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Borchert's protagonist Beckmann vacillates throughout the play between these poles: remaining alive in spite of the obscene absurdity of a world populated by such types as the Colonel, the Cabaret Director, and Frau Kramer, and despite the availability of the escapist solution of suicide by drowning. Returning home from the war, Beckmann discovers the absurd: he finds another man in bed with his wife and learns that his one-year-old son has been killed in the bombing.

Beckmann cries out in distress, but both human and divine ears are deaf. Beckmann is confronted with what Camus calls the "benign indifference" of the universe. The conclusion of the play remains open. Beckmann asks urgent questions, but he receives no answer. The universe has become mute and benignly indifferent. In the unreasonable silence of an absurd world, he will receive no answer. He will have to rely on himself. The mind, Camus says, when it reaches its limits, must make a judgment and choose its conclusions. Beckmann stands in that waterless desert where thought has reached its limits. He will have to choose between life and death.

DON NELSON

See also Aesthetics

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Popular Literature

With the advent of cultural studies and postmodern theories, heralded by Leslie Fiedler's battle cry to "cross the border—close that gap" between so-called highbrow and lowbrow literatures and cultures, the English term *popular literature* (the German correlatives are *Populärliteratur* or *Unterhaltungsliteratur*) has surpassed if not totally replaced the terms *Schundliteratur* (trash literature) or *Trivilliteratur*. German literary scholars have hotly debated the parameters and definitions of class- and gender-related differences between literary productions and habits of reception since the early 1960s. While some have guarded the classical literary canon and its bourgeois tradition with thinly disguised and self-serving mechanisms of quality control, others have solely focused on Marxist, sociological, and ideology-critical approaches to literature—according to R. Schenda's credo, "the reading material of the dominated class is the dominant literature" (Bayer). By contrast, the newer term *popular literature* promises to allow for a "plurality of methods" (Petzold and Späth) intent on discovering the specific interrelations between literature, mass production, distribution, and consumption.

Since the term *popular* has generally been linked to the technical ability to reproduce cultural products mechanically, the phrase *popular literature* describes literature from the beginning of printing onward, but especially the dramatic increase in literary productions after 1765. Today, the phrase is equally applicable to the phenomenon of international best-sellers as to *Serienliteratur* (serial literature), *Heftromane* (threepenny novels), genre fiction (including thrillers, romances, science fiction, fantasy, and war books), and television and film novels. The adjective "popular" thus not only delineates the common taste of a majority of people but also always connotes accessibility and "of

the populace"—the people's choice. While it is true that popular publications by female and male authors, whether writing under their own name or pseudonyms (such as Utta Danella, Johannes Mario Simmel, or Hans Bemann) or contracted per volume by one of the many international series, tend to reinforce existing social, racial, and political prejudices and dichotomies, it is just as true that many examples of popular fiction instead criticize the very assumptions on which the status quo is based.

During the years of waning aristocratic power and beyond, "popular" held the threat of democracy, even anarchy. In the 18th century in Germany, several interconnected factors created an increase in literature production, reception, and purchases, among them the advance of scientific positivism paired with philosophical Enlightenment, general schooling, social and geographic mobility, more leisure time for the middle class, newspaper and magazine circulation, the appearance of book clubs, public libraries, and the move toward a national literature. The modern novel could be called the single most important contributor to the promotion of popular fiction. As Tony Tanner so adequately put it, the modern novel has been embroiled in adulterous activities from the beginning, filching material from myths and neighboring genres such as letters, poetry, and drama and developing a narratology of seduction, incest, and betrayal. Because the reading of novels was soon widespread, the act of reading in private was associated with addiction (Langenbucher) and sinful fantasies (wanting to lead a better life than the one God granted) and was imbued with sexual overtones (voyeurism), whether the actual content perused was morally uplifting or, indeed, erotically or politically charged. Due to the simultaneous rise in female and "common" readerships and authorship beginning in the late 18th century, which ran counter

to the period's stylization of the individual male artist as social outsider and to the perception of artistic creation as a sacrifice of conventional life, the conflation of popular and trivial indeed bears the stamp of critical chauvinism.

