Aesthetics of Popular Culture

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A History of Aesthetics of Popular Culture

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Scholars in aesthetics of popular culture cannot escape the need to work with a multidisciplinary corpus of texts. Popular culture aestheticians seldom, if ever, confine their discourse to only one school of philosophy. Those who take the challenge read Umberto Eco’s (semiotic) aesthetics, yet they cannot ignore the (Hegelian) work of Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno on the topic, and in all contemporary texts covering the issue we also find Richard Shusterman’s (and John Dewey’s) pragmatism and Noël Carroll’s analytic aesthetics at least mentioned.

Like this would not pose enough of a challenge, the corpus is conceptually fragmented. Discussions on philosophy of art, for example, are based on the use of only one concept, ‘art’. Some aestheticians narrow ‘art’ down to a clinical museum sphere, some others talk about a broader array of practices — sometimes even touching upon the popular. All of them, anyway, use the same word, which, in its extension, does not differ very much in different languages. Kunst, (‘)art, (El/‘)arte, umenî, sztuka, taide and konst all cover quite the same field of culture, and it is the context and way of use attached to them that one has to focus on. In this respect one finds, of course, huge differences. For George Dickie art is mostly about public (visual) art services and for Dewey the most meaningful and living arts are found outside of the institutional world of highbrow art — in popular culture, actually, jazz and comics.

Discussions on ‘mass culture’, ‘mass art’, ‘popular culture’, ‘popular art’, ‘high and low’, the lower arts and sometimes even entertainment, the spectacle, kitsch or camp are, on the other hand, quite about the same phenomena, although the conceptual field looks fragmented. Shusterman (‘popular art’), Carroll (‘mass art’), Vattimo and Eco (‘cultura di massa’) all lean on the same (already sketchily presented) idea history starting from Adorno and Benjamin, including as well e.g. the mass culture debates of American sociology of the 1950s (Gans, Rosenberg, White) and names like Clement Greenberg and Dewey. The habits, objects and institutional frameworks they focus on are also quite the same. The goal is to discuss not just any media culture, e.g. news broadcasting, or any form of culture being popular. Neither are the scholars here interested in traditional folk culture or do-it-yourself-culture. They study professional
artistic production that stands institutionally outside of the confines of the art world, and the habits, sensibilities and aesthetic rewards of this territory of culture.

'Mass culture' as a negatively laden concept might recollect 'nasty vibes' in an exciting way, as the concept has roots in the uprisings of the feminist suffragettes and the workers in the 19th century. Many scholars associate the concept, though, to elitist laments about the passive and heard-like nature of the consumers of mainstream culture. (The Italian 'cultura di massa' seems to be a bit softer in this respect.) 'Popular art', on the other hand, would be a good choice for a concept to work with if one wanted to accentuate the fact that most artistic production is today actually executed and presented in the sphere of culture which we conceive of as being popular culture. But we have here chosen to use the most common concept about our topic, 'popular culture', for our brief presentation of the history of the aesthetic scholarship on this territory of culture extending from German crime TV series to the San Remo Italian song festival. Though in some languages, like Italian or Spanish, 'cultura popolare' denotes folk culture as much or even more than modern mass-mediated culture, at least most European languages have a popular readymade concept for our topic rooted in two Latin words, 'populus', the people, and 'cultivare', to cultivate. In the case of mass culture the 'culture' stands more often for the anthropological use of the word. Popular culture, on the contrary, definitely points to a more enthusiastic vision of the nature of the field, still without leaning on the complicated concept of art. We find the concept popular culture good to use following its international popularity among scholars.

Though problems and concepts in aesthetics of popular culture have been touched upon throughout the history of aesthetics — we will get back to this at the end of our essay — the theoretical deep end of the discourse was created by philosophical thinkers engaged in the so-called mass culture debate. Here we find philosophers of the masses and mass movements (Ortega y Gasset), cultural critics (T.S. Eliot), and then, in the end, the first scholars to build strong theoretical frameworks on the topic, the critical theorists of the Frankfurt school, mainly Theodor W. Adorno and min (who was needed to add them to developing Lowenth.)

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W. Adorno and his older, more enthusiastic counterpart Walter Benjamin (who was an outsider member of the community) — though one needs to add that also Leo Lowenthal and Herbert Marcuse contributed to developing philosophical thinking on the subject. Lowenthal’s “Historical Perspectives on Popular Culture” (1957) was the first study on the birth of the ‘Great Divide’. Lowenthal traced the root of the discourse on the topic to Pascal’s and Montaigne’s exchange of letters. In Marcuse’s work popular culture became, in the late 1960s, a possible key for overcoming ‘negative dialectics’ (see below the section on Adorno). Marcuse believed, for a moment, that the emerging hippie sensibility, sensuality (long hair), anti-career-thinking and revolt of the 1960s were starting to break ties with modern metaphysics. This view was most concisely argued for in An Essay on Liberation (1969). Benjamin is, still, the one to ‘blame’ for the first theoretically well-grounded discourse on popular culture. His theory will so be the first in the line. As is the case of the other scholars presented here (Adorno, Eco, Vattimo, Dewey and his followers, analytic philosophy), we aspire to explain his thinking as much as possible as it is read in his own home field. Working out a criticism from the point of view of another school of thinking can sometimes be productive, but mostly these criticisms are illiterate and create only clashes, as it is very hard to be an expert in all schools of philosophy. Even if we were interested in taking the challenge, this is for sure not the right time and place for a work like that.

**Walter Benjamin**

Walter Benjamin’s philosophical odyssey into modernity was fueled by encounters with popular culture. Though his thinking has been overtly anchored to media philosophy, film theory and photo theory — topics which, of course, collide with ours — Benjamin clearly discusses popular culture, though while roaming in urban entertainment districts, watching movies and analyzing the entertainments of the masses, Benjamin does not explicitly separate popular culture from his broader conception of
modern art and culture. Popular culture is still in the heart of his aesthetic thinking, something opposed to what he calls the negative theology of art.

Not all art was, though, about fetishizing dusty ‘original’ objects. Still, in his The Writer of Modern Life (1939, Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire) the shocking acts of the avant-gardists seem to be totally unable to compete with the impact Tivoli and modern entertainment venues have on reconfiguring experience. The latter resonate with the new forms of mechanical work applied in factories, famously carnegialized in 1936, the same year as Benjamin wrote his Artwork-essay (see below), in Charlie Chaplin’s film Modern Times. Benjamin thought that this new aesthetic culture of entertainment was anchored to the changing conditions of everyday life and its (everyday) aesthetics. It was a way of coping with the new frameworks of experience people had to adapt to. So the new forms of more or less artistic culture, working hand-in-hand together with e.g. working life and the reconfiguring of traffic and urban culture, helped to shape modern experience.

In “The Work of Art in its Age of its Technological Reproducibility” (1936, “Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit”) Benjamin polarized distraction and concentration.

The masses are a matrix from which all customary behavior toward works of art is today emerging newborn. Quantity has been transformed into quality: the greatly increased mass of participants has produced a different kind of participation. (...) The masses are criticized for seeking distraction [Zerstreuung] in the work of art, whereas the art lover supposedly approaches it with concentration. In the case of the masses, the artwork is seen as a means of entertainment; in the case of the art lover, it is considered an object of devotion.

In Benjamin’s view art lovers become absorbed by the work they devote themselves to, and “the distracted masses absorb the work of art into themselves”. Architecture was so, according to Benjamin, the first mass art, as it has been from the beginning an object of distracted attention at the same time as it has been a collective object of aesthetic attention.

