Beautiful Things in Popular Culture

edited by Alan McKee
Beautiful Things in Popular Culture
As always, to John Hartley, who is right about most things
Beautiful Things in Popular Culture

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Notes on Contributors

**John Banks** has been an avid gamer since playing the arcade game *Defender* at the local corner shop as a teen in the early 1980s. His favorite videogames include the *Grand Theft Auto* series and *Halo 1 & 2*. Recently, he has been spending far too much time playing Blizzard’s *World of Warcraft*. He works with the games development company Auran, as well as being a researcher with the Australasian Cooperative Research Centre for Interaction Design. He has researched the relationships among computer games, their audiences, and game development companies, among other things.

**Marc Brennan**’s first and only encounter with Kylie Minogue was a personal appearance by the pop star at the Perth nightclub Pinocchio’s in 1987. An arch Indie boy at the time, his intention was to heckle the diminutive starlet – an aim that was thwarted by his two autograph-hunting friends. Age has weathered such prejudiced tendencies, as has a greater appreciation of the art of the pop song encouraged by years of viewing such Australian televisial staples as *Countdown, Rage*, and *Video Hits* (but not *So Fresh*). He now finds pleasure in cutting the rug to remixes of pop songs, drinking beer at live performances, and busting some Janet Jackson moves for his students. He will, one day, manage a boy band.

**Will Brooker** grew up on Denny O’Neil’s Batman in the 1970s, Frank Miller’s Batman in the 1980s and Grant Morrison’s Batman in the 1990s. While researching his PhD thesis, a cultural history of Batman’s first 60 years, he spent two weeks in DC Comics’ NYU offices and interviewed Denny O’Neil about Miller and Morrison. On the publication of his book
Batman Unmasked in 2000, he was interviewed by Gloria Hunniford on a sofa with the 1960s Caped Crusader, Adam West. Brooker knows seven working defenses. Three of them disarm with minimal contact. Three of them kill. The other . . . hurts.

Simon Frith is old enough to be described these days as a pioneer of popular music studies – his first academic book, The Sociology of Rock, appeared in 1978. In university terms, his disciplinary expertise has always been a little unclear – he has been a lecturer in sociology, a professor in departments of both English Studies and Film and Media, and now holds the Tovey Chair of Music at the University of Edinburgh. His first published reviews (of records by Gene Vincent and the Small Faces) appeared in Rolling Stone in 1970 and in the 1980s he became rock critic of both the London Sunday Times and the Observer. For much of this period he reviewed singles, and his “Thesis on Disco” (an homage to Karl Marx’s “Thesis on Feuerbach”) appeared in Time Out on the occasion of the UK release of Saturday Night Fever. He has been the chair of the judges of the Mercury Music Prize since its inauguration in 1992 and is the author of Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music. He may not know much about disco, but has every confidence in his expertise in what is meant by “the best.”

Claire Gould would like to think she has the best-dressed feet in the world. A former university lecturer and newspaper journalist, she crossed the floor to online media when they adopted the more casual combat trousers and trainers dress code. She currently edits the Daily Telegraph online (www.dailytelegraph.com.au) in Sydney, has broadened her footwear horizons and wears thongs (flip flops) in summer. She stares at her feet for at least three hours a day.

Sara Gwenllian Jones has researched and written extensively on Xena: Warrior Princess in particular, and cult television generally, in her books Cult Television and Worlds Apart: Essays on Cult Television (edited with Roberta Pearson). She has also published on the topic in journals including Continuum, Screen, the Journal of Television and New Media, and in book collections including Mark Jancovich and James Lyons’ Quality Popular Television. Her next book will be a cultural history of pirates.

John Hartley lived in Wales for 19 years and fell for Humphrey Jennings while taking a film production course at Chapter Film Workshop in
Cardiff in 1979. His interest in propaganda stems from having made an “agit-prop” film about working conditions for cinema projectionists. Called *We’re Dying to Please You*, it played at art houses and film festivals and led to the replacement of Chapter Cinema’s carbon arc lamps with xenon bulbs. Hartley visited Cwmgiedd with a view to making a film about *The Silent Village*, but emigrated to Australia instead. He went on to write about Jennings and propaganda more generally in several books, including *Tele-ology*, *The Politics of Pictures*, *Uses of Television* (all Routledge) and *A Short History of Cultural Studies* (Sage).