In the age of colonialism and orientalism, the figure of woman became a projection not just of sexual but also of racial fantasies and anxieties, especially regarding impurity and hybridity. By definition, mass culture in this age was based on reproductions: pirated copies, hybrid forms such as the postcard, or the serialized novel in the *Gartenlaube* (summer house). According to Andreas Huyssen, "the gendering of mass culture as feminine and inferior has its primary place in the late 19th century, even though the underlying dichotomy did not lose its power until quite recently." Because "trivialization" is defined as the process by which "once valid and valued objects or forms drift into the common, the general, resulting in a superficiality of content and a one-dimensionality of form" (Bayer), this definition has crucial implications whenever and wherever women enter the public sphere. When popular literature is seen as verging on *Kitsch* (Ludwig Giesc, 1960), this idea is more often than not demonstrated by pointing to the literary products of women writers such as Ida Hahn-Hahn (1805–80), Eugenie Marlitt (1825–87), Hedwig Courths-Mahler (1867–1950), and Vicki Baum (1888–1960).

As Jochen Schulte-Sasse points out, "ideas of aesthetic value regarding *Kitsch* . . . were developed during the Goethe age by Goethe and Schiller themselves in their discourse on trivial literature." What is voiced in terms of a decrease in variance, however, appears as a mode of purity control. That adaptations and stylistic mixes create new forms and are largely responsible for innovating genres, not to mention literature as such, is ignored. In the 20th century, the modernist foible for clean, straight lines and high functionality, while itself exemplifying a cultural reaction to Biedermeier ostentatiousness, did not allow for any type of adulteration. Despite the awareness raised by current feminist, postmodern, post-Marxist, postcolonial, and queer scholarship, thematic and formal bricolages, unless realistically representing the chaos of modern life, are still viewed with skepticism from the modernist vantage point of a resilient avant-gardism.

Contemporary women authors such as Svende Merian in *Der Tod des Märchenprinzen* (1980; *The Death of the Fairy Prince*), Elfriede Jelinek in *Krankheit, oder moderne Frauen* (1987; *Sickness, or Modern Women*), and Marlene Streeruwitz in her picture serial *Lisa* (1995–97), as well as filmmakers Doris Dorrie in her comedies and Monika Treut in *Die Jungfrauenmaschine* (1988; *Virgin Machine*), have not only leveled their own brand of genre-critical parodies at the conflation of women with romance and the trivial but they have also created a postmodern form of popular fiction. In addition, in a relatively recent development, postfeminist popular novels exemplified by Hera Lind's *Das Superweib* (1994; *Superwoman*) and the thriller author Ingrid Noll's *Der Hahn ist tot* (1991; *The Rooster Is Dead*) actually couch values such as motherhood, sacrifice, emotional strength, heterosexual bonding rituals, and physical beauty in the language of emancipation and lifestyle choices reminiscent of politically conscious and "correct" feminist thought and action.

While the term *popular* appears more neutral than its predecessors *trivial* or *entertaining*, it tends to mask the difficulty in accounting for taste and popularity trends within and across

class, race, gender, and nationality lines. Is a book popular simply because thousands of people buy it? Is the desire to buy equal to the desire to read? What makes some works and authors steady sellers, such as Karl May's adventure novels, Johannes Mario Simmel's spy novels, or Utta Danella's romances, and others such as Patrick Süskind's *Das Parfum* (1985; *Perfume*) instant best-sellers? Is the book design, its advertisement, or its sale price a diagnosis for popularity? How does one account for the popularity of English and Scandinavian titles in translation (Peter Hoeg's and Hannah Erickson's novels in particular)? And is it simply an effect of the normalization of globalization that lies behind the phenomenon that German readers and cinema-goers sometimes do not even realize that they are consuming a translated title, despite the foreign scenery and different names? What is the role of literary and journalistic criticism for popular literature and film? What has and will continue to change as the electronic information age is altering print culture as we know it?

