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**LOW THEORY AND CRAZY
WHITE MEN**

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Queer theorist Jack Halberstam (former known as Judith Halberstam), visited Helsinki as a guest of the CoreKin Project, the Queer Wills Project and the SKY Doctoral Program. He is famous for a variety of books in which queer theory meets popular culture. In a Queer Time and Place (2005), The Queer Art of Failure (2011) and Gaga Feminism (2012) are still not well known to popular culture scholars who are not into queer theory. Halberstam gave an interview for Popular Inquiry on May 28, 2017 in the 3 kruunua restaurant, where Jack ate meatballs and Max had blueberry pie.

Max Ryynänen

You use a lot of popular culture when you discuss theoretical issues. Is it about finding examples that everybody would know, a common ground to build upon? Or are you more into thinking that popular culture constitutes who we really are culturally, so that it would be important to discuss it?

Jack Halberstam

I think it's a bit of both. It's technically a shared set of texts, which we can use to seminate ideas to students and non-academics, because not everyone reads T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* or *Capital* by Marx. But people have seen films or they've been engaged with other forms of pop culture in a meaningful way. But really up until the 1960s and 1970s the split between high and low culture was truly decisive in the American university context. I really wanted to take apart the logic of high and low culture, and high culture as a kind of site of resistant complexity and low culture as the place of capitulation, which is what we get from the Frankfurt School, Adorno and so on. We are no longer in the culture industry which Adorno described. We all engage in pop culture. So I think it's too valuable as a resource to leave alone.

MR

Since you mentioned Marx and Eliot, I think they're both important thinkers for popular culture. Marx's connection to the masses is well-known, but also in Eliot you find descriptions

of people between high and low culture, sitting both in literary salons and then being connected to dance halls, tabloid journalism and so on. Is this connected to what you call low theory?

JH

The thing is that even though low culture makes an appearance in these high culture texts, it is not what the footnotes which explain the connections, the Sanskrit words and references to other high culture texts stress. The high culture citation often creates a kind of elitist genealogy that people plug in to. And low culture takes on the elitism at the university and the disciplines.

MR

So are you thinking about this low theory as a pedagogical tool; I mean is it about implementing theoretical ideas to the people and popular discourse, or is it a methodological thing, a way of building theory beginning from the other end?

JH

I'm thinking about it as a methodological thing, as a way of reminding ourselves that we need different kinds of theories for different critical projects, and while we might need high theory to decode and disarm the culture industry, we need low theory to criticize people who are jaded, tired, notice-hardened... who don't think anything can be different. You can't really get to those people through a very high set of cultural agendas. We need to have an exchange of knowledge, not just this idea of knowledge transfer. I've been thinking a lot about Ranciere, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*.

MR

The one on intellectual democracy? It's a beautiful book!

JH

Yes, it is. It is a reminder that the university system is not designed to authorize professors who are into helping people to think. So low theory is a way of thinking about how we can change things.

MR

I often think about Ranciere's book myself. I love the story of Joseph Jacotot, who first starts to teach his students Flemish without being able to speak the language, and who then contin-

ues to the poor quarters of the town to explain to people who cannot afford education that they can teach their kids even if they don't have education themselves. And the fact that this became a scandal and he got fired from the University of Louvain...

JH

I think it undermines the idea that the university is the only place where learning happens and that the professor is the only person who knows.

MR

Getting back to high and low culture, I've always been a bit amazed about the way people seem to think that, for example, gender roles would be more developed in highbrow cinema. If you look at French arthouse films, females have really absurd roles; in some films they just keep their lips ready to kiss and look at the camera. At the same time, you have this lowbrow tradition where you can find the cocky and witty female gang members of early Russ Meyer or Japanese trash films. I've gone quite to the other end. I don't defend mainstream Hollywood movies, but I think films which have been considered to be trash have been the boldest in many ways. Am I totally mistaken or do you have the same feeling about this?

JH

I definitely agree with you. High and low used to have a lot of explanatory power, but now it has less. In cinematography, high and low are scrambled; television is where some very complicated visual transactions can happen and film can be pure representational exploitation, repetition and cliché. So I think we live in a very interesting moment in terms of the high/low binary system. And the attempt to think differently, to think about what culture is and what it isn't. The university is not that powerful anymore, so... Still people want to go to university to learn about high culture, but both of those ends are undefined.

MR

That's interesting. When I went to university in the mid-1990s and started to study aesthetics, the course description stated said that aesthetics develops taste.

JH

At Columbia, where I'm teaching right now, the undergraduates take a set of courses on the history of civilization. You would think they would push back against it, but it's what they go to Columbia to get. They'll read Homer, Shakespeare, Jane Austen, Virginia Woolf, and then

they'll feel equipped and go to the business world with the feeling that they are able to discuss with anyone. And it really works, people really love it; it's surprising. They love it. That surprises me.

MR

I've been pretty interested in the French post-Bourdieu discussion where scholars now talk about the need to show off your competence in both high and low, not just in high. I suppose a person with only a high cultured sensitivity could be dull or something.

JH

Mmh, you have to know both at this point. Well that's what I'm saying; it's not clear what's high and low anymore. Students spend time at elite universities trying to get a certain understanding of culture. I'm just amazed that the understanding of culture as a set that makes you a cultured person has still survived.

MR

For me the whole idea of whole has become more and more ethnic, and my intuition is that we could trace it to Southern Germany, all those ideas echoing German idealism, the metaphysics of being pure and deep.

