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Reflections on Popular Culture and Philosophy

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Abstract: Contributions to the philosophical genre of *popular culture and philosophy* aim to popularize philosophical ideas with the help of references to the products of popular (mass) culture with TV series like *The Simpsons*, Hollywood blockbusters like *The Matrix* and *Jurassic Park*, or popular music groups like *Metallica*. While being commercially successful, books in this comparatively new genre are often criticized for lacking scientific rigor, providing a shallow cultural commentary, and having little didactic value to foster philosophical understanding. This paper discusses some of these methodological and didactic objections and seeks to encourage a constructive discussion of concerns with the genre. It shows how the genre similar to previous attempts to foster public understanding of philosophy and that it is a methodologically viable approach to reach a broad range of readers with diverse informational preferences and educational backgrounds. Considering what makes this approach to the popularization of philosophical thinking successful will shed light on some of the criteria for popularization of philosophy in general.

Keywords: popular culture and philosophy, popularization, philosophical genres, science communication

1 Introduction

Pseudo-philosophy needs to be replaced by philosophy like pseudo-science needs to be counteracted by science. (Irwin 2006)

In the early 2000s, a new way of popularizing philosophical thinking emerged. Philosophers like William Irwin and Georg Reisch began to edit volumes on two seemingly disparate cultural domains: popular culture on the one hand and academic philosophy on the other. Bridging the gap between these two realms, philosophers started to illustrate and explain philosophical ideas with the help of popular TV series, movies, song lyrics and video games. Books from this genre – for

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instance, *The Simpsons and Philosophy* (Irwin, Conrad, and Skoble 2001) and *Star Trek and Philosophy* (Decker and Eberl 2008; Decker, Eberl, and Irwin 2016) – have found their way into most well sorted bookstores. Addressing laypeople with no formal training in philosophy, these books attract a readership interested in philosophical investigations into their favorite format of pop-cultural entertainment. While readers obviously have enjoyed such volumes, as the number of published volumes in this genre indicates, some academic philosophers have been vocal about their criticism of this genre (Lawrence 2007) and within the genre, a self-critical awareness of the limits of the literary format has been voiced as well (Irwin 2006; Irwin and Garcia 2006; Snaevarr 2008). Off the record, some philosophers even lament pseudo-intellectual fandom, a lack of argumentative, conceptual, and terminological precision, and of cultural criticism – the opponents of this genre rate it as a kind of second-tier philosophy. William Irwin, one of the founders of this philosophical genre and the editor of the *Open Courts Popular Culture and Philosophy* series, has defended the genre against these accusations, saying, “[...] philosophy needs to be popularized, as science needs to be popularized, and philosophy professors should be involved in the popularization of philosophy, rather than leaving the task to well-meaning amateurs.” (Irwin 2010)

In this contribution, I will reflect on the value of the genre of popular culture and philosophy for the popularization of philosophical ideas and methods and make a case in favor of this genre. In this regard, I will defend the view that popular culture and philosophy is a legitimate and important way to popularize philosophical thinking. I also want to encourage further engagement with popular culture in philosophical writings and classroom settings. I will first differentiate between various attempts to popularize scientific knowledge in general and philosophical ideas in particular and discuss intellectual aspirations associated with popularized philosophy (in 2). Then I identify some common features of the genre of popular culture and philosophy on the basis of paradigmatic examples as well as writing instructions for authors given by series editors (in 3). Against this background, I then depict several reservations against the philosophical genre in question (in 4). In the following two sections I describe the socio-historical tradition of this genre (in 5) and address methodological concerns (in 6).

2 Popularization of Philosophy

Contributors to the genre of popular culture and philosophy leave the “ivory tower” of academic philosophy (Shapin 2012). This is necessary in the context of science communication, since writings in academic philosophy, in particular research articles and monographs, are often hard to comprehend for lay people,

thus philosophers should, according to editorial requirements of volumes in this genre (see Section 3), (i) mitigate certain technical complications in philosophical writings.¹ This includes the reduction of the usage of technical terms, logical formalizations of all kinds, complicated thought experiments, extensive historical reconstructions of thought traditions, as well as giving a representative (non-selective) overview on the relevant research literature with proper references. Also (ii), instead of focusing on abstract arguments, thought experiments and illustrative examples from high culture, authors should focus on popular culture to explain or illustrate philosophical ideas. The former (subtractive) feature reduces barriers of understanding for readers without a formal training in philosophy, while the latter (topical) feature ensures that the readers' continuous attention is directed at the philosophical content and argumentative structure, since it is embedded in a familiar narrative. Thereby, philosophical lay people can easily learn something unfamiliar, like important features of classical utilitarianism, such as the principle of utility and the hedonistic calculus, without being overstrained by seemingly tedious philosophical investigations. More technically speaking, popular culture and philosophy is an attempt to reduce *esoteric textual features*, i.e. the application of formal and semi-formal tools, structural arrangement of textual content, argumentative schemes and intra- as well as intertextual markers (like cross-references, references to research literature), which require a solid understanding of scientific writing in order to be interpreted correctly. At the same time, this also means an effort to strengthen *exoteric textual features*, i.e. aspects of the text which do not require any particular training in scientific or philosophical writing. This includes, in particular, the usage of familiar narratives from popular culture, which require little interpretative effort by readers, since background knowledge about these narratives is readily available.

