

## Pure and Public, Popular and Personal and the Inclusiveness of *Borgen* as a Public Service Blockbuster

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### Abstract

In the article I reexamine the traditional aesthetic and political critiques of popular culture and reevaluate the social and communicative potential of bestselling cultural artifacts such as highly popular television series.

First, I sketch the alleged aesthetic and social problems of popular culture as described in the critical tradition originating in Kant and radicalized by Theodor Adorno regarding the cultural industry, and by Jürgen Habermas regarding the public sphere.

Second, I draw attention to the blind spots of this critical tradition: the distinctions of the pure aesthetic and the exclusions of the public sphere. I argue that the ideals of a pure aesthetic and a public sphere neglect issues that are crucial to the type of commonality at stake in popular cultural artifacts: personal issues, social conflicts, and what is pleasurable to the senses or has to do with emotions.

Third, I exemplify my argument by drawing on the case of the television series *Borgen*, produced by the public service broadcaster DR (the *Danish Broadcasting Corporation*) in 2010-13. I examine how *Borgen's* combination of themes, discourses, and domains includes the viewers in ways that point towards a more pragmatic and inclusive understanding not only of bestselling popular culture but also of aesthetics and the public sphere.

*Keywords* Popularity, aesthetics, public sphere, inclusiveness, *Borgen*.

### **Pure and public**

It might seem highly irrelevant to approach blockbuster cultural artifacts from the perspective of early modern ideas of aesthetic experience and the public sphere. Does it make any sense at all to examine an extremely popular television series equipped with Kant's concepts of disinterestedness and subjective universality? Have we not long ago left his sharp distinction between high and low? And have we not given up the ambitions of universality that are fundamental for his ideas both of a pure, reflective aesthetic judgment unaffected by private sensual pleasures, and of a general public debate unaffected by personal or social interests?

There are two reasons why it does make sense to revisit Kant when examining the aesthetic and communicative potential of bestsellers and blockbusters. One is that the ideas and concepts inherent in the Kantian tradition have contributed greatly to the low esteem of popular culture in general and bestsellers and blockbusters in particular – and that they still do. Contemporary ideas of what art and the general public ought to be can be traced back to Kant's conception of aesthetics and of enlightenment. And these ideas that were not only Kantian but became essential for modernity logically led to an aesthetic as well as political critique of popular culture.

The second reason for including the Kantian ideals of aesthetics and an enlightened general public which popular culture fails to live up to is that these ideals, paradoxically, can illuminate what popular culture does: why it can have a social and communicative potential in our late modern culture. I will emphasize two elements:

When Kant wrote his three critiques – of pure reason, of practical reason and of judgment – he made a distinction which has been essential for understanding modernity's differentiation in various discursive and institutional domains. We see a similar differentiation in Habermas's distinction between three validity-dimensions, each having its own specific form of argumentation and justification. Habermas distinguishes between a cognitive-instrumental, a moral-practical, and an aesthetic-expressive dimension, in which we treat respectively what is theoretically true, what is right, and what is subjectively truthful.

Secondly, Kant, in his *Critique of Judgment* from 1790, defined aesthetics in a way that is still extremely influential. The influences include his opposition of high and low taste. While the low, sensual taste is private (for instance, I like red wine better than white) and characterized by idiosyncratic judgments of what is immediately pleasurable to one's senses, the elevated reflective taste reaches out from "I" to "we." The social or even universal potentials of the judgment of taste is based on its disinterestedness, its ability to release the individual from both personal and social particularities and interests, including the limitations of already given rules or concepts. Only in the "subjective universality" of the aesthetic judgment do we transcend private and social limitations, appeal to what is common to everyone, and belong to a human community. Only when we judge something as beautiful without interest can we reach what is common for all of us: "the mental state in which we are when imagination and understanding are in free play" (Kant 2004, §§ 6). This is the democratic, optimistic, and edifying point in Kant's aesthetics: that this mental state in principle is open to everyone and can be communicated and shared. Every single one of us can participate in aesthetic communication and thereby in an inter-subjective and potentially universal community. In this way, the aesthetic experience also has social potentials when bracketing what divides us, and confirming and reinforcing what is common for all of us.

To sum up, this pure aesthetics is characterized by aesthetic autonomy, reflective taste, disinterestedness, and subjective universality while being opposed to cognitive/instrumental and moral/practical interests, idiosyncratic and low sensual taste, personal and social interests, and given rules and concepts.

### The problems of popularity – and of its critique

What is problematic in, for example, very popular films and television series, according to this dominant aesthetic tradition, is probably quite obvious: There is far too much interference from calculated commercial interests, far too many easily digestible industrial products, low sensual pleasures, cultural fashions, and economic and social power. Blockbuster film and television is not produced by, and – in this tradition more importantly, the audience do not approach them as – free, reflective, and disinterested subjects, detached from their own sensual taste, from economic, social, and cultural interests and from already given rules and concepts.

