

Frye and the *Opposition* between Popular Literature and Bestsellers

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Abstract

Northrop Frye's view of "bestseller" literature forms the focus of this article. The legacy of postmodernism entailed the demise of the division between high and low cultural products. However, this did not solve the problem concerning the value of a given work. Frye offers a different model. While Frye defends popular literature proper, he has general reservations about commercial bestsellers, and his choice of concepts represents an interesting contribution to the current discussion.

Keywords popular, mass, value, literature, postmodernism, best-seller.

Introduction

In this article, I discuss Northrop Frye's view of "bestseller" literature, providing an account of this area of fiction and placing it in the context of the most relevant earlier critiques of the same material. As I shall explain, while Frye defends popular literature proper, he has general reservations about bestsellers as well as specific concerns relating to some hardboiled crime fiction as well as the

later bestsellers which match it in terms of what Frye considers brutality and prurience (Frye, 2006, p. 21). I begin by focusing on the typical account of the postmodern breakthrough (highly relevant to the bestseller context). I then turn to Frye, who supplies us with a radically different conceptual framework for discussing twentieth-century popular literature – bestsellers included. I characterize his understanding of popular literature before turning to his view of the kind of commercialized – and indeed exploitative – fiction about which he has reservations.

In my view, Frye's conclusion – that a substratum of literature is perhaps "beyond the pale" – is a one which should be taken seriously. But whether or not the reader agrees with his outlook, Frye's views form a significant part of the history of ideas, and a proper account of them is important for all theorists interested in arguments about levels of culture and "value."

The bestseller and the legacy of postmodernism

The neatest, and for that reason one of the most persuasive ways of thinking about the opposition between modernism and postmodernism, is to think in terms of modernism as a time when there was a gap between high culture and low culture, and postmodernism as a time when that gap was closed. It is interesting to reflect upon how critics demonstrate that the gap was closed. Sometimes the focus is on the consumer of culture – the gap was closed owing to a new openness on the part of the reader or listener. In her "One culture and the new sensibility," Sontag characterizes the new openness in a very memorable closing passage:

From the vantage point of this new sensibility, the beauty of a machine or of the solution to a mathematical problem, of a painting by Jasper Johns or a film by Jean-Luc Godard, and of the personalities and music of the Beatles is equally accessible. (Sontag, 1966, p. 304)

However, usually critics are interested in finding qualities in the cultural world which point to the fact that the gap has been closed. Writing in 1997, Hunter and Kaye, using verbs like "blur" and "to be eroded" convey a sense of our cultural world, previously a hierarchy, as one in which no demarcation can be made. This culture is

much less hierarchical than before – it may even be thought of as a horizontal culture:

Growing numbers of adaptations of ‘classic’ literature, novelisations of films and new media such as laser disks, CD-ROMs and the Internet blur the lines between film and fiction, reader and author, spectator and participants well as mass and elite culture. (Hunter and Kaye, 1997, p. 2)

In this multimedia age, barriers are eroded between film and fiction and between elite and popular culture: director’s cuts, never seen at the cinema, are now available on laser disk, including commentary with the film. Films like *Braveheart* (1995) spawn CD-ROM interactive adaptations, *Babylon 5* creator, J. Michael Straczynski, corresponds with fans on the Internet. (Hunter and Kaye, 1997, pp. 9-10)

Different rhetorical strategies are employed by critics to convey a sense of the demise of the division between high and low. Of particular interest to critics is the notion of a popular culture which is touched by the “distinction” of high culture. Thus Louis Menand constructs the postmodernist moment in terms the appearance of a culture all of which is at once popular and sophisticated, his sweep including albums, novels, sit-coms, a music label, a musical, the work of a visual artist, and a magazine:

Just up ahead [...] a different dispensation was poised to come into being. This was a culture of sophisticated entertainment that was neither avant-garde nor mass, that was commercial but had a bit of brow. This was the moment of *Sgt. Pepper’s* and *Bonnie and Clyde*, *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* and *All in the Family*, Motown and *Blonde on Blonde*, *Portnoy’s Complaint* and *Hair*, Andy Warhol and *Rolling Stone*. (Menand, 2011, p. xx)

In “Cross the Border - Close that Gap: Postmodernism,” perhaps the most well-known discussion of the postmodern phenomenon, Fiedler focuses mainly on literature. In his view, the new generation of

writers, the “young Americans” of the time, embrace “Pop forms.” Where Menand thinks of a popular culture which absorbs the sophistication of high culture, Fiedler records how serious writers adopted genre fiction:

