
The Wood and the Trees

Popular Fictions between Literary and Cultural Studies

Sara Martín (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain)

The inclusion of the study of popular culture within Cultural Studies has stranded the study of popular fiction in an uncomfortable position, especially as regards novels, short fiction and cinema. By 'popular fiction' I mean all the storytelling found in novels, short stories, radio plays, TV programmes, movies, comics and computer games that we call 'popular' even though in many cases it doesn't actually reach a big audience; the 'popular' is paradoxically quite often a minority pursuit and may even be a tiny 'cult'. What causes this discomfort is that while media such as TV or radio are homogeneously popular – has anyone ever used the phrase 'artistic TV' in the same sense we refer to an 'artistic novel'? – fiction in print and on the big screen is far more heterogeneous, ranging from the brazenly formulaic to the boldly artistic.

Thus, whereas the Emmy awards honour the best in the whole medium of (American) TV, films and printed fiction in English compete for different awards depending on whether they are regarded as artistic or popular. The Oscars, which might seem to be as homogeneous as the Emmys, tend in fact to patronize popular films, especially if they deal with fantasy, awarding them prizes only for technical achievements. The major Oscars inevitably go to films with a realistic subject matter and, it is implied, a higher artistic content, *pace* the Oscars reaped by Peter Jackson's trilogy *The Lord of the Rings* in 2005. Any cinema fan knows at any rate that winning an Oscar is significantly different from getting a Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival or a Golden Bear at the Berlinale, awards that confer a halo of artistic prestige that the Oscars still lack.

Novelists and short story writers are far more sharply divided into the two fields of the artistic and the popular because the achievements of popular fiction in print are never acknowledged by the literary establishment or only in confusing

ways. Popular film-makers are regularly belittled by film critics of an artistic inclination, which is why Steven Spielberg has fallen into his routine of making a popular summer movie followed by an artistically inclined film: box-office success is the most positive kind of endorsement a film-maker can get in Hollywood but it still rankles him that snobbish critics do not acknowledge his talent. Still, he gained some kind of satisfaction on both accounts when in the year 1993 an artistic film and a popular movie that he had made won Oscars and became huge money makers: *Jurassic Park* and *Schindler's List*. Stephen King suffers from the same schizophrenic malaise but has so far avoided trying his hand at writing artistic fiction, which wasn't an obstacle to his being given the National Book Award in 2003 to the scandal of many.

Honouring King in this way would be the equivalent of Spielberg's getting a Palm d'Or for *The War of the Worlds* – a strange faux pas. It is also proof of the same kind of confused thinking that resulted in the entrance of Spanish popular writer Arturo Pérez-Reverte in the elitist Real Academia de la Lengua and in the awarding of the prestige Príncipe de Asturias Prize – the Spanish Nobel Prize – to J. K. Rowling in the same year 2003. While King and Reverte at least were granted literary honours, Rowling got the Príncipe de Asturias for Concord on the grounds that she has reached a wide, universal readership with her books, praise which is quite ironic considering that she's narrating the horrifying confrontation between a boy and a bloodthirsty villain bent on killing him. The 2003 corresponding award for Literature went to Fatima Mernissi and Susan Sontag, two feminist, intellectual, literary writers who have certainly worked for concord far more committedly than Rowling.

All this disorientation arises, as I'm arguing, from an inability to acknowledge the merits of

popular fiction per se in a way that can be as satisfactory for its creators and its audiences as artistic prestige. It also arises from the failure to see that some writers and film-makers regarded as popular because of the subject matter they deal with *are* also gifted artists. One thing is *not* incompatible with the other since there's no radical difference between the popular and the artistic but, rather, a continuum. The wrong belief that there is a sharp difference has seriously distorted the academic organization of the study of fiction, arbitrarily split between Literary Studies and Cultural Studies in a way that complicates enormously the task of making sense of the whole map of storytelling in English.

