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**Rorty and Shusterman on Popular Art\***

Works of Richard Rorty and Richard Shusterman on art and aesthetic issues are usually categorized as pragmatist views, one of the basic characteristic of which is the refusal of a profound difference between works of art and products of popular culture. In this paper, after locating the approach among some others formulated in a similar vein, I will examine and try to contest the arguments given by Rorty and Shusterman for this idea. The basic claim I shall argue for is that there is a functional difference between works of art and products of entertainment, the generic difference of which should not be blurred even if we acknowledge the existence of borderline cases. This is, in turn, not to say that I seek to give an essentialist account of artworks. It may sound like a paradox, but in what follows I seek to establish a substantial difference between art (high art) and entertainment (low/popular art) without defending a substantialist or essentialist concept of art. Against this latter inspiration Adorno himself could be cited: “The concept of art is located in a historically changing constellation of elements; it refuses definition.”<sup>1</sup> Works of art constitute a field of human experience with an extreme individuality of its objects. It has often been remarked that the plurality of different branches of art itself might be regarded as a problem: “art and arts” – as Adorno entitled one of his essays. So I am not trying to give a unified sufficient definition of artworks, but will rather argue for discerning features that make artworks differ from entertainment products. What I am going to elaborate in works of art concerns a basic dimension inherent to them that could be and has been regarded as a clarification and enrichment of individual human life, be it in the form of artistic cognition or in the form of beauty.

Denial of the difference between high culture and popular culture has been argued for variously in a series of theories, beginning with theories of pop-art, Cultural Studies, postmodern thinkers, and pragmatist aesthetics. More specifically, there are some who think that the distinction can be understood but gradually, and some who think that the distinction cannot even be drawn gradually, because it simply does not make any sense. The obvious flaw of the latter position is that it cannot do justice to manifest deep differences between, say, Wagner’s *Gesamtkunstwerk* and a soap opera. Some theoreticians of pop-art (Sonntag, Alloway, Chambers) declare that there is no difference between ordinary products, products of

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<sup>1</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London – New York: Continuum, 2002), 2.

commercial culture and artworks. Since the 1960s scholars of the research program Cultural Studies (Stuart Hall, Paul Willis, Dick Hebdige) cast explicitly doubt on the tenability of a distinction of “high” and “low” culture, and they made considerable efforts to recognize and to upgrade everyday culture and the culture of different social strata. Numerous philosophers and thinkers of postmodernism (Lyotard, Jameson, Baudrillard, Huyssen) share the firm refusal of this distinction. For the other position holding the difference of high culture and popular culture to be merely a gradual one, pragmatist aesthetics (Richard Rorty, Richard Shusterman) can be taken as an example. Each of these conceptions either claims or suggests that there is no essential difference or no difference at all. In what follows I shall focus on the pragmatist version of this idea as elaborated by Rorty and Shusterman.

Turning specifically to Rorty’s work, the first thing usually associated with him is probably not so much aesthetics, but the “linguistic turn”.<sup>2</sup> Given that we take Rorty here as a representative of “pragmatist aesthetics”, the pragmatism implied herein should be spelled out first. A certain tension emerges immediately, if one tries to rely on features generally attributed to pragmatism: pragmatism is held to be connected somehow to the primacy of practice as opposed to theory, and it is in this sense, for example, that we talk of a pragmatist theory of truth, according to which a proposition might be regarded as true, if it functions in practice. Now, the difficulty arises, if we consider that aesthetic experiences are inherent to contemplative or, in a broad sense, to theoretical situations. It is characteristic for such situations that one cannot really oppose “practical relevance” and “mere speculation” – an obviously misleading difference in connection with phenomena where there is only contemplation. The first sentences of Shusterman’s *Pragmatist Aesthetics* address this tension, and develop an alternative understanding of “pragmatist aesthetics”: with regard to aesthetic issues the adjective “pragmatist” can not only be taken to mean a priority of praxis over theory, but also the priority of aesthetic experience over artwork as John Dewey developed it.<sup>3</sup> Since Rorty has in fact not talked about aesthetic experience, Rorty and Shusterman could be taken here as different versions of a pragmatic understanding of art and culture.

As to theory of art, it should be remarked at the outset that the core of Rorty’s work does not lie in aesthetics; it is not a philosophy of art he is famous for. This is, however, not to say that his relation to art is uninteresting or simplistic. To illustrate his interest in art, or at least in

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<sup>2</sup> It is worth mentioning that the requirements articulated in the linguistic turn might be followed back at least to Aristotle’s methodological formula *pollakhos legetai* (“we talk of ... in manifold ways”). The point of Aristotle’s methodological requirement was the task at the beginning of an investigation that it should be preceded by the clarification of the ways we are talking about it.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art* (London: Blackwell, 1992).

literature, it suffices to remember that during his intellectual development Rorty left his original field of research, i.e. philosophy, for something else – and at this point of my argument it might remain open whether this “something else” be literature, art, or literary studies. Accordingly, a reflection on art and literature seems to belong essentially to Rorty’s philosophical development. Under closer inspection, however, this impression needs further clarification, for Rorty’s reflections on art and literature must be seen in the light of his in-depth critique of philosophy, and the importance of and his interest in art and literature grow out of this critical approach. Philosophy must be modified or assimilated to something else, and this is in Rorty’s eyes, roughly speaking, art and literature. To put it differently, it is not Rorty’s primary interest to give an account of art and literature for themselves, but they constitute the field into which the critical modification of philosophy leads. The interesting question whether it is intended to be an enlargement or a correction cannot be examined in detail here<sup>4</sup>. In the present context it should be stressed that Rorty’s approach thus conceived is less sensitive from the outset to differences of branches of art, to diversity in levels of artworks, and to specialized intra-aesthetic questions in general. Let us see more closely what Rorty hopes to gain from art, and especially from literature.