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See also *Children's Literature; Fairy Tales*

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Postmodernism

The idea of postmodernism has been pursued by different interpretative communities in different ways since the 1960s. At the end of the century, the discursive event that once determined the course of artistic practices—predominantly those in the United States—has become a Babel of cultural and socio-political discourses, in part as a result of the impact of poststructuralist positions. A micrological account of this history—with specific reference to the German reception of postmodern perspectives—can better illuminate the complex intertextuality of the various initiatives than a macrological survey.

The term is documented in several early usages, from Rudolf Pannwitz's "postmodern man" (1917) to Arnold Toynbee's similarly pessimistic view of a postmodern age (1947). In the 1960s, the concept of the postmodern became the shibboleth of literary and academic circles in the United States that were disillusioned with the *l'art pour l'art* program of aesthetic modernism. Their pursuit of rupture was aided by developments in the New York art scene, where the canonization of Abstract Expressionism was countered by a new generation of artists, the pop artists, who were committed to bridging the gap between high and low culture. Leslie Fiedler's quasi-manifesto, "Cross the Border—Close the Gap," which appeared in the December 1969 issue of *Playboy*, is characteristic of the populist agenda that informed both academic inquiry and creative writers alike. Susan Sontag's essays "Against Interpretation" and "Notes on Camp" were also important in shaping a new sensibility that defined itself against the high culture productions embraced by the New Criticism. The postmodern movement in American prose writing is documented by the 1998 *Norton Anthology of Postmodern American Fiction*. Important members of this movement were Paul Auster, John Barth, Donald Barthelme, Raymond Carver, Robert Coover, Raymond Federman, Thomas Pynchon, and Kurt Vonnegut. The most seminal theoretical proponent of a new type of literary text in the 1970s and early 1980s was Ihab Hassan, who influenced Americanists in many parts of the world, especially in Western Europe. He pleaded for a postmodern aesthetic of anti-form and play—disjunctive, open, collage—and for a literature of the absurd (considered modern in Europe).

The German reception of these developments began with Fiedler's problematic delivery of a paper preceding the above essay, with the added subtitle "A Case for Postmodernism," in Freiburg in 1968. A politically engaged Martin Walser and critics such as Reinhard Baumgart mistook Fiedler's casual remarks

for the constitutive postmodernist program of Americanists. Their negative reception—positive only in the case of the writer Rolf Dieter Brinkmann—marks the beginning of a long-lasting negative reception of the concept of the postmodern in the German intellectual community, which crystallized in terms such as "postmoderne Beliebigkeit" (postmodern arbitrariness) or "Anything Goes" (Feyerabend). This crystallization, however, ignored the politicized and democratizing nature of the anti-modernist commitment within this U.S. movement.

An essay by Frankfurt School philosopher Jürgen Habermas, "Modernity—An Unfinished Project," which he gave as a speech upon accepting the Adorno Prize in 1980, significantly shaped German understanding of postmodernism in the 1980s. The brilliant polemic, much reprinted in English, suffers from two strata of misunderstanding that nonetheless structured the German horizon of knowledge with regard to postmodernism. Habermas decisively dismissed the new postmodern style in architecture that had just been programmatically displayed at the Venice Biennale. Unlike practicing architects or architectural historians, the philosopher did not see the postmodern style in architecture as a reaction against the purist, anti-historical functionalism of Bauhaus-type modernism, which had lost its utopian edge in the corporate idiom of the "international style." The new architecture did not present a challenge to modernity as an epoch, as Habermas claimed, but aimed at commercially reintegrating historical styles into contemporary building technology. Postmodern architecture was theorized by the architect Robert Venturi (*Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, 1966) and by the architectural historian Charles Jencks (in many publications, beginning with *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* [1977]). Artistically ambitious architects ceased to build in the postmodern idiom by the early 1990s, while watered-down versions continued in general building practices in the United States and elsewhere. As the architects pursued their new directions (e.g., "Deconstruction"), postmodern architecture was historicized as a style period.

Habermas's attack on postmodernism of 1980 (and later) further equated the concept with poststructuralist positions, in particular those of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, that in his view presented a radical critique of enlightenment ideals and embraced irrationality and neo-conservatism. Although "Vernunftkritik" was upgraded by philosophers such as Wolfgang Iser, drawing on the theory of Jean-François Lyotard,