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**Pulp Poets and Superhero Prophets: A Case
For Popular Culture in Academic Library Collection Development**

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Abstract

For decades, popular culture was neglected and frowned upon by academics. In recent years, cultural critics, including librarians, have found popular culture materials to be didactic tools, and vital to the study of society and the zeitgeist that has prevailed at the time of their production. As a result, many academic librarians have found it useful to develop collections in their libraries that reflect a range of sociological change as demonstrated in these resources. With diligence and research, academic collection development managers may choose materials that will enhance the role of popular culture in their libraries.

Traditional libraries of higher education have prided themselves on maintaining collections that support the college's curriculum, enhance research materials, and act in the best interest of their learning community. However, it has become apparent to many librarians in previous decades that, not only do academic library collections need to include breadth and depth, but also relevancy and currency. To neglect popular culture materials is to avoid a major didactic tool in the twenty-first century and to miss out on some of the most timely and relevant issues today.

Popular culture materials include, but are not limited to: comic books, graphic novels, pulp fiction, crime novels, hardboiled literature of old and new, current and vintage music, and films that include a variety of genre related and otherwise, storytelling. These resources not only reflect socio-political climate, but the cultural changes and developments in a society or civilization. Studying popular culture can tell researchers and the world about major shifts in values, morals, and ambitions of inhabitants of a specific region or even world-wide. How else can social researchers understand the psychology of an era other than through an in-depth study of the time period's popular entertainment and art forms?

Take the graphic novels *Watchmen* (1987) and *Maus* (1986), as examples of powerful popular culture tools in academia that have tapped into areas of which students are most interested. It has been the source of discussion in the librarianship community of how to develop a popular culture collection that is representative of diverse voices, ideologies, and time periods for their library, including resources such as the aforementioned graphic works. These books have been included in collections to support a diverse and cutting-edge curriculum. Not only are they accessible to college students, but are also major literary works in their own right. For those

who dismiss graphic novels as frivolous, seem to miss out on relevancy and far reaching effects of these works that become tools rather than “entertainments”.

“The purposes for which libraries exist, the nature of the community and its needs, and the social philosophy which underlies prevailing principles of selection are interactive elements which contribute to the framework of collection development in any particular library,” as Curley and Broderick contend in *Building Library Collections* (24). Yet, there are so many librarians and “laymen” who misunderstand the dynamics of this practice. Collection development goes beyond **M.U.S.T.Y or Misleading. Ugly. Superseded. Trivial. Your collection.** (has no use for it.) (*Coined by the American Library Association in cooperation with the Texas State Library, 1976) or guidelines of elimination damaged, irrelevant, or torn materials from the shelves. Since the migration of information to digitized format, librarians need to realize the need to weed in their own database configurations. Librarians need to become more actively engaged in content as well as the format.

Many of the articles discussing popular culture collection development, upon preliminary appraisal, seem to reflect the sentiment that the meaning of popular culture and its significance have changed over time:

Peggy Johnson describes *collection management* as:

An umbrella term covering all the decisions made after an item is part of the collection. These decisions often become critical tasks because of condition, budget or space limitations, or shifts in the library’s user community and parent organization priorities. Collection management often is more politically charged than collection development (60).

Wayne Wiegand, a professor of Library Science, published one of the first and most significant peer reviewed articles on the subject of popular culture and libraries in the *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* stemming back to the late 1970s. His work speaks to the very vitality of popular culture in our libraries today. Back in 1979, Wiegand identified a problem with librarian's selection process for academic libraries. He questioned whether their activities were missing something. He called it "traditional micro-cultural emphasis". Wiegand posits the idea that traditionally librarians have been conservative with collection development materials. Yet, as of late, in metropolitan areas and at cutting edge research libraries many films, magazines, music, and critical analyses of these items are more readily available. However, Wiegand's article is still be relevant today. Wiegand is not without limitations and problematic in certain areas. For example, he is limited in the range and scope to which popular culture can and should be used. Additionally, Wiegand sees popular culture as a "new frontier" rather than a serious academic study tool (Weigand 200).

Every library struggles to find balance between diversity and functionality. To restate, librarians want to select materials that will be used by the student body and faculty in the academic library. Therefore, librarians are concerned with budgetary related issues and want to get the most substance for their dollar resulting in librarian selecting the most relevant texts and media for the mission of the college as the foremost priority. Popular culture has always taken a secondary role. Yet, more and more professors are including texts such as *Watchmen*, Mickey Spillane novels, and television such as *the Twilight Zone*, as essential aspect of their course. Therefore, librarians need to purchase these items to meet the curriculum's demands.

There appears to be two camps with regards to popular culture. One is of preservation, archives, and novelty. The other is that popular culture is embedded right within coursework at a

university. One such library that is perhaps the single-most influential collection of popular culture is at Bowling Green State University. For this collection, the remnants of past popular culture items are more than just ephemera and nostalgia. They are major cultural artifacts. However, not all academic libraries can afford to be as specialized as the one at Bowling Green. That does not mean that popular culture should be ignored. For the common academic library, collections need not be specialized and museum-like. However, copies of works such as *Watchmen* (1986), *Kiss me Deadly* (1956), or Quentin Tarantino screenplays may play important roles in humanities' courses.

Connie Van Fleet in her 2003 survey of academic library collections explains:

Interdisciplinary research into the interaction of reader and text underscores the appeal of popular and genre fiction and emphasizes its value. Selectors should have background knowledge in the structure and characteristics of the body of popular fiction, an understanding of the reader, and expertise in all aspects of library service. Strategies for selecting and acquiring popular fiction include developing policy grounded in the library's mission, sharing knowledge with patrons and colleagues, analyzing pertinent in-house data, and using standard and specialized bibliographies and review sources (60).