Popular culture and philosophy as a philosophical genre can be interpreted as just one approach for philosophers to reach the general public and popularize philosophical thinking. Other approaches include classic formats of science communication like public lectures, panel discussions, interviews, articles in Cultural Section and non-fiction books for a general audience, which avoid philosophical jargon and focus on illustrative and publicly interesting issues. Novel formats in science communication comprise of blog posts on personal websites, posts on social media platforms, online videos, video streams, and podcasts. Also, novel formats for organizing more mutual engagements between experts and lay people play a bigger and bigger role in scientific communication;

¹ With “layperson” I denote an individual who lacks professional training in the field of philosophy or another field of science, while an “expert” is an individual who received the respective professional training (for details see page 6).

these include science cafés, student or science parliaments, junior science cafés, citizens' conferences, and 21st century town hall meetings (Riise 2012). Against this background, Kappel and Holmen (2019) point out that there are currently two paradigms of proper science communication, these include a *dissemination paradigm* of science communication, which conceptualizes it as the unilateral transmission of scientific knowledge from experts to the public, and a *public participation paradigm* of science communication, which emphasizes the necessity of well-organized and informed reciprocal communication processes between experts on the one side and lay people and decision-makers on the other side.² These two paradigms obviously endorse different aims and methods for public outreach. Whereas the dissemination paradigm generally encourages formal training and classical formats of science communication through mass media (like popular science books, public lectures, television documentaries, and more recently science blogs), the public participation paradigm instead emphasizes the value of mutual public encounters and the active participation of representatives from a diverse range of peer social groups.

With regard to the aim of science communication, authors like Kappel and Holmen (2019), Sánchez-Mora (2016), Burns, O'Connor, and Stocklmayer (2003) identify a plurality of aims in science communication. It can be done in order to (a) share novel, in some cases hotly disputed research results, (b) inform lay people about scientific consent and settled research debates, (c) evoke excitement and public appreciation for science, i.e. a specific field of scientific inquiry³ and (d) increase scientific literacy, meaning the capacity of lay people to correctly assess information presented as scientific knowledge. Furthermore (e), science communication can be understood as an active effort to influence political, societal, legal, and economic decision-making processes.

This broad range of aims (a–e) hints at the idea that one of the primary reasons for science communication is the acceptance of social responsibility through the spread of scientific knowledge, since scientific knowledge is seen as valuable for rational decision making. In research ethics, such a principle of social responsibility, i.e. that scientists have an individual or collective *prima facie* obligation to avoid damages to society and bring about societal benefits by providing technical and epistemic services, can be further justified by an argument from fair compensation (Shamoo and Resnik 2015, p. 284). According to this argument, scientists as well as research institutions greatly benefit from society,

² A similar distinction can be found in (Akin 2017; Bauer 2009; Trench 2008).

³ In the following I use the concept of science in a rather wide sense, comprising all fields of research commonly found in universities, which include all disciplines ranging from natural sciences, arts and humanities, medicine, and legal studies.

which provides research funding, infrastructure, and legal frameworks. Thus, society as a whole and specific social subsystem – in particular legal, political, and economic institutions – have a well-justified interest in the production of socially valuable knowledge and in the provision of research-related services as compensation for providing a complex socio-economic framework and resources for the social institution of science. Such a well-justified interest corresponds to a responsibility to consider society's interest in agenda setting, research conduct, and the dissemination of research results. A second line of argument emphasizes social responsibilities of individual scientists, which arise from the factual and practical knowledge on certain subjects that scientists acquire during academic training and during their research activities (professional experience). This argument is obviously based on the assumption that high degrees of professional agency found in scientists come with special responsibilities towards society as a whole or social subsystems, which would be overdemanding for lay people.

The acceptance of social responsibility is certainly easier for scientific disciplines aiming at more or less directly applicable knowledge, like knowledge from epidemiology and virology about the safety and efficiency of vaccines and the usefulness of quarantine procedures during a pandemic. Philosophy, in contrast, seems to have no universally agreed upon, uncontroversial concept of service to the general public. Philosophers often even struggle with the idea of social responsibility. Yet the popularization of philosophical knowledge and methods of thinking is widely considered as socially responsible, since philosophical knowledge on certain issues can help philosophical lay people in ethical or political decision making. This is especially apparent in context of practical philosophy and some fields of (applied) theoretical philosophy. For instance, knowledge on the problem of demarcation in general philosophy of science, which is about the distinction between science and pseudoscience, can help lay people to identify specific instances of pseudoscience or science denialism. Likewise, knowledge on the concept of speciesism in animal ethics, i.e. the discrimination of non-animals due to their species membership, might evoke a more morally attentive perspective on the treatment of non-human animals in our society. In addition to this, many philosophical movements incorporate the idea that the adoption of certain philosophical systems can be a prerequisite of a good life – the latter is a more old-fashioned perspective on philosophy, which was certainly more established in ancient ethics focusing on eudaimonia – which means being free from emotional disturbance.

Realistically, these examples seem to be rather thin evidence for the thesis that the popularization of philosophy via the writing of essays in popular culture and philosophy is an effective way to accept social responsibility. It seems more probable that popular culture and philosophy is at most a way for experts (philosophers) to evoke excitement and public appreciation for philosophy in lay people.

