

# Introduction: Popular Culture, Media Engagement, and Democracy

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This special issue on “Popular Culture, Media Engagement, and Democracy” is the result of research coordinated from the Center for Popular Culture Studies (PoCuS) at Linnaeus University. PoCuS is a new and growing research environment, started by Tommy Gustafsson and Mariah Larsson in 2020, which aims to bring together scholars from across disciplines and faculties with a focus on popular culture in order to promote research, education, and collaboration with society.

Popular culture and modern liberal democracy developed together during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the connections between the two are manifold. Most obvious among them are perhaps those actors who have become politicians, such as the U.S President Ronald Reagan (1981–1989) and the Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky (2019–). There are, however, several other examples of such connections, including the film *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) leading to the resurrection of Ku Klux Klan in the USA, and the effects of Swedish Prime Minister Göran Persson dancing with the cow Doris in the children’s television show *Abrakadabra* in 2001. Besides its great economic, cultural, technological, and industrial impact on society in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, popular culture has also exerted an impact – both imagined and actual – on peoples’ experiences, understandings, and engagement of society, citizenship, and the world.

Many of the ideas about popular culture up to this point have been shaped by the dynamics of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. During this time, a negative understanding of mass culture, mass media, and mass entertainment was born out of a need to understand the rise of fascism in the decades leading up to the Second World War. A more positive reinterpretation of popular culture placing emphasis on active consumers only took hold in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Since the 1980s, popular culture has expanded in reach and diversity due to technological and demographic changes. Today, social media is an integral part of popular culture, and with it, a much larger possibility of permutations and transformations, quotation and references, fragmentation, disinformation, and propaganda has developed. As digital technologies and internet algorithms change the conditions of popular culture consumption and engagement, we need better to understand not only *how* people engage with popular culture but also *why* they do so, and why such engagement can take different social, political, and activist expressions. Although there is no lack of research on popular culture and democracy, the great majority of this emanates from the Social Sciences, which historically has been characterized

by a programmatic and deterministic view of popular culture as an undemocratic phenomenon hindering social change and intellectual emancipation. The critical theory of the Frankfurt School still looms large over Social Sciences' approaches to popular culture in ways that all but foreclose social critique within popular culture (Bottomore 2003).

Consequently, in this special issue, the contributing scholars explore various connections between popular culture and democracy with a special focus on how the engagement with popular culture phenomena has, in different ways and with different outcomes, led to acts of democratic participation where popular culture is employed in order to affect society and its citizens. Popular culture can therefore function as a common frame of reference within certain consumer groups, bringing with it a surplus significance into political, activist, or proto-political discourse (Dahlgren 2009). This surplus significance has been understood as something which happens at the point of the consumer (e.g. Fiske, 1987; Fiske 2010; Jenkins et al 2020). However, without the polysemic qualities of popular culture products, such use of them in public or social media discourse would not be possible. Popular culture is often – although not always – transformable as well as permutable and its meanings can shift and be used differently in different contexts for different purposes.

This overall approach places this special issue close to the field of Cultural Studies but unlike, for instance, the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies or the “Birmingham School”, this special issue aims to shift the primary focus from simple understandings of popular culture as something representational that reflects or influences societies or as a passive object to be interpreted and used differently by different active consumers to instead the interactive and transformative aspects of media engagement with popular culture and how this relates to the very idea of democracy.

In all of the articles in this special issue, focus is on what happens when a popular culture phenomenon reaches an audience, be it the powerful imagery of *Stranger Things* utilized by young climate activists on TikTok (Happer and Åberg); the conflicts arising around the rock group Rammstein's use of German history (Zander); reactions to MTV music videos in the 1980s engaging in current sexual politics (Johansson); the shifting understandings of “based on a true story” in a true crime television series about the murder of Swedish prime minister Olof Palme (Gustafsson); local patriotism reciprocated in the gritty yet poetic rendering of a city in *Thin Blue Line* (Larsson); or Cold War politics shaping the perception of *Rocky IV* (Nowell).

Although these articles share the interest in how media engagement happens, they also focus on why it happens – what is it about these television series, music videos, and films that elicits such a response? If media engagement, as Dahlgren and Hill have conceptualized the term, is “a process whereby we develop relationships with media that are not solely about consumption and economic value, but that also enable us to participate in

politics, to recognize the social and cultural, as well as economic, values of media in our lived experiences” (2020, p 3), where do these social and cultural values originate? Is it all “in the eye of the beholder”, that is, up to the active and creative consumer, or does the material itself hold qualities which create possibilities for engagement, and how open, varied, and perhaps even conflicting can these possibilities be?