In order to clarify this, the critical distance Rorty developed towards philosophy in his most well-known book *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* should be considered. As a central thesis of the book, Rorty claims that philosophy, since Plato and especially since Descartes and Kant, has been held captive by an image of the mind as a mirror of nature. And in connection with it, philosophy conceives of knowledge and language as accurately representing in thought the world independent of mind. In this image, Rorty claims, philosophy attributed to itself the role of the foundational discipline for the rest of culture because of its special understanding of the fundamental problems about consciousness, knowledge, truth, and reality. As a general tendency, the book characterised this image as misleading and contingent, and drew thus the conclusion of its uselessness in present days. In fact, Rorty argued for a post-philosophical attitude that favours a pragmatic sensibility about knowledge focused not on whether we accurately represent the world but instead on what people do to successfully cope with the world. This approach seeks the freedom of description rather than truth, and renounces to find the single true vocabulary at the foundation of all vocabularies. As a consequence, the plurality of incommensurable ways of talking about ourselves and the world does not appear as a

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<sup>4</sup> It is worth noting that this figure of thought, i.e. a critical modification can even be extended to Rorty’s treatment of democratic tasks, including the idea of a “conversation of mankind” serving as an encompassing platform and motivation both for philosophy, literature, and art.

problem, and the role of the philosopher as judge of the rest of culture comes to be replaced by the public intellectual, informed dilettante, by “the polypragmatic, Socratic intermediary between various discourses”.<sup>5</sup> This role of the informed dilettante was attributed by Rorty to hermeneutic philosophy which he outlined primarily on the basis of Hans-Georg Gadamer’s *Truth and method*. It is less important in present context to examine Rorty’s interpretation of Gadamer’s hermeneutics; much more important is the mediatory function Rorty ascribes to hermeneutics. In his conception, hermeneutics is the proper reaction to the permanent incommensurability we find ourselves in. With regard to incommensurability, it could be shown that Rorty’s relying on Gadamer is misleading. Being well aware of individuality and finitude, Gadamer develops an idea of translation that overcomes the simple declaration of incommensurability, as we find it in Rorty. For Gadamer, it is always possible to translate between languages, vocabularies, and cultures.

It is Rorty’s “anti-Philosophy” that links his thought to art and literature.<sup>6</sup> And what Rorty hopes to get especially from literature and in general from art must be understood in terms of what philosophy fails to give. Furthermore, it was the political consequences of his anti-foundationalism that increasingly dominated his thinking. Having abandoned foundationalism, Rorty found no more central functions in philosophy as far as Western culture was concerned. He sought to follow instead the “adventure of the West” still to be found in Dickens, Kundera, and others. While repeating time to time the critique of traditional philosophy, his subsequent work was an evaluation of contingency and its political consequences, receiving inspiration from literary as much as philosophical sources. This interpretation of contingency was elaborated in the character of the *liberal ironist* central to *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*.

In a wider context, Rorty defines freedom as recognition of contingency, and consequently attributes to culture the task to eliminate, to therapy metaphysical needs desiring for fundamental justifications [KI 87?]. The central figure of this conception is the ironist representing the attitude Rorty thinks proper to problems of our world. He defines the ironist as follows:

“I use ‘ironist’ to name the sort of person who faces up to the contingency of his or her own most central beliefs and desires – someone sufficiently historicist and nominalist to have

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<sup>5</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 317. This is the role Rorty himself intended to play. “Rorty claimed that this was the view held in common by Dewey, Wittgenstein, and Heidegger. However, his arguments were drawn primarily from analytic philosophers: from Wilfrid Sellars, Willard Van Orman Quine, and Donald Davidson” (David R. Hiley, “Rorty among the continentals”, in: Alan D. Schrift (ed.), *The history of continental philosophy*, vol. 6 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 405-6.

<sup>6</sup> Hiley, “Rorty among the continentals”, 409.

abandoned the ideal that those central beliefs and desires refer back to something beyond the reach of time and chance.”<sup>7</sup>

The figure of the ironist recognizes the groundlessness of his final vocabulary, and claims, consequently, the groundlessness of any vocabulary. And an ironist was liberal when among those ungrounded beliefs and desires was the “hope that suffering will be diminished, that the humiliation of human beings by other human beings may cease”.<sup>8</sup> Rorty develops a vision of culture for finite human beings without any “links to something Beyond.”<sup>9</sup> As Espen Hammer puts it, “[d]espite his eclectic use of motifs from thinkers as different from one another as Nietzsche, Dewey, Wittgenstein, Davidson and Rawls, it is abundantly clear that Rorty was more concerned with his cultural vision than with the nitty-gitty of particular philosophical debates. In this regard he was, like several of his intellectual heroes, Nietzsche in particular, first and foremost a philosopher of modern culture.”<sup>10</sup>

It is within this conceptual framework that Rorty considers art and culture, and regards the difference of high culture and popular culture to be deceptive, since in his view it should be seen as merely gradual. Rorty holds literature, movie, and television to be the most relevant factors in moral education and moral life, because he thinks that novels and soap operas can much better describe and draw attention to social problems, discrimination, loneliness, and poverty than abstract philosophical treatises. It is even more important in democracies where “politics becomes a matter of sentimental calls for alleviation of suffering rather than moral calls to greatness.”<sup>11</sup> Literature leads, therefore, to concrete questions concerning “what we can do so as to get along with one another, how we can arrange things so as to be comfortable with one another, how institutions can be changed so that everyone’s right to be understood has a better chance of being gratified.”<sup>12</sup> And so he concludes that it is not philosophers but poets and engineers who “produce startling new projects for achieving the greatest happiness of the greatest number.”<sup>13</sup> Literature presents various descriptions and perspectives, and in this way it

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<sup>7</sup> Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), xv.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. Democracy in Rorty’s sense is best characterized by his description of Dewey’s conception: “For both Whitman and Dewey, the terms “America” and “democracy” are shorthand for a new conception of what it is to be human – a conception which has no room for obedience to a nonhuman authority, and in which nothing save freely achieved consensus among human beings has any authority at all.” (Richard Rorty, *Achieving our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 18).