Rather broadly, I will later distinguish between two types of popularizing philosophical thinking, i.e. making philosophical thoughts and ways of thinking available for lay people. But before that, it is necessary to explain the differences between lay people and experts, because typically the popularization of philosophical thinking establishes bridges of understanding between those who received philosophical training and those who are merely interested in philosophy or have only basic philosophical knowledge. With “lay people”, I denote individuals who lack a professional training in philosophy or another field of science. The “epistemic gap” or “asymmetry” between philosophers and lay people is relative to specific types of knowledge. For instance, a philosopher with expertise in climate ethics might engage in a discussion with an otherwise highly skilled and knowledgeable physician about the ethics of climate migration. In this context, the physician is a layperson *relative to a specific type of ethical knowledge*, while the philosopher is a layperson relative to a specific type of medical knowledge. Popularization of philosophical knowledge means an active attempt to somewhat level out the epistemic asymmetry between experts and lay people without referring to formal training.

Furthermore, I propose to distinguish between *public advocacy* for a specific philosophical idea (like the adoption of ethical veganism by animal rights activists, work in ethics committees on bioethical issues etc.), *cultural, political and social criticism by philosophers* (like criticism of the restriction of liberty rights during the COVID-19 pandemic) and the *popularization of philosophical knowledge*.⁴ Although public advocacy and criticism often go hand in hand, they are not necessarily connected, nor are advocacy or criticism necessarily done in a popular fashion, intended to reach large parts of our society.⁵ Against the background of these conceptual considerations, I further differentiate two types of literary attempts⁶ to *popularize philosophy* with the help of philosophical writings by considering the originality of the produced text as a distinguishing feature: First,

⁴ See the contribution of Frauke Albersmeier in this special issue.

⁵ It rather seems as if – except very few exceptions like Peter Singer, Michael Sandel, Amartya Sen, Jürgen Habermas, Martha Nussbaum, Ronald Dworkin, Daniel Dennett etc. – the majority of publicly speaking philosophers primarily reach niche groups interested in certain issues (e.g. veganism, atheism, global justice, liberty rights etc.) consisting of comparatively well-educated individuals.

⁶ I will neither look into the details of non-literary approaches to popularization, like public lectures, nor novel teaching strategies, which include references to popular culture. For the latter, please see (Bronson 2012; Daspit and Weaver 2000; Duran 1983; Gingell and Brandon 2000; Irwin and Johnson 2010; Malloy 2012; Olivier 2000; Schurtz 2017; Smith 1995) and in particular (Bronson 2012; Irwin and Johnson 2010), who aim to introduce students in specific philosophical fields with the help of certain works from popular culture.

the popularization of philosophical knowledge can take the form of the production of an original piece of philosophically inspired literature (original popularization). Here, authors focus on philosophical ideas which are of special importance to them and originate from their own philosophical stance in research debates, while not necessarily adhering to conventional standards of academic writing. Typical examples would include some literary works of Jean Paul Sartre (e.g. *Huis clos*, 1944) and Albert Camus (e.g. *Le mythe de Sisyphe*, 1942), which incorporate existentialist themes.

From such forms of original popularization I distinguish, second, writings that can be described as attempts to an “illustrative popularization”. While in original popularization an author *creates a piece of philosophical writing* with fictional content solely or primarily written to bring about a philosophical point (hence the criteria of originality), authors intending to engage in illustrative popularization refer to *already existing* (preconceived) stories by other authors and cultural phenomena in order to make few selected philosophical ideas more understandable. This practice of referencing does include cultural products, which are especially amusing for the recipients and might include things associated with (a) high culture (e.g. classical plays, classical music, certain forms of jazz music, high literature etc.)⁷, (b) popular culture (see below) and (c) common culture, i.e. widely shared cultural practices like driving a car, being married, or eating breakfast.⁸

Common culture and *popular culture* are in my view distinguished from each other in terms of statistical frequency, stability of frequency over time and individual degrees of freedoms based on essential and second-order preferences. Elements of popular culture have high, but comparatively instable frequencies in a domain determined by non-essential preferences. For instance, it is a part of our common culture to use the Internet. As such, people from almost all societies on Earth have access to the Internet (high frequency), it is *ceteris paribus* a stable cultural phenomenon and it satisfies an essential need for information and a multitude of services. Yet, preferences for specific types of online services or specific types of information on the Internet can be a part of popular culture, since they can be found in a specific peer groups with particular medial preferences, which might change over time. Take the preference to watch, comment, and rearrange music from South Korean singer Park Jae-sang (Psy) – like the song

⁷ Some works usually seen as an example for high art or high literature are so popular that they qualify as popular culture and are thus debated in contributions, which belong to the genre of popular culture and philosophy, like *The Catcher in the Rye* by J. D. Salinger (Dromm and Salter 2012).

⁸ Interestingly, many writings in philosophy include references to a-c, primarily cultural references in the sense of a and c.

“Gangnam Style”. The video to this song was very popular in 2012 and up to today (November 2021) has been watched 4,241,434,056 (4 billion) times.⁹ This is an example of *popular* culture, since the overall frequency of media reception was high for a period of time and has now gradually declined due to a lack of interest in Psy’s newer music. The latter obviously depends on non-essential preferences (second order preferences) for a specific type of musical entertainment.¹⁰ In the following, I will identify important genre defining features of the genre of popular culture and philosophy and give a short overview over of the literature published in this genre.