After a long and expensive apprenticeship in shiny, fast, and beautiful Italian objects – namely racing bicycles – **Margaret Henderson** eventually progressed to beautiful two-wheeled objects with engines. Four Japanese sports bikes later, and one ride of a friend’s Ducati F1, she finally got the economic base in place and bought her first Ducati, a 750 Monster. She now rides a Ducati 800 Supersport – red, of course, with white GT stripes. She has published widely in cultural and literary studies, including a study of motorcycle magazines.

**Henry Jenkins** once received a fan letter from Neil Gaiman after Jenkins testified before the US Senate Commerce Committee hearings on “Marketing Violence to Youth.” DC Comics president Paul Levitz returns his phone calls. In fact, he is working with Gaiman, Levitz, and Harlan Ellison to organize the Julius Schwartz lecture series at MIT in honor of the Silver Age editor who revitalized The Flash and Green Lantern and created The Justice League of America. He regularly teaches courses on comics as the DeFlorz Professor of the Humanities and Director of the Comparative Media Studies Program at MIT. He is the author or editor of more than 10 books on various aspects of popular culture, including *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games*, and the forthcoming *Convergence Culture*. He is now turning his attention to the challenge of understanding what it means when a genre – superheroes – totally dominates a medium – comics. He should confess, however, that this topic is in part a scam to get his endowed chair to support his comic-book-buying habit.

**Alan McKee** is a connoisseur of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (best episode: “Hush”); Terry Pratchett novels (*Carpe Jugulum*); Andrew Lloyd Webber musicals (*Phantom of the Opera*); action movies (*Aliens*) and gay porn...
Notes on Contributors

(Frisky Summer, although Johan Paulik isn’t really his type). He’s 5’10”, 35 years old, gym fit, cute, and currently single. For a photograph, email a.mckee@qut.edu.au.

Thomas McLaughlin is a lifelong pickup basketball player, beginning on the playgrounds of Philadelphia, and including more than 20 years in an ongoing faculty/staff/community “oldguygame.” His main claim to hoops fame is that he has played with a guy who used to play with Michael Jordan. He is also a lifelong fan who practically cries when basketball season begins every Fall. As a scholar interested in cultural studies and everyday practices, he has published articles on basketball ethics and on basketball as an improvised group movement practice. His book Give and Go: Basketball as a Cultural Practice, is currently being considered for publication.

Mark McLelland researches gay culture and the Internet in Japan and is the author of Queer Japan from the Pacific War to the Internet Age and co-editor of the collection Japanese Cybercultures. In his cyber travels he has made numerous important discoveries, including the fact that more gay porn is written by straight Japanese women than by gay Japanese men and that the largest audience for these “boy love” stories is Japanese schoolgirls. When not annoying Western feminists with this observation, he likes to drink Earl Grey tea and read literary biographies of famous homosexuals.

Once, while Glen Thomas was in conversation with Emma Darcy, she asked him to describe his favorite sexual fantasy. He is still trying to think of an answer. He does, however, know a lot about other people’s. He has read more romance novels than he can count, interviewed some of the most successful romance writers in Australia, and has spoken with hundreds of devoted romance readers. He is a member of the Romance Writers of Australia, and has become something of a fixture at the RWA annual convention. He has also published articles and book chapters on romance, the romance market, and romance readership. More recently, Emma Darcy told him that his work on romance would give him any number of insights into the female mind, which he should be able to use to his advantage. Sadly, this is yet to eventuate.

Sue Turnbull has been a co-convenor of the writers and readership network Sisters in Crime Australia since 1992. In this capacity, she has been a judge of the Scarlet Stiletto Short Story competition and the Ned
Kelly Awards for Australian Crime Fiction. She regularly reviews crime fiction for the Age and the Sydney Morning Herald. Her academic essays on crime fiction have appeared in such journals as The Australian Journal of Law and Society and The International Journal of Cultural Studies. She teaches Media Studies at La Trobe University when she is not contemplating crime, and is currently writing her own book about popular culture and aesthetics, entitled Moments of Intensity.
Introduction

*Alan McKee*

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**Shit Books**

When I was much younger than I am today I bought a historical romance novel – a “bodice ripper” – for my mother’s birthday, knowing that she enjoyed the occasional foray into the romantic past. Using all of the fine discrimination at my disposal, as a non-reader of the genre, I bought one that looked suitably florid. On the cover, the sky was bloodshot dark and a hero who looked like Fabio boasted a flouncy pirate’s shirt and a swooning heroine in his arms.

