

WHEN HIGHBROW MEETS LOWBROW: POPULAR CULTURE AND THE RISE OF NOBROW

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When Highbrow Meets Lowbrow: Popular Culture and the Rise of Nobrow is a collection of nine articles on popular culture by nine professors or cultural scholars from around the world: Europe, Canada, Australia, America and Hong Kong. More specifically, as the subtitle shows, the book is about ‘nobrow’, a term that one of the editors (Peter Swirski) has previously studied at length in his monographs *From Lowbrow to Nobrow* (2005) and *American Crime Fiction: A Cultural History of Nobrow Literature as Art* (2016).

Peter Swirski and Tero Eljas Vanhanen, editors of this collection, are indeed not the first to have used the term. In 2000, following the examples of ‘highbrow’ and ‘lowbrow’, John Seabrook, an American scholar, coined ‘nobrow’ to signify certain contemporary cultural qualities that are neither highbrow nor lowbrow. But Swirski, when he begins to use it in *From Lowbrow to Nobrow*, turns the tables by allowing nobrow to embrace both of the extremes, so that it embodies an eclectic mix of high- and lowbrow. This is the way nobrow is understood in this collection. Since, as Swirski recites on various occasions, highbrow stands for everything elite or classic, experimental, inventive, individual, variable, artistic, intellectual, complex, rewarding, social, critical etc. while lowbrow, being low, stands for the very opposite —popular, conventional, generic, conforming, simple, entertaining, emotional, personal and unhealthy, etc.— so the eclectic mix of high- and lowbrow may happen in a literary work by juxtaposing any feature with that in the opposite

camp, for instance, conventional with inventive, conformity with individuality, art with entertainment, complexity with simplicity, social with personal, etc.

Swirski has used other names or expressions for specific examples of nobrow, like “artertainment” (2005: 93), “pulp with gravitas” (2016: 22), “beachbook for intellectuals” (2005: 170), or the more general term “nobrow art” (2005: 6). In *From Lowbrow to Nobrow* Swirski already gives essential shape to the nobrow thought as adumbrated above, which he continues to elaborate in *American Crime Fiction* and again in the present book edited with Tero Eljas Vanhanen. Swirski has systematically studied a series of literary genres, such as American crime fiction, American political fiction, and other fictions through the concept of nobrow. Bearing this in mind, we come back to *When Highbrow Meets Lowbrow*, Swirski’s and Vanhanen’s new approach to the term. As an edited collection the book achieves several things that are worth noting: one, it deepens the nobrow theory and our understanding of it; two, it testifies to the nobrow theory in an all-round way; three, it extends the application of the nobrow theory.

First, *When Highbrow Meets Lowbrow* further deepens the nobrow theory so far developed by Swirski. In “Introduction—Browbeaten into Pulp” (Chapter 1), written by both editors, and “Nobrow, American Style” (Chapter 3), written by Swirski himself, the concept of nobrow is defined and further developed. For instance, “three distinct, if closely related” domains of nobrow are identified, namely, nobrow as a cultural formation, nobrow as a creative strategy, and nobrow as identified within massively crowd-sourced audiences. Nobrow is not just a creative or literary strategy reduced to written fiction. It exists in social and cultural contexts and is received in specific ways by readers or audiences. No longer is nobrow restricted to literature or any text but free to travel the overall cultural domain.

Swirski, in his chapter, also compares nobrow with the well-known term “middlebrow”: “Where middlebrow culture runs alongside the middle of the road like a monorail does, nobrow is a cultural engine that runs on two rails” (36-37). In short, he renders them decidedly different. Similar comparison is made by Beth Driscoll in her “Middlebrow and Nobrow” (Chapter 4), in which Driscoll scrutinizes the limit of middlebrow where it fades out and nobrow begins in fictions commonly known as middlebrow. In this way the nobrow theory, as well as our understanding of it, is deepened and not least through the book’s further testification and application of it as we will see next.

Second, *When Highbrow Meets Lowbrow* testifies to the nobrow theory. In fact, each of the articles of the book quotes Swirski or cites his nobrow concept many times throughout, which is already an act of recognizing nobrow as something theoretically tenable. Moreover, articles like “Pop Culture and Nobrow Culture”,

“Middlebrow and Nobrow”, and “Prequels to Nobrow” even employ the term for their titles; by so doing they presuppose nobrow in the first place, whether or not they will go any further to prove nobrow to be theoretically or practically true. Anyhow, most of the articles end up defending the nobrow theory by Swirski in one way or another.

