism and Presley’s femininity combine to produce Dylan’s androgyny. For Dylan, and for pop as a whole, dialectic remakes the world.

Preface: *The Resistance to Pop*

Accompanying this topical narrative is a historical one. Pop dialectic resolves not only the problem of high and low. It also resolves a specific transatlantic cultural history. American pop circulates within a wider British context, and does so from the start. As early as James Fenimore Cooper, American popular culture reveals what official American culture is too high-minded to reveal: America's anxiety about its cultural and political sources in British culture and political history. American culture is, by definition, post-colonial, and not happy about it. This uneasiness about Britain lies deep in the American grain. A century after Cooper's death, as I will show, a defensive Anglophilia actively structures the shaping of American intellectual opinion about American fiction and the films of Hollywood by the doyens of *Partisan Review*. Norman Mailer topples this defensiveness by co-founding the "hipster" *Village Voice* in 1955. Britain responds to its own post-colonial anxieties in like pop measure. As the Angry Young Men give way to the Teddy Boys, British culture's principal energies give way to the rock and roll of the British Invasion and the ska and reggae of the British Caribbean. British culture also reinvents itself by doing what American culture can only do through rock and roll – embrace the music of slavery. What Paul Gilroy calls "the black Atlantic" (1993) provides the transatlantic dialectic required by both cultural settings.

Each section of the book subsequent to Part I culminates with this transatlantic refrain. The history of American fiction, which begins with Cooper's anxieties about British aristocracy, concludes with Raymond Chandler's sublimation of them. Raised in England and writing as a young aesthete in London before settling in California after World War I, Chandler is the transatlantic pop novelist *par excellence*. The Hollywood star system resolves these anxieties about Britain by functioning as a surrogate and *faux* American version of aristocracy, leading to today's runaway cult of fame on both sides of the Atlantic. The music of the British Invasion, as I have noted, is the means by which Britain enters the pop conversation that America begins. Buddy Holly's tour of England in 1959 is the trigger for the British Invasion (Leigh, 2009), and for a good reason. Like Elvis Presley, Holly invents rock and roll by joining rhythm and blues with country music, whose

own distinct source is British and Celtic hymn and jig. The British Invasion apprehends the “popularity” of American music at its source – not only its African American origins in the blues, but its British origins in gospel, which even the blues is forced to read, after the fact of empire. Holly resolves American anxieties about Britain by resolving British anxieties about America. The blues reading of gospel is how the transatlantic peace is made. This transatlantic conversation is wholly resolved by Bob Dylan, whose lyrics, as Christopher Ricks has shown (2003), bring the weight of English poetry to bear upon the history of American blues and folk tradition.

By “dialectical,” I mean what Adorno means by the term – an exchange of differences that results in an outcome qualitatively different from them both, and that produces new differences from itself. Here is the vivid description Adorno provides in the *Introduction to the Sociology of Music* (1962), one to which I will recur in Part I when my history of high and low reaches Adorno’s moment in it: “Dialectic,” he says, “catches fire” on “historical form,” “melts” it “down,” “makes” it “vanish, and return in vanishing” (1962, 26). Here is Adorno’s more technical description of dialectic in *Negative Dialectics* (1966):

As a sense of nonidentity through identity, dialectics is not only an advancing process but a retrograde one at the same time. . . . The concept’s unfoldment is also a reaching back, and synthesis is the definition of the difference that perished, “vanished,” in the concept. . . . Only in the accomplished synthesis, in the union of contradictory moments, will their difference be manifested. (1966, 157)

What is new presents, not a unity or totality, but a difference both from the past and from itself. Every cultural product is entirely specific, never the emanation of an “ahistorical” paradigm because it is a dialectical product. This makes cultural production inevitably historical and inevitably specific, every thing the thing that it is and no other. The worry that if any theory works too well it must be “totalizing” is itself “totalizing” because it is polemical and tendentious.