Genre theory is one of the main roots of this mix-up but also the insistence on the idea that popular fiction is a subset of popular culture rather than a sibling of artistic fiction. It is more likely for an essay on Michael Crichton to appear published next to one on Madonna – as icons of popular culture – than for it to appear next to one on any artistic American novelist. While academic publications on film tend to progressively erase the barrier between Hollywood and artistic film-making, perhaps because independent film-makers are themselves pulling it down, the equivalent publications on fiction in print only focus on the literary. If one can only call him- or herself a film specialist by claiming to know all about movies, from Spielberg to Lars von Trier, why should academics interested in fiction be free to ignore popular writers? And the other way round: shouldn't Cultural Studies specialists in detective fiction see that this *is* part of the field of fiction within Literary Studies?

Depending on the topic it deals with, popular fiction is subdivided into genres: westerns, thrillers (legal, political, technological, spy), pseudo-historical fantasy, science fiction, horror, romance (in all its varieties, including sex-and-shopping fiction, chick lit and erotica), historical fiction and crime fiction. Arthur Asa Berger explains that

Before the development of genre theory we were more or less limited to discussing texts, such as a spy novel like *Dr. No* and then relating these texts to the mass media, society and

culture.... There was a gigantic leap we had to make, from a specific text to the mass media. Now, with the recognition of the importance of genres, we have an intermediary stage – one that enlarges and enhances our understanding of the way texts function and of the way that texts relate to one another, the media, and society. (1992: xiii)

The label 'genre fiction' is not, however, an adequate synonym for popular fiction. 'Genre' is a notoriously unstable concept but if we agree for the sake of the argument that stories are categorized into genres on the basis of their main topic, as the list above suggests, it doesn't make sense to suppose particular types of story escape genre labelling.

If we truly want to map the whole territory of storytelling in English we should arrange *all* fiction by subject, regardless of artistic quality and even narrative medium (printed words, live performance, drawings, moving pictures). While in so-called genre fiction this is done constantly so that some consumers (readers, viewers, players) specialize in narrowly defined sub-genres like cyberpunk, feminist crime fiction, lad-lit or military technothrillers, in artistic fiction this categorization is generally ignored on the supposition that what defines the literary is not primarily the subject matter but the stylistic quality of the medium it uses, whether it is prose, the spoken word of drama or the images in film. Thus, on the one hand, most academics in the field of Literary Studies suppose that certain topics can never make good literary fiction and those in Cultural Studies assume that there are no artists among the ranks of the creators of popular fiction: all of them generate trash, even though it's trash worth studying. Both attitudes, I believe, are wrong.

Literary Studies specialists have no doubts about what kind of fiction they prefer studying; quite another matter is whether they're mainly interested in Literature or simply in fiction (how many actually read poetry?). Basically, the subject of Literary Studies is fiction with a strong emphasis on style, by which I mean not only the literary quality of the prose but also all the strategies to enhance the role of how the tale is told over what it is about; it is also preferably

fiction about a realist subject matter outside the range of topics defined by genre theory as exclusive of the so-called popular genres. Instinctively, this tells us that Martin Amis is the kind of author Literary Studies favours and that Danielle Steele is not. Instinct, however, opens up a vast gap when it comes to studying, on the one hand, realist writers with a less elaborate style (ranging from the failures of writers who *do* have artistic ambitions to the plain middlebrow who don't) and, on the other hand, writers with artistic talent as shown in their achievements in style, who write on topics considered only appropriate for popular fiction.

Cultural Studies specialists say little about what kind of Literature they read, giving the wrong impression that we don't read any, which contributes to this artificial separation between the artistic and the popular. We have, besides, so far made quite a poor job of defining popular fictions, trapped as we still are by the primary need to defend the visibility of our subject. Cultural Studies academics too often criticize the elitist position of our Literary Studies peers without realizing that "academic writing about popular culture risks pompousness" (During 2005: 194) – an assertion I quote hoping not to be guilty of the crime myself. The most radical, the cultural populists, also tend to make sweeping statements which hardly help build bridges for a better mutual understanding. Thus, while Literary Studies has Harold Bloom, Cultural Studies has Clive Bloom, claiming that "High culture is now dead. It is dead not because it cannot still fulfil or enlighten its recipient, nor because it died of neglect amid the philistinism of the masses. It is dead because it no longer has the right environmental conditions to sustain its creation." (Bloom 1996: 226) As Tony Bennett wrote, as long as twenty years ago, the problem with the idea that we must study popular culture – including popular fiction – because it is as rich as high culture "is not that the argument is wrong but that the constant making of it merely confirms the existing hierarchy of the arts in accepting the claim that 'high culture' constitutes a pre-given standard to which popular culture must measure up or be found wanting." (1986: xviii) It is therefore