When she opened the present and saw the book, my mother was suitably delighted. But several weeks later I noticed that it was still lying on her bedside table, obviously unread. I asked her why. She looked a bit embarrassed, but finally admitted: “That’s not really the kind of book I like. That’s shit.” This last was said, not angrily, but apologetically. I, looking in from the outside, knowing nothing about the detail of the genre, had casually assumed that any bodice ripper was as good as any other – that these texts were completely anonymous and interchangeable, and that their readers would like any one as much as any other. I didn’t know – as my mother evidently did – that there are rules for the genre. There are rules about what makes a good bodice ripper, and what makes a bad one.

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**It All Sounds the Same to Me**

I was young then, but it’s not only young people who make this mistake. The consumption of popular culture is going on around us every day.
Hundreds of millions of people are consuming films, television programs, computer games, pornography, trashy magazines, pop music, heavy metal, rap, country and western, crime novels, romances, and hundreds of other kinds of culture. And as they do so, they are making judgments about whether they are good or bad – whether this particular T-shirt or skateboard or website is a good T-shirt or skateboard or website. The everyday consumption of popular culture involves the use of popular aesthetic systems. And yet – amazingly – the intellectuals whose job is to understand and comment on the cultures in which they live continue to know very little about these systems. Indeed, when it comes to understanding how the masses decide what examples of popular culture to consume, many intellectuals assume that it is in fact the producers of popular culture who make the decision – that consumers simply accept whatever is offered to them.

The reason for this mistake isn’t difficult to understand – for most intellectuals, popular culture is simply not their culture, and they don’t know very much about it. They may know a lot about what Theodor Adorno, Stuart Hall, or Harold Bloom say about popular culture – but very little about popular culture itself. The fashionable philosopher Slavoj Žižek, who is taken seriously by many intellectuals as a useful thinker on culture, famously wrote a book in which he claimed that Star Wars was directed by Steven Spielberg.1 Because they don’t know the culture, they don’t see the differences between different television programs, films, trashy magazines, or pornographic videos. Like grumpy old men kvetching about rock music, they say “It all sounds the same to me” – not realizing that this tells us more about them than it does about the music in question. Television researcher Sonia Livingstone quotes a group of academics complaining that: “One would have to have a passion for same-ness, amounting to mania, if after six years of viewing Coronation Street or Hawaii Five-O one still looked forward eagerly to the next episode.” 2 She points out that in fact: “Soap operas present a vision of endless ‘same-ness’ only to a non-viewer: to those who know the programme well, a wide range of subtle, complex and historically informed meanings are involved.”3 As anyone who regularly watches large amounts of television can tell you, some episodes of soap operas are better than others – and some are standout classics (the Moldavian Massacre in Dynasty; the birth of Sonia’s child to Martin in EastEnders; the wedding of Kylie and Jason in Neighbours . . .).

Some branches of intellectual thought – the much maligned “cultural studies” for example – have acknowledged that popular aesthetic pro-
cesses exist. And we have recently seen researchers begin to explore and report on some of these systems. It is now possible for the interested reader to find out how the consumers of popular music decide what is good music, and how horror film aficionados engage in processes of aesthetic distinction; how baseball fans decide which is the best team; the ways in which television viewers distinguish between good and bad sitcoms; how karaoke singers decide which performances are best; what rock fans look for in their music; how fans of television science fiction exercise their discrimination; the criteria for deciding what is good graffiti; and what the consumers of soft-core porn value in their videos. But there still remain vast areas of popular culture where only the expert consumers themselves understand how they are making the distinctions between good and bad examples; and outsiders – including people whose job it is to understand the culture around them – do not even know that these systems exist.