Adorno’s “negative dialectics,” with its emphasis on “nonidentity,” has its best counterparts, as I will note throughout, in deconstructive

différance (Derrida, 1967b) and in Freud's *Nachträglichkeit*, or deferred action (1918). They share the same dynamic structure. Negative dialectics is a diacritics, based, like deconstructive difference, on what Adorno calls "unconscious remembrance" (1966, 54), or what Derrida calls "the trace" (1967b). It is an exchange of background for foreground, as in those scenes of emerging knowledge that Freud describes as instances of deferred action. The Freudian accent supplies the temporal mechanism that Marxist notions of dialectic, for all their historicism, too often lack. This is true of both group and individual *praxis* or "agency." In "Pop Culture in the Spectator" (Chapter 2), I will propose a mechanism for "agency," and show how it is bound to temporality through deferred action. Agency's condition is both reactive and sensory. Time is the medium in which its effects occur. No sufficient theoretical model exists to describe the mechanism of historical agency. To provide one is one of this book's key theoretical labors. Agency, particularly the dialectical way in which the high becomes the pop, is defined in Chapter 2 as a "trickle-down effect." This phrase, trickling down to us from Reaganomics, originates with William Jennings Bryan's "Cross of Gold" speech in 1896, and is the name I give to the way "high" dialectically converts to "low" historically. This series of assumptions about dialectic guides my assessment of both Adorno himself, and of dialectic as a notion. Mine is a descriptive account, not a philosophical one. I will hold Adorno at his word in the face of the empirical evidence of a variety of "pop" traditions to see whether or not they, too, are dialectical, like the "high" culture to which Adorno customarily opposes them.

By "culture," I mean what Terry Eagleton (2000) means by the word – its early etymological sense as "husbandry," or a reciprocal relation between species and environment. Eagleton draws on Raymond Williams to plot this history (1958, 1976), which is a traditional one. The word is used to mean husbandry by Bacon (1626), Dryden (1697), and even by Emerson (1856). Thomas Beddoes (1793) and Wordsworth (1805) use the word "culture" in a sense midway between the cultivation of the environment and the cultivation of the mind, forecasting how the word culture will grow also to mean, as it does most memorably in Matthew Arnold, "the intellectual side," as

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the *Oxford English Dictionary* puts it, of “civilization.” Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), as I will point out, solidifies the new usage, distinguishing “culture” from an “anarchy” of taste which it is the job of culture to correct. This notion of culture has a prehistory that begins, as I will show in “A History of High and Low” (Chapter 1), at the start of the nineteenth century. Beginning late in the nineteenth century, “cultural” anthropologists, in a long tradition from Edward Tylor and James Frazer to Franz Boas and Clifford Geertz, gradually restore the wider meaning of “culture” in Eagleton’s traditional environmental sense. Culture viewed as a holistic enterprise ensures that one grants a systematic regularity to the workings of all its parts, high and low. This sense of culture is what initially cleared space for the study of “pop” in the 1980s. Andrew Ross’s *No Respect* (1989) is both a good example and a good reaction. The anthropological justification for the study of pop is also why fully historical and aesthetic accounts of pop are hard to come by, despite the widespread assumption that taking pop seriously goes without saying.

This is a simple and schematic book. It is not only a topical study; it is also a historical one. Like the wider history of high and low with which it begins, each history within it is introduced by a reception history that begins with a classical account of the medium in question. These histories of interpretation have eroded because their paradigms have. It is time to rewrite them both.

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Part I

“The Battle of the Brows”

1

A History of High and Low

“Highbrow,” “Lowbrow,” “Middlebrow”

The terms “highbrow” and “lowbrow” come from phrenology, the nineteenth-century science of regarding the shape of the skull as a key to intelligence. A “high” forehead meant intelligence; a “low” one meant stupidity. Phrenology thrived as a popular science in the late nineteenth century and led eventually to the racial theories of the Nazis, for whom the Jewish cranium and pale, sunken face were clear indications of Jewish racial inferiority. But in its origins, phrenology was actually the beginning of serious brain science. If one of its destinies was Nazism, the other is today’s neuroscience. By 1820, phrenology, despite its notorious future as a cult practice and locus of popular assumption about intelligence, had emerged as the first attempt to map the brain. Its background was the discovery in 1781 of “animal electricity” by Luigi Galvani and the notion that the crackle of mental activity could be broken down into component parts and quantitatively studied. The anatomy of the soul had replaced its salvation. Erasmus Darwin, in *Zoonomia* (1794–6), used the medical term “sensorium” to describe the relation of brain to perception. Franz Joseph Gall regarded the brain as a systematic organ; he published a series of physiologies of the brain from 1808 to 1825, including an attempt to discuss the relation of brain anatomy to soul and spirit in 1811.