Discussing aesthetic objects shared and used both by experts, the elite and ‘the masses’, and by criticizing the way some scholars had been discussing a the question, aesthetic, as the entire culture and film we many they. New media, to sit and st news report being phen with them - longer toler Benj find a produ he did not t he discuss experience) things was on larger pc for ref togi had a role culture — here is the by its natur touch on th. Benja complex th of the word Louvre or a had, accord culture. Th
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been discussing if photography or film are 'arts'. Benjamin indirectly launched a prophecy, later picked up by e.g. Marshall McLuhan, that the question of whether something is an art or not has become ana-
chronistic, as the real question is how e.g. photography and film change the entire character of the arts. 14

Aesthetic experience and artistic work was in change. Photography and film were already more or less appreciated as art forms, though by many they were still viewed as ephemeral and surface-natured hobbies. New media, traffic — bringing far-away places closer and forcing people to sit and stand 'too close' to each other, working conditions (factories), news reporting and fashion which stressed the up-to-date, and all the differing phenomena the new faster, more fragmented lifestyles brought with them — this was something traditional art and aesthetics could no longer tolerate without a change.

Benjamin was mainly interested in the question how an artist could find a productive position in the changing culture. But it was logical that he did not give the most central role to the avant-gardist margin when he discussed the turning of the heavy wheels of history (and changes in experience). The change that was to affect the whole way we experienced things was of course more cultivated by culture that truly had an impact on larger populations. Dada and surrealism were necessary preconditions for refiguring the societal role of art, and of course, that way they also had a role in the re-estimation of the relation between high and low culture — but naturally only in the highbrow sphere. The difference here is that for example film broke barriers from the beginning and by its nature, and became an art form with a totally new and different touch on the topic in a way that affected the (wo)man of the streets, too.

Benjamin's thinking on the aura is a key for understanding his complex thinking on popular culture. It characterizes the relationship of the work and its recipient. A classical work of art like a painting in Louvre or a villa by Palladio somewhere in the remote parts of Veneto, had, according to Benjamin inherited a cult value from historical religious culture. The original work of art, with its Here-and-Now nature, inhabited a place where you had to travel, and it was not reproducible. One has to
remember, though, that Benjamin was also very interested in the fact that reproductive arts had a long history. It was just that reproduction had not been as central before late modernity. Already photography offered a twist for this way of thinking, it did not have ‘an original’ — the negative is just a source — and while old-fashioned art works forced you to travel, photographs took distant sights closer to us, both in space and time. Seen from our topic this is the most interesting idea of “Little History of Photography” (1931, Kleine Geschichte der Photographie).\(^5\)

This crack in the aura of the traditional works of art was made even bigger by film, which in Benjamin’s times did not yet suffer from a worship of geniuses (e.g. Godard) or fetishism of ‘old media’ like traditional screen technology that is typical for today’s film culture. In the 1930s film had already, though, walked a long mile from the shocks offered by the train arriving to the screening organized in 1895 by the Lumière brothers. (As we are told, some people in the audience lost consciousness following the sight.) According to Benjamin, fast cutting, close-ups and other new ways of ‘seeing’ had now a big role in developing perception, experience and thinking.

Film here helped the whole modern culture, giving backup for digesting and working out a relationship to the new fragmented, fast-paced and shocking everyday life. Speed and montage, surprising close-ups — these were both signs of and a motor for an erosion of the old way of seeing and experiencing.

The shock effect modern man encountered while bumping on people in the crowds of the streets (here Benjamin paraphrases Baudelaire’s poems and Poe’s short stories), in rush hour traffic and factory work, was now in the heart of aesthetics, and the old-fashioned slow contemplation of e.g. paintings could not survive the change.

In the footsteps of the German philosophical interest in experience, Benjamin’s division of Erlebnis and Erfahrung, the first concept classically pointing to more immediate experience, and leaning towards pre-reflection, and the second pointing to a more structured, lived-through experience which one could reflect upon and communicate, was to mark conceptually the shift from the dominance of traditional high art to the new Erlebnis, a central collect a challenge. From a the first instance, mostly Be shocks, non-digging, one effects Tivoli a the made it the which, the track became work at To the ‘ne, from a there of an arte experience on the Sc was no aesthet that Be role in its pot
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rest in experience, concept classically ng towards pre-re red, lived-through communicate, was to aditional high art
to the new, profane and experientially thinner arts of the whole society. Erlebnis is also, though, more individual, and Benjamin claimed it had a central role in the bourgeois appropriation of Erfahrung. He was after a collective Erfahrung, and here the new dominance of Erlebnis was both a challenge, as noted, and a potential way to access collective experience. From a world where these two ways of experiencing were connected, the first one leading to the second one — from immanence to permanence, mankind was now entering a world where Erlebnis dominated mostly without a following.

Benjamin thought life was more and more about defense against shocks. The shocks that were hard to digest became encased. These non-digested experiences then changed the way one experienced, becoming, one could say, a part of the aesthetic a priori. In a world were shock effects had become a commonplace, from traffic and factory work to Tivoli and film (and its montage which resonated with modern life), the mode of experiencing was changing. Through these encounters which, following their shocking nature could not be incorporated into the traditional system of experience, old-fashioned ways of experiencing became unsatisfying, thus paving the way for the victory of new artistic work and experience.

Together with the fact that the new arts provided a challenge to the 'negative religion of art', which had borrowed its pathetic nature from ancient fetishes and magic, this also paved the way for a new world, where old art could no longer be seen as it used to be. The whole idea of an autonomous 'art' would be eroded, and the old notion of aesthetic experience would die out. (This is of course an echo of Hegel's thoughts on the death of art.)

So, Benjamin thought that after (200 years of) autonomous art 19 it was now time to break out from the box. Art was going to change and aesthetics craved for broader frameworks. We can conclude by saying that Benjamin was the first thinker to give popular culture the leading role in his philosophy art, 20 but he might have been too hopeful about its potentials.
Theodor W. Adorno

To understand Theodor Adorno’s aesthetics of popular culture one has to go back to the philosophy of G. W. F. Hegel. Also Benjamin’s work is deeply interwoven into Hegelian dialectics, it is just that it is still more easily understandable without a philosophical voyage into this background.22

Hegel’s dialectic philosophy, which Marx famously turned up and down in his political thinking, was based on certain ideas on the development of human consciousness and self-realization. Hegel saw world history as a story of human development, or, to be precise, a story of the development of the Spirit (Geist), where the high season of art was already over.

Hegel’s dialectics, his way of framing development, the part which was most actively adapted by other thinkers, was based upon the following principles: First, say, one has a phenomenon which dominates as a historical force. In Marx’s reading of Hegel this is capitalism. The ‘thesis’ already includes and produces its own negation, which through historical development turns into an ‘anti-thesis’ of the first. In Marx’s more practical and societal reading of Hegel this is the revolutionary process organized against capitalism. By dividing the society and not offering decent living for the lower classes, capitalism was thus, according to Marx, forging its own negation, which would then be lifted up (Aufhebung): on the way to the forthcoming ‘synthesis’ the opposition was to be both abolished and preserved, followed up then by this higher form of the historical process (for Marx communism).

Though the role of the analysis of this dynamics of thesis, anti-thesis and synthesis is not as dominant in Hegel’s work as one could think, following the amount of discussion it has attracted, this way of dialecticizing issues dominated e.g. the work made in the Frankfurt School as much as it dominated Marx’s views on history and revolution. As Marx had been counting that capitalism (thesis) would produce its own negation and then a subversive counterpart to it (revolution), leading to communism (synthesis), the Frankfurters now set out to understand

why the rev...
Why the revolution never arrived though capitalism produced unhappy subjects and unworthy living conditions, inequality and pain.