In discussing the nobrow aesthetics in American Gothic fiction, “Gothic Literature in America” (chapter 6) by Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet goes so far as to affirm that even Gothic fictions boast of the nobrow nature, so much stressed by Swirski, of combining the features of both high- and lowbrow literature and “literary ambition with popular forms and audiences” (111). By the same token, Tero Eljas Vanhanen’s “The Good, the Bad, and the Nobrow” (Chapter 10) witnesses the nobrow nature, which is so much overlooked by scholars of violence fictions, of blending high art (highbrow) with gory violence (lowbrow), again in the manner Swirski suggests.

Other articles turn to testify to nobrow more generally. “Pop Culture and Nobrow Culture” (Chapter 2) is by Arthur Asa Berger, one of the precursors of cultural studies, who once taught at San Francisco State University. He first traces the history of cultural studies and his own half-century-long career in it. Then, he illustrates the close relationship between cultural studies, postmodernism and discourse analysis. Finally he dwells on popular culture and nobrow culture with reference to Swirski. As he describes it, we are assured that nobrow is the natural outcome of both popular culture and cultural studies. In “Prequels to Nobrow” (Chapter 5), Kenneth Krabbenhoft tries to evidence nobrow from history. Here under observation is the 2,000-year history of Western verbal correctness whose principles had kept on changing, from the ancient unbrow theory through the Christian unbrow theory, until the modern nobrow theory which inevitably absorbed the former two. Suffice it to say that Krabbenhoft grounds nobrow solidly in history.

Again mention should be made of Swirski’s own corroboration. This time, he is able to establish his nobrow on newly found evidence. One such piece is from interactive fiction, crowd-sourced fiction and use-generated film, which embody the crossover, eclectic, and participatory nature (nobrow) of contemporary culture to the full (46-50). He even calls our attention to a test conducted recently on the groove, a popular form of music, a test which, as he points out, reveals the music’s traits of incorporating variability into regularity or complexity into simplicity (39-42)—that is, in other words, nobrow. These cases exemplify his theory of nobrow very well.

And third, *When Highbrow Meets Lowbrow* extends the application of nobrow theory. As mentioned above, ever since his proposal of nobrow in 2005, Swirski

has applied it consecutively as a new approach to fictions, e.g. political fiction, crime fiction, science fiction, and so forth. *When Highbrow Meets Lowbrow* extends the scope in which Swirski's nobrow theory can be applied, in literature and beyond.

In literature, its application is extended to more genres, for example, Gothic fiction and violence fiction as we see respectively in "Gothic Literature in America" (Chapter 6) and "The Good, the Bad, and the Nobrow" (Chapter 10), and also to science fiction at large as seen in "Neither Indian Reservation Nor Baboon Patriarchy" (Chapter 7). These cases of application, in addition to those by Swirski himself elsewhere, cannot but anticipate even further application of the nobrow theory to fictions of any genre—or, for that matter, to all literature, generic and classic, since nobrow does not distinguish between generic and literary. Nobrow theory is further applied to address cultural issues, such as fashion art and popular culture as we respectively see in "Mambo Clothing and Australian Nobrow" (Chapter 8) by Chris McAuliffe and in "Pop Culture and Nobrow Culture" (Chapter 2) by Arthur Asa Berger. All these examples denote the wide applicability of the nobrow theory in the area of literature or culture.

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"Cultural studies", the general term for the multiple methods of criticism of today, is not a theory itself. Indeed, it needs a theory of its own. Thus, Swirski offers his theory of nobrow. For twelve years—a full Chinese decade—starting from 2005 when he first used the term, Swirski had been constantly cultivating his nobrow theory. In *When Highbrow Meets Lowbrow*, Swirski and Vanhanen, with the aid of the contributors to the collection, strengthen nobrow theory by further deepening it, roundly singing its praises and significantly extending its use. Following this campaign, many more people will surely become nobrow oriented—we live in a world of increasing nobrow after all—and find nobrow useful as a new approach to our culture.

Works Cited

SWIRSKI, Peter. 2005. *From Lowbrow to Nobrow*. Montreal/Kingston: McGill-Queen's U.P.

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