<sup>9</sup> Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), xiii.

<sup>10</sup> See Espen Hammer, “Contingency, Disenchantment, and Nihilism. Rorty’s Vision of Culture”, in: Matthias Buschmeier/Espen Hammer (eds.), *Pragmatismus und Hermeneutik. Beiträge zu Richard Rortys Kulturpolitik* (Hamburg: Meiner 2011), 127.

<sup>11</sup> Richard Rorty, “Heidegger, Kundera, and Dickens”, in: *Essays on Heidegger and Others: Philosophical Papers II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 81.

<sup>12</sup> Rorty, “Heidegger, Kundera, and Dickens,” 78.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

is the best defence against simplification. It should be underlined that in Rorty's argumentation a single branch of art, literature, plays a pre-eminent role, and what is more, a single genre, the novel gets a high estimation because of its multi-perspectivism, relying on Kundera's principle "L'esprit du roman est l'esprit de complexité". The fact that Rorty, it appears, has not paid any attention to music, or visual art, except literature and movies, seems to restrict his arguments to a considerable extent, since he simply generalizes what he hopes to get from literature to art. Culture becomes the liberal placeholder of what has been the task of philosophy.<sup>14</sup>

Let us turn now to Richard Shusterman's position as elaborated in his *Pragmatist Aesthetics* on popular art. As he remarked elsewhere, he thinks that even terminology on this topic implies preferences: "While those sympathetic to popular art call it such, those who traditionally opposed it prefer to label it "mass art" – the term "mass" suggesting an undifferentiated (and possibly even subhuman) conglomerate rather than merely the idea of mass-media technology."<sup>15</sup> In his *Pragmatist Aesthetics* he is very explicit on refusing a sharp distinction between high and low art, but develops this idea as part of an over-all philosophical project and not only for its own sake. The ambitious project is the "emancipatory enlargement of the aesthetic" involving a re-conception of art "in more liberal terms, freeing it from its exalted cloister, where it is isolated from life and contrasted to more popular forms of cultural expression. Art, life, and popular culture all suffer from these entrenched divisions and from the consequently narrow identification of art with elite fine art. My defense of the aesthetic legitimacy of popular art and my account of ethics as an art of living both aim at a more expansive and democratic reconception of art."<sup>16</sup>

The aesthetic legitimacy, thus, is just an element of the argumentation, and I cannot deal here with this over-all structure of Shusterman's project. In explaining the project Shusterman also makes it clear that for this project John Dewey figures as the principal point of orientation, whereas Rorty would be much less a contribution to pragmatist aesthetics: even if there are "important contributions by contemporary pragmatists to certain aesthetic issues – for example, Rorty on the ethical role of literature, and Margolis and Fish on interpretation", he insists on

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<sup>14</sup> "In Rorty's ideal culture, we see ourselves as profoundly alone in a wholly disenchanted world, more geared towards invention than discovery, without any authorities other than the ones we provisionally constitute as political and cultural animals in the widest sense." (Espen Hammer, "Contingency, Disenchantment, and Nihilism", 126.)

<sup>15</sup> Richard Shusterman, "Popular art", in Stephen Davies et al. (eds.). *A Companion to Aesthetics*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009), 476.

<sup>16</sup> Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, xv.

the necessity to develop pragmatist aesthetics at all.<sup>17</sup> As to the distinction between high art and popular art, Shusterman succinctly puts his view as follows:

“My Deweyan pragmatism makes me not only critical of the alienating esotericism and totalizing claims of high art, but acutely suspicious of any essential and unbridgeable divide between its products and those of popular culture. Moreover, history itself clearly shows us that the popular entertainment of one culture (e.g. Greek or even Elizabethan drama) can become the high classics of a subsequent age. Indeed, even within the very small cultural period, a given work can function either as popular or as high art depending on how it is interpreted and appropriated by its public.”<sup>18</sup>

This refusal goes, however, hand in hand with an image of high art which is highly problematic, since it focuses to a high extent on the allegedly conservative role in preserving social differences and hierarchies. Shusterman’s view on the conservative character of high art can be summarized in three counter-arguments: 1. The first way the tradition of high art promotes established and oppressive social orders lies in its “pious respect for the past, an adulatory nostalgia achieved through the mystifying beauty of past works of art. [...] Art thus provides an oppressive conservative establishment with a most powerful weapon to sustain existing privilege and domination, to affirm the status quo and the past which engendered it, despite all the misery and injustice they contain.”<sup>19</sup> 2. A second argument against high art as an oppressive social evil is that it provides a “devastating strategy by which the socio-cultural elite can at once disguise and assert its proud claim to intrinsic superiority through privileged association with high art’s illustrious tradition.”<sup>20</sup> 3. Last but not least, high art is held by Shusterman to support “a wretched and iniquitous social reality by providing a substitute imaginary realm where our frustrated desires for a happier life and our just demands for a better society are displaced, sublimated, and gratified – but in imagination only. Progressive praxis is thus paralyzed through the hallucinatory bliss of what Marcuse calls art’s ‘real illusion.’”<sup>21</sup>

Shusterman unmistakably relies on the position developed by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who explains the difference of high culture and low culture in the light of differences in social position. According to his opinion, consumption of products of popular culture and that of high culture should not be regarded as correlative to its content, but as an

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<sup>17</sup> Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, xvi. “Pragmatist aesthetics began with John Dewey – and almost ended there.” (ibid)

<sup>18</sup> Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, 169.

<sup>19</sup> Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, 141.

<sup>20</sup> Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, 144.

