

Popular Culture of the Past

As *Studies in Popular Culture* moves from its thirtieth into its thirty-first year, we have decided to devote an issue to popular culture of the past. Popular culture is sometimes perceived as strictly contemporary, and the study of popular culture is sometimes perceived as dedication of the mind to the ephemeral. But each time has its own popular culture. Sometimes, the most popular lives on to become high culture, as in the case of Shakespeare or Dickens. And some of us who are considered popular culture scholars spend our time trying to call attention to work we expect to endure (*pace* those who warn against the dangers of elitism in the classification “Art”). Sometimes the popular rightly never comes to be considered art, but continues happily to thrive in our culture nonetheless—as in the case of, for example, the Nancy Drew novels. And sometimes the popular flourishes briefly then is indeed forgotten—except, perhaps, by a few scholars. It is worth remembering that, while we may argue over whether or not our subject matter is of the May-fly variety, we should ourselves, as scholars of popular culture, take the long view.

The essays in this issue focus mainly on the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, though some of the writers reach farther into the past and up into the present. Abigail Dennis traces the surprisingly early development of the popular cookbook genre, beginning with the work of Marcus Gaius Apicius, “a gourmandiser of Ancient Rome,” and emphasizing the nineteenth-century evolution of the genre, notably in the productions of Mrs. Beeton. As Dennis carries us forward into the present, she evaluates gender, class, and nationalism through both graphics and text. Pamela Bedore investigates surprising play with gender in nineteenth-century American dime novels. As Bedore reminds us, “These texts sold”; yet some of them contained figures such as the androgynous “Gay Gus Giles” and the clever, “foxy” Nina Renard. Moving to later in the nineteenth century, Nils Clausson examines Arthur Conan Doyle’s 1892 Sherlock Holmes story “The Blue Carbuncle,” pointing out the significance of the cultural context in recognizing its double-coding and thus its underappreciated aesthetic worth. It helps to consider Conan Doyle in the light of Oscar Wilde. Clausson uses “The Blue Carbuncle” to explore larger issues of the perception of popular culture. Across the ocean, in 1900, L. Frank Baum published a very different but perhaps equally famous work, *The Wizard of Oz*. Sydney Duncan points out the author’s ties to early feminists, and contrasts his Dorothy’s strengths

with the evolution of the character in a variety of later texts, including Fleming's 1939 film, Geoff Ryman's novel *Was*, and Gregory Maguire's *Wicked*. Some versions of Dorothy move from America to Europe and beyond, but Duncan argues that none matches the original's strength. Another American icon is Jello; and it may surprise some to realize how long it has been with us. Susan Grove Hall traces its symbolic life from its beginning in 1902. Successful advertisements of a product can, of course, tell us something about the audiences to whom they appeal; and Jello has been with us long enough to tell us quite a bit, from its domestic beginnings to its place in art to Jello Biafra's political campaigns; and through representatives from Jack Benny to Bill Cosby; and in authors from Philip Roth to Don DeLillo. As early Jello ads celebrated the soft pleasures of domesticity, the sharp fears of invasion were selling copies of Sax Rohmer's 1920 book *The Insidious Dr. Fu Manchu*—so successfully that a series of seven Fu Manchu films were made from 1920-1940. Rebecca Wingfield concentrates on the specifics of the image of the foreign threat in Rohmer's stories, and the way in which they undo imperialist, rational control: Rohmer makes Fu Manchu's obscurity powerful. But he thus justifies the imperialist response and expresses the anxiety of the age. We proceed from the exploration of anxiety to the pleasures of cultural production in Kevin Moist's analysis of record collecting. Many of the records themselves date from the 1910s to the 1940s; however, Moist focuses on the act of collecting itself, particularly the work of Harry Smith (who built his collection starting in the 1940s); Joe Bussard, "The King of Record Collectors"; and R. Crumb, the famed cartoonist. As Moist points out, they not only collect different types of records; they also collect for different purposes and using different systems. In some way, however, they all see these records as "bearers of meaning."

Those of us who bear the name of popular culture scholars are ourselves at least as various in our purposes and methods as these record collectors. We may aim for aesthetic validation, or anthropological analysis, or for contributing to the historical record. Whatever our purpose, it should be of benefit to recall, as Kevin Moist does, the words of Walter Benjamin (despite what he might think of our subject matter): it is worthwhile "to renew the old world." We hope these essays help to do so.

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