On the contrary, many blockbusters seem to confirm and reinforce the commercial interests and the already given recipes for success – resulting in numerous sequels, remakes and imitations. To a certain degree, this is valid also for public service broadcasters. Even though a national broadcaster like DR is “independent of economic, commercial and political interests” (*DR’s public service-kontrakt for 2013-2014*, p. 2), funding and political goodwill depend heavily on audience ratings.

We can read Adorno’s critique of the “culture industry” if we want an analysis of the commodification and the calculated appeal to conformity inherent in the standardization and pseudo-individualization of blockbusters. The vast audiences that today enjoy blockbusters would no doubt confirm Adorno’s most pessimistic view of the culture industry: That it supports an abstract conformity and prevents the formation of independent individuals who reflect and decide for themselves what books to read, what films or television to see – and more generally: how and what to think.

This brings me to the second type of critique of popular culture: the social or political critique that sees blockbuster phenomena as supporting the opposite of enlightenment, of modernity and of strong, autonomous subjects. Adorno made this point very (some would say far too) clear in “Culture Industry Reconsidered” from 1967, when stating that

The total effect of culture industry is one of anti-enlightenment [...]. It impedes the development of autonomous, independent individuals who judge and decide consciously for themselves. These, however, would be the

precondition for a democratic society which needs adults who have come of age in order to sustain itself and develop (Adorno 1975, pp. 18-19).

One does not, however, have to be as radical as Adorno to present popular culture as a democratic and political danger. In Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989), the ideals attributed to the modern public sphere strikingly resemble the above characteristics of the pure aesthetics. Inspired by Nancy Fraser's "Rethinking the Public Sphere" (1990), I will point at three assumptions that are central to the public sphere as Habermas describes it: First, the assumption that participants of the public sphere can bracket status hierarchies and deliberate as if they were social equals. Second, the assumption that there is a single public sphere – *the* public sphere – and that this is preferable to a nexus of multiple public spheres. And third, the assumption that private interests and issues are unwanted and that the discourse of the public sphere should deal only with the common good (cf. Fraser).

These similarities between the ideal of a pure aesthetics and the ideal of a public sphere may not be surprising considering that both ideas can be traced back to Kant. Nevertheless, it is striking that modernity's dominant conceptions of both art and the public sphere rely on the notion that we as viewers or participants are able and willing to forget personal issues and interests, to regard social conflicts and hierarchies as irrelevant, and to accept reflective taste and abstract reasoning as the only acceptable way of legitimation – thereby excluding what is pleasurable to the senses, what is good for one's life, and what has to do with feelings and emotions. Both conceptions, of a subjective universality in aesthetics and of the common good in the public sphere, imply that we can eliminate the level of concrete, empirical sociality and community with all its differences, bonds, and conflicts, and that we can link directly from an individual, autonomous, reflective, reasoning subject to a common good or even a universal humanity.

The problem with these conceptions of a subjective universality in aesthetics and of the common good in the public sphere is that they seem to exclude so many people and so many ways of communicating about and relating to aesthetic objects and social issues. As Bourdieu has argued theoretically and showed empirically, a

disinterested aesthetic point of view is neither universal nor natural but a distinctive ability appreciated and acquired by the dominant social class from early childhood. Aesthetic judgments do not unite people in what is common to everyone but rather function as a distinction (1984).

Similarly, Nancy Fraser has argued that the concept and norms of *the* public sphere relies on a generalization of a particular bourgeois and masculine norm: a norm that has become hegemonic, but also a norm that marginalizes and excludes both groups and “languages” of lower status and social issues that are dismissed as “private” (1990).

Let us now return to the blockbusters. What they do is obviously attract a lot of people. And since people are different, this is, I will argue, only possible if the blockbuster films and television are open towards being read and used in different ways. Instead of claiming, like Adorno, that the culture industry attract by manipulation, I suggest that we have more faith in readers and viewers and accept that many people can relate to popular culture in a variety of ways that are not possible with more exclusive and pure versions of art or public debate. The reason for this, I will claim, is not conformism but rather that the highly popular artifacts transgress some of the demarcations characteristic of the pure aesthetic and the public sphere – and that they, exactly by doing this, are capable of creating a more pragmatic version of some of the qualities inherent in these concepts.

### **The case of *Borgen***

Let me exemplify with the popular Danish television series *Borgen* (*Government*), produced by and shown on the public service broadcaster DR in 2010-2013. My reason for choosing this case is that *Borgen's* combination of themes, discourses and rationalities includes the viewers in ways that point towards a more pragmatic and inclusive understanding not only of bestselling popular culture but also of aesthetics and the public sphere.

