

Experiencing the Everyday

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NSU Press

CHAPTER NINE

Chopin's Heart: The Somatic Stimulation of Our Experience of Thingness in Everyday Popular Culture

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1

Inside of the Holy Cross Church in Warsaw, there is a small sign on one of the central pillars that reads "Here rests the heart of Frederic Chopin". The composer died in France in 1849, but according to his wish his heart was cut out and taken to Poland (Lagerberg 2011).

The fact that Chopin bears the label of a romantic composer gives soundness to the story. The (neurotic) reason for his odd wish, however, is rooted in his fear of being accidentally buried alive: He insisted that a doctor would perform an autopsy on his body when he dies, to check that he is really dead. But of course only a romantic subject would add: take my heart back to my "native land".

The way we conceive our bodies has been severely attacked by so many contemporary artists that if someone acted like Chopin today it would fit the pattern. The list of extreme and famous acts of self-mu-

tilation in arts is long.^[1] Here it suffices to recall two victorious careers. The French artist ORLAN conducted a series of plastic surgeries through which she transformed her looks towards iconographical women in classical paintings and sculptures (1990-). The Australian artist Stelarc, after various excessive piercing acts, had a cell-cultivated ear surgically attached to his left arm in 2007. One can imagine the effect of Stelarc or ORLAN saying "when I die, dismember my body part x and take it to y".

These are, of course, extremities – though ultimately these cases are no longer too far from some of the growing margins of the everyday, like biohackers, grinders, and extreme piercing – and current trends of well-being are mainly far from extreme. If we open a women's magazine or read the Sunday pages of our local newspaper, we are likely to find soft holistic approaches to the body. If paleolithic diets are based on a search for the (at least partly imaginary) original organic roots of humanity, pilates, hot yoga, and mindfulness are based on a mindset where man's fragmented whole is repaired. People must feel terribly fragmented, as they put a lot of money on cultivating a feeling of a living, harmonious whole. These are all practices that one could attack for being semi-fictional projects of 'authenticity', metaphysically painting visions about what it really means and should mean to be a human being. But I am not going into that here, and I also believe that these practices can form a base for well-being, whatever their metaphysical grounds are, perhaps even increasing the feeling of being a whole (if that is what people want), and so they are not really of interest here.

To get back to the arts, using the body as an experimental stage, sculpture, symbol of excess, and exhibited *object* has often attracted the yellow press (tabloids) more than art that has worked on well-being. Excess has sensational value. Reading some of the short histories of contemporary art, one also gets the feeling that art history, too, has bought into this idea that every excess leaves a deeper trace in the sto-

ry about art than those of marks made by moderate works of art.^[2] But most artists *do not* do excess and they live moderate lives.

Although Stelarc's and ORLAN's work relates to the everyday fragilities of the human body, both of them have a very emancipated idea about identity and integrity, and they do not fit into our utopias of an original and harmoniously holistic body. But how much should we react to them as uncanny, in the end? Our teeth are mostly not really ours, and we go through surgeries where we get small plastic pieces implanted all over the body. We wear glasses and we get medication for depression (cooking up a well-working chemistry in the brain). We are not, I think, as much cyborgs as it was fashionable to say at the turn of the millennium, but we are not as purely original, organic, 'authentic', and natural as we tend to imagine. Here and there we are, however, things, whatever framing one has for the concept.

It is time to bring Western philosophy into this juxtaposition of man and thing. Philosophy and art have, of course, developed, at least partly, side by side. Gilles Deleuze was early in helping us understand that we are not just human, we are sometimes plain animals, or, for better or worse, machines.^[3] Following in his (as well as Walter Benjamin's, whom I will discuss later,) footsteps, Mario Perniola published a book in 1994 where the experience of 'being a thing' called for attention. *Il sex appeal dell'inorganico*, or, *The Sex Appeal of the Inorganic* (2004a), as the book is called in English, is often referred to as one of the more marginal classics of post-humanism, but one can simply think about it as one of the key books theorizing our drift from humanist body metaphysics.

Perniola discussed our 'thingness' as, broadly speaking, the way our reactions to our bodies as merely tools or objects sometimes takes over our way of relating to ourselves as human beings (or animals). And his, at least at the time, radical claim is that this should not be seen simply and only as inauthentic. The book dug up something very 'contemporary': a feeling or experience where one sees oneself as just

a machine or a thing, or, as the name of the book suggests, by echoing Karl Marx's and Benjamin's work, as a commodity. Vampires and Santa Clause were seen as 'shells', semi-humans leaning towards being 'just a thing', but otherwise the arsenal of examples used in the book paved the way to thingness by celebrating post-modernist utopias of sexual neutrality, virtual reality, and cyber punk (Perniola 2004a).