How do the readers of serial killer fiction decide which books are particularly good? As an expert on Internet porn sites, how would you know which ones can safely be dismissed as worthless? Why would the cognoscenti refuse Britney the title of best pop princess? Welcome to Beautiful Things in Popular Culture. The aim of this book is to bring together a collection of experts in various areas of popular culture, and have them explain – through the medium of “the best” example in their area of expertise – just how these popular aesthetic systems work. The chapters have been chosen to try to offer a wide range of different kinds of popular culture – literature (Thomas, Turnbull, Jenkins, Brooker), the visual arts (Jenkins, Brooker, Banks), music (Frith, Brennan), design (McLelland, Banks), material culture (Henderson, Gould), performance (McLaughlin, Brennan) and drama (Gwenllian Jones, Hartley, Banks). Of course this collection cannot be exhaustive. There is much, much more to learn about popular culture than there is about high culture, simply because the area of popular culture is massively larger than high. The number of texts being produced and circulated in popular films, television, magazines, novels, computer games, music, and every other medium is many orders of magnitude greater – thousands, perhaps even hundreds of thousands of times greater – than that area of human endeavor that rejoices in the title of “high culture.” And as the respected music critic and academic Simon Frith (who has contributed an account of “the best disco record” for this collection) has pointed out, even within a single area of popular culture there are many different evaluative systems,
employed by the people who make it, the people who distribute it, and the people who consume it, taking account of different genres and historical traditions, and focusing on different aspects of the texts. This collection does not even pretend to be representative – but hopefully the range of topics covered is, at least, indicative of the wide variety of kinds of production that we can bring under the title of “popular culture”; and shows that across these areas, aesthetic systems for judging their worth are in play.

Whatever They’re Given

But why does any of this matter? Who really cares how consumers of Batman comics work out which is the best story – or even if they do so in the first place?

The answer is simple. On the left and the right of intellectual politics – and continuing into wider public debates about “dumbing down,” trashy media, globalization, and media ownership – there is a shared assumption underpinning much intellectual theorizing about culture: that the masses cannot distinguish between good and bad culture. They lack the faculty for discrimination. They take whatever they are given by the producers of the culture machine.

On the right we have writers like Allan Bloom – author of The Closing of the American Mind – and Harold Bloom – who wrote The Western Canon. These Blooms (no relation, as far as I can tell) seem very grumpy. Both received substantial publicity for their defense of the “canon” – “the good old Great Books approach” to teaching culture at university. Both contend – and were received sympathetically in the media for their contention – that it is the job of universities to teach students discernment: how to discriminate between good culture (the “canon”) and trash culture (that is, mass culture). If we do not do this, they say, culture will fall into “chaos,” “mere anarchy,” or a “sea of democratic relativism.” They argue that there are “only a few” people in any nation who have “cultivation” or “the discerning spirit.” These people are not in the masses. Harold Bloom argues that “it seems clear that capital is necessary for the cultivation of aesthetic values. . . . This alliance of sublimity and financial and political power has never ceased, and presumably never can or will”; and that “[v]ery few working class readers ever matter in determining the survival of texts”, while Allan Bloom condemns the
“vulgarities” (vulgarity, *OED*, “the quality of being usual, ordinary or commonplace; an instance of this”) of the world outside the university. For the Blooms, it is only educated people who are able to distinguish good culture from bad culture: “Lack of education simply results in students’ seeking for enlightenment wherever it is readily available, without being able to distinguish between the sublime and trash.”

But it is not only elitist conservative intellectuals who believe this to be the case. A large proportion of left-leaning intellectuals draw on similar assumptions in developing their models of culture. The German philosopher Jürgen Habermas is also a popular public intellectual – indeed, he made it into *Time* magazine’s 2004 list of the top 100 “most powerful and influential people in the world,” as one of the most important “scientists and thinkers,” one of those whose “words and deeds have an outsize effect on the rest of us.” Habermas’s most commonly cited book is called *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*; in it he argues that the public sphere in Western countries is collapsing back into feudalism because of multinational corporate greed. The problem as he sees it is that the *producers* of popular culture have control over what is consumed. He says that the masses who consume popular culture have an: “inarticulate readiness to assent” to whatever culture they are offered. His belief is that working-class audiences are “intellectually lazy” and lack the ability to discriminate between good and bad culture, “because under the pressure of need and drudgery, they had neither the leisure nor the opportunity to ‘be concerned with things that do not have an immediate bearing on their physical needs’.” “The part of consumer strata with relatively little education” tend to like “relaxation and entertainment.” But it is the job of education to provide “guidance of an enlarged public towards the appreciation of a culture undamaged in its substance.”