3 Genre-defining Features of Popular Culture and Philosophy

It is obviously the case that philosophers relate in at least two ways to popular culture, they are doing *philosophical research on popular culture* and the illustration of philosophy with the help of popular culture. The former includes a wide range of philosophical investigations, including conceptions of love in philosophy starting with platonic conceptions up to modern depictions in popular culture (Secomb 2007), gender ideals influenced by Barbie dolls (Wright 2003), philosophical approaches to mass art (Carroll 1998; Kelly and Carroll 2000; Lopes 2000; Messaris 2000), Christian critique of the depiction of ethics in popular culture (O’Connor 2004), investigations into the relevance of certain approaches to culture philosophy, like social theory (Barron 2012; Light 2014), the representation of philosophical feminism in popular culture (Crasnow and Waugh 2014), post-modernism and popular culture (Story 2011), theological issues like the depiction of god, sin, and salvation in popular culture (Cobb 2005), and investigations from philosophers of medicine and research ethics into the meaning of medical concepts like placebo effect in popular culture (Marshall 2004). This heterogenous list of philosophical investigations shows that philosophical research *on* popular culture is obviously not limited to a specific philosophical paradigm or movement, apparently not limited with regard to certain topics, and is vastly different in

⁹ <https://youtu.be/9bZkp7q19f0>, retrieved November 7, 2021.

¹⁰ For the time being I leave it with this rather rough differentiation. Yet one needs to mention that essential characteristics of popular culture are debated in cultural theory (Storey 2018; Strinati 2004). For an overview on theories on popular culture, see (Cobb 2005). Definitions were discussed for instance in (Parker 2011) and (Irwin 2006). Also, some scholars like (Berman 1991) work towards a clear-cut distinction between popular culture and populism.

ambition – starting from the descriptive analysis of popular culture to cultural criticism.

In popular culture and philosophy, the depiction of elements from popular culture serves as a literary framework to convey philosophical ideas, which is per se not uncommon in philosophy. For instance, principlism, based on common-morality in biomedical ethics (Beauchamp and Childress 2001), was criticized in (Arras 2009) as a “Borg-like approach”, since principle ethicists can incorporate a variety of cultural values and norms into their approach.¹¹ Arras makes a reference here to a species from the Star Trek franchise (the Borg), which consists of cybernetically enhanced humanoids who incorporate other species members and their cultural traits into their hive-like machine collective, thereby destroying individuality. The difference between such sporadic pop-cultural references and the genre of popular culture and philosophy is that the latter requires a continuous focus on the pop-cultural element chosen to illustrate a philosophical issue, while the former utilizes pop-cultural references *without continuous focus* on a fictional narrative. I focus on the latter phenomenon in writings published in the major series of this genre, yet is important to highlight that some authors have a broader understanding of popular culture and philosophy, which goes beyond the written word. For instance (Cox and Levine 2012; LaRocca and Corrigan 2017; Litch 2002; Litch and Karofsky 2015), investigate the possibility of disseminating philosophical ideas through movies and focus on specific genres, like Film Noir (Conrad 2006).

With “philosophical genre” I denote a specific type of textual format defined by *formal features* like the usage of technical terms (terminology), subtle and transparent argumentative structure, sophisticated methods used to introduce philosophical concepts, specific ways to reference philosophical literature and the extent of intertextuality and type of quality control (e.g. no review, editorial review, peer review) (etc.). Also, some genres are partially defined by *thematic features* like philosophical approaches used in a philosophical investigation (like a transcendental analysis, rational reconstruction, causal modelling etc.), range of topics investigated in a single investigation, consideration of scientific evidence from natural and social sciences (etc.). Traditional examples for philosophical genres include letters, treatises, confessions, meditations, (informal) essays, symposia, commentaries, disputations, and dialogues (Heller 2012; Peters 2009). Modern genres within the tradition of modern analytic philosophy include, for instance, research articles in peer-reviewed journals, in which the author is limited

¹¹ Principlism is a normative approach in bioethics (in particular medical ethics), which uses principles like respect for autonomy, beneficence, nonmaleficence and justice as a basis for the deliberation of morally problematic cases – for instance in medical practice.

to 5000–10,000 words of text length, focusses on a novel research issue (a novel problem, new argument in an ongoing debate etc.), carefully reconstructs hitherto done research, uses formal and semi-formal philosophical tools (like conceptual explication, rational reconstruction, but not typically a Kantian transcendental analysis) and focusses on the application of a specific philosophical framework from analytic philosophy within an often highly specialized research debate or produces a text with a high degree of intertextuality by comparing a multitude of different views.¹² The genre of popular culture and philosophy is vastly different from this way of writing, as I will show in the following.

In 1999, Open Court launched a ‘Philosophy and Popular Culture’ series, edited by Bill Irwin. The first title, *Seinfeld and Philosophy: A Book about Everything and Nothing*, was followed by dozens of volumes with a focus on popular culture. There are currently four series with volumes on popular culture and philosophy on the market, these include Wiley-Blackwell’s *The Blackwell Philosophy and Culture Series* (edited by William Irwin),¹³ Open Court’s *Popular Culture and Philosophy Series* (edited by George A. Reisch),¹⁴ The University Press of Kentucky’s *The Philosophy of Popular Culture* (edited by Mark T. Conard)¹⁵ and Rowman & Littlefield/Lexington Books: *The Philosophy of Popular Culture* (edited by Mark T. Conard)¹⁶.