<sup>21</sup> Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, 146.

expression of different social strata which communicate their social status through habits of consumption. It is the process of accumulating of field specific symbolic capital that is the main drive behind the consumption of cultural products, whereas the whole process exhibits mechanisms of preservation of deep social differences and borderlines. Bourdieu, however, does not really refuse the difference of high culture and popular culture, but explains the difference in an entirely functional way that corresponds to theories mentioned above. Contrary to Bourdieu's description, Shusterman hopes to get new possibilities from popular culture, as it is clear from the programmatic passages quoted above from the introduction of *Pragmatist Aesthetics*.

Shusterman's illustration in favour of his argument is William Shakespeare who was in the 19<sup>th</sup> century America both high theatre and vaudeville. Shusterman claims that all features we find in high art can be seen in so-called mass culture products as well, and on the basis of this he tries to challenge the distinction between them. He wants to show on the case of rap and hip-hop that these "low" music directions meet criteria that were traditionally reserved for high art. Pop music contradicts, thus, all kind of distinctions between "high" and "low", and it especially obliterates the general misevaluation in the "culture industry". With the increasing estimation of popular works it becomes easier to attribute a social function to art (tolerance, plurality, and so forth).

Let me begin with the reference to Shakespeare where the objection made by Shusterman concerns the fragility of canons. This idea might be understood as follows: The claim that there is a categorical difference between amusement and high art provokes certain concerns about the possibility to judge whether something belongs to this or that category. One could legitimately ask what kind of criteria are at work here? Is there a list of products that could be categorized as artworks, whereas other products seem to be popular artworks, but being not art at all, categorized instead as amusement and entertainment? Are there canons that can help us to distinguish art from entertainment? In order to respond to this counter-argument let us specify the claim what is at stake here. Shusterman attacks a thesis that might be called the claim on rigid canons. Canons are, then, rigid in the sense that they should enable us to decide one for all whether something belongs to this or that category.

It might be useful to have a look at the example of Shakespeare analyzed in detail by Levine who wanted to establish the claim from the perspective of history of art that there is only an unstable and vague dividing line between high culture and popular culture. On a wide scale of examples from Shakespeare through jazz, opera to Max Brothers, Levine believes to



be able to demonstrate the dynamic change and arbitrariness of dividing lines of this kind.<sup>22</sup> One might object, however, that his argument does not at all show the impossibility of the contrast. The re-qualification of products and achievements in entertainment into high culture always takes place retrospectively, and it is not at all very unstable. And even if there were borderline cases hard to decide, it would not show the impossibility of the distinction. Under closer inspection the borderline cases can be judged at least in terms of the intention of the author, since the pretension of the work or product is usually not very complicated to identify.

Furthermore, the alleged instability in classifying high art or mass culture is in overwhelming majority of the cases one-sided: we might see several times that products originally made for purposes of amusement become qualified as object of art appreciation – but for the opposite case there are no convincing examples. Artworks do not become products of entertainment industry in a way that they could lose their character of artwork, even if they might be or might become unexciting, boring artworks. What has been canonized can be sometimes re-evaluated, but it does not suffer the loss of its status of an artwork. This is bound up with the fact that in popular culture there are no classics in a comparable sense to high art. Even if their definitive list might be and, in fact, is open to debate and to historical change, classical artworks exhibit an intensity and depth of meaning in a way that they are often read, heard, and consumed again and again by consecutive generations. With regard to soap operas, pop music, graffiti and the like a similar idea cannot even be conceived of. There are some, for example Lüddeman, who think that popular culture has its classics, but the examples he gives – early songs of a band, first series of a soap opera, posters – show the weakness of this idea<sup>23</sup>. These cases are clearly not similar to classical works of art that we deal with again and again.

Contrary to this, I would argue that there are canons, but they are not as rigid as their opponents like to characterize them. Instead, we have *flexible canons*, the functions of which explain their flexibility. Canon is in Ancient Greek a word for rules and became well-known, when the Catholic Church designated the texts constituting the “true Bible” as canonical. The term’s bad reputation in the humanities comes first of all from the standard counter-argument highlighting instability as characteristic feature of canons. It is easy to realize that the core of the counter-argument relies on the alleged rigidity of canons: canons decide once and for all what belongs to it and what does not. By contrast, a more flexible understanding of culture could be attained, if detached from the idea of eternal validity. The classical scholar Manfred

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<sup>22</sup> Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow. The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).

<sup>23</sup> Stefan Lüddemann, *Kultur. Eine Einführung* (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2010) 99.

Fuhrmann suggests a definition of canons in this vein: they are mediating means whose function is to prepare a pre-selection of the huge amount of works in a certain field. In light of this function it is clear that canons cannot be but flexible.<sup>24</sup> Accordingly, the case of Shakespeare is not so simple, because he was not a typical producer of popular culture in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, as Johann Sebastian Bach was not a typical liturgical musician either. To make the case Shusterman wants to, it should be shown that not only exceptional works but also average ones can be classified and re-classified as classics in later epochs. And it is, of course, not the case: not every script-writer had the talent of Shakespeare, not every organist had the genius of Johann Sebastian Bach. There is a general additional point to make here. Classifications function, so to speak, in a one-way modus. If a piece, a work ever was held to be worth reading or hearing, it generally does not lose this evaluation. In other words, cases of getting omitted from a canon are significantly rarer than the opposite, let alone the case of sudden intellectual and cultural changes when they easily explain radical changes in canons (e.g. the Christian re-figuration of classical literature).