high time to move away from those stale definitions and consider new angles rather than run the risk, as Dominic Strinati warns us, of insisting on a populism that shows its "critical failings" because it's nothing but "a mirror image of elitism." (1996: 259)

The canon wars fought in Literary Studies for the expansion of the range of writers that might be granted canonical status in spite of not being white, European, dead and male, raised no major issues in relation to how to incorporate popular fictions within Literary Studies – which is not at all the same as integrating them into the canon. Certain popular classics like Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* or Bram Stoker's *Dracula* were 'rescued' and accepted as proper subjects for research and teaching on the grounds that they were also part of the canon (or should be). There was, however, no intention to take seriously the idea that omnivorous reading habits are the best tool for truly understanding how fiction operates at all levels. Some complained, like Christopher Pawling, who worried that "although there has been a growth of interest in popular fiction over the last few years, one could not claim that it has been established in schools or colleges as a central component of Literary Studies" (1984: 1) Others, like Harriet Hawkins, made pointed accusations against the academic tradition that

has erected barriers between 'high art' and popular genres even as it has erected barricades between art and life. The artistic tradition (popular as well as exalted) tends to break all such barriers down, even as in the last analysis it is the artists (popular as well as exalted) who create the extra-generic, extra-curricular, extra-temporal and international canons of art. (1990:113)

It is clear, in any case, that these aberrant barriers have worried Cultural Studies far more than Literary Studies, which hasn't even started a process of self-criticism past the canon wars in relation to the popular. In contrast, John Storey warned a few years ago that "it is never enough to speak of popular culture, we have always to acknowledge that with which it is being contrasted" (2001:17). In a recent introduction to Cultural Studies Nick Couldry

points out, somewhat perplexed, that while Cultural Studies has often congratulated itself on its openness and diversity it has actually focused only on the cultures of youth, resistance, leisure and the working classes while neglecting the cultures of the old, the non-resistant middle-brow, business and, paradoxically, the culture of the elite (2000:3). There are no such pangs of conscience in Literary Studies in relation to the popular.

My proposal is that we bridge the gap between Literary and Cultural Studies for the sake of better understanding fiction in all its rich diversity. Fiction Studies should be able to accommodate in its territory anything and everything about fiction, from Narratology to studies on the contractual conditions under which writers work today. It is time to abandon the hierarchical, vertical axis dominated by the notions of high and low which have split fiction between Literary Studies and Cultural Studies and start thinking in terms of a horizontal continuum along which texts, their creators and their consumers can be placed on a more egalitarian basis. At one end of this line we'll find all storytelling in which the compelling need to enjoy style overwhelms all other concerns – Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* – and on the opposite end all storytelling dominated by tight plotting – J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter series. There are failures at one end (artistic fiction that is simply pretentious) and at the other (inconsistent storytelling in clichéd, purple prose) but also much overlapping since, clearly, all storytellers want to tell interesting stories as enticingly as they can (under the circumstances, of course, marked by the talent, energy and time in their hands).