The volumes in these series include comparatively brief, simply written and philosophically reduced – more on this later – investigations into philosophical aspects of various instances of popular culture. There are volumes on sports like baseball (Bronson 2011), basketball (Walls and Bassham 2008), soccer (Richards 2010), golf (Wible 2010) and football (Austin 2008), but also sporting events like the Olympic Games (Reid and Austin 2012). Some volumes focus on the whole opus of popular authors, in particular authors of science fiction and fantasy novels like those by Neil Gaiman (Bealer, Luria, and Yuen 2012), while other volumes comprise contributions on singular works or a books series written by one author, like

¹² It is quite hard to give exact criteria for a research article in analytic philosophy, since single- and multi-criteria approaches typically comprising naïve circumscriptions like “conceptual clarity” and can often be met by contributions from other philosophical traditions. For instance, a reader of a medieval philosophical text might consider Thomas Aquinas *De Veritate* (Thomas von Aquin 1986) as an example of a text which is conceptually transparent. Rightly the text is considered a prime example for the scholastic literary genre of a quaestio (Sweeney 2021).

¹³ <https://andphilosophy.com/>, retrieved 22-09-21.

¹⁴ <https://www.popularcultureandphilosophy.com/>, retrieved 22-09-21.

¹⁵ <https://www.kentuckypress.com/search-results/?series=the-philosophy-of-popular-culture>, retrieved 22-09-21.

¹⁶ https://rowman.com/Action/SERIES/_/LEXPPC/The-Philosophy-of-Popular-Culture, retrieved 22-09-21.

Frank Herbert's *Dune* (Nicholas 2011). Some volumes are even more focused and thematize single characters within novels, like Hannibal Lecter from William Thomas Harris III's *Silence of the Lambs* (Westfall 2016) or Ian Fleming's James Bond (South and Held 2006). While human characters are in the majority here, fictional creatures found in folklore, mythology and religion as well as fantasy, horror and science fiction are also selected as topics, like Frankenstein (Michaud 2013) and the Christian devil (Arp 2014). Besides volumes on popular literature, in particular cult movies like *The Big Lebowski* (Fosl 2012) and TV series like *The Big Bang Theory* (Kowalski 2012) as well as franchises like *Star Wars* (Decker and Eberl 2005) and *Star Trek* (Decker and Eberl 2008; Decker, Eberl, and Irwin 2016) are common in the various series on popular culture and philosophy.

While rather topically focused volumes are a certainly proper means to target specific groups of fans, say *Star Trek* fans, some volumes address whole genres like western (McMahon and Csaki 2010), science fiction (Sanders 2008) and film noir (Conard 2006) or movie directors like the Coen Brothers (Conrad 2009), Tim Burton (McMahon 2014), Martin Scorsese (Conard 2007), Spike Lee (Conard 2011), Stanley Kubrick (Abrams 2007) and Steven Spielberg (Kowalski 2008), without being limited to a specific movie genre. Since music is a huge part of our popular culture, several volumes exist on popular musicians like Bruce Springsteen (Auxier and Anderson 2011), Bob Dylan (Vernezze and Porter 2005) and bands like Pink Floyd (Reisch 2007) and Metallica (Irwin 2007). Comedians and comedy groups can also be found, examples include the books on the philosophy of Monty Python and Louis C.K. (Hardcastle and Reisch 2006a; Ralkowski 2016). In addition to this, volumes on musical genres were published, for instance on philosophical issues in hip-hop music (Darby and Shelby 2005). A few volumes concern video games and video game series like Nintendo's *Zelda* (Cuddy 2010) and Blizzard's *World of Warcraft* (Cuddy and Nordlinger 2009), social media networks like Facebook (Wittkower 2010), technical products like Apple iPods (Wittkower 2008), leading figures in the technology sector like Steve Jobs (Shawn 2015) and iconic motorcycles built by manufacturer Harley Davidson (Rollin et al. 2012). Other volumes are hard to characterize, they debate philosophical issues in various social practices like bullshit in discourses (Hardcastle and Reisch 2006b)¹⁷ and the Atkins diet (Heldke, Mommer, and Pineo 2005).

¹⁷ "Bullshit" here refers neither to bovine excrement nor a naïve pejorative judgement on certain things, like proclaiming obvious falsehoods or being incredible obnoxious in debates by making a stance for a position no one – not even the speaker – really endorses. Rather "bullshit" refers here to the elaborated philosophical understanding proposed by Harry G. Frankfurt, according to which bullshit is a *deceptive misrepresentation of somebody's own thoughts, feelings, or attitudes* (Frankfurt 2005). Incidentally, the concept of bullshit in Frankfurt's philosophy must be seen in

A closer inspection of “Alien and Philosophy” (Ewing and Decker 2017) can give an idea of some important features of such an edition with contributions to the genre of popular culture and philosophy. The edition comprises of 19 relatively short articles, each about 10 pages long, which are organized in six parts, roughly covering moral issues like the personal identity and moral status of androids, business ethics of the fictitious Weyland-Yutani Corporation, the moral psychology of several film characters, the feeling of fear and horror (*Alien* (1979) is a science fiction horror movie), sex and gender issues relating to the main protagonists Ellen Ripley as well as perspectives from continental philosophy on the absurd nature of the alien monster. The edition has no unified philosophical perspective and the authors come from a wide range of philosophical traditions, common is only the shared interest in the *Alien* franchise. For instance, I wrote a contribution to this edition in which I made a case against the thesis that the main protagonist of the *Alien* franchise should be considered a feminist heroine. Instead, I argued that Ellen Ripley is (a) probably motivated by a professional ethos and (b) a feminist interpretation of this fictional character is probably sexist, since it is not based on the characters explicit reasons for certain moral decisions, but on her gender identity (Christian 2017).