It is important to realize that Shusterman's arguments against a distinction between high art and entertainment products are far from being evident and do not succeed in establishing the impossibility of the distinction. In what follows I cannot but sketch without really entering into details a possible development of the distinction following Theodor W. Adorno and Hannah Arendt. Taking the sharp critique of "culture industry" given by Horkheimer and Adorno as a point of departure, it is clear that the description of *Dialectics of Enlightenment* gives clues to an approach sensitive to the differences of works of art and entertainment products. In the footsteps of Hannah Arendt it can be claimed, furthermore, that the variety of all that is categorized as mass culture or as popular culture can be understood better, if related to a need for amusement and entertainment. Arendt's position is attractive, because it recognises, in contrast to the theory of culture industry, the need for entertainment and amusement, in so far as the need for leisure is held to belong to the biological life process. As part of the biological life process, entertainment is as much a must for each individual as food or health. and so on. This need for entertainment, in turn, must be basically distinguished from art as intellectual orientation or a specific pleasure with intellectual content. From this point of view, artworks and products of mass culture are rendered to different dimensions of human life, the former to the world and worldliness, and the latter to the biological life-process. The function of art might be clarified through the distinguished role of the artist, in so far as he is "the authentic producer

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<sup>24</sup> Manfred Fuhrmann, *Bildung* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2002).

of those objects which every civilization leaves behind as the quintessence and the lasting testimony of the spirit which animated it.<sup>25</sup>” The basic thesis suggests then, that it is possible and fruitful to make a difference between high culture and popular culture, not in the sense of a gradual difference, but as a generic difference, a difference in kind. Conversely, confusing high art with popular culture, endangers the role art might play in individual human life. Mass society, the common conviction of Adorno and Arendt says, makes culture and art to undergo an essential transformation in a negative sense, although they differ in explicating this negative effect.

If we consider first Adorno’s oeuvre, we find the idea of a double, dialectical character of art. On the one hand, art can be mass deception (*Massenbetrug*) and manipulation, wherewith it contributes to maintaining the existing order of late capitalism. To analyze and exhibit this stabilizing feature of mass culture was one of the main theoretical tasks of the chapter entitled “Culture industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception” in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. But on the other hand, autonomous artwork can be the only place of freedom against the existing order (*das Bestehende*), an administrated world repressing, in his opinion, all spontaneity. This double character of art could be shown by an interpretation of his two major works *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (with Horkheimer) and the posthumously published *Aesthetic Theory*. Even though *Dialectic of Enlightenment* also contains a twofold description of art, it is rather *Aesthetic Theory* that offers an elaborated version of the idea of art as freedom in administrated society (*verwaltete Gesellschaft*). The term mass culture does not occur, to my knowledge, in the book, but the formula culture industry indicates such reservations that are usually formulated against mass culture. The art of mass society means a double process, partly a depravation of culture, partly an intellectualization of entertainment, which end in a fusion of culture and art. It is essential for understanding the conception of culture industry that it does not try to give a neutral, objective description of artistic and cultural phenomena. The term and the project it is embedded in must be seen in its relation to the perspective of seeking for possibilities of social transformation.

Culture industry as the version of “Enlightenment” identical with mass deception is one of the main issues in Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s book. Enlightenment is not held to be a historical era or epoch, rather as a structure, sample of behaviour of reason striving to survive. Enlightenment is the attempt to dominate the threatening nature (inner and outer nature), but this attempt is doomed to failure, whence its ”dialectic” nature comes. Horkheimer and Adorno

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<sup>25</sup> Hannah Arendt, “The crisis in culture”, in: *Between Past and Future. Six exercises in political thought* (New York: Viking Press, 1961), 201.

hold to be "nature" everything not made by humans, including both outer nature (things, other persons) and inner nature (own desires, feelings), and a characteristic feature of nature thus conceived is, according to their opinion, its threatening effect. Enlightenment reveals reason's power-like nature, and this instrumental reason is responsible for the barbarism of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Now one can say that, culture industry is Enlightenment in so far it gives an organized form of the deception of masses, and thereby it is at the same time a form of domination of nature, since Adorno and Horkheimer include in the scope of "nature" human beings as well. In a summary, Adorno makes a remark telling clearly that their previous drafts used the term "mass culture" instead of culture industry, and the substitution took place in order to exclude the interpretation of mass culture as contemporary variation of folk art. Consequently, it is appropriate to look for an analysis of mass culture in the theory of "culture industry". Horkheimer and Adorno talk about a kind of industry in order to stress that products are made in a more or less planned manner for mass consumption and these products determine to a high degree this consumption by masses.

Despite the centrality of the issue, the chapter on culture industry is not very well elaborated. There is a more serious difficulty, in so far in a draft-sentence omitted later Horkheimer and Adorno promised to analyze "positive aspects of mass culture", but they had not come to realize it. Culture industry means in the context of *Dialectics of Enlightenment* first of all one single system in the administrated world which controls free time and amusement. It is an "escape form everyday life," but the same everyday life is presented as Paradise. The basic idea of Horkheimer and Adorno is to reveal the factory that presents schematic, easily understandable products as artworks, and it constitutes thus the deception of the masses. The "industrial" character is not meant literally, the point of the word is "standardization" and "uniformization" of products and rationalization of dissemination, but it does not want to refer to the production process.<sup>26</sup> The authors of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* thought of the uniformity guaranteed by movie, radio, newspapers forming a system. This epoch of mass culture endangers the possibility of autonomous art through the influence of a global culture industry, for it excludes the emergence of something new. Instead of information and instruction culture industry makes up a huge deception of masses, where the deceptive character amounts to stopping and preventing real experiences, giving only disintegrating and infantile distraction and amusement (*Zerstreuung*). In the Preface, the authors define the meaning of

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<sup>26</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften* 10/1, 339.

enlightenment to the effect that it “consists primarily in the calculation of effects and in the technology of production and dissemination; the specific content of the ideology is exhausted in the idolization of the existing order and of the power by which the technology is controlled.”