The forms of the novel which they prefer are [...] at the furthest possible remove from art and avant-garde, the greatest distance from inwardness, analysis and pretension; and, therefore, immune to lyricism, on the one hand, or righteousness social commentary, on the other. It is not compromise by the market-place they fear; on the contrary, they choose the genre most associated with exploitation by the mass media: notably, the Western, Science Fiction, and Pornography. (Fiedler, 1972, p. 351)

As if by magic, all cultural phenomena are redeemed by this revolution and suddenly anything which might constitute “pseudo-culture” simply vanishes from our view. Everything in our culture now possesses some value, and resistance is cultural conservatism. Because the distinction between high and low fails, value is diffused throughout the cultural world, and nothing is untouched by the diffusion. Thus Lawrence Alloway fondly remembers how

the area of contact was mass-produced urban culture: movies, advertising, and science fiction. We felt none of the dislike of commercial culture standard among most intellectuals, but accepted it as fact, discussed it in detail, and consumed it enthusiastically. (Storey, 2009, p. 183)

The postmodernist outlook suggests we look at the cultural landscape differently from the modernists. They may have thought in terms of the palace of high art and the entertainment of the masses, but from the later twentieth-century perspective, mass culture is of enormous interest and undoubtedly “valuable.” The mass culture of the modernist period, therefore becomes a valid area of academic enquiry. The valorization of popular culture is not limited to twentieth century, however. The popular culture of all ages is valorized by this shift in paradigm.

The Frye option

Not everyone will subscribe to the above view, however. One problem clearly stands out: Do we really want to work on the assumption that all types of culture – all movies, novels, television programs, and so forth – may be accorded value regardless of how blatantly commercial they are? Some might wish to offer a little resistance to the postmodernist view. In relation to literature, which is what I will be focusing on in this article, the postmodernist view attributes value to all twentieth-century literature, for example. But is that gesture entirely judicious? Bestsellers, as well as blockbusters, are effortlessly caught up in the realm of “value.” Perhaps, we might decide to valorize popular literature, while suspending our validation of many “bestsellers,” effectively driving a wedge between the two. Of course not every commentator harbors such a desire. But for our history of ideas to be complete, we should know at least know that making a distinction between the two is a genuine intellectual option. What we need in relation to these considerations is not an arch-modernist critic – a voice from the distant past telling us that we had been warned about popular culture. Rather, what is needed is a critical voice which, on examining the area of popular literature, is capable of distinguishing between the literature which merits the term “popular” and the literature which may only lay a false claim to that status.

Frye, the subject of this article, provides us with a model of this kind of thinking. He provides us with some useful distinctions which help us to discriminate between not just “serious” and “popular” literature, but also different types of popular literature, especially the genuine and the purely commercial. I will turn to the precise nature of his attitude to the “bestseller” in a moment, but, first, Frye deals with the oppositions between “high” and “low” in an exemplary manner. The term “low culture” is not used in Frye’s criticism, clearly because it is patronizing to speak of a valuable cultural product as metaphorically “low.” Frye does use the term “highbrow” (Frye, 2003, p. 9), but he places the terms in speech marks to indicate his reservations about this formulation. What Frye is most comfortable with is the opposition between “serious” and “popular,” though, as we shall see, he does use the term “elite” as a synonym for “serious” at times, occasionally placing “elite” in speech marks, suggesting a certain number of reservations about

that term, too. "Popular," in his view, may easily be employed as an appreciative word, suggesting the reader's love for and valorization of, say, popular literature, and "serious" (or "elite") is preferable to "high-brow." Frye is very careful about never drifting towards the kind of Gilbert Seldes inverted snobbery, which subsumes the elite to the popular, but he forever defends popular literature. Indeed, he puts it on an equal footing with elite culture as far as it is possible to do so. In our day, some commentators have made names for themselves by boldly stating that a figure associated with popular culture is as good a poet/musician/painter as another figure drawn from our cultural heritage: Bob Dylan is as good as Keats, and so on. In *The Secular Scripture*, he states that the typical writer feels himself pulled in two directions:

The same writer may feel the pull of elite and popular tendencies within himself. The popular helps to diversify our literary experience and prevent any type of literary education from getting a monopoly of it; but as time goes on, popular writers without exception survive by being accepted by the literary 'establishment.' Thus Spenser has acquired the reputation of a poet's poet, and a storehouse of recondite allusion and allegory; but in his day *The Faerie Queene* was regarded as pandering to a middlebrow appetite for stories about fearless knights and beauteous maidens, and hideous ogres and dragons, instead of following the more sober Classical models. (Frye, 2006, p. 23)

We should think, then, of writers as simultaneously "elite" and "popular" figures. In his most celebratory statements about popular literature, Frye explores reasons why we might think of elite and popular literature as *equals* and two manifestations of the *same kind of literature*:

Popular literature [...] is neither better nor worse than elite literature, nor is it really a different kind of literature: it simply represents a different social development of it. (Frye, 2006, p. 23)

Nevertheless, it is to some degree possible to separate elite literature from popular literature in Frye's view. He defines popular literature as

the literature that demands the minimum of previous verbal experience and special education from the reader. In poetry, this would include, say, the songs of Burns and Blake, the Lucy lyrics of Wordsworth, ballads and folk-songs, and other simple forms ranging from some of the songs and sonnets of Shakespeare to Emily Dickinson. Much if not most of this would be very unpopular in the bestseller sense, but it is the kind of material that should be central in the literary education of children and others of limited contact with words. (Frye, 2006, p. 22)

Interestingly, however, as Frye starts to suggest in the last passage, he thinks in terms of the distinction between the genuinely popular and what he seems to view as the "pseudo-popular," which seems to point to the run-of-the-mill "mass" product, the "bestseller" (Frye, 2006, p. 22). Of course, certain types of cultural studies make interesting study objects of *all texts*. But Frye also demands of us that we consider the moral and/or aesthetic power of works of literature, and that type of consideration often leads us to different conclusions about the value of different works of literature. Throughout Frye's works we come across a number of statements which encourage us to distinguish between popular literature and the "bestseller." While popular literature is bound up with a very special education in the imagination, bestsellers do not possess that power. They are part of a "fad," which may only lay a false claim to the term "popular":

By 'popular' we usually mean what is temporarily fashionable, for reasons that can be derived from the social conditions of any given time. But there is a more permanent sense in which a work may be popular, not as a best-seller, but in the sense of providing a key to imaginative experience for the untrained. The popular in this sense is the continuing primitive, the creative design that makes its impact independently of special education. Burns is a

popular poet, not in any technical or best-seller sense, but in the sense that he continues and provides modern examples for a primitive tradition of folk song and ballad. (Frye, 2010, p. 161)

At times Frye is slightly more emollient on the subject of the best-seller: “no book can remain on a best-seller list for long,” he states, “unless it is written with a good deal of professional expertise” (Frye, 2000, p. 584). But what is perhaps more interesting is that he is particularly critical of one important type of bestseller. Having invoked the specter of “a packaged commodity which an overproductive economy, whether capitalist or socialist, distributes as it distributes foods and medicines, in varying degree of adulteration” (Frye, 2006, p. 21), Frye then proceeds to speak even more damningly of pseudo-popular literature, highlighting what he sees as its unequivocally exploitative treatment of sex and violence:

Much of it, in our society, is quite as prurient and brutal as its worst enemy could assert, not because it has to be, but because those who write and sell it think of their readers as a mob rather than a community. (Frye, 2006, pp. 21-22)

Interestingly, in *Anatomy of Criticism*, Frye speaks confidently of readers’ ability to deal ironically with such fiction, thereby defusing any “danger” posed by it. “In the melodrama of the brutal thriller,” he argues, “we come as close as it is normally possible for art to come to the pure self-righteousness of the lynching mob” (Frye, 2007, p. 44). But readers are not helpless before this kind of fiction.

We should have to say, then, that all forms of melodrama, the detective story in particular, were advance propaganda for the police state, in so far as that represents the regularizing of mob violence, if it were possible to take them seriously. But it seems not to be possible. The protecting wall of play is still there. Serious melodrama soon gets entangled with its own pity and fear: the more serious it is, the more likely it is to be looked at ironically by the reader, its pity and fear seen as sentimental drivel and owlish solemnity, respectively. (Frye, 2007, p. 44)

That said, it is clear from both quotations that such literature is of little or no “value,” and Frye may be encouraging us to entertain the idea that there may be a literature type which is not part of the “elite-popular” continuum – a literature which is, indeed, “beyond the pale.” Ultimately, this judgment stems from moral considerations. “[T]rue comic irony or satire” – the novels of Graham Greene, for example, “defines the enemy of society as a spirit within that society” (Frye, 2007, p.44). The “brutal thriller,” by contrast, seems to be characterized by a decidedly illiberal spirit.

Frye is no doubt picking up on a vein in English letters about American or, better, pseudo-American, exploitative fiction, which runs from Orwell’s “Raffles and Miss Blandish” to Hoggart’s *The Uses of Literacy*.¹ Orwell and Hoggart shared something of a common outlook. Both believed that American mass-market fiction was wandering into an ethical gray area. But both were above-all focused on British imitations of that type of debased American fiction – *No Orchids for Miss Blandish* by James Hadley Chase, in the case of Orwell, and the British “sex and violence novelettes” published under names such as “Hank Janson” in the fifties, in the case of Hoggart. Frye’s own focus is the “brutal thriller” (Frye, 2007, p. 44), where “detection begins to merge with the thriller as one of the forms of melodrama” (Frye, 2007, p. 44). He never mentions specific authors’ names, but one can make a few educated guesses. In the period leading up to the publication of *Anatomy of Criticism*, hard-boiled crime fiction continued to sell well, and Frye feasibly had in mind Mickey Spillane’s Mike Hammer novels when completing that study. Similarly, one book which was widely read some years before the publication of *The Secular Scripture* was Harold Robbins’s *The Carpetbaggers*, described in a review in the *The New York Times* on the occasion of its release as “an excuse for a collection of monotonous episodes about normal and abnormal sex – and violence ranging from simple battery to gruesome varieties of murder” (Schumach, 1961, p. 14).

Conclusion

It is difficult to avoid the sense that, for better or for worse, this tradition in letters petered out in the twentieth century.² Frye’s distinction between the genuinely popular and the sham-popular no doubt represents a late restatement of the Orwell/Hoggart approach. Perhaps,

however, the distinction will be adopted by literary and cultural studies again. The feeling that some mass culture is better than other mass culture seems to be quite widespread in society today, despite the rejection of cultural hierarchies by so many academics. Continuing this tradition would involve picking up from where not just Orwell and Hoggart left off, but also from where Frye takes the discourse in his late but significant treatment of it.

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Notes

- 1 In "Raffles and Miss Blandish," Orwell argues that Chase's "whole theme is the struggle for power and the triumph of the strong over the weak" (Orwell, 1944, p. 218). The novel betrays "nihilistic" traits: there is no moral difference between detective and gangster. Orwell connects this to the culture of idolizing criminals. He sees the appearance of the book as evidence of the Americanization of British reading proclivities: "In America, both in life and fiction, the tendency to tolerate crime, even to admire the criminal so long as he is a success, is very much more marked" (Orwell, 1944, p. 220). Such storytelling may be indicative of an inversion of the underlying myth of Western literature: "Perhaps the basic myth of the Western world is Jack the Giant-killer, but to be brought up to date this should be renamed Jack the Dwarf-killer" (Orwell, 1944, pp. 222-223), he concludes. Similarly, in *The Uses of Literacy*, Hoggart focuses on the mass culture embodiment of literature, particularly "Sex novelettes" (Hoggart, 1957, p. 205). In the stories, all sex is violent, and "there must be violence all the time" (Hoggart, 1957, p. 213); "it is violent and sexual, but all in a claustrophobic and shut-in way" (Hoggart, 1957, p. 213). Crucially, "it exists in a world in which moral values have become irrelevant": "'forgiveness,' 'shame,' 'retribution,' and 'to be sullied,' 'to fall' or 'to pay' are all concepts outside their moral orbit" (Hoggart, 1957, p. 213). "Crooks" are defeated in the end, but the texture of the writing is bereft of moral reference. When men and women have sex, they do so as "physical enemies" (Hoggart, 1957, p. 215). The aim of the writing is to make the readers feel "the flesh and bone of violence" (Hoggart, 1957, p. 217). Gangster fiction, Hoggart admits, "moves [...] with a crude force as it creates the sadistic situation;" but even here "it has the life of a cruel cartoon" (Hoggart, 1957, p. 219).
- 2 Thomas Whiteside's *The Blockbuster Complex* represents a further attempt to develop a model for critiquing the bestseller. In his study, he criticizes book publishers for focusing upon "commercially successful

works of no literary merit" (Whiteside, 1981, p. 103), the publishing-industry equivalent of aesthetically-moribund television programmes and movies.