As Van Fleet explains, the use of popular culture develops interdisciplinary competencies and literacy. In order for the collection development librarian to compete with other substantial academic libraries, he or she needs to consider these literacy practices. They should consider for each purchased resource or book, how they fit in the cultural philosophy of their institution (60).

The Oxford-English dictionary describes popular culture as the following: *n. the cultural traditions of the ordinary people of a particular community. (OED)* Yet in so many libraries it seems that cultural traditions are often buried in esoteric academic-speak, jargon-laden, and cumbersome to the student. In a community college, it may be especially useful to use the traditions of "ordinary people in a particular community," as the students generally are in need of

an indoctrination into academics. By preceding denser, esoteric readings, students can be engaged by important, and timely icons. It, therefore, becomes not only an option for the library respond to these needs; it becomes an obligation and a duty.

Clarke writing for *College and Research Libraries* way back in 1973 has a similar opinion to Wiegand. Clark explains:

The study and teaching of popular culture is one of the most rapidly developing disciplines on American university campuses. Pop-culture scholars require a wide range of subliterate materials, including dime novels, comic books, phonograph recordings, and even three-dimensional objects. No single library can hope to acquire and organize for use more than a fraction of the primary sources of popular culture. Inter-institutional cooperation in identifying and preserving these fragile records of American culture is underway, but many unsolved problems remain for librarians and scholars.(215).

Because the study of popular culture is a relatively new phenomena, many institutions have not latched onto or have accepted this movement. Yet even in the sparsest collections, we can find evidence of popular culture. In DVDs and magazines including entertainment weekly, the world of popular culture is ubiquitous to the patron. How do librarians harness this force which can be used to teach not only information literacy, but cultural literacy?

The major tool at the heart of this trend towards curriculum and information literacy inclusion of popular culture materials is largely the collection itself, obviously. Of course, there must be a criteria and set of principles guiding the careful selection of resources as with any collection development practices. Wiegand posits four steps towards developing and implementing a collection that has an effective amount of popular culture. He states: Step one requires an attitudinal adjustment.....Given obvious environmental factors (e.g. budget, inflation), we (libraries) are doing an adequate job of acknowledging high culture. However, we need to exhibit a macro cultural perspective in building our collections. Step two involves initiating discussion so popular culture at

our professional committee meetings. Third, we must identify the locations of current pockets of pop culture materials. Finally, we must develop policies and procedures on institution wide scale (200).

Wiegand's theory leans towards publicizing and rallying behind the concept of pop culture as a viable learning tool. However, currently popular culture is ubiquitous and highly available as opposed to the more limited mediums of the 1970s. The high culture/ low culture paradigm is gradually being destroyed, so that the line between the two is becoming invisible. For example, one can see the independent film movement of the 1990s saw a rebirth of noir and heist films that came to be known as "neo-noir" and found itself in films such as *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) and *The Usual Suspects* (1995). These films were modern day pulp types, yet they were critically praised for being art as well. As a result, we see that genres traditionally associated with popular culture, also, find their way into cinematic art and are even being called masterpieces. Had Wiegand written this piece currently, he probably would have an easier time selling his ideas to willing librarians and the school collectives (Wiegand 200).

Again, the most substantial and successful example of a popular culture collection in an academic library is Browne Library at Bowling Green. "The BPCL, founded in 1969 and dedicated to the acquisition and preservation of research materials on American popular culture (post 1876), is the most comprehensive repository of its kind in the United States. Archives include over 10,000 volumes of popular fiction in addition to 10,000 periodical issues. Its strengths are American magazines (1926-1960), pulps, and fanzines (BGSU Library). The library demonstrates the coexistence of materials that were on the fringe of academic and have now become inclusive in the overall American canon of literature. It is safe to say that at the dawning of this library and the new decade of the 1970s is when a reevaluation of this type of work started to occur. The Frankfurt School of Horkheimer and Adorno, perhaps the world's first popular culture critics, were prominent in 1940s and continued to be so through latter decades. This school of social

and popular culture critics was one of the few to study “low-brow” and “common culture” from an academic and intellectual point of view. As a result, popular culture’s significance took on a whole new meaning. The Frankfurt school saw mass media or otherwise known as popular culture as a windows to view social and economic structures. They valued the meaning of this culture. Therefore, the social and creative interactions of “Texts” were essential for studying societal relations and creative activity. As a result, we can see the origins of how simplistic, formulaic popular entertainments can have a place on our library shelves.

The problem with the practice of incorporating popular culture into collections is that there is so little currently written about it. Yet it might be one of the most important routes for the collection development specialist to take in order to create comprehensive and thoroughly engaging library offerings. Obviously, popular culture is not suitable for all libraries. This goes without saying. However, the libraries most likely to purchase these materials are special collections, research, and community colleges. The reasoning for this is that special collections preserve materials, research universities use to broaden the knowledge pool, and lastly, community colleges utilize such resources to tap into student’s collective psyche by creating thoroughly engaging projects and materials with which they can relate.

In the major critical treatment of popular culture in academic libraries, through surveying the somewhat limited readings on this topic, it can be surmised that this concept is still developing. In order to establish a popular culture initiative in collection development at a library, one needs to assess what supports the curriculum, what will be a part of special collections if any, and what will students read and research. This incorporates librarians staying abreast of major cultural changes in the United States, in the last few decades. The librarian

needs to decipher between current and developing cultural phenomena as well as those of the past. Therefore, a subject specialist in media or English may play a key role in this initiative.

Ultimately, the incorporation of engaging, thought provoking cultural phenomena in library stacks and research database may be one of the most rewarding aspects of collection development in a contemporary academic library today. This collection can be updated and established with care and diligence, research, and study, and the discretionary use of funds. The result may be essential to the survival of the academic collections both in print and online.

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