The ambivalence of culture, correspondingly, consists in its twofold character. Culture, on the one hand, hides behind its appealing surface the social and economic difficulties, contradictions, and therein stabilizes the existing order. Culture, on the other hand, is an expression of undistorted life (*unbeschädigtes Leben*) and conveys the desire of a life liberated from practical requirements. Art articulates with it a surplus against the existing order. Autonomous artworks escape from social conformism; they do not say always the same, but something new. Thus they represent a kind of uniqueness, a singularity in a world of identity and uniformity. It is “contemporary listening which has regressed, arrested at the infantile stage. [... Listening subjects] listen automatically and dissociate what they hear, but precisely in this dissociation they develop certain capacities which accord less with the concepts of traditional aesthetics than with those of football and motoring. They are not childlike [...] But they are childish; their primitivism is not that of the underdeveloped, but that of the forcibly retarded.”<sup>27</sup>

In view of the fact that culture industry consists in soap operas, magazines, movie (western), pop music, it is instructive to consider Adorno’s most concrete example for culture industry, what he calls “musical fetishism”, because he analyzes much less other cases of mass culture, for example western movies. The new musical state is deeply characterized by the “liquidation of the individual”, and Adorno argues that pop music, especially jazz, follows the principles of culture industry, that is the principles of standardization, pseudo-individuality, and reification.

These considerations can be completed with his analysis of television what might suggest a refutation of the dichotomy between autonomous art and mass media. Adorno opens his study entitled “How to look at television?” with trying to cast some doubt on the dichotomy between autonomous art and mass media. Stressing that their relation is highly complex, he claims that distinctions between popular and elite art are a product of historical conditions and should not be exaggerated. I suggest as the interpretive strategy of my research that even if Adorno tempted to avoid emphasizing the difference, one could insist on it.

Turning to the posthumously published *Aesthetic Theory*, it is much more dedicated to what might be called high art, and mass culture appears to be rather a peripheral issue. It deserves, however, attention, because we find here an elaborated account of artworks, and this

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<sup>27</sup> Adorno, “On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening”. in: Theodor W. Adorno, *The Culture Industry. Selected essays on mass culture* (London: Routledge, 1991), 46-7.

elucidates the fundamental difference between artworks and products of culture industry. According to Adorno's conviction, what he takes over from Benjamin, artworks "are the self-unconscious historiography of their epoch"<sup>28</sup>, and it establishes their philosophical significance. An artwork is, in addition, rational construction, in so much as it includes "(raw) material" – language, sounds, colours, forms, and so creation of artworks implies a forming instance, a kind of "rationality". Adorno explicates it as a form of reason dominating nature. Furthermore, artworks have a puzzle-character in so far as they say something and hide it at the same time: "All artworks – and art altogether – are enigmas; since antiquity this has been an irritation to the theory of art."<sup>29</sup> As to concrete examples and preferences, his references go clearly to classical modernity, As for preferences and examples, he heavily relies on classical modernity, his favourite authors are Schönberg, Kafka, Joyce, Proust, and Beckett. In his view, art is not a means to happiness, because that would be identical with the lying of culture industry. Instead, it has a revolutionary role, viz. to resist mass culture and culture industry. This resistance leads to the rehabilitation of ugly and unsayable, and the prize to pay for that is that art has no political effect, it does not take party. Despite this, Adorno thinks that the truth content of artworks has a political dimension by expressing social contradictions with their possible reconciliation.

A second level of *Aesthetic Theory* develops the idea of liberation of raw material in art. Artworks are in this sense the salvation of manifoldness and difference that disappears otherwise because of the dominating comportment of reason. Through this achievement, artworks become the most prominent examples for the salvation of the non-identical (*das Nichtidentische*) which is a central notion to Adorno's thinking. The non-identical is the heading of his complex theory about the violent character of conceptual understanding explicated in his other important later work *Negative Dialectics*.

Hannah Arendt has paid less attention to problems of culture and art than to questions of political theory, albeit she wrote numerous studies on writers, poets, and intellectuals. Her main field of inquiry lies in political philosophy. Nevertheless, in her essays on culture, Arendt argued for the distinction mentioned above, and put it in relation to mass society. Her position is attractive, because it recognises, in contrast to the theory of culture industry, the need for entertainment and amusement, in so far the need for leisure is held to belong to the biological life process. As part of the biological life process, entertainment is as much a must for each individual as food, health and so on. One could be tempted to doubt whether Horkheimer and Adorno really wanted to refuse the necessity of leisure; one could say they simply wanted to

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<sup>28</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 182.

<sup>29</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 120.

claim the ideological character of leisure time in capitalism, and it was this and only this fact that was the object of their critique. In any case, their fierce critique might easily be understood as refutation of popular culture's right to exist. Arendt's approach is more plausible, since it can avoid both mixing up high art and mass culture and refusing mass culture entirely.

The perspective where I would like to interpret her position is labelled "Hannah Arendt's political existentialism". This characterization intends to underline the fact that Arendt seeks to say something about meaning and role of politics in the life of individual human beings. Her perspective might be summarized by the question how the political fits into individual human life. Therefore she strives to understand the meaning of political activity with regard to and on the basis of individual human life – an approach to political phenomena within the framework of a comparative description of human activities.

The sensitivity to problems of individual human life arises from her intellectual orientation, as it is clear from her biography. Hannah Arendt studied classics, philosophy, theology, and her most important academic influences were Martin Heidegger in Freiburg and Karl Jaspers in Heidelberg who was also supervisor of her PhD thesis *Der Liebesbegriff von Augustin*. She studied with the German masters of existentialism. It is little wonder, then, that Arendt's political philosophy is grounded basically on a conception of human life and existence. Normally, each political philosophy presupposes some ideas about the nature of human beings, on the base of which the tasks and possible means of politics could be specified. But in Hannah Arendt's thought, there is a closer connection between human existence and politics. On the one hand, she approaches political phenomena with the intention to understand their meaning in the context of human activities. On the other hand, she is convinced that human life is dependent on a public space in order to grasp itself in its individuality. A further step Arendt makes is the idea that this public space is inherently political. Politics is, thus, linked to the basic need of human existence to grasp itself. To live an individual human life inevitably contains the task of understanding oneself, and it is possible only under public conditions. In view of these assumptions of her theory, her proposal is not one to define the political tasks as distinct from others, but rather to search the meaning of public activities and the meaning of action within the context of human life.