It is true that the right and left wings of intellectual politics disagree on just *why* the masses need to learn to appreciate high culture. On the right it is argued either that high culture is simply better, in a transcendentental way, than popular culture; or that its consumption shapes consumers into being better, more moral citizens. On the left it is argued that art, unlike popular culture, challenges the status quo and leads people to think for themselves, thus having politically progressive effects. But on both political sides of the intellectual spectrum there is agreement on this fundamental issue: that the masses consume indiscriminately. The fact that they choose to consume trash is taken as all the evidence that
is needed to prove that they lack the ability to distinguish between good and bad culture.

This assumption isn’t limited to writing within universities. As noted above, commentators like Harold Bloom and Jürgen Habermas are public intellectuals. And the idea that the consumers of popular culture are indiscriminate also informs many public debates about culture. In worries about globalization, media imperialism, media ownership, and dumbing down, consumers are always presented as being incapable of making informed choices about culture. In these debates, it is always the media owners, producers, and transnational companies who are held to be responsible for negative changes to culture. It is very rare for commentators to acknowledge that consumers might be playing a part in – or even driving – these changes, by the choices they make about what to consume.

The belief that consumers of mass culture lack the ability for discernment is often articulated in public debates by writers contending that they will take “whatever they’re given”: “Most Americans feed on whatever they are given at the trough of ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN, Fox and newspapers that are by and large owned by the same companies”; “Kids will suck up whatever they are given”; “Most of America is all too eager to accept whatever they are given”; “The one-way character of broadcast media . . . encourages passivity, receptivity, inaction . . . [and consumers] learn how to be better passive recipients of whatever they’re given.” If we believe that consumers are indiscriminate, that they don’t make informed and intelligent choices between different trashy television programs, pornography, pop songs, or comic books, then we can blame everything about the changing media on the producers – for after all, it is they who give the consumers “whatever they’re given.”

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Savvy and Discerning

The odd thing is that the only people who believe that the consumers of popular culture are indiscriminate are those who are ignorant about the area. Whenever writers do research into everyday consumption practices, they discover – without exception – that they involve discrimination, decision-making, and the application and assessment of many competing criteria. The anthropologist Daniel Miller studied the culture of grocery shoppers in London, finding out – among other things – how consumers
made their decisions about which material goods to buy. He was not specifically studying the use of aesthetic criteria; but his analysis of everyday purchasing decisions (groceries) shows that even the most quotidian moments of consumption involve complex decisions about what is a good and what is a bad product. He spent a year working with 76 families, watching what they bought in supermarkets, listening to them talk about why they bought what they did, and spending time in their houses watching how those provisions were used. Grocery buying is a massively important part of consumer society. Few people buy Porsches, but everybody needs food and drink on a daily basis. The common view of shoppers who buy junk food and heavily advertised household brands is that they see the adverts for these products and then reflexively go and buy what they see. We pay little attention to the complex intellectual work involved in choosing one brand of meat pie over another. But Miller found that the housewives and other women who still make up the majority of grocery shoppers make complicated decisions about what to buy based on who they are buying for (husbands, children, other relatives), what official authorities say these people should be eating (healthy foods, of course), what these people will actually eat when it’s put in front of them, the relationships they have with these people (trying to make them happy and show them love, sometimes trying to influence and change them), the messages that advertisers have circulated around products, and the question of “quality” – whether a more expensive product might, in the long run, prove cheaper if it is better made and will last longer.