But it is not only the feeling of being just a commodity, tool, or thing that Perniola writes about. Taking a look at his life work, one can easily find more clues on where to head: In *Contro comunicazione*, he discusses terms like 'cool' and 'high' as relevant for understanding today's narrower, cold(er) culture of experience (2004b, 14), and here, of course, we are mainly talking about the current trends in popular culture, i.e. the arts of the everyday.

And what about the inorganic? *Unnatural* is one of the significations of the concept 'inorganic'. Organic materials are made from (or extracted from) plants or animals. That which is not composed of organic matter, which is artificial – that is the inorganic. And in philosophical use it is, of course, also about the magic of the objects (commodities), now just expanding into our way of experiencing ourselves.

Culture is full of experiences of being just a thing, or being treated like or experiencing oneself as an object or commodity – and these are often very negative experiences. There have been wide discussions in critical manifestos against this. I am here thinking about e.g. Laura Mulvey's discourse on the male gaze (1976, 6-18). But there are also uncritical, fascinated approaches that echo a Benjaminian attitude, which Noël Carroll has written a great history about in his *A Philosophy of Mass Art* (1998).^[4] Here issues like virtual helmets (Jaron Lanier) and utopias of changes in our perception are a commonplace.

The media-critical wing has focused more on the (evil) ideologies behind the making of culture whereas the fascination-oriented wing has been more interested in the reactions (and experience), and so

staying on the side of the masses / audience. It is this part of receiving – of being the end result of cultural manipulation, sometimes without intellectual activity, and often an ‘activity’ viewed as passive, or an act where one loses individuation or humanist self-framing – which I am here interested in.

Dancing oneself ‘high’ in a techno party, getting a ‘second skin’ with the help of PVC clothes (organic and inorganic), being called a machine in bed (something many males want to hear), being touched, like we were broken machines, by our doctors who sometimes feel like human engineers in a science fiction fashion – or being treated by our lovers in sexual acts like only tools, or forgetting ourselves in sports team-play (being merely a part of a well working machinery of flesh); all these experiences can, of course, be experiences of people who are capable of individuation and holistic thinking about themselves. But still, what is at stake here is an experience that I believe has become more central for us lately.

It is as in Michael Taussig’s book, *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America* (1980), where the indigenous people of the Amazon have turned from seeing eagles and totem animals to bargain with the Satan of their colonial threat to get wealth and capitalist objects of desire: commodity culture, digital culture, machines and other contemporary everyday pleasures and challenges may have taken one step further into us. And this calls for philosophical reflection.

Marx’s idea of the ‘fetishism of the commodity’ focused on the way value receded in the object more than in the work used for making it, and this estrangement was famously a problem for him. Freud’s use of the (originally anthropological) concept of the fetish focused on the lack of something which was substituted by an (often) inorganic object.^[5]

But, while Marx combatted this relationship to objects, Benjamin was less haunted by the alienation of labor:

If the soul of the commodity which Marx occasionally mentions in jest existed, it would be the most pathetic ever counted in the realm of souls, for it would have to see in everyone the buyer in whose hand and house it wants to nestle. Empathy is the nature of the intoxication to which the flâneur abandons himself in the crowd. ‘The poet enjoys the incomparable privilege of being himself and someone else as he sees fit. Like a roving soul in search of a body, he enters another person whenever he wishes. For him alone, all is open; if certain places seem closed to him, it is because in his view they are not worth inspecting’ (‘Les Foules’). The commodity itself is the speaker here. Yes, the last words give a rather accurate idea of what the commodity whispers to a poor wretch who passes a shop-window containing beautiful and expensive things. These objects are not interested in this person; they do not empathize with him. In the sentences of the significant prose poem ‘Les Foules’ there speaks, with other words, the fetish itself which Baudelaire’s sensitive nature resonated so powerfully; that empathy with inorganic things which was one of his sources of inspiration (ed. Hanssen 2006, 71).

Benjamin quotes Baudelaire: ‘I am an old boudoir full of faded roses’. And he does not forget to report that mechanical working conditions in factories, the fast multi-faceted machinery of modern traffic and its signs, the Tivoli, filmic montage and, most famously, the way old art can no longer be experienced as it used to be, following the fast development of reproductive art, are all together about reaction and work for a change in human experience.^[6] In the age of shock and the erosion of auratic experience, experience itself must undergo changes that