What literary features do contributions to the genre of popular culture and philosophy commonly have? According to William Irwin, contributions to collections about popular culture and philosophy (1) refer to popular culture and not to high culture, (2) are intended to reach a philosophically interested, yet often not professionally educated readership and (3) draw interest on philosophical ideas and ways of thinking (Irwin 2014; 2010). Further textual characteristics include (4) either a *pedagogical model*, according to which popular culture serves as an example to explain philosophy, or an *applied philosophy model*, according to which philosophical interpretation of popular culture opens up a new dimension of a particular element of popular culture (Huss 2014). Also, (5) virtually all contributions to this genre are non-original in the sense of not making a novel philosophical argument to a debate, instead the conservative focus is on the depiction of an already established philosophical insight. A final (6) important characteristic is the informal mode of depiction of these contributions. This means that authors are expected to avoid philosophical jargon (e.g. “post hoc”) and terminology (e.g. “transcendental”, all kinds of “-isms”), formal and semi-formal language, complex sentence structure and extensive reference to research literature. Many

context of his successor book on truth (Frankfurt 2006), in which he makes a case for caring about the concepts of truth and falsehood.

editors even limit the number of references, consequently expecting authors to avoid extensive referencing to research literature and instead focus on few selected primary sources.

What does a piece of writing that satisfies the criteria mentioned look like? The following scene from Becky Chambers' book *To be taught, if fortunate* (Chambers 2019) can serve as a starting point for a short piece written in the sense of popular culture and philosophy.¹⁸ A part of the plot in *To be taught, if fortunate* is as following: The crew of the spaceship Marian lands on hitherto unexplored planet. While exploring the strange new environment, a group of jellyfish-like creatures attach to the Marian's hull. While the alien jellyfish's behavior is scientifically interesting for the crew, it also posits a problem for the continuation of the mission, since the crew cannot start the Marian's engines without killing the alien creatures. The crewmembers therefore debate whether their intrusion into an alien habitat was morally acceptable from the beginning, as well as whether their removing and possibly killing the natural inhabitants of the planet is morally acceptable.

A typical contribution to popular culture and philosophy could use such a partial plot to illustrate different types of moral approaches in environmental and animal ethics by referring to the debates between the crew, who try to answer the question whether they have a moral right to kill the sentient beings on the ship's hull for the sake of continuing their mission. An author could start with a brief summary of the short story, then focus on the events in the chapter and finally attribute specific types of moral theories to the crewmen. One important feature of many contributions in this genre is that philosophical comments are nested in familiar fictional narratives. For instance, a philosopher could first focus on one of the crewmen's right-based arguments for protecting the alien life forms from the fire of the spaceship's engines and then could for instance explain why such an argument can be understood as an example for a deontological approach to animal ethics, which is a family of theories which (generally speaking) highlight rights of non-human animals and populations and responsibilities of human towards these entities.

18 Becky Chambers is an American science fiction writer who is best known for her Wayfarer book series. Her stories are character-driven, dialog-based development with very slow narrative pacing and a complete lack of typical action elements of other science fiction genres (like space opera or military science fiction). Another important characteristic of her books is the constant focus on the depiction of fondness and affection between the characters, which is quite uncommon in other sub-genres of science fiction.

4 Reservations against the Genre

The set of features – in particular the informal nature of these writings – identified in the previous section can be met with some reservations. In the following I will play devil's advocate and present a series of reservations against the philosophical genre of popular culture and philosophy, although I have published a series of contributions in this genre (Albersmeier and Christian 2020; Christian 2017, 2018a, 2018b, Villanueva-Gardner and Christian 2020). Yet I will try to make the case against such contributions as strong as possible, since criticisms of the genre of popular culture and philosophy are often not well-developed and concerns oscillate between explicit objections and silent reservations.

The following methodological arguments against the genre of popular culture and philosophy comprise of technical reasons to doubt the instrumental value to works within the framework of the genre to foster philosophical understanding.

- a. *missing methodological rigor* – Due to missing methodological rigor (few proper references, little work with sources, lack of depth in reconstructing and interpreting philosophical arguments) contributions to the genre might convey an inaccurate picture of real philosophical research.
- b. *linguistic limitation* – Due to the methodological requirement of exoteric, i.e. common/non-technical, language and the avoidance of esoteric (technical) language, contributions to the genre might fail to render conceptual clarity and argumentative precision as important assets of philosophical reasoning.
- c. *illustrative limitations* – Due to the strict focus on specific narratives from popular culture, contributions to popular culture and philosophy are limited to the crypto-philosophical content in these narratives, which might hinder philosophers from giving a representative overview of arguments and positions in specific philosophical debates.

