

U.S.-American Culture as Popular Culture

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.

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 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 global communication. Thus, concepts such as remediation, transmedia, and convergence culture, among many others, have provided useful tools to describe new formations of user-based yet thoroughly commodified popular culture.

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. The conference thus also seeks to explore the proximity between popular culture and cultures of populism. Since popular culture can simultaneously be conceptualized as a consolidator of norms as well as a mode of resistance or aberrant decoding, it can serve both as a vehicle for and a bulwark against populist rhetoric, aesthetics, and agendas.

With our conference theme, we are aiming for workshop contributions that reflect the manifold social and historical, material and medial dimensions of popular culture as an important motor of American culture.