CALL FOR PAPERS: Representation of Diversity in Mediated Popular Culture in the Twenty First Century

An International Conference
<u>Rotterdam (The Netherlands), June 10th and 11th 2024</u>

Mediated popular culture consists of shared images, ideas, and objects, which emerge through a process of mass production aimed at a wide audience (Kidd et al, 2017). Today, digitalization paves the way for innovative models of visual creation, challenging both the elitist notions of "great art" and the "populist" conceptions of popular art (Laugier, 2023). In conjunction with globalization, digitalization has led to an increase in the circulation of transnational cultural products—such as TV series, films, video games, social media content, etc. —and in the diversity of their countries of origin, while also broadening their target audiences.

Million viewers watched the French TV series *Lupin,* starring black French actor Omar Sy in 2021 (Diallo, 2023), while both the U.S. TV drama *Bridgerton*, which addresses race relations, and the South Korean dystopian drama *Squid Game* on Netflix became the platform's most-watched TV series, each attracting over 100 million viewers. In 2022, the British TV series *Sex Education*, lauded for its intersectional approach to gender and sexuality, and the Japanese anime *One Piece* ranked among the most-watched (and most anticipated) shows on Netflix. Films examining race relations (*Get Out*, *12 Years a Slave*), intersectionality (*Moonlight, Barbie*), body dysmorphia (*The Whale*), or produced outside Western countries (*Parasite* from South Korea; *Slumdog Millionaire* from India), or featuring predominantly non-white casts (*Everything Everywhere All at Once; Black Panther*), have not only won prestigious awards, but also achieved significant global box-office success.

The extension to social media platforms confirms that contemporary visual popular culture is not only globalized but can also be measured in tangible, significant numbers (Lecler, 2019). Forbes' 2023 list of the Top 50 Creators represents a diverse group of media producers who have collectively amassed 2.6 billion followers and earned $570 million (Bertoni, 2023). Moreover, the most popular YouTube channels originate from India, while hundreds of millions watch the latest music videos from Nigerian rapper Rema or Barbadian R&B singer Rihanna on YouTube, while simultaneously streaming their albums on various platforms and attending their concerts worldwide.

While popular culture may be seen as capitalistic (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002), owing to its capacity to transform billions of viewers into consumers, it also possesses significant democratic potential. It does not require formal or technical training to engage with its imagery (Laugier, 2023; Schuster, 2017), nor does it demand considerable cultural capital to be appreciated (Parker, 2011). Television series and popular cultural forms thus provide and confront viewers with a plethora of ideas and styles (Hirsch & Newcomb, 1983), which can modify people's beliefs or knowledge or reinforce existing viewpoints (Furman Daniel & Musgrave, 2017), as well as influence their self-image (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016; Saiphoo & Vahedi, 2019).

Engaging with visual popular culture entails understanding its global and symbolic importance, but also considering how audiences interpret it (Fiske, 1991). TV series, films,

social media, music, and other forms can be seen as spaces where artistic, ethical, and hermeneutic authority is reclaimed and re-routed, empowering viewers to create, share, and discuss content. The audience plays an active role in shaping the meaning of popular culture texts with viewers not just as passive consumers but as active participants in the reception and interpretation of cultural products (Fiske, 1991). Moreover, with the rise of social media, popular culture has become marked by the emergence of a participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006) where consumers not only comment on but also remix existing cultural products on digital platforms (Jenkins, 2006).

At the heart of popular culture lie the characters depicted on screen—whose lives, feelings, opinions, physical features, and actions are observed, analyzed, and discussed amongst audiences. Representation of diversity in contemporary popular culture has its contradictions. Although, in the past, films and TV series, particularly in Western nations, tended to feature homogeneous ensemble casts—typically white and male-dominated (Europe, U.S.), recent studies show that the situation has improved. At the same time, however, we still see that characters of minority ethnic backgrounds, the LGBTQ community, the elderly, and those with disabilities are often subject to stereotypes and underrepresentation (Ramon & Tran., 2023). On the other hand, today's most popular creators, influencers, and streamers as a group represent more gender and racial/ethnic diversity than ever before (Bertoni, 2023). This shift raises new questions as recent studies emphasizes not only the role of an active audience, but also the production processes behind the on-screen representation (Renshon, 2014; Bal & Velkamp, 2013; Mares & Woodward, 2005; Brusselle & Crandall, 2002). Thus, discussions on diversity cannot be reduced to calculating on-screen presence but should rather aim to take a more holistic perspective and interrogate how diversity on screen materializes through production processes and audience discourse.

Amidst a surge in publications analyzing the representation of diversity in popular culture (Nwonka, 2023; Hole et al, 2017; Gay, 2014; Sulimma, 2021; Grandin, 1995), this international conference seeks to foster a transdisciplinary dialogue on how diversity is depicted, received, and produced in contemporary visual popular culture, from its traditional forms (TV series, films) to the latest evolutions (global social media platforms), thereby embracing Hall's concept of culture as a continual process of deconstruction and construction of meaning (1997).

We invite scholars to submit proposals for paper presentations on topics that may align with, but are not limited to, the following themes:

- Female/Male gaze in popular culture.
- Conceptualizations and representations of masculinity/ femininity.
- Discourses on race and ethnicity.
- Representational tropes and stereotypes.
- LGBTQ+ visibility and representation.
- Inclusivity and intersectional storytelling.
- Crip theory and popular culture.
- Ageism and the elderly in media portrayals.
- Body positivity movement and popular culture.
- Representation of mental health issues.

The conference will take place on **June 10ᵗʰ and 11ᵗʰ 2024** in Rotterdam (The Netherlands). Conference language is English. Contributions should not exceed a speaking time of 20 minutes.

Proposals, which should include an abstract (**maximum 300 words),** as well as a short bio-bibliographical note, should be received by **5 January 2024** and should be directed to diversityrotterdam@gmail.com. Participants will be notified about the selection by **15 February 2024**.

Steering Committee
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