Thus, I agree with Ken Gelder when he observes that Literature is identified with concepts such as 'creativity' or 'art' whereas "popular fiction doesn't tend to use the 'autonomous' language of the art world, although this is not to say that it is without artistic merit. It simply means that popular fiction, as a form of literary production, occupies a different position altogether in the literary field, one that is not so dependant, or engaged with, art world discourse." (2000:14) Yet even his egalitarian

position is coloured by hierarchical judgement when he says quite incongruously that, in spite of the counter example set by authors such as Anne Rice, in popular fiction "the term 'writer' is preferred to 'author'" (2000:15). "This," he adds, "is because popular fiction has to do less with discourses of creativity and originality, and more with production and sheer hard work. The key paradigm for identifying popular fiction is not creativity, but industry." (2000:15) Inevitably, this begs the question of how many books a writer needs to publish to be considered popular and, alternatively, whether literary authors lose their status if they publish past a given quantity. What kind of writer/author, besides, is Iain Banks, 'writer' of 11 literary novels and 'author' of 10 science fiction volumes as Iain M. Banks?

Those who know popular fiction as writers or committed fans do not see the field as intrinsically different from artistic fiction: they are also obsessed by building canons and reputations. The insistence of popular fiction in maintaining its own critical circuits with their peculiar closeness to fandom (the seedbed from which most writers spring) has very much to do with how it is ignored by the critical and academic establishment, even by writers. Take the case of William Gibson's masterpiece *Neuromancer* (1984), winner of both a Nebula awarded by the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America and a Hugo awarded by the fans gathered at the annual World Science Fiction Convention (WorldCon). Every reader of science fiction knows that this is a seminal, canonical novel as regards the subject of the awakening consciousness of artificial intelligence; millions love it even though it is surprisingly hard to read on account of the neologisms that shape Gibson's invention of the concept of cyberspace – after all technical jargon is essential in science fiction – but also because he is a *literary* author. Gibson, however, does not exist for the literary establishment.

Since the protagonist of David Lodge's *Thinks...* is a scientist specialized in the same field that *Neuromancer* touches upon, I naively asked the author during a presentation at the British Council in Barcelona whether he had read Gibson. I assumed Lodge would have

interesting comments to make on the contrast between Gibson's approach and his own to a similar subject. 'No', Lodge answered, without the smallest flicker of curiosity and, my guess, quite annoyed that I might next label *Thinks...* as science fiction. This is not to condemn Lodge in particular but to give an accurate impression of how deeply ignorance of the popular runs among the literary authors and critics for fear they will be in some way tainted by their contact with it. For all I know, Lodge may well be aware of Gibson's work but his response made it plain he wanted no connection with popular fiction. The reverse, of course, may also happen, though I believe that readers rather than writers of popular fiction are far more resistant to the idea that omnivorous reading habits are the only way out of a needlessly narrow outlook. The list of favourite books Stephen King includes at the end of his essay *On Writing* (2000) supports the same view.

We need to ask ourselves, too, who has brought popular fictions into the academy, and how and why. Simon During notes that "academics are, by virtue of their job, middle class and connected to authority, while a great deal of popular culture emerges from, and is addressed to, those who have no post-compulsory education." (2005: 194) This is inaccurate on two counts: it doesn't consider what social class academics originally come from and it fails to see popular fiction as exceptional within popular culture even though it's read mostly by people with at least a secondary education and is written mainly by authors with university degrees, usually in English. In our functionally illiterate world very few, in relative terms, actually enjoy reading to the point that soon all fiction in print might well be by definition 'high' culture.

It's impossible to be unprejudiced against uneducated people of poor tastes. It is important to remember, though, that they exist in all social classes – some people happen to be willingly ignorant in spite of being educated – and, secondly, that at the end of the day, whether we are academics or supermarket clerks, we're all too overworked to truly appreciate any fiction remotely creative, whether popular or artistic.

In a sense, while most artistic fiction assumes a devoted, alert spectator free from worldly cares who can invest surplus brain energy to engage in difficult texts, popular fiction is more generous, knowing beforehand that its consumer won't be able to afford this luxury – which doesn't necessarily mean it's all pap.