In the spring of 2013, *Borgen* finished its third and presumably last season on national Danish television with an average of around 1.6 million viewers. The series obviously has international appeal as well: In the UK, it had more than 1 million viewers in the second season; it has won several international prizes; it has

been sold to more than 60 countries; and it is being aired in an American television version and has been novelized in at least three countries.

But how is this popularity possible when *Borgen*, as described in the *New York Times*, is “a thriller woven around possibly the most boring conflict in Europe: parliamentary elections in Denmark” (Stanley, 2011)? How can this include people in Denmark and abroad?

One reason is, of course, that *Borgen* is more than a series about Danish politics. It is a television drama focusing mainly on two strong and beautiful female characters who both want to do the right thing: most of all the prime minister, and eventually ex-prime minister, Birgitte Nyborg (Sidse Babett Knudsen), but also the journalist, and eventually media adviser, Katrine Fønsmark (Birgitte Hjort Sørensen). And with minor but interesting male characters as well: the media adviser Kasper (Pilou Asbæk), and the head of news on national television, Torben Friis (Søren Malling). Focusing on these characters and on feminine perspectives, *Borgen* deals with problematic decisions regarding how to balance idealism, pragmatism and personal desires in the political sphere *and* how to live your life, including very well-known dilemmas of how to balance work and family life, how to maintain a family, and how to continue as co-parents when it turned out that you did not succeed in maintaining your family. Although Birgitte Nyborg is a prime minister, she is also an attractive, charming and vulnerable woman, whom it is very easy to like and identify with.

Secondly, *Borgen* is a piece of meta-fiction and meta-media. It reveals convincingly how the media produces reality, and how the political-commercial demand for higher shares of the audience can turn public service television into absurdist kitsch while destroying any ideal of enlightenment and quality. In this way, it has a critical and very self-ironical twist regarding its own status as blockbuster *and* national public service television.

Thirdly, *Borgen* is a political drama, and the political themes and parties are all very close to the actual political debates and parties in Denmark. When the series thematized whether to legalize prostitution and thereby formalize the social rights and obligations of sex-workers, the topic was immediately caught by Mai Henriksen, a conservative member of parliament, who proposed something very

similar two days before an episode of *Borgen* aired the fictionalized version of the dilemma in prime time.

More generally, *Borgen* is an interesting example of the interplay between fiction and real life politics. The television series includes some actual political themes, but politicians and others also use the fictionalized version to get more attention and raise a public debate about specific political topics. This happened again when the series thematized the use of antibiotics for pigs, a topic which was taken up in the media afterwards and led to protests against the use of antibiotics in Danish agriculture.

It is hardly surprising that politicians grab the opportunity to present political initiatives that have already been sympathetically motivated in prime time television with an extraordinary number of national voters as viewers. One may, of course, worry about the risks in mixing fiction and real life politics. We would not like the political priorities of our politicians to be guided by the most popular series on television. But I think the risk is minor compared to the positive potential in a television series like *Borgen* for engaging its viewers in political and ethical debates. Thematically, what *Borgen* does, is to mix three domains: the personal, the political and the media. It reveals how they are entangled, and how dilemmas transgress and traverse the individual domains. This means that we see politics with a human and even feminine face, the personal and democratic costs of the will to power, the mediatization of politics and personal lives and so on. But it also means that we get different types of entries to the fictional universe, from the most common problems regarding love affairs and family life to more un-familiar negotiations between politicians and media advisers.

This is even more conspicuous on the series' official website and Facebook profile. On Facebook, people discuss what type of jeans a certain character is wearing and how good he looks in them (*Borgen's* Facebook profile). They debate whether Birgitte Nyborg and her ex-husband will get back together again – the majority hopes so even if they do not believe it. Although many discussions focus on personal and ethical dilemmas, they also include gender issues and Danish politics (for example, agriculture, including links to information about EU's rules about animal welfare). Most of all, however, people write how much they like the series, thereby making



aesthetical judgments and mixing these with emotional, ethical and political aspects of the series.

On the official website of the series (DR1/Borgen), we find a similar mix of aesthetical, emotional, ethical and political perspectives but also a complex mix of fiction and reality. A few examples: You can vote whether prostitution should be legalized. You can make your own speech after having practiced with Birgitte Nyborg. You can write which political key issue you would choose in case you founded a new political party, and vote for the key issues of others. And you can take a test and discover how you balance your moral principles with your wish to reach your goals. There is even a Birgitte Nyborg-Twitter with a tweet telling you that "It is your life and your choice. Remember to make up your mind and vote!", as if you were part of the fictional universe with an election coming up. And if you cannot get enough, you can read a fictionalized version of the most important newspaper in the series, *Expresen* (DR1/Ekspres), complete with breaking news, editorials, and personal tests in which you can test the importance of children in your life, the degree of gender equality in your family, your own fitness for politics, and so forth. Finally, you can find informative online teaching material about real life Danish politics (Undervisning/Borgen i virkeligheden).

