

U.S.-American Culture as Popular Culture (annual conference, Hamburg 2019)

Lawrence Levine aptly conceived of popular culture as “the folklore of industrial society,” or a field of cultural production directly connected with the fast-changing socio-economic conditions of U.S. American society. The question of which forms of culture became popular at what time opens up a historical dimension that allows us to explore past practices of culture formation as well as contemporary ones. By approaching American culture *as* popular culture, the scope of investigation may include discussions of egalitarian and folkloristic notions of culture in U.S. history.

Moreover, American popular culture has become, roughly since WWII, an important vehicle of transnational cultural exchange, which critics have denounced as one-sided and therefore as hegemonic or even neo-imperialist, as testified by such cultural studies concepts as “Coca-Colonization,” “Americanization,” etc. On the other hand, popular culture is by definition continually transformed in individual as well as collective acts of consumption and thereby adapted to the specific needs and desires of individual practitioners, subcultural communities, or even entire nations.

With our conference, we would like to invite scholars of American Studies from Germany and abroad to critically revisit the terrain of popular culture as one of the foremost fields of cultural production today. We are interested in exploring diverse forms of cultural expression, encompassing, among others, music, television, Hollywood cinema, the internet, comics, fashion, podcasts, dance as well as literature in order to examine our understanding of a wide range of everyday social, cultural and political practices.

Beyond the appreciation of such diverse expressions of popular culture, we are interested in furthering theoretical conceptualizations of popular culture. In recent years, there has been a plethora of attempts to theorize, in particular, the new media formations of the digital age radically changing communication habits around the globe. Thus, concepts such as remediation, transmedia, and convergence culture, among many others, have provided useful tools to describe such new formations of user-based yet thoroughly commodified popular culture. The explosion of internet memes is a highly visible sign of precisely this development.

Generally speaking, popular culture has been regarded increasingly positively in the wake of its reappraisal in Cultural Studies roughly since the 1960s. However, recent developments in Europe as well as the United States urge us to critically evaluate the triad of popular culture, populism, and politics, with president Trump’s frequent use of social media to reach out to his supporters being a particularly salient case in point. Cultural Studies emphasizes the duality of consolidating and challenging hegemonic discourses through popular culture, and is therefore in an ideal position to examine the convergence of popular culture and populism as facilitated through internet-based platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.