This different approach to the figure of the implied reader explains why, while artistic fictions are keen on sophisticated experimentation, popular fictions tend to use well-established narrative conventions – the writer thus smooths out all the difficulties for the reader. What we are still far from understanding is that one option is not *better* than the other but *different*: the ability to keep the reader turning pages is in dire need of acknowledgement as a literary skill as praiseworthy as the ability to create a singular narrative voice or a poetic text. We need to accept, too, that the same person may enjoy a wide range of fictions depending on the leisure in his or her hands. Whether artistic or popular, readers keep the more demanding texts for the time when they can devote the attention they're due. Interestingly, this might also explain why literary novels are relatively short in comparison to popular novels: in the end, it may be 'easier' to read the last Man Booker prize – John Banville's *The Sea*, only 200 pages long – than Neal Stephenson's astounding Baroque Cycle trilogy *Quicksilver*, *The Confusion* and *The System of the World*, which runs for over densely-packed 1500 pages and is a perfect sample of the best popular fiction published today.

Returning to the question of class, even though Marxist theory has been instrumental in the institutionalization of the study of Popular Culture, paying close attention to the interaction between education and cultural consumption, there is relatively little awareness in the field of how the social origins of academics have shaped it. In *The Long Revolution* Raymond Williams includes a curious study of the social origins of English writers born between 1470 and 1920 with a view to tracing the connections between class, education and literary creation. Although he warns the reader that individuals

are never mere representatives of their class and the institutions that educate them, he explains the emergence of many new English writers “from the families of clerical and industrial workers” (the essay was published in 1961) as a consequence of the social mobility of a whole class. He attributes, besides, the rapid Americanization of most English popular arts to the talent drain from the working to the middle classes via their state-sponsored university education. (1984: 254-270)

This declassing is common, too, among academics active in the fields of popular culture and popular fictions. Henry A. Giroux opens his volume *Disturbing Pleasures: Learning Popular Culture* by declaring that “growing up in a working-class neighbourhood in Providence, Rhode Island, provided me with a particular orientation to the relationship between popular culture and schooling.” (1994: ix) His street culture was simply ignored by his teachers so that he and his friends felt that “something stopped us in school. For me, it was like being sent to a strange planet. Teaching was exclusively centred on obscure books and the culture of print.” (1994: ix) All my academic colleagues working in Spain in the field of popular fictions in English fit that pattern, including myself, despite our having been raised in a very different context.

What I read in 1970s Spain as a child of a working-class couple with primary school certificates was not literature for children – except for a few fairy-tales – but what my parents read. My father was keen on the Spanish equivalent of American pulp fiction (spy thrillers, detective fiction, horror, science-fiction, westerns) and I read many of these plot-driven, thrilling novelettes written by Spanish writers using anglicized pen-names. Today horror and science fiction are still my preferred genres both as a reader and researcher. My mother favoured so-called best-sellers: romances with a historical background, the middlebrow foreign novels by the Lapierre-Collins team or James Clavell (often the origin of TV adaptations she had enjoyed) and also middlebrow Spanish fiction written by women like Mercedes Salisachs. At this stage, between the ages of 7

and 12, I identified reading with enjoyment, not study, and only when my Literature classes in primary school got serious did I realize that I was meant to overcome that attitude and approach reading with a more mature outlook. The teachers, of course, knew better.

Throughout my childhood and adolescence TV and cinema were a constant presence in our working-class home with a heavy emphasis on films and series of the same genres that my father enjoyed as a reader (my mother preferred reading to watching TV and still does, a habit I have inherited from her). Between roughly the ages of 12 to 16, in this second phase of my life as a reader, I learned to combine the popular fictions consumed at home with my own exploration of the local library in search of the kind of texts that my Literature teachers pointed out as an extra-curricular pursuit of literary pleasure. I also made my first forays into cinema with friends of similar backgrounds mainly to see Hollywood films: we all remember as a childhood landmark the first time we saw *Star Wars* (1977). In secondary school, though, and later at university, I found myself surrounded by students with slightly higher class backgrounds, which didn't affect my reading but gave my film preferences a more prejudiced outlook in favour of artistic films. In the 1970s and early 1980s Spain was still, however, a very homogeneous country, which in practice means that everyone saw the same TV channels and saw the same films in cinemas; the tiny minority that read enjoyed more or less the same books so that in practice my parents were not so different from most middle-class people, at least those without university degrees.