It is interesting to note that Arendt's distinctions in human activities do not really help to elucidate the essential features of works of art. In *The Human Condition* she develops a "political anthropology", in which Arendt elaborates a trichotomy of activities: labor, work and action. These three activities constitute parts of "vita activa", Arendt's term for practical-political life. Originally the Latin translation of Aristotle's of "bios politikos" in the Middle

Ages, “vita activa” in Arendt’s use includes the ways we can be active. It means an important shift compared to Aristotle that her investigation does not include the activity of thinking, which figures as constitutive for the highest possibility in Aristotle’s hierarchy of forms of life, for theoretical life.

Labor, work, and action correspond to three basic conditions under which life is given to human beings. The first of these basic dimensions of human life is the life process in a biological sense, and labor (*Arbeit*) serves exclusively to maintain this process, having no further end to fulfil. Secondly, it is the human world of durable objects and artefacts which corresponds to the activity that produces them, to work (*Herstellen*). Third, the plurality of human beings is a fundamental dimension that makes, in Arendt’s view, both individuality and politics conceivable. It is a strong individuality, i.e. not merely numerical plurality of the same, but the manifoldness of essentially different beings, what appears in action (*Handeln*). Without individuality as implicated in plurality there could not be action as revelation or disclosure of the doer, and so Arendt can write: “Action alone is the exclusive prerogative of man; neither a beast nor a god is capable of it”.<sup>30</sup> This passage shows immediately Arendt’s idiosyncratic use of the term “action” which is much narrower than ordinary usage, since in ordinary use “action” includes both “labor” and “work”.

Arendt’s interest for art stems from her being a passionate consumer of literature and artworks. She managed, for example, the translation of Hermann Broch’s *Death of Vergil* into English, and edited a collection of Broch’s essays, making the Austrian novelist known in the US. Nonetheless, theoretical questions of art and aesthetics are not in the foreground of her thinking as compared to political issues. Mass society has for Arendt the distinctive feature in the disappearance of strata where those who are opposed to society and its overall requirements could retreat: “There is, however, an important difference between the earlier stages of society and mass society with respect to the situation of the individual. As long as society itself was restricted to certain classes of the population, the individual’s chances for survival against its pressures were rather good; they lay in the simultaneous presence within the population of other non-society strata into which the individual could escape... A good part of the despair of individuals under the conditions of mass society is due to the fact that these avenues of escape are now closed because society has incorporated all strata of the population.”<sup>31</sup> Arendt’s use of „society” highlights primarily a set of anonymous expectations that might endanger the living of my own, authentic life. In this idea she follows partly Heidegger’s analysis of the „they” (das

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<sup>30</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 22-23.

<sup>31</sup> Arendt, “The crisis in culture”, 200.



Man) as elaborated in *Being ant Time*. In *The Human Condition* the „Social” is the sphere between public and private sphere governed by conventionality.

The status of culture in mass society, then, is conditioned by the fact that mass society “wants not culture but entertainment, and the wares offered by the entertainment industry are indeed consumed by society just like any other consumer goods.”<sup>32</sup> Accordingly, culture in mass society is analysed by Arendt in terms of the opposition of culture and entertainment, where they differ categorically. Entertainment is different from art in kind, and so they are not the inferior and the superior realization of the same. As a consequence, the Arendtean approach does not enface the problem of separating high (sophisticated) art and pop art. In her view, mass culture is not art at all, products of mass culture are basically consumer goods that help resting. From this point of view, artworks and products of mass culture are rendered to different dimensions of human life, the former to the world and worldliness, and the latter to the biological life-process.

The function of art might be clarified through the distinguished role of the artist, in so far as he is “the authentic producer of those objects which every civilization leaves behind as the quintessence and the lasting testimony of the spirit which animated it.”<sup>33</sup> Arendt shares a common conviction with Benjamin and Adorno, according to which the essence of a historical epoch is to be grasped through its artworks. This idea has also something to do with the Arendtean conception of “world”, to which works of art constitute an essential contribution. Artists produce durable objects, and the multiplicity of these durable objects make up the world Arendt’s sense. In her interpretation, “world” is neither the totality of facts, nor that of objects; it is rather the context, the complex net of meaning we live in as the framework of our specific human life. Artificial objects last longer than individual life processes, and so this more durable structure of artefacts is the context what gives a home, a human place for individual life.

Artefacts in general have a task to fulfil, they are tools for certain purposes. In contrast to that, artworks have no immediate utility, they do not satisfy obvious needs or accomplish functions. This has to do also with the fact that they are radically individual, irreplaceable. For this reason artworks are not „used”, they are rather kept away from contexts of action and use. Arendt claims, therefore, that works of art belong to the most durable things and objects; they are the most worldly things.

It might be objected that there is no definition of art in Arendt’s work. I suggest to take this as a consequence of the high individuality of artworks that makes a general definition very

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<sup>32</sup> Arendt, “The crisis in culture”, 205.

<sup>33</sup> Arendt, “The crisis in culture”, 201.

difficult. Arendt draws attention to the difficulty that what can be given as general definition says nothing. This individuality is attested, on the other hand, by troubles when interpreting an artwork: usual, ordinary language does often not suffice, and task of the critic, therefore, is exactly to find a linguistic articulation of the individual features of the artwork in question. It is worth to mention in this context that according to Benjamin's idea works of art are in terms of their individuality not part of history.

Entertainment, on the other hand, is explained by Arendt in terms of the needs of biological life process, in so far as the products in question serve this life process, "even though they may not be as necessary for this life as bread and meat. They serve, as the phrase is, to while away time, and the vacant time which is whiled away is not leisure time, strictly speaking time, that is, in which we are free from all cares and activities necessitated by the life process and therefore free for the world and its culture it is rather left-over time, which still is biological in nature, left over after labor and sleep have received their due."<sup>34</sup>

Arendt's approach offers important conceptual means to treat some difficulties, even if there remain shortcomings to be reflected. First, she elaborates a conceptual solution for separating high art and mass culture to the effect that there is no continuum, no unity of the two. Artworks and products of mass culture are only seemingly similar. Second, Arendt is capable both to recognize mass culture in its own right, and to assess its threat for high art. The main problem she notices is that entertainment industry uses up, trivializes real artworks as raw material, and so a real encounter with artworks becomes much more difficult. As to the shortcoming of Arendt's approach, it does not contain a comprehensive analysis of aesthetic pleasure, appreciation of art works. In spite of frequent hints at Kant, her interpretation of art remains in this respect Hegelean, i.e. the intellectual content of artworks comes to the fore. A sign of this approach might be the fact that Arendt had scarcely paid attention to music.

There appear to be some conclusions to be drawn from Arendt's approach. First, not to differentiate between high culture and pop culture is simply to confuse intellectual orientation and entertainment. This opposition should be, however, refined and elaborated. Second, with the help of this distinction the objection can be met that artworks serve often as a mean of distinguishing ourselves from other classes and from the crowd that are generally regarded as inferior. Snobism in various forms can be an illustration of such behaviour, and it was the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu who developed a theory based on this idea: different consume of different cultural products reproduce social differences. Using Arendt's arguments

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<sup>34</sup> Arendt, "The crisis in culture", 205.

it might be made clear that snobism is a deficient, inappropriate attitude, which, by contrast, presupposes a normal attitude. This normal attitude of consuming art is the basic counter-argument to Bourdieu as well. It might, of course, be admitted that the appreciation of artworks is an activity with certain preconditions – free time, some money etc. – that are not distributed equally, but it seems not to be convincing, as Bourdieu suggests, that differences in social status are intentionally mirrored in various art consume.

A similar objection emphasizes that art consume could have in different times goals lying to a high extent outside of pure art. For example, opera performances served as meeting point for centuries, or the music of Bach was embedded in liturgy. What all such cases show, however, is that there could be an external occasion for artists to create great artworks; but it does not follow that these works remained in the scope of the original situation. One can argue that even if created with such a motivation, real works of art supersede the original social or religious framework. On the other hand, only great works survive this kind of functionality, whence the overwhelming majority of Bach's contemporary composers had remained unknown.

The lesson to draw from Adorno and Arendt, then, is that there are basically different approaches and tasks which should not be confused, even if the existence of disputable cases might be admitted. Despite their different views of popular culture, both Adorno and Arendt hold this position. The difference lies in the evaluation of what popular culture is capable of. For Adorno, it is sheer mean of repression and legitimization of the existing order, while for Arendt entertainment industry satisfies a need (resting, amusement [*Ausschalten*]) emerging from the biological life process, therefore it makes no sense to attack it. The opposition between entertainment and amusement on the one hand, and intellectual orientation and artistic pleasure on the other is theoretically fruitful, because it is usually not difficult to decide which one was the intention of the author. The objection that there are many examples for serious artworks that were at the same time products for purposes of amusement is not a real one. In this vein, it is often said that Shakespeare wanted to write popular plays and Bach liturgy music. To answer this really frequent objection it suffices to remind that even if they coincide, there are here two distinct achievements which make up a lucky mixture. But it is not essential to them to be intertwined, and in fact, they are usually not linked together.

A further difference of art and entertainment can be highlighted, if one works up the thesis Adorno and Arendt with regard to the relation of art and the domain of self-evident. Artworks have the effect that they illuminate the self-evident as self-evident. Art is capable of this, because it has the character of the non-evident. The more or less radical innovation, or at

least originality we demand from artworks is connected to this point. Art, thus, means a sort of self-reflexion of human life lived in the framework of the self-evident. Amusement and entertainment, on the other hand, figure in the domain of the self-evident and of the routine-like.

Adorno and Arendt can be seen as sharing a perspective of catastrophe in describing their age. Adorno's famous saying that a poem after Auschwitz is barbarian depicts his time from the point of view of a catastrophe. The same holds true for Arendt as to her political thought: in her opinion, the concentration camps signify a dramatic break in European culture – a conviction that is also present in the essays of Hungarian Nobel laureate Imre Kertész. Arendt's reservation that mass culture might use up artworks relies on some anxiety because of high culture. In view of recent decades such a fear can even be reinforced, since reading-based culture with an affinity to complex, sophisticated works loose apparently room and begin to function in closed circles. This kind of new barbarism is perhaps an exaggeration, and perhaps classical philology is right in saying that classic works can afford not to be read for some hundred years. Similar optimism can be found in Adorno when he writes: "Great works wait."<sup>35</sup>

From a theoretical perspective, the task to be done is first of all a refinement and elaboration of the concept of entertainment. Adorno had not delivered an acceptable interpretation of free time, and Arendt's proposal on meaning and character of amusement have to be clarified and carried on. It should be at the same time combined with a discussion of those theories that tend to doubt the distinction between high and popular culture. It is instructive at this point to have a glance at these positions. As a preliminary remark, it is appropriate to note that historical research has made clear that it was only in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when wider parts of the population gained free time to an extent that the question how to fill this free time could be formulated at all. Gerhard Schulze's *Erlebnisgesellschaft* describes in detail this process with a special focus on leisure time activities. To some extent, this is the time when the problem of a popular culture, i.e. cultural products for a larger audience, could raise.

To sum up, let me summarize what I was about to say by way of contrast: my proposal to follow Adorno in understanding popular culture as entertainment goes partly against the position of Richard Shusterman's – and of many others – by refusing that popular cultural products are artworks at all. Instead of a huge continuum of products including Joyce's *Ulysses* and the soap opera *Two and a Half Men*, I propose to have two by and large different sets of artefacts perhaps with some controversial pieces. On the other hand, my suggestion to follow

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<sup>35</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 67.

Hannah Arendt in rendering entertainment products to the needs of biological life process helps to overcome the unfruitful hostility Adorno and Horkheimer had against “culture industry”, and this is an idea in line with Richard Shusterman’s attempt to understand popular culture in a positive way.

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