In the following sections I present several arguments in defense of the genre of popular culture and philosophy. The first (shorter) argument rests on the observation that appeals to popular culture are not uncommon among thinkers who are generally considered as important proponents of western philosophy.

5 The Historical Defense

Attempts to popularize philosophical thinking are present throughout the history of western philosophy and as Irwin rightly points out, “There is a long

tradition in philosophy of making exoteric the esoteric, carried on by the likes of Socrates, Aristotle, Boethius, and Descartes” (Irwin 2006). In ancient times, Plato wrote fictitious philosophical dialogues while his contemporaries authored didactic poems. Roman philosophers translated Greek philosophical terminology into common language (Latin), thus establishing an understandable linguistic framework for readers. Marcus Aurelius and Augustine of Hippo wrote philosophical autobiographies meant to be read as a philosophical prose for a wider audience — in dire need of a source of personal guidance and self-improvement. In medieval times, Nicholas of Cusa even invented a game to illustrate philosophical and theological ideas (*De ludo globi*, 1463). In modern times, Niccolò Machiavelli devoted *Il Principe* (1513), an accessibly written instruction to gaining and maintaining political influence, to the Duke of Urbino Lorenzo de’ Medici. Encyclopédistes like Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d’Alembert intended to advance science and also spread the ideals of enlightenment among the folk. In contemporary philosophy, the popularization of philosophical thought is not uncommon either: Jean-Paul Sartre wrote several existentialist plays, philosopher of science Karl Popper participated in public debate after the Second World War with his *The Open Society and Its Enemies* and one of the last so-called “Volksbücher” of philosophy was written by Theodor W. Adorno (*Minima Moralia*, 1951). Peter Singer influenced the debate about the moral consideration of nonhuman animals outside of academia with his *Animal Liberation* (1975).

These philosophers tried to make philosophical thinking — theories, concepts, terms, and arguments — more accessible to a broader readership and a common implicit assumption was that philosophical thought should take precedence over the mode of depiction. This means that there is a long tradition of mediating philosophical knowledge (expert knowledge) by reducing esoteric features in written text. The genre of popular culture and philosophy seems to be just a contemporary form of the general ambition to make philosophy more accessible to the general public. The distinguishing feature is that popular culture and philosophy is dissociated from high cultured and elitist niche elements of the cultural industry. Critics of popular culture and philosophy must make clear why this new genre is methodologically inadequate or due to its relation to the popular culture an inappropriate means to disseminate philosophical knowledge. At the same time, such a criticism should not devalue historical examples for the popularization of philosophy, which present a *prima facie* case *in favor* of the genre of popular culture and philosophy.

6 The Methodological Defense

The examples mentioned in the previous section indicated that a skeptical attitude with regard to the value of popular culture and philosophy lacks initial plausibility, since the reduction of esoteric elements in philosophical writings is widely present in the history of western philosophy. In the following, I give some replies to the methodological objections.

missing methodological rigor – Due to missing methodological rigor (few proper references, little work with sources, lack of depth in reconstructing and interpreting philosophical arguments) contributions to the genre might convey an inaccurate picture of real philosophical research.

This argument seems to rest on the assumption that writings meant for the popularization of philosophy should reassemble the methodological characteristics of specific types of academic genres, like research articles in the respective philosophical field. This is a rather unplausible assumption, since research publications are not written for a general readership, but for experts who are familiar with textual features relevant for their own research practice. For instance, experts require precise references to primary and secondary literature, since they have a genuine interest in figuring out and critically examining the arguments presented. Lay people, on the other hand, might be satisfied in learning the superficial fact that some philosopher said something in a book or article. In addition to this, the proclaimed lack of methodological rigor must be not necessarily the case, since common techniques for philosophical writing can also be applied in popular culture and philosophy. For instance, so-called *paragraph writing* (Martinich 2016) is still possible and can be incorporated into a popular culture and philosophy contribution. Paragraph writing consists of structuring paragraphs of academic texts into topic, argument, conclusion and bridge sentences, which can include references to popular culture on all sentence levels. Furthermore, what some consider a lack of depth in reconstructing and interpreting philosophical arguments others might consider a necessary form of *didactic reduction* which is in accordance with the cognitive aims of a piece of educational writing. Just like a philosopher in an introductory class, say a class on ethics for first year students, might reduce the syllabus and choose to accentuate certain aspects of philosophical arguments, writers in popular culture might focus on just one important aspect of a philosophical approach and identify only enough philosophical background to give a rough idea about the line of reasoning. A philosopher, for instance, might focus on Karl Marx's theory of alienation, while not presenting all aspects of the theory found in *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* and the Ludwig Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity* (1841).

The second argument highlights linguistic limitations due to the focus on non-technical language and the avoidance of philosophical jargon and terminology:

linguistic limitation – Due to the methodological requirement of exoteric, i.e. common / non-technical, language and the avoidance of esoteric (technical) language, contributions to the genre might fail to render conceptual clarity and argumentative precision as important assets of philosophical reasoning.