Teachers, however, were another matter, especially at university: they were upper middle class, held PhDs often obtained after a stay abroad in Britain or the USA and were unfamiliar with all the popular culture that people like me – the first working-class generation to enter massively Spanish universities – knew about: TV, popular music, Hollywood films, popular novels, comics, computer games... My university teachers simply never mentioned anything that was remotely related to popular

culture as I knew it (medieval ballads, though, were acceptable).

For as long as I was a university student and in my first years as a university teacher, I was both culturally schizophrenic and a snob. Schizophrenic because a good deal of the fiction I enjoyed and that had motivated me in the first place to study English Literature was silenced and excluded from my studies and my teaching – not to mention films, which seemed not to exist. I felt, therefore, second rate, even an interloper, because I couldn't shake those 'disturbing pleasures' off me; at the same time, I felt tongue-tied because I knew there were deep links between what I read for class and what I enjoyed in my leisure time but wasn't being trained to articulate them. I became a snob, too, because I started thinking in terms of cultural hierarchies, despising the texts I had enjoyed as a child and as a teenager. I even believed that as a reader and as a spectator there is a constant progression so that one begins as an immature spectator of *Star Trek* and graduates into becoming a mature reader of James Joyce who watches no TV and only enjoys Ingmar Bergman films in their original version. Now, quite a few crises later, I know better: there is no reason to reject one for the other; actually it is to anyone's advantage to be able to enjoy it all while still being selective.

We should perhaps in the end agree that popular fiction is what educated people mostly of working-class background enjoy in spite of the efforts of a biased education to teach only the literary or, more generally, the artistic. I've been a close witness of the process by which one of my most conservative middle-class colleagues has discovered not only popular fictions but an even more important fact: that there is no contradiction in being a very sophisticated critic and reader – as he is – and appreciating them. In a certain sense, and without any intention to unduly glamorize our task, teaching and doing research on popular fictions is a calling, a vocation with deep personal roots that, of course, mirrors the missionary zeal of those who believe in the ideal of literary excellence. Whereas all the institutions of education aid them in their mission the problem in our case, precisely, is that we seem to be preaching to the converted (colleagues and students of similar backgrounds). Our calls to illuminate all corners of our knowledge about

fiction in English often fall on deaf ears.

Of course, previous calls to consider the importance of gender, race, sexual orientation, theoretical backdrop and other factors in Literary Studies have had mixed results. Soon, teaching and research involving popular fictions will no longer raise eyebrows, and specialists in the area will have the same credibility and deserve the same respect as those doing Post-Colonial Studies, Gender Studies, Queer Studies and/or those applying the latest trends in Theory, as long naturally as the preceptive academic rhetoric and methodology are applied. After all, we all know, don't we, that what should matter in research and teaching is, above all, the quality of the results and not just the choice of subject: producing good or bad academic work on Shakespeare or on Tom Clancy doesn't depend on the qualities of the author under study but on the qualities of the researcher and teacher as such. What is more worrying is that, if the idea of the canon weren't damaging enough for its insistence on exclusion even at its widest range, the high degree of specialization that all the revolutions against it have brought about is resulting in a fragmentation of Literary and Cultural Studies that decreases rather than increases our knowledge of fiction in English.

An academic specialist in black lesbian Caribbean literary fiction is as limited in this sense as a specialist in Paul Auster or a specialist in the comic fantasy of Terry Pratchett if that's the only territory they know. I'm calling, therefore, for a complete regeneration of the way we study fiction because reading, teaching and writing about popular fiction has shown many American and European colleagues, and myself, that we are not seeing the wood for the trees. Useful as Literary Studies and Cultural Studies are to approach, respectively, the literary artistic and the popular, it's time that we saw that the study of fiction needs a far more comprehensive point of view and a new methodology but also, above all, a genuine wish to transcend the idea that literary fiction is the apex of the pyramid formed by all fiction. It is not; it's just a node in a complex network of stories that is not even dominated by print. The wood is far bigger than we imagine, and the trees are of many more different species than we have identified so far. And this is good news.

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