The emergence of the brain as the biological source of thought, feeling, and sensation complicates the presumably idealist air of Romanticism, British Romanticism in particular. Brain science made

“The Battle of the Brows”

both Romanticism and psychology materialist affairs, not because it was mechanistic, but because it situated ideas in relation to the “sensorium.” Keats’s hands-on involvement with the sciences of the body has produced generations of scholarship preoccupied by the connection between his emphasis on sensation and his experiences as a surgeon actually holding the material of his own metaphors. The British climate was particularly rich. David Hartley’s *Observations on Man* (1749) is the best link between sensory philosophy and the beginnings of the science of the brain. Galvani’s contemporary, Hartley already regarded physiology as the basis of psychology. Like Galvani’s “electricity,” Hartley’s “vibrations” connected physical stimulation with events in the mind by using “association” to understand the way sensation, ideas, and feeling were linked. It is not Hartley’s associationism that was new. The “associationist” bond between sensations and ideas was familiar from David Hume. What was new was the connection between associations and vibrations, the latter understood in a strictly medical sense: as an “active” power, as Hartley put it, in the “medullary substance” (1749, 1: 4). Hartley gave Hume’s associationism an explicit neural foundation that was already implicit in Hume’s own precursors, John Locke, like Hartley also a medical doctor, and Bishop Berkeley, whose early work included a short treatise on the physiology of human vision (1709).

Phrenology is also the precursor to the development of the first scientific discussions of perversion and criminality later in the nineteenth century. “Low” intelligence and “low life,” as Luc Sante calls it (1991), are linked. Poor judgment does indeed lead to sin, with science replacing religion with the authority for saying so. Cesare Lombroso and Max Nordau play the most significant European roles in this parallel or adjacent history of “high” and “low.” Lombroso’s *Criminal Man* (1876) argued that sexual and criminal delinquency were “atavistic,” deriving from the return of primitive instincts ordinarily superseded by evolutionary development in the “normal” individual. The pioneering Lombroso was often photographed with a skull in one hand and a cranial measuring device in the other. For Nordau, in the enormously influential *Degeneration* (1892) – the book was dedicated to Lombroso – skull types and facial characteristics

were direct indices of human character. For Nordau, no measuring was necessary; the state of affairs was self-evident:

When under any kind of noxious influences an organism becomes debilitated, its successors will not resemble the healthy, normal type of the species, with capacities for development, but will form a new subspecies, which, like all others, possesses the capacity of transmitting to its offspring, in a continuously increasing degree, its peculiarities, these being morbid deviations from the normal form – gaps in development, malformations and infirmities.... Degeneracy betrays itself among men in certain physical characteristics.... Such stigmata consist of deformities, multiple and stunted growths in the first line of asymmetry, the unequal development of the two halves of the face and cranium; then imperfection in the development of the external ear, which is conspicuous for its enormous size, or protrudes from the head, like a handle, and the lobe of which is not involuted; further, squint-eyes, hare lips, irregularities in the form and position of the teeth; pointed or flat palates, webbed or supernumerary fingers (syn- and polydactylia), etc. (1892, 16–17)

Between Lombroso and Nordau come the first scientific sexologists, Richard Krafft-Ebing and Alfred Benet. Krafft-Ebing was not only the first psychiatrist, or “alienist,” to study sexual difference with reasonable objectivity, particularly homosexuality and the perversions. In the obvious premonition of Freud, he did so by assuming that sexual characteristics were acquired in early development by chance associations experienced by the child in relation to his or her body. For perverts and hysterics alike, memory joined objects, whether through fetish triggers or hysterical ones, with the infantile affects associated with them. Thanks to sexology, phrenology was revising its own primitivism by becoming, like Hartley’s before it, a physiological psychology.

As pop metaphors for intelligence and stupidity, however, “high-brow” and “lowbrow” do not enter English and American vernacular until early in the twentieth century. They are examples of what H.L. Mencken calls “loan-words” in *The American Language*, his compendium of American English, first published in 1919 and revised