JH

In the 1920s and 1930s, Germany was very important culturally, and probably that's when many of our still existing ways of looking at this were constructed, so there might be a point in that.

MR

I like one thing in your work. You're into outsiders. I myself have worked on outsiders in the history of philosophy, not the outsiders of the story of the history of philosophy, but the fact that the people who are now hailed as pioneers have often been totally out. They haven't had jobs, they've been considered to be freaks and so on. They haven't even published a lot. They've been losers. When I did this 3-year background study (together with Jozef Kovalcik) for the article ("The Institutional Margins of Aesthetics," *Contemporary Aesthetics*, Vol 14 (2016), <http://www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=744>) I noticed that only in one academic field did the scholars seem to be conscious of this fact, and that's queer theory – maybe because sexual margins have been facing discrimination and in many

parts of the world they're still illegal. There are also classics close to the queer texts, like bell hooks's *Outlaw Feminism* which even play with these concepts. I was wondering how other disciplines can learn from you and become more conscious about this? This knowledge might help us to understand the problems of the institutionalized academic world.

JH

I don't know if you can really think about queer theory as the outsider. There is a lot of queer theory which is really normative. But I do think that it is a feature of queer critique that the goal of the narratives is not to assimilate or to be recognized, but to disrupt critique and to make trouble. That has been the best part of queer theory. And in this way it is a kind of anti-disciplinary project. The disciplines tend to reward work that reinforces the discipline. In queer theory, the people who have done it, like you say, in a different manner have also been very embedded in the discipline. ...

MR

Do you think that with all the prejudices facing them queer theorists have also been forced to play the academic games extraordinarily well to make it? Many people in history had to be good to be able to be bold, I think Foucault is a famous example: he wrote bold stuff but he learned to be careful with the academic rules.

JH

Well, certainly. Many scholars have had to face many obstacles; they had to master the disciplines to be able to work against them. Like Butler. And she's still not recognized in philosophy. She has never really made it in that sense. She hasn't been hired by a philosophy department. Disciplines do not support transformative work; they support work which makes the discipline stronger. For this reason, the work outside the discipline has the possibility to change it.

MR

Well, this takes me to another part of your work. You've written in many different ways. I've read your scholarly texts, I've read your blog and sometimes you're very essayistic. So going back to your last answer: do we need to find different ways of writing and different contexts for our work to keep it effective?

JH

Yeah. I do blogs... (See Bullybloggers: <https://bullybloggers.wordpress.com/about/>) and I've always written film reviews. I started as a graduate student and I continue to do it. I make use of all of the advantages I can to write essays. Academic writing is not enough.

MR

I like the French scene. The interviews are also good there. Someone reads someone else's books and then they talk. People are forced to talk from different viewpoints about their work.

JH

I was in Barcelona in February. It was in a center for the study of contemporary culture and there was a lot of media interest in the event. So there were many people asking for interviews. One was a very straight guy who was writing for a local newspaper. He didn't have a clue about anything and he didn't write well. It's hard to control your work and this is a problem with interviews.

MR

Getting back to Bullybloggers. So you're a group of people?

JH

There are five of us. We've been writing a lot about different ways of being in relationships for example.

MR

I especially enjoyed the post White Men Behaving Badly, which was about the film Manchester by the Sea (2017/02/22). That was hysterical fun, the way you portrayed it with irony (<https://bullybloggers.wordpress.com/2017/02/22/white-men-behaving-sadly-by-jack-halberstam/>).

JH

Have you seen the responses to the blog?

MR

I don't usually read them, but I recall that you really pushed some buttons...

JH

Yes, lots of crazy white men. Angry white men saying how can you write that way about white men's problems. It's insane. It shows exactly my point, a film like that pretends to be universal.

MR

I suppose this is a form of low theory to write this and to answer... And I suppose blogs are popular theory today. And... well, do you respond to the comments?

JH

Sometimes I just delete the comments. There are white supremacists who write how dare you critique white male culture, it's been at the center of every meaningful movement.

MR

Crazy!

JH

There you can see, I was right – this is the way they think. That film, *Manchester by the Sea* is insane, people loved it, and there was no critique of it. I trash films like that on purpose because no one else is doing it. I love to blog and I want to do more of it. It's an excellent way to think and the responses are immediate.

MR

I know that you've been studying the connection between fascism and homosexuality. It's a heavy topic. Are you still into this complicated and painful connection?

JH

Not so much. I pretty much wrote what I thought in the *Queer Art of Failure*. But I do come back to it pretty regularly because I'm convinced that there really is a strong relationship between white gay male culture and fascism and I was just watching the film on Tom of Finland on the plane. He is... I'm sick of having to argue with white gay males about having this visual rendering, this visual archive on the fascination with fascist masculine bodies complete with uniform. It requires some kind of analysis. It's not enough to say that Tom of Finland was also a victim of the Nazis. Tom of Finland was also persecuted as a homosexual... oh yeah, okay, but... the eroticization of fascist masculinity is never criticized in his work or in the responses to it, it's just considered beautiful, these are amazing bodies... How radical to represent the gay

male body as hypermasculine rather than feminine. It's not radical, it's actually kind of weird and a problem, because you're suggesting that in this world where women play no role whatsoever you achieve the highest form of masculinity possible by having two fascist looking masculine males together; that's a kind of fascist principle!

MR

You're very brave!

JH

Brave or stupid...