### **A need for inclusiveness?**

*Borgen* moves in and out of domains and discourses that are kept separate in purer versions of aesthetics and public debates. It mixes the private, the political, and the media, and lets various and conflicting validity-claims and types of reasoning interact. This happens thematically but also formally by integrating various discursive domains, and it happens not least in the reception, where viewers are invited to combine politics, fiction, and their own lives in various ways.

This inclusiveness towards a plurality of discursive domains, validity-claims, and types of reasoning makes *Borgen* special compared to many other television series. If we compare it with some of DR's other recent television series like *Forbrydelsen I-III* (*The Killing*) or *Broen I-II* (*The Bridge*), they are obviously less concerned with political questions. Even though they also have strong female heroines, seem to subvert certain gender roles, and touch upon a few

ethical questions, the focus of these crime series is predominantly on the detection of the crime. On the websites of the two series (DR/forbrydelsen and DR1/broen), the focus is almost exclusively on exposing the crime plot: there is information about the locations and the suspects, and you can vote who you think “did it”, see how other viewers have voted, and so on.

Compared to these crime series, *Borgen*’s mix of private life and politics, aesthetics and ethics, fact and fiction, a feminine heroine and a traditionally masculine domain has invited the viewers to relate to and maybe also talk about a much wider variety of themes. Even if viewers have not been active on the website or Facebook profile, *Borgen* has aimed at and widely succeeded in creating various links between the fictional universe and the everyday life. In doing this it has also appealed to Kant’s two types of judgments – the low type regarding, for example, how attractive the characters are, and the reflective type regarding the quality of the episode or series. One might object that the fictionalized version of (Danish) politics is simplified, that the heroine’s political opponents fall into stereotypes, and that the drama only deals with the charming challenges of a privileged creative class. But still, the series combines private and public domains in a way that opens a semipublic debate for a variety of themes, perspectives, discursive modes, and ways of reasoning. *Borgen*’s success in doing this, not only in Denmark, is maybe best indicated by a 2013 article in *The Times* commenting on the close of the second season. Under the headline “Everyone’s talking about: Life after *Borgen*,” the article begins in Danish:

Hvad vil du gøre? Ikke mere *Borgen*! Hvordan vil du fylde dine dage? Oh come on, you don’t need a translation. All right, just in case: what are you going to do? No more *Borgen*! How will you fill your days? (Wagner, 2013)

The English viewers have probably not been so engulfed in *Borgen* that they have learned Danish by watching it. But they obviously found it so appealing that they watched it with subtitles and also in other ways mixed various languages. This mix was realized also by talking about the series: probably not “everyone” like the headline of *The Times* indicates but many, probably not disinterested but with a variety of personal and social interests, and probably not with

pure reflective taste or abstract reasoning but with various rhetorical, stylistic and argumentative forms.

The point is that this popularity is neither conformism nor total individualization and segmentation. *Borgen* might be a special type of blockbuster television in its combination of political and personal domains and its integration of a feminine perspective on the good life. It fits very well into the public service-obligations of DR: to “connect the Danes” around its products and stimulate “participation in the public debate and democratic process,” “culture and language,” and “interest in and knowledge of a wide variety of subjects” (DRs public service-kontrakt for 2013-2014). The fact that it is produced by a public service broadcaster gives it other conditions and obligations than purely commercial productions. This, however, does not mean that it exists regardless of audience ratings. As thematized in the series itself, popularity is a *sine qua non* also for a public broadcaster like DR1. This means that *Borgen* shares one quality with other highly popular artifacts: a necessary inclusiveness. And it gives a public service version of this inclusiveness when it generates communication and connectivity across differences.

Through its popularity, *Borgen* might actually make us communicate across specific discursive domains and with people who are different from ourselves. And this, I think, is very important in our current mediascape where cultural niche-marketing and niche-casting is increasing, thereby dividing audiences, consumers and citizens into ever more narrowly defined groups and presenting them only with information and media products made especially for them. In a situation where most media products are directed towards specific segments with specific lifestyles, conformism is not necessarily our most serious problem. Maybe it is time to worry more about the lack of communication and connectivity than about conformism, and to take interest in the forms of commonality and community generated by and around very popular books, films, television series, and so on. If we do that, we might welcome that so many actually see and like a series like *Borgen*, and we might also conceive of the common good and the public sphere in ways that are less pure and reflective but more inclusive and social than the ones we have got used to.

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