They 'found' that the whole Western society was glued to survive with the help of the "Kulturindustrie", culture industry. This is how Theodor W. Adorno came into touch with the topic that we here discuss as popular culture. Adorno himself did not accept the term 'popular culture', as he thought the concept should refer to a 'real' culture of the people, which he did not see as an option in his own era. So he spoke of mass culture.

The whole Western world was now locked into a negative position, the production of anti-thesis against capitalism and failed enlightenment, which could not be turned over. Hedonistic entertainment produced false satisfaction. False hedone here points to the untruth offered by false enlightenment and false democracy. In Adorno's view, if a negatively laden society is based on consumption and easy satisfaction, the only way truth can recede in art is by mirroring this negative totality. So, the pure position held by Samuel Beckett and abstract art in his system was about art's role as truth. Doing what one is supposed to do — enjoy, entertain yourself — one only reinforces the system. Interestingly, Marx had never given art or culture any significant role in his philosophy of history, but here suddenly it is not only labor and capital that turn the wheels of history — or, to be more precise, arrest development.

The essay "Kulturindustrie. Aufklärung als Massenbetrug" (1947, Culture Industry), which was written together with Max Horkheimer and published in the Dialektik der Aufklärung (Dialectics of Enlightenment), became an immediate classic, producing a great deal of simple-minded readings in e.g. the 1950s American sociology, where Adorno was often seen to be just an elitist who was against popular culture. Still, his essays on jazz and comments on mass culture are not that simple, and one has to read Adorno holistically and in depth to come to terms with his theory.

In Adorno's view there had once been something that could be called 'genuine' popular culture, and that 'project' was still visible in e.g. circus, which offered people quite what it said it would, sensual entertainment that was easy to approach, pure entertainment. It had been created during a period when something we would today call experience industry was
not yet dominating the everyday. The same way of thinking applies to art music, too, a topic that was very important for Adorno who had studied modernist composition with Alban Berg. In Adorno’s view Mozart was still able to write lighthearted and joyful music in a world where false reconciliations were not at stake. Already in Beethoven’s times this was no longer possible.

Adorno’s theory is actually quite much about the so-called middle-brow. If one end is producing series of classical music for middle class consumers and the other end of the same process a fake-sublime Tolstoy filmatization for the masses, it is the totality which is the problem, not that there would be a good world of art out there — it is actually totally the contrary in Adorno’s thinking. Only in its extremes did culture industry point to truth. It was only total junk like car advertisements and free critical art, like abstract painting or modern atonal music — failing deliberately in producing enjoyment — that had a less corrupted role in the system (although one has to say that Adorno wrote positively only about modern art).

So Adorno, like Benjamin, set out to discuss popular culture by claiming that it had a special historical role in society and culture. It was just that in Adorno’s view no change was happening, and the reason for this was the victory of popular culture.9

In Adorno’s view culture and society had been stuck in negativity, and the main subject fabrication of modern life was made by consumer culture. It produced needs which were not true, distributing easy satisfaction backed up by hedonist ideals, and it only claimed to offer aesthetic delights although the fact was that there was no real aesthetics at stake here. It was only a resonance of produced needs and products designed to fulfill these fabricated needs that produced a feeling of consolidation. And there was no subject behind it, as is the case in many Marxist paranoia theories about media and mass culture — just ‘the voice of the master’.

Adorno even claimed that amateurs get the most intense experiences (in modern music), as art — when it mirrors society allegorically in Schoenberg’s works — is not about experience at all. Only ‘pure’ works on ‘negativity’ where thus given a special place in Adorno’s theory, the very
applies to art. If had studied Mozart was d where false times this was called middle-class middle class blime Tolstoy problem, not actually total-s did culture isements and isic — failing upted role in sitively only ur culture by culture. It was he reason for in negativity, vy consumer easy satisfac- fer aesthetic stics at stake s designed to idation. And ist paranoia 'the master'. re experien- giorically in e' works on ory, the very marginal and narrow territory of works which could not be used as entertainment no matter what one tried to do — from Schoenberg to Kafka, from Beckett to Malevich. The fact that you could use Wagner or Sibelius as background music in a romantic movie showed how art, if its creators aspired to make a difference, had to position itself outside of the production of fake-artistic satisfaction.

According to Adorno the polarization of autonomous highbrow art and mass culture could not be overcome, and all attempts to do that — e.g. Benny Goodman's orchestra performing with the London Philharmonics — were just false reifications of a society and culture which could not be reified.

Adorno was well aware of the social injustice separating highbrow art and the poor masses, but this was something he thought to be impossible to overcome by compromising culture. Historical avant-garde was, according to Adorno, maybe not as much a false compromise as were Tolstoy filmatizations and the music of programmatic big audience composers (Sibelius, Wagner), but it was not, according to Adorno, working to keep up the distance. Dadaists and Futurists broke barriers from art to everyday life, and did not work in the 'serious' fashion required by Adorno.

We find Adorno nagging about kitschy high culture nearly as much as we find him analyzing the problems of 'mass culture' (jazz, comics, film). In a way, Adorno's essay on the culture industry, written together with Max Horkheimer, is a paradox, too. It is a very impulsive and entertaining essay with a populist drive claiming that all 'hedone' is false. In his later years Adorno explained, e.g. in the essay "Television and the Patterns of Mass Culture" (1957), that he had been exaggerating in his own earlier writing to wake people up. So the most famous enemy of mass culture was not as negative about mass culture as he has often been interpreted to be, and he used its methods (of populism and Benjaminian shock) to bring forth his ideas.
Umberto Eco

It was the anti-Frankfurt oriented wave of American sociology, named above, which caught the attention of the young Umberto Eco, who had already in his early years been discussing e.g. the problems of defining art, the boundaries of aesthetics and mythologies of contemporary culture (Superman) — the last attempt being a brave paper Eco presented in a conference on mythology in the late 1950s (a paper which was, to his surprise, received positively).66

Eco, though, became the first scholar to take popular culture seriously artistically. But he already had a lot to build on. In 1939 the modernist art critic Clement Greenberg had, in his essay “Avant-Garde and Kitsch”, attacked all culture between ‘genuine folk art’ and modernism, most importantly abstract visual art, as being kitsch.71 The 1950s marked a growing interest in the subject that gained serious, though not very aesthetic attention (through texts on wrestling and cars) in Roland Barthes’ Mythologies (1957).72 Even the father of phenomenological art philosophy, Martin Heidegger, touched upon the topic. In his Gelassenheit (1957)73 Heidegger talked about the world of radio and TV, and claimed it was not a real ‘world’. In Heideggerian philosophy this points to the way popular culture could not constitute or contribute to forming cultural reality in depth. This means that radio and TV were no better or worse than many works of art hailed as highbrow. In his Von Ursprung des Kunstwerkes (1935 — 1936/1949)74 Heidegger had already broken ties with the modern highbrow matrix of marginalisms and professionalism, and he had rehabilitated a broader culturally constitutive role to art. Like Benjamin and Dewey, Heidegger could broadly speaking be said to have discussed an experiential crisis, but his way of thinking did not lead explicitly to popular culture, although one could think that his central example of a Greek temple in The Origin of the Work of Art could actually be thought of as an example of early popular culture.

So, Eco already had before him quite a smorgasbord of thinkers itching about the subject. Eco is mainly a semiotician, but he has, especially in the beginning of his career, written extensively on philosophical aesthetics — a focus published books philosophical at his work on art.

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aesthetics — a feature that has lately come back to his work, as he has published books on beauty and ugliness. During the 1960s the role of philosophical aesthetics became weaker in his work, and in the 1970s his work on art was already nearly only semiotics.