Everyday purchasing decisions involve complex intellectual work. Aesthetic criteria play their part in making these decisions – and not just for highly educated, middle-aged American professors of literary studies. The journalist Alexis Petridis spent an afternoon with a 9-year-old girl who loves pop music – perhaps the ultimate icon of the helpless consumer in thrall to the decision-making of multinational corporations – and found that even here, consumption is never indiscriminate:

Olivia is nine years old and she loves pop. These days, troubled music journalists spend a lot of their time clutching their brows in despair and demanding to know who buys all these dreadful, anodyne, manufactured pop singles . . . Olivia does . . . I have given her 20 pounds, let her loose in HMV and told her to buy what she wants . . . [A] lot of older music fans . . . like to believe that your average pre-teen fan is devoid of musical taste, susceptible to the most basic advertising techniques and incapable
of making a considered choice about what music they like . . . Kids will
buy anything as long as it’s been on the telly [they say] . . . But [they]
haven’t watched Olivia carefully dissecting her morning’s purchases . . .
She’s . . . savvy and discerning . . . Olivia seems to have eclectic taste, and
her opinions about music worked out . . . She prefers Pink to Britney
Spears, not because of her hair or clothes, but because “her lyrics are better,
she sings about different things, about herself and being angry. Britney’s
songs are all the same as each other” . . . [Later] she lets out what sounds
suspiciously like a cynical cackle. I came here expecting to be horrified by
the insane caprices of a weenybopper, but, frankly, I rather like the cut of
Olivia’s jib²⁴

When research is done into the decisions involved in the consumption
of popular culture, it repeatedly shows that these decisions do involve
discrimination. By contrast, the assumption that consumers of popular
culture are indiscriminate seems to rest on the following chain of reason-
ing: these people consume trash; it is not possible that anybody could
make an informed decision to choose trash rather than high culture;
therefore they are not making informed decisions. But this syllogism
doesn’t follow. It assumes that it is not possible for aesthetic systems to
exist against whose criteria trash might be judged as “good” culture. And
this is wrong. For there do exist just such systems: detailed aesthetic
systems by which the consumers of popular culture come to decide that
Red Dragon is a good serial killer novel, while other serial killer novels
are less worthwhile; that Michael Jordan is an outstanding basketball
player; that Brian Michael Bendis stands out for the quality of his super-
hero comic book work.

How do we know this? We have the research. You have the research –
here in your hands, with this guide to Beautiful Things in Popular
Culture. Each chapter in this book lays out in detail the criteria that can
be used to distinguish between good and bad popular culture, and shows
that connoisseurs are using these in their discussions about their areas of
interest. Which is not to say that social scientists have it right, and that
we can explain consumer behavior as a series of rational decisions follow-
ing straightforward logical rules – any more than we can reduce the
history of Shakespeare criticism to a series of diagrams, lists of attributes,
and statistical processes.²⁵ The creation, discussion, and circulation of
these popular aesthetic systems are imaginative, unruly acts requiring
inspiration, intelligence, and occasional bouts of extreme irrationality.
Just like any other act of creativity.
And when we see the creative intellectual work involved in making popular aesthetic judgments, it changes the way that we imagine culture working. We can no longer accept that popular consumption is indiscriminate. We can no longer believe that consumers will take “whatever they are given.” Which means that we cannot argue that consumers have no place in explaining important structural changes that we observe in our cultures – globalization or dumbing down, for example. For consumers are making informed decisions about what is “good” and “bad” in their preferred areas of popular culture. We must at least acknowledge their voices as contributing to the debate about what should be available in culture, what kinds of texts should be consumed, and what value those texts bring to the people who consume them. Too often we think about computer games, violent television, pornography, and even popular music as having “effects” on people. But there is intellectual work involved, discriminating work involved, in the choices about which pornography, which pop music, which computer games to consume. Consumers do not just do whatever they are told, or buy whatever they are offered.

Are We the Masses?

Each chapter in this collection is written by a connoisseur in the area. Each of them is an intellectual – or so I am claiming, although not all might be happy with the label – in the sense that the writers hold jobs in the “knowledge class” and make their money through the intellectual labor of generating and disseminating ideas. Most – though not all – work as academics, but they’re also journalists, book reviewers, music critics, presidents of fan clubs, and judges of prizes.