What all articles in this special issue point to, is the complexity of readings of popular culture phenomena. Although the specific case studies in the articles have been selected with an eye to the responses they have elicited, they still illustrate a variety of popular culture products that are not monolithic but highly diverse and allow both for insular subcultures or fandoms and for extremely varied political interpretations.

The articles can be divided into two groups based on their types of readings. In the first group, the approaches focus on media engagement, where the content of the popular culture products is communicated with some sort of message to intended audiences but where these messages are reshaped, misunderstood, or even denounced in the encounter with their different audiences. *Stranger Things*, the subject of Happer and Åberg’s article, is not in any obvious way about climate change, yet young climate activists make use of the allegorical potentials of the narrative to read monsters as the threat of climate change while at the same time employing the powerful common frame of reference that the popularity of the series ensures. The controversies surrounding the group Rammstein’s explicit allusions to German history, described in Zander’s article, are dependent on the videos’ ambiguous treatment of history, violence, and sexuality. These Rammstein videos thus become critical conveyors of a German past at the same time as the provocative content often is misinterpreted as a pretext for fascist ideology. Closely related to this misreading of popular culture is the American parents’ lobbying organization PMRC’s activities as they tried to ban popular music and music videos during the 1980s. PMRC can be understood as “moral entrepreneurs” in a moral panic, but they also (perhaps inadvertently) took popular music and its music video content very seriously in a way that was not entirely misguided. As Johansson demonstrates in his article, this became a double-sided media engagement where, on the one hand, the many music videos that aired on MTV during 1980s contained complex, radical, and positive messages about sexuality, gender, and sexual health. On the other hand, detractors such as PMRC, construed the content of the same music videos as damaging evidence against the artists, claiming that their songs caused immorality, and even death, among its viewers.

The second approach towards popular culture and democracy in this special issue is through reception. Reception of popular culture is, of course, another form of media engagement but with an approach where the reactions, feedback, and consequences usually are connected to certain audiences that in different ways interact with and interpret the popular culture products. In

this case, the common denominator is that the reception is conducted by professional reviewers and critics who have aesthetic and/or ideological assessments on their agenda. They thus participate in a democratic exchange in the public sphere that includes both the popular culture products assessed as well as the intended audiences to these products, and how they ought to think about them. In Gustafsson's article on the Netflix mini-series *The Unlikely Murderer* (*Den osannolike mördaren*, 2021), this latter approach becomes apparent as critics used their platform to warn audiences about the danger to democracy that the based-on-a-true-story concept could entail, which in turn risked obscuring and undermining the perception of historical accuracy. At the same time, the article demonstrates that the perception of historical accuracy is not solely based on the content, but also on who interprets that content, and with which previous knowledge this assessment is made. Similarly, in a study of the reception of *Thin Blue Line* (*Tunna blå linjen*, 2021–), Larsson demonstrates that the geographical location of the reviewer has a decisive impact on the assessment – both culturally and politically – of the series' narrative content but foremost of the *mise-en-scène* that highlighted the city of Malmö. A vital part of the self-perception of Malmö is that its identity is diverse and multi-ethnic, a kind of melting pot that distinguishes the city from the rest of Sweden, often viewed from outside as a bad example. Therefore, the audiovisual representation of Malmö could be interpreted as a democratization. This is matched by the local reception of *Thin Blue Line* where Malmö is perceived to be misunderstood by the rest of the country, and even the world. Lastly, Nowell revisits the Cold War of the 1980s, with a focus on the so-called Cold War Cinema of Hollywood that scholars have tended to distill to a nationalist American project that projected hyper-patriotism and Anti-Sovietism, supposedly reflecting conservative values of American filmmakers, politicians, and audiences. However, with an in-depth analysis of the contemporary reception of *Rocky IV* (1985), Nowell can demonstrate that the Cold War Cinema of Hollywood provoked wholesale critical revulsion by American reviewers, who thereby misinterpreted the film's more complex meanings, since films like these were thought to jeopardize the newly started reconciliation process between the two superpowers of the era, USA and the Soviet Union. In this way, the reception of *Rocky IV* could be interpreted as a democratic participation or intervention for world peace.

Together these six articles demonstrate that popular culture has a decisive impact on the notion of democracy, not least through different types of media engagement where a variety of consumers, audiences, and critics have interacted with the popular culture products. By shifting away from an understanding of popular culture as merely reflecting or influencing societies and instead focusing on the polysemic qualities of popular culture and the interactive and transformative aspects of media engagement, these articles can

contribute to a wider understanding of popular culture in general and how popular culture relates to the very idea of democracy in particular.

## References

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