During the early aesthetic phase of his career Eco wrote e.g. on experimentality and the death of art. The book where most of his early essays are collected, *La definizione dell’arte* (1990) also includes discourse on the boundaries of aesthetics. As a part of this phase one can read Eco’s ‘first Magnum Opus’, *Opera aperta: Forma e indeterminazione nelle poetiche contemporanee* (1962), which has been used as the base for an English mix of Eco’s texts from this period, *The Open Work* (1989). The idea of the ‘open work’ is mainly that although we have always found new interpretations of works of art with rich textures — just think about Shakespeare — the openness for interpretation, even for the performer, has become a central tenet in ‘today’s’ art. Good examples can be found in Karl-Heinz Stockhausen’s musical works, where the performer chooses the order of the parts played. All in all, art had, Eco claimed, been leaning more and more towards a situation where all works had, semiotically speaking, differing codes.

This code and its role in art were in the center of Eco’s article “The Structure of Bad Taste” (*La struttura del cattivo gusto*), which was an attempt to explain kitsch. The article was originally published in the first monograph ever published on aesthetics of popular culture, *Apocalittici e integrati* (1964), where Eco discussed e.g. the history of mass communication debates, Italian TV, comics and the theoretical issues of high, low and middlebrow. Eco wanted to say that the thing which often disturbs elitists in kitsch is the fact that it does not challenge our interpretation, that formally kitsch is stereotypical and only reproducing old formats. One bright idea here was that the whole matters more than the detail. Eco e.g. rolled out a cocktail of literary fragments, which were horrifyingly sentimental, and told the reader then that one part of the text was borrowed from Rainer Maria Rilke. It showed that you can use kitschy passages or details in any work if the whole paints another kind of picture.
Formats were something Eco got into as well in his early writings about literature. In “Le strutture narrative in Fleming” (1964) Eco studied both the formula of Ian Fleming’s James Bond novels and the way one could still gain enjoyment from reading them. Here sports served as a heuristic allegory: reading James Bond and detective stories is like watching a basketball match between Harlem Globetrotters (on tour) and a local team (which will lose, definitely). It is not the end result but the way the game is played out — the donks, the turns of the dynamics, and so on — which provides the pleasure.

In *Apocalittici e integrati* Eco also wrote about the way middlebrow, status-oriented cultural consumption, was a bigger problem than mass culture. As the latter provided for the people what they really thought they were buying, a whole industry of arts and culture tries to give people a feeling that they are into arts, although they’d actually be consuming highbrow kitsch (this concept is ours). In “Alto, medio, basso” Eco discussed critically the mass culture debate, and accused critics of mass culture of paternalism and misunderstanding its basic idea of entertainment.

This way of thinking could be said to be essential to the aesthetic side of Eco’s later, more semiotic writing about media and mass culture. Different formulas, and the different conceptions of originality in mass culture, e.g. in Las Vegas and other theme parks, were the focus of Eco’s analysis in *Travels in Hyperreality*; which, though, later on, was often not taken to its peak aesthetically speaking. Eco was already too interested in signs, codes and other semiotic issues.

**Gianni Vattimo**

After sharing the same undergraduate teacher with Eco, i.e. the catholic existentialist Luigi Pareyson, Gianni Vattimo left for studying hermeneutics with Hans-Georg Gadamer. So his interest for interpretation, which he shared with the other star of the Turin school, found a more philosophical, Heideggerian base. After creative but exegetic work on classics like Heidegger’s problems, at take the same dire

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classics like Heidegger and Nietzsche, Vattimo ventured into more con-
crete problems, at the same time as his way of writing started to slowly
take the same direction as Jean Baudrillard’s; it became essayistic.

Vattimo made an international breakthrough by editing (and co-writ-
ing a witty introduction for) Pensiero debole (1983) together with Pier
Aldo Rovatti. The book, which contained essays by e.g. Umberto Eco and
Maurizio Ferraris, became revolutionary in Italian philosophy. Anti-foun-
dationalist by nature, the introduction claimed that after the search for
a new ground for philosophizing, which had made structuralism a hit,
phenomenology a semi-religious activity and Michel Foucault a heroic
figure, one now needed, after rewarding analyses of power, subjectivity
and cultural patterns, a start without the hunt for a strong base.

Hermeneutics, the philosophy of interpretation, was to become
the new way of being for philosophy. As for example scholars understood
that scholarly activities were subordinated to certain rhetoric forms from
footnotes to professional jargon, their activities had to become more
reflective and interpretative towards these conventions. This exemplifies
the main tenet of Vattimo’s idea of the decease of the power of modern
metaphysics, and it could easily be applied to art, which had found new
mirrors for its self-reflection. One now had to ask what was really the role
of museums, that were once the holders of cultural value, and one had
to look over the borders, to the fields of mass culture, where many
significant aesthetic processes from production to interpretation occurred.

In his own text for Pensiero debole, “Dialettica, differenza, pensiero
debole”, Vattimo turned to Heidegger, who had presented two different
German terms for ‘overcoming’, Überwindung for a total one, and Verwind-
zung for a slow, reflective, process of overcoming something, a process
analogous to recovering from a long illness. Vattimo used this analogy
to discuss modernity. La fine della modernità (1986), was a more focused
attempt to concentrate philosophically on modernity as a horizon of inter-
pretation and a ‘disease’ which we were slowly getting rid of. The seri-
ous-minded modernist attitudes that had once dominated culture, were
now slowly being eaten out by lighter attitudes. (Here Vattimo definitely
paraphrases Benjamin.)
Issues of mass culture, which had never really been meaningful in phenomenology and hermeneutics, thus stepped into Vattimo’s philosophy. In Vattimo’s moderate view, high and low did not collapse (as some postmodernists claimed) nor did art become a word that would no longer always signify a hierarchical stance towards mass culture. He claimed that we were in a slow process of recovering from the (too rigid) compartmentalization of modernity.

According to Vattimo, aesthetics had still not really taken the world of media and its possibilities seriously enough, so trying to safeguard and save a modernist idea of art with the capital A. In this way philosophers had actually tried to save modern metaphysics, where art has had its role as one foundation of culture together with science and religion. As philosophers had been hoping that they would find a strong basis for their work, they were also nostalgically looking for a modern highbrow experience. This is the 39th century that Vattimo looks back to in his La società trasparente (1989).

Weakening compartments of modernity, together with the hierarchies and values of culture that once walled up the modern world, are not easy to get rid of. Still they are now slowly becoming ‘only’ regulative horizons for interpretation. One can still see — this is something Adorno nagged about already in 1947 — the twisting of different sensibilities when a symphony orchestra plays together with a rock band (Adorno’s example was jazz), but it is not scandalous nor is it provocative. It is just a mix of different compartments and/or sensibilities, although there are still traces of hierarchies and values which one is able to experience.

In this lighter, less compartmentalized, and less serious time of life, our destiny is to receive tradition like a smorgasbord, where one can see and feel the differences, but the attention paid to that is no longer as rewarding or interesting as it used to be. Mashing up Benjamin and Heidegger, Vattimo analyzes the experiential role of art. The way Heidegger discussed Stoss, the way art (or Angst in the 1927 Sein und Zeit) thrusts, connects people to the depths of culture and at the same time makes one realize one’s limits (death), was now, by Vattimo, seen as analogous to Benjamin’s Schock (shock). The latter had discussed the way modern culture (films, working about disturbance an experiencing, which and so making tradition seen in new (lighter,)

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culture (films, working conditions in factories, Tivoli, traffic) was mainly
about disturbance and shocking effects, thus laying out a new way of
experiencing, which in Benjamin’s mind was taking over the old ways,
and so making traditional art as well something which was going to be
seen in new (lighter, more profane) ways.