These writers are not typical of popular culture consumers – they’re unusually intelligent, articulate, and often very funny. That’s why I asked them to contribute to this collection. But at the same time, they are ordinary consumers in the sense that although their discriminating consumption of their area of culture might differ in degree from those of other consumers, it does not differ in kind. Not all consumers are connoisseurs of every kind of culture; but the authors demonstrate that the evaluative systems they are drawing on in making their choices about what is best also belong to the wider communities of consumers – not just those who work as intellectuals. For intellectuals have now begun to realize that there is no line between them and “the masses”; that the
masses “may be just like them”; or indeed, that the masses may even be us. As one media researcher puts it: “Although my status as an academic defines me as a member of an elite group . . . I am at the same time a fully paid member of the mass audience.” The contributors to this collection are all consumers of popular culture at the same time as being outstanding intellectuals.

They also all understand – precisely because they know their areas and the ways in which popular aesthetic systems are employed in the practices of everyday consumption – that claims about what is “the best” in each area are always provisional. Such claims never tell a simple truth – they are always gambits, claims to power, and to the right to have one’s own tastes validated. There is no final agreement among the aficionados of sneakers that the Nike Air Max Classic TW is the best sneaker; there will always be experts on Xena: Warrior Princess who will argue that Ares is the best villain; while a certain contingent of gay male porn connoisseurs will insist that straightcollegemen.com must be acknowledged as the best website for men who have sex with men. The claims offered in this book are not objective truths. Rather, the authors are playing the game. In every case, the claim that is made for “best” is a reasonable one. Other connoisseurs in each area would at least recognize the “best,” would realize that it is uncontroversial for an expert in the area to make such a claim, and understand the criteria used and the arguments made for it – even if they do not personally agree that this is the absolute best. The authors all know that the question of which people are allowed to legitimate their tastes as “the best” is a politicized one. The call to the authors in this collection was a cheeky one – to take the methodologies of exegesis and appreciation, which are agreed by intellectuals to be acceptable ones when applied to art, and to turn them onto vulgar, trashy objects that are not normally granted such a dignity. The object of the collection is not to provide a canon which interested students in popular culture must learn off by heart (although I personally have found the descriptions of the “beautiful things” to be fascinating and convincing). It is rather to give us a glimpse into popular aesthetic systems, and how they function in the consumption of mass culture. In most other contexts these authors would spend their time deconstructing the social functioning of traditional aesthetic systems; I’m grateful to them for indulging my call to a strategic use of them in this collection – and for playing the game so well.
Of course, given that my interest is ultimately in the systems of popular aesthetics used by consumers in deciding what is good and what is bad culture, I could equally well have put together a collection called *Absolute Crap in Popular Culture*, where aficionados wrote excoriating essays describing the very worst examples of their areas of expertise – “The worst romantic comedy” (*Forces of Nature*, perhaps); or “The worst rapper” (Vanilla Ice?). There are two reasons I chose to go with the Beautiful Things instead. First, I don’t think that *Absolute Crap in Popular Culture* is quite as catchy a title; and second, it’s my feeling that there’s quite enough commentary already in circulation that’s keen to focus on the worst examples of popular culture – and not enough looking at the beauty of the best of it.

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**Guidelines For Their Choices**

What will happen to our cultures if the masses cease to look to intellectuals for guidance about what is good culture and what is bad? Do we necessarily face “chaos” and “anarchy,” a “sea of relativism,” as the critics on the right worry? With those on the left, should we be concerned that the working classes, if we do not lead them to appreciate art, will be lost to the “intellectually lazy” world of popular culture, unable to distinguish for themselves between what is valuable and what is worthless? With those who worry about the globalization of the media, and about dumbing down, should we be concerned that consumers of popular culture will take “whatever they’re given”?

I am confident that none of these is true. When audiences don’t rely on intellectuals to guide them in their cultural consumption, what actually happens is that they engage for themselves in detailed debates about what’s good, what’s bad, and how you would make these judgments. The consumers of popular culture already have aesthetic systems in place, which play a part in the intellectual work involved in making decisions about which trashy magazines to buy, which vulgar television programs to view, which dirty websites to visit. We may not approve of everything that they consume – but we can’t leap from that fact to a claim that therefore there is no discrimination involved in their choices. Harold Bloom writes, with a flourish as though he is making an irrefutable point about the intellectual bankruptcy of those who challenge the traditional Western canon: “Batman comics, Mormon theme parks, television,