This argument seems to be a strong case against popular culture and philosophy if one assumes that conceptual clarity and argumentative precisions are essential parts of the philosophical ideas (problems, arguments etc.), which should be disseminated. Against this argument we can bring forward two counter-arguments: First, philosophers from different philosophical movements have a vastly different understanding of what conceptual clarity actually means and which formal methods should be used to clarify philosophical concepts. Second, the avoidance of philosophical jargon, like small Latin phrases commonly found in research literature (post hoc, ergo, etc.) can be substituted with little loss of argumentative clarity with ordinary words (afterwards, therefore, etc.). More concerning is the avoidance of philosophical terminology, something that is commonly seen as essential to the practice of philosophical inquiry. A twofold reply might mitigate this concern: First of all, the avoidance of philosophical terminology does not imply the complete elimination of terminology. What can be found in many contributions to this genre rather is the tendency to focus on just one or two essential philosophical concepts, their explanation in natural language and their illustration with the help of a pop-cultural phenomenon. Thus, the avoidance of philosophical terminology is just an instance of didactic reduction of content. Secondly, writers in physics and biology can surely report newest research results without engaging in lengthy depictions of mathematized theory, as popular physic books by Stephan Hawking and Richard Dawkins clearly show. Such a perspective can also be found among editors of popular culture and philosophy series, like Irwin, “If physicists can write books of popular science with virtually no equations, philosophers can write books for a general audience with limited jargon.” (Irwin 2014). Thus, philosophers avoiding philosophical terminology when it can be substituted by a natural paraphrased description, seem to choose an adequate mean to reach their readers.

A final methodological argument appeals to illustrative limitations due to the constant focus on a particular piece of pop-culture:

illustrative limitations – Due to the strict focus on specific narratives from popular culture, contributions to popular culture and philosophy are limited to the crypto-philosophical content in these narratives, which might hinder philosophers from giving a representative overview on arguments and positions in specific philosophical debates.

This argument rests on the idea that the dissemination of philosophical ideas should end in the depiction of a representative overview on a scholarly discourse, which is a rather high cognitive aim in context of the dissemination of philosophical ideas. Yet, if a philosophical teacher lowers the cognitive aims for her reader, as commonly happens in the scheduling of philosophical teaching or writing of introductory text for beginners, then she can cope with illustrative limitations. For instance, if a character in a movie constantly refers to rules and regulations, a teacher might focus on the introduction of philosophical approaches, which appeal to rules, principles and laws, and explains in a subclause that there are other ways of moral reasoning. Here you strive for *familiarity* with certain philosophical concepts and not the *capacity to explain* subtle differences between a number of philosophical concepts.

So, yes, there are some limitations and some risks for those who read contributions to popular culture as earnest philosophical contributions coming with the ambition to further philosophical knowledge. But, altogether, many instances of popular culture seem to make small but significant contributions to the public understanding of philosophy. They are written to convey on a lower cognitive learning scale some philosophical knowledge and primarily spark philosophical wonder.

Additionally to the historical and methodological defense of popular culture and philosophy, one can also make an *ethical and didactical case* for cultural references to popular culture: Referencing to popular culture in philosophical teaching and public communication can be considered a form of respect for cultural preferences of others, while focusing on illustrations supplemented by references to high-art or elusive cultural niches might be a form of disregard for legitimate cultural preferences as well as the students' right to teachers making an active effort to be understood without being coerced into a different system of cultural values. The usage of contemporary art forms, which are familiar to students and lay people alike, is also *didactically plausible*. Just as it was plausible to refer in philosophical writings to theater plays and now classical pieces of literature in 1800s, it is now plausible to refer to contemporary movies, video games and other works from popular culture (Lawrence 2007). Popular culture and philosophy might therefore be seen as one didactic tool to foster the imaginative power in student (Lawrence 1975).

7 Conclusions

In this contribution I depicted features of the philosophical genre of popular culture and philosophy, worked out three methodological objections against this

genre and tried to defend this genre against its critics. I in particular developed two arguments that made a historical case for the value of the genre of popular culture and philosophy and countered methodological concerns, which related to a lack of methodological rigor, linguistic limitations and illustrative limitations. I primarily defended the position that popular culture and philosophy is a form of *methodologically-legitimate public engagement* that must not live up to the methodological gold-standards assumed by its critics, since the intended readership of contributions to popular culture and philosophy largely consists of philosophically-interested lay people, who are in an asymmetric epistemic relationship with experts (philosophers).

One might wonder whether some of the reservations against this genre might root in cultural elitism, i.e. a bias against popular culture work forms. Such a bias might be rooted in a preference for (a) works associated with high culture or (b) for a critical stance with regard to works associated with popular culture, which disregards popular culture as of little value compared to other forms of cultural expression. Such an aversion to popular culture could also be a sign of the way social distinction – in the sense of (Bourdieu 1984) – is gained among philosophers, namely by referring to high culture, not popular culture – albeit it is somewhat common that philosophers refer to some types of practices and artifacts. Typical examples for this include Wittgenstein's references to work instructions among craftsmen or Heidegger's depiction of the fulfilling experience of craftsmanship, which enables an authentic mode of existence.

The previously mentioned defenses of popular culture and philosophy tip-toed around the, in my view, rather plausible assumption that references to popular culture in philosophical thinking might simply be tainted with a feeling of cultural disgust among those who are used to participating in intellectual discourses, in which intellectual praise and collegial recognition are partly dependent on making references to the “right” kind of cultural phenomena, i.e. high culture. Gladly, the further justification of such an unpopular thesis about philosophers is certainly beyond the scope of this article.

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