Now, Stoss and Shock may not, in the end, be that different — Vattimo
speculates. Heidegger’s term (Stoss) now echoes an old role that art and
aesthetic experience once had in culture when there was a restricted
amount of really constitutive works around, and the other one (Shock)
takes over dominance from the first, in a period when strong commit-
ments, strong communities and anchorage to only one cultural territory
have been weakened. Compartments, polarizations and classifications
do not die here. Art, gender, science and religion just become weaker.
We believe that we believe, we still choose academic style because it is
the most convincing of all forms of rhetoric, we reflect our gender (how-
ever much we keep to our habits) and we still see some forms of artistic
culture as more valuable or important than others.

One thing that Vattimo does not discuss in detail is how popular
culture could have a constitutive role in culture, but this is put forward
by another contemporary, Hubert L. Dreyfus, who uses the example of
Woodstock in his “Heidegger on the connection between nihilism, art,
technology and politics” (1993) to question what really glues culture
and people together, and constitutes worlds for them.

Anyway, we do not really get rid of modernity, according to Vattimo,
as much as some proponents of postmodernism have been dreaming
about it. This way of framing culture is a fascinating reinterpretation of
both Benjamin’s and Heidegger’s philosophies of art. And it gives mass
culture a central role in aesthetics.
Pragmatist Aesthetics
from John Dewey
to Richard Shusterman

Although Dewey is an earlier agent than Eco and Vattimo in the history of philosophy, his impact on popular culture studies grew significant no earlier than in the 1990s when Richard Shusterman started discussing his aesthetics in a new key. Dewey’s main ideas on aesthetics are presented in *Art as Experience* (1934), which is a holistic book presenting more ideas on the everyday, popular culture and the aesthetic pleasures of life, than art with a capital A. In this respect Dewey’s work resonates with that of Heidegger and Benjamin. As also other thinkers woke up to discuss experience, new forms of art and the media in the 1990s, the experiential change during that period must have been remarkable.

Dewey’s interest, (aesthetic) experience, helped to shift Anglo-American aesthetic discourse towards a broader view on what the aesthetic is, and his early critique of high-cultured thinking and museum culture pointed out the fact that it was not always a positive matter that an art form was appreciated ‘as art’. Besides the bad effects art theories sometimes had — Dewey’s most famous example here is the way Aristotle’s ideas of drama stifly modeled drama writing during French classicism — museums did often not help art to flourish. As examples of the bad use of art Dewey recalls in his museum criticism e.g. the way paintings are hung in Louvre too close to each other without helping the old ways of looking at them to flourish, the ways of appreciating them, which had once made paintings live culture.

No wonder that Dewey, in his aspiration to enrich and deepen our skills and abilities to experience, ended up thinking that people did not understand how they were actually consuming art in their everyday life, while they were listening to jazz from the radio and reading comics at the breakfast table. He started using the term ‘popular art’. Dewey, still, never elaborated a theory of popular culture, and though his open-minded views on the subject had an impact on how later pragmatists like Stanley Cavell (film) and I had to wash for R discussed thorough.

Shusterman 1980s. He has coalesced definition of postmodern culture and its expressive experiences, astray from what develop our relations and make a meaning! The special kind c

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ray Aristotle's a classicism — of the bad use paintings are re old ways of m, which had id deepen our people did not everyday life, ings comics at . Dewey, still, open-minded ts like Stanley Cavell (film) and Joseph Kupfer (sports, film) wrote, pragmatist aesthetics had to wait for Richard Shusterman to get the issue of popular culture discussed thoroughly.

Shusterman has published extensively on the topic since the late 1980s. He has criticized historical figures of the mass culture debate, bridged definitions of art to cover popular culture (with the help of ‘esthetic experience’) and discussed rap music as an art which suits our ideas of postmodernism. Shusterman has been as well critical about high culture and its esoteric spirit.

Shusterman thinks that technical definitions of art lead aesthetics astray from what is meaningful in arts (i.e. experience) and how to develop our relationship to it. Dewey starts by differentiating ‘experience’ and ‘an experience’, the latter one referring to the experiences that make a meaningful difference to the constant 24/7 stream of experience. The special kind of experiences that Dewey calls ‘an experience’ becomes formed in engagement and interaction with meaningful objects or during a rewarding process, e.g. cleaning the house, and they accumulate energies, focus the mind, recollecting memories, emotions, intelligence and aesthetic skills/habits, so providing fulfillment.

Already Dewey focused on thinking about the organic base of experience, the human body that he himself studied through Alexander technique, but in Shusterman’s work this bodily side has become broadly developed in his so called somaesthetics. This can be seen already in his earlier work on popular culture. Though Shusterman analyzed rap lyrics as ‘literature’, he reminded the reader in Pragmatist Aesthetics about the fact that the original goal in rap music was to ‘move the ass’ on the dance floor. Shusterman also recalls the bodily enjoyments of popular culture, which often differ from the more intellectualized ways of appreciating art. Already Dewey actually thought that for example dancing could help people to overcome anxieties and shyness. Shusterman’s theory of experience has included plenty of fresh pioneer work dealing with popular culture, e.g. thoughts on different types of concepts which could be of help for the debates on issues like ‘titillation’, ‘bliss’ and ‘ecstasy’, which are rooted in bodily experience.~
Shusterman’s defense of popular culture is more famous than this delicate philosophy of experience. He wrote in defense of popular culture against a partly simplified and black-and-white Adorno, who in Shusterman’s hands became a straightforward defender of highbrow. He also wrote a broader defense, which is partly borrowed from sociologist Herbert Gans (1974), but made it better. So as Gans was still apologizing for the cultural level of entertainment and expecting that educated people choose high culture (as popular culture is only for those who cannot do better), Shusterman’s defense goes deeper. To defend popular culture, Shusterman claims, one has to do it aesthetically, as there is always an assumption underneath an attack against popular culture that it is aesthetically bogus.

Other hierarchical elitists from van den Haag (1957), who refers to the use of popular culture as analogical to masturbation which brings out only relief and no real satisfaction, to Dwight MacDonald (1957), who claims that the pleasures of popular culture are imposed from above, are so, even if their work might not have been that much read in circles where people were really interested in popular culture, thoroughly criticized in Shusterman’s work, starting by asking what is real satisfaction and analyzing the intellectual paranoia on the subject (Macdonald).

Shusterman also showed how works of art had changed category from low to high — are there examples of a movement to the other direction? — for example in the case of the of the Brontë sisters’ novels, and his work was partly meant to be eroding the distinction. The project was emancipatory as well. Though we would not like to think about ourselves as liberating others, the side of us which likes and needs entertainment could be freed from thinking that enjoying popular culture is something low and not worthy of our attention. In Shusterman’s seminal work, Pragmatist Aesthetics (1992) popular culture became anchored to the philosophy and aesthetics of life in other ways as well. For example celebrities, Shusterman claimed, have today a role analogous to the one that saints used to have in earlier times. We follow their lives and reflect upon our own lives through them.

Shusterman’s work was about connecting art theory and aesthetics to popular culture, and to show the aesthetic potentials of it, not to elevate its main interest and to develop commentary pro theory.

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elevate its users to take up the challenges of high culture. Shusterman's main interest was to turn the gaze towards meaningful perspectives and to develop debates on popular culture to be subtler, but most of his commentators have focused on his theory of popular culture as a simple pro theory, a theory that claims that all popular culture is good.  

All in all, Shusterman's work has been about eroding the polarity of the institutions art and popular culture by showing that popular culture actually, and pragmatically, is already often art, if art is not restricted to the narrow museum and concert hall sphere, but thought of as a tradition, practice and form of experience. Even his concept 'popular art' stresses the artistic side of popular culture.

Shusterman has clearly also seen postmodernism as a phenomenon which gives a rewarding framework for discussing popular culture. In *Pragmatist Aesthetics* Shusterman even showed how well rap music fitted the ideas scholars of that era (the early 1990s) had about postmodern art. Later on this analysis has often been interpreted to mean that Shusterman would like to legitimate rap music in the sphere of art with a capital A, although the point is to discuss the fact that critics of popular culture do not even apply their definitions of art to their objects of study very well.

David Novitz's work, which is situated somewhere between pragmatism, analytic aesthetics and cultural studies, has not gained the attention it would have deserved. Still, for example we and some other authors of this book share a high respect for Novitz. In *The Boundaries of Art* (1992), and especially in its first introductory chapter, "The State of the Arts" and the second one, "High and Popular Art. The Place of Art in Society", Novitz works out a philosophically witty description of the state of high and low and aesthetics' relation to popular culture.

Novitz claims that philosophical aesthetics shares the same problem as distinguished highbrow art: both have grown apart from a dialogue with life, and so they do not have that much to give to other fields of knowledge and experience. (The focus here is on Anglo-American aesthetics.) For example the opposition of art and life is not truthful, if we think about the way the arts are embedded in our everyday practices, and how they satisfy us. Art is much more than just the narrow highbrowed
sphere of museums of concert halls, Novitz reminds us, and so it is natural that film, pop music and other forms of popular art gain a role in his polemical book.

Novitz’s main project is to analyze how the divisions of culture do not really benefit us, and how our ideas on what popular culture is often only touch on a part of popular culture — a way of thinking shared by Shusterman. Otherwise he is not really elevating the status of the popular, but working on a broader conception of what art is, a conception that is already quite a commonplace outside of the philosophy of art. As a test of how ‘postmodernist’ views on culture could be discussed on quite a practical level, Novitz’s book provides an excellent opening to what kind of questions the aesthetics of popular culture could be directed to.

Analytic aesthetics

Analytic aesthetics was not the earliest of the schools to enter the debate about the nature of popular culture, but since the early 1990s its impact has also been strong outside of the school itself, which is not typical for analytic aesthetics otherwise. Though there is an article in the JAAC written by Abraham Kaplan already 1966, “Aesthetics of the Popular Arts”, where the main idea is to argue that philosophy should no longer try to stay away from mainstream culture and to show how the popular arts satisfy different needs than highbrow art, popular culture entered analytic aesthetics through a cluster of themes which were marginal for its nature, although still important if one’s into getting the whole picture.

For example Susann Sontag’s “Notes on Camp” (1964), which was an intellectual, and, actually, anything but an analytic essay on what camp is, has been well acknowledged, but kitsch had a more important role in guiding analytic aestheticians into the topic. In 1986 Matei Calinescu’s Five Faces of Modernity, and its chapter on the history of the concept of kitsch laid out new perspectives towards kitsch, making the whole issue historical, and even one varying from culture to culture. Also the etymology and practical history of kitsch was well highlighted in Calinescu's work.

On Kitsch

“The Structure of Taste” - Shusterman hit the sc

Novitz, both in his book and in his essays, who was

published in the late 1980s and early 1990s was just one of the

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in Calinescu’s book. In 1988 Tomas Kulka published his classical article “On Kitsch”\textsuperscript{8}, the same year — probably not accidentally — when Eco’s “The Structure of Bad Taste” (La struttura del cattivo gusto, 1964) became
translated and published as part of the English edition of The Open Work. Shusterman’s early analyses of rap music (1988, 1989),\textsuperscript{9} which still then fit
the framework of analytic aesthetics (Shusterman’s original background),
hit the scene at the same time.

1992, then, marks the beginning of the new debate. Shusterman and
Novitz, both half outsiders in analytic aesthetics, launched their books,
and got soon followed by Ted Cohen’s “High and Low Thinking About
High and Low Art” (1993),\textsuperscript{10} which provided thoughts on the differences
of high and low, but not giving any special value to the ‘high’. Cohen,
who was famous for his work on jokes, continued on the issue in 1999,
publishing “High and Low Art, and High and Low Audiences”;\textsuperscript{11} a text
which focused on the way the same works (say, Hitchcock movies)
could be used by two different ways of interpreting and experiencing (Cohen
used the term bilateral here). Based on his (never published) keynote
(Cohen sadly died during the editing of this book) in the 2012 conference
on Aesthetics of Popular Culture (organized by us) in Bratislava, Cohen
was just before his death (2014) working out a way of rethinking the whole
question, claiming that there is no popular culture, as the concept does
not really signify anything.

When Noël Carroll’s extensive study on the topic, A Philosophy of
Mass Art (1998),\textsuperscript{12} there was already a discussion on the topic (though it did
not gain a lot of attention in Carroll’s work). Carroll claimed that popular
 culture, or what he called mass art, was the most important source of
esthetic experience in today’s world. The book begins with a presentation
of the history of the critical and positive wings of popular culture studies,
and it ends with Carroll’s own theory, which is about ontologically defining
a group of objects. Carroll’s history of the aesthetics of this topic, the only
real contender for our article, is written from a very narrow perspective,
not really taking seriously the differing methodological attempts some
of the classics in this debate have had. Critical theorists, Marxists and
other schools of philosophy have just become failed analytic philosophy.
Carroll himself concentrates on accessibility and wide audiences, and how mass art is produced and disseminated by modern technologies. For him mass art is a question of quantity (copies), distribution and the way untutored audiences can approach it. Carroll’s definition of mass art was an attempt to find sufficient and necessary conditions for mass art, i.e. easily accessible art that was distributed with the help of modern media, and he clearly wanted to polarize the terms ‘popular art’ and ‘mass art’.

Mass art, here, is art that is reproduced with the help of technology. We are talking about multiple instances of the same art work (in quite the same sense as Benjamin understands the novel arts of photography and film) and it has to be easy to digest for the masses. So even if complex art was made to be distributed through TV, it would not be mass art.

In 1999 The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism published a special issue, Aesthetics of Popular Culture. Edited by Kathleen Higgins and Joel Rudinow, the issue contained, besides Cohen’s article on high and low audiences and Shusterman’s analysis of country musicals as ethnic popular art, texts which discussed the nature of the popular (Timothy Gould), specific forms of popular culture like horror and humor (Noël Carroll), and ideas on rock vs. classical music (Stephen Davies).

One ‘wing’ of analytic aesthetics has focused on specific popular arts. Theodore Gracyk’s Rhythm and Noise, An Aesthetics of Rock (1996), David Carrier’s The Aesthetics of Comics (2000) and Thomas Roberts’ An Aesthetics of Junk Fiction (1990) all offer detailed analyses of specific arts. E.g. Gracyk’s book shows wittily how people who discuss ‘what the original version of some Bob Dylan song is’ concentrate on searching for the original in a fashion that is borrowed from classical highbrow thinking about art history. One can reverse the idea as well: even Shakespeare was an ever-changing corpus of text before it became interpreted to be a part of the modern highbrow tradition, which made it immediately staler.

In the analytic, or post-analytic branch of aesthetics popular culture has also gained an encyclopedia entry by John Fisher (2001), and lately the debate seems to have drifted into discussing more and more marginal concepts like ‘cheesy’.
Early history — and where we are today

In the end it is easy to conclude by saying that the history of aesthetics has been written too much from the point of view of ‘art’. Still, the audience culture of the antique theatre spectacles bore more resemblance to our sports gatherings than to modern theatre. And if there was no concept or family of arts, why should we treat all aesthetic remarks before Baumgarten and the birth of the art institution as philosophy of art and not something that could also be thought of as popular culture?

Often it could also be meaningful to think that Plato or Aristotle actually discussed popular culture and not the arts. As Plato wants to ban (what he thinks is) bad theatre from his state, and he explains why the scandalous intrigues of the Gods in some plays have a negative effect on young males, could it be that — if we have to choose — popular culture would be a more rewarding concept in this context than art? If theatre had such a central impact on society that some of its plays could be thought of as bad for the people, why would we apply highbrow thinking to this, as our closest analogy to this, in our times, is found in films and TV series?

It seems that everything which came before highbrow culture is now often claimed to be early history of highbrow art, and the impact of the non-highbrow arts which have flourished during its reign, are nearly never noted to having had an impact on art with the capital A. So, one thinks that Andy Warhol used popular culture imagery, and not that popular culture had an impact on Andy Warhol, nor that Warhol would have been popular culture and then accepted into highbrow — and when Arthur Danto had elevated Warhol to be a superstar of art, why should he have lost his popular culture appeal at the very moment? Could one not have both?

At the same time we find very old instances of thinking on the arts that seem to raise questions of the cluster of problems associated with popular culture. The Chinese philosopher Sung Yü used the metaphors of high and low in his discourse on composers who are genuine and
composers who just please the taste of the broad public, approximately 300 B.C. — the latter ones in this allegory being represented by birds who fly lower.\textsuperscript{73}

Aristotle who had neither a concept, system, nor a cultural territory of art to discuss, but, yes, did discuss some artistic practices through — for us quite logical — groupings, touched upon the theme in \textit{Politics}, where the spectacle of the slaves allured his attention. According to Aristotle, we should not criticize the spectacle of the slaves without acknowledging the fact that the slaves’ souls are distorted following the fact that they have had to work, while the souls of free men needed different types of activity.\textsuperscript{21} If not popular culture, this could be read as the first defense of less appreciated artistic practices. In Tertullian’s Roman Christian thinking theatre and sport entertainment were viewed in the same fashion: they allure our focus from what is most important, God, to ephemeral earthly pastimes.\textsuperscript{74}

Then centuries pass and there is not much to mention about our topic. Umberto Eco has claimed in his \textit{Apocalittici e integrati} (1964) that the Medieval monk debates on church painting, and whether it is a good way to communicate about the bible, is the first real mass culture debate. In Baldessare Castiglione’s \textit{Il libro del cortegiano},\textsuperscript{75} at the beginning of the Renaissance, we find a passage where it is claimed that a courtly man should know peasant dances in case he enters a situation where he has to e.g. spend the night at the peasants’ house, so one can say that at least the themes of aesthetic mass communication and the lower arts enter the debates of Renaissance times in this societal way.

We have had a concept, institution, and cultural sphere of (fine, modern, high) art for less than 300 years. Today’s concept of popular culture is intuitively used only of the culture of our modern era, a little shorter than the period of modern art, which was preceded by folk art. The system of art started its development in Southern and Central Europe. Then it proceeded to Northern Europe. Today it covers all modernized and westernized cultures in the world, and only through its emergence have we felt a need to look out for the ‘other’ arts, the nostalgically historical folk art and contemporary popular culture.
Popular culture has mostly been studied by scholars in cultural studies, who emphasize class issues, cultures of consumption and leisure. Scholars working with the aesthetics of popular culture are, at least to some extent, always conscious of recurring discussions in cultural studies, as this discipline has created the basic scholarly framework for the discourse on popular culture. Antonio Gramsci’s Marxism, the French outsider philosophers, mainly Gilles Deleuze and Jacques Lacan (who is visible of course in Slavoj Zizek’s work on film as well) have found a place in this constellation, though often in a form which makes it hard for a philosopher to approach these texts, as the thinkers in question have become simplified. They are reshaped to be ‘tools’ for thinking — which we have nothing against.

Cultural studies might also be the discipline which stands for making ‘popular culture’ the dominant concept of this issue, while mass culture, which has not been very trendy in a long time, has become seen as more or less the only negative one. Aestheticians of popular culture have been more interested in the aesthetic and artistic side of popular culture than their fellow scholars in cultural studies. Cultural studies have provided a detailed critique of aesthetics, but every time when this issue is raised, one can see that the scope of the critique is narrowed to Anglo-American analytic aesthetics only. The main target has been the analytic focus on aesthetic properties and its reliance on modernist ideology. The authors who criticize aesthetics do not even realize that they are themselves using philosophies of art (like Deleuze’s) in different ways.

One strong base for societal thinking on the subject has been the work of the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, where ‘cultural capital’ is viewed critically. In Distinctions (1984) Bourdieu analyses the way the bourgeois high culture taste has been made something ‘natura’, although skills needed for it are gained from bourgeois family culture and education. Bourdieu’s followers have often flattened the idea. They stress that all use of art and highbrow culture is oriented towards marking class difference. Bourdieu never wrote about real avant-garde art, but actually only about the bourgeois conception of art, so called middlebrow culture, and did not leave much space to genuine interest in highbrow art — nor popular culture, which he was not very keen on.
Debates about the postmodern must be named as one site where popular culture has popped up here and there. The most famously cited idea in this respect is probably the way Jean Baudrillard’s idea of implosion has been applied. Baudrillard ‘borrowed’ his concept from space research where implosion refers to the way planets, after swelling up to be too big, in the end lose all their dynamics and force. Just before becoming ‘black dwarfs’ they are huge but not very intense. Baudrillard thinks this has happened to ‘art’.

In Robert Venturi’s, Denise Scott Brown’s and Steven Izenour’s *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972)* Las Vegas is discussed in the same morphological way which had for long been in use in discussing cultural heritage. Many saw the book as propagating that there is and should be no value difference between Las Vegas and e.g. Venice, and this way of thinking that the one who writes about popular culture always attacks highbrow culture one way or another or claims that popular culture is always good seems to live on.

Cultural studies have been a real ‘hit’ during the last decades. Aestheticians, besides their more aesthetic/artistic interests that do not always match with the narrowly societal interests of scholars in cultural studies, also have a methodology which is foreign and hard to understand for most people who do not have a background in philosophy. When the debate on popular culture was formed, philosophers had a key role, but now their role has diminished so much that it is virtually non-existent today. Of course, it might have to do with a broader issue, a connection addressed by Richard Shusterman (interview in this book): philosophy has lost its hegemony in the cultural field. But there is more to it. Aesthetic theory was too negative about popular culture too long, and so it became an object of criticism. Philosophy has also marginalized itself by becoming more specialized, and by demanding more and more of the reader. While any sociologist still in the 1920s could understand without help what Ortega y Gasset was saying, today s/he needs to work hard to be able to understand what is discussed in philosophy. One goal of this article is to open up pedagogically some of the background and methodology that has been used by philosophers when they have discussed popular culture. We
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culture. We hope this text could serve as an introduction to aesthetics
of popular culture.

At the same time we have wanted to highlight the great tradition of
aesthetics of popular culture. As we see it, though Adorno and Benjamin
were officially social scientists, they still worked inside the framework
of philosophical aesthetics, and so e.g. the Hegelian theory left huge
marks on the whole way popular culture has been thought of since. Many
scholars doing cultural studies do not understand that people doing
aesthetics formed the very basics of their field, and this is one insight we
want to stimulate. It is good to understand the history of your discipline.

We are not interested in getting the hegemony back (we are happily
‘weak’ with our discipline), but it is historically fascinating to think
about this background. The potential of aesthetics to give a helping hand
to other types of popular culture scholarship has to be tested as well.
The theoretical side of cultural studies has been too much locked into
issues of class, race and gender. It has totally forgotten Homo Aesteticus.
Cultural studies abandoned art, in the broad sense of the term — and
what discipline could help it if not aesthetics?

Even if culture was used with a class agenda, it does not mean
that culture, whether we speak about highbrow (or what is left of it),
avant-garde/experimental art (which often stands quite far away from
elitist audiences) or popular culture (which can be mainstream, under-
ground or experimental, not always mainstream) should not be studied
as the existentially, organically and experientially important resource
it is. It makes our world meaningful, warms it up (here we paraphrase
Monroe C. Beardsley), and constitutes who we are. Popular culture, as
the most popular territory of the arts, has a huge impact on people. And
whatever people say, everybody likes some kind of ‘trash’.

The new wave of fusion aesthetics — no strong base in any ‘school’ —
which is embodied in e.g. Wolfgang Welsch’s work — has a big impact
on this scene today. Welsch’s ‘aestheticization’ is one way to broaden
the scope of academic aesthetics, and for sure, those who are interested
in popular culture and aesthetics, know his work. Also many other con-
temporary thinkers have notes on the topic, Peter Sloterdijk on the front
with his ideas on the lower sensibilities (1983). In other fusionist theories of aesthetics, popular culture has been eagerly discussed for example in the writings of the Finnish school of applied aesthetics, which has otherwise mostly concentrated on environment and the everyday. Also the world congress of aesthetics in Ankara 2007 had a session on popular culture.

In cultural studies Lawrence Grossberg’s work on ‘fans’ and classical authors like Raymond Williams, John Fiske and Stuart Hall have provided many good overall ideas on the topic, which are, for sure, in one way or another echoed in many philosophical texts today, although their authors would not always be conscious of where their ideas stem from. This way also aesthetics is stealing from cultural studies, and it is time to rethink both heritages. The most important person in cultural studies, for aesthetics, might be Stuart Hall, who made it mainstream to focus on the shared meaning and pleasures gained from objects, not their aesthetic properties. Fiske’s impact is also very strong, especially through *Television Culture* (1988), which e.g. Shusterman comments on. Fiske’s book showed how varied our ways of interpreting and enjoying popular culture are. Feminist aesthetics has here come a long way as well with Christine Battersby’s *Gender and Genius: Towards a Feminist Aesthetics* (1989), which shows how many traditionally highbrowed male-dominated practices, like thinking about ‘genius’, have found a new home in popular culture.

Anyway, aestheticians are back — but we claim that we have always been here. May the discussion vary more in the future than it has done up to these days. Aesthetics of popular culture has always been and will probably always be a part of popular culture studies, and the authors of this text hope to strengthen our understanding of the length, width and position of this topic and the work done in it in the broader contexts of aesthetics and cultural studies.

### Endnotes:

1. Any problem area — a variety of scholars of bringing diverse Hegel and John to debate analogical mile to bridge their
different approaches to the subject.
2. Annette Pavla submitted her first stage of his
classics for study the subject.
3. The first time that this not much later did he do.
4. Of course some set.
5. The Popular", in *78 Popular*, ed.
6. The Frankie Robbins (ed.)
7. Marcuse, and *Habermas*
8. Leo Lowenthal, "U.S.
9. America, ed.
10. Andreas Huyssen, (Bloomington: In
11. Herbert Marcuse,
12. The German "Die M of its historical.In
13. Peter Osborne, Ma
14. There might be a
15. Walter Benjamin, "of Art in the Age of B"
17. Benjamin does not for sure his think:
18. Ibid., ref. p. 39.
19. Ibid., ref. p. 40.
20. Ibid., ref. p. 38, More
21. His Counterfeit Foundation (Ne
22. See e.g. Gilbert Sel and Henry Patland
r fusionist theories used for example in aesthetics, which has he everyday. Also session on popular on ‘fans’ and classical Stuart Hall have ch are, for sure, in these today, although re their ideas stem al studies, and it is person in cultural ade it mainstream d from objects, not strong, especially man comments on eting and enjoying a long way as well a Feminist Aesthetics browned male-domi und a new home in that we have always ire than it has done always been and will, and the authors of e length, width and broader contexts of
The analogy of the impact of traffic (sometimes forcing) overcoming distances is something Benjamin hints upon, but does not really go into analyzing in detail. It has a role in the destruction of the aura. As the Here-and-Now of a work of art is partly based on being hard to reach, the role of traffic, which had brought Venice and Rome (Falladio, Michelangelo) closer to Northern Europeans already soon after the mid — 1800s, has for sure had a big role in the profanation of classical art, which for long was very hard to reach.

We are thankful to Mika Elo about this point.


Benjamin interpreted that Braudel had in a way already in the 1960s showed the way for this in his self-reflective texts, both writings about "contemporary" (modern) life and poems on urban culture.


For another interesting thinker working more clearly on a family of "lower arts" and a theory of the emerging new sensibilities, and as well an idea on how to develop their own institution, see Gilbert Seldes's "The Seven Lively Arts" (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1924). It is just that Seldes is not very philosophical. Anyway, he tried to create a popular version of the modern system of arts, analyzing 7 fresh art forms (film, variety, etc.).


Benjamin had been afraid of the change he saw as dynamic, and which he thought was fueled by popular culture; he hoped that the aesthetic force of mechanically reproduced art would not become a dangerous tool in the hands of fascists. (See the end of the Artwork essays)


See e.g. Marc Culture, The Popular Arts in America, eda. Harold Rosenberg and David Manning White (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1952). The essays in the book are both pro and against popular culture. Many of them refer in a way or another to the work of the Frankfurt School of Social Sciences. (Both Adorno and Lawrenthal have as well an own essay in the book.)

See the introduction to the second edit. of Umberto Eco, Apocalittici e integrali: Comunicazioni di massa e teorie della cultura di massa (Milano: Bompiani, 1997).

It is remarkable, that also Adorno actually concentrates on this huge middle field, though he is much more cynical, as he does not approve that genuine folk art (what he'd call popular culture) could anymore exist.


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27. Umberto Eco, *Aestetica e retorica: Comunicazioni di massa e teorie della cultura di massa* (Milano: Rizzoli, 1999 (1964)).
30. In Italy Eco and Vattimo are sometimes seen to belong to the Turin school, which consists of Parenzo's followers. They all share a broad-minded attitude towards culture, cross-disciplinary scholarship and interest for the problems of interpretation.
31. The third major name associated with the school is Mario Fernini.
35. This view is typical of cultural studies, where it is often taken to be a fact, not something one could debate. Anto Hasaplia argues in his "Koment sa ylemmät", in *Miehdyppiin muoto-oppiminen ja muotoilua*, ed. Olli Immenn and Jouko Mykkänen (Lahti: Lahden Sivistysoppimattaminen, 1993), pp. 173-184, that overcoming high and low is actually something unwanted, although many people would be dreaming about it. According to Hasaplia culture is based on differentiations. Our ways of grabbing and sketching out what we affirm cultural value to is something that has led us to discuss high and low.
37. Heidegger's *Ereignis* is of course not incompatible with "Erlangung," but still stresses in a broad sense the experiential to objects and forms. With Ereignis Heidegger worked out a new way of thinking about Events, outside of subjective, objective, satisfying or other forms of experience. These moments which could be acknowledged not just with art (Heidegger thinks actually most art does not lead to this), but as well with other forms of culture (Heidegger even talks about war in his book on art), are constitutive for culture, and a hotline to who we are.
76 Guccione, who studied e.g. the way workers read Dostoyevsky’s novels in a different way than people from upper classes, is provided in his theory a big role to territories of culture, where there still were possibilities to negotiate meanings in the society.
80 See e.g. Wolfgang Welsch, Undoing Aesthetics (London: Sage, 1999).
81 Peter Sloterdijk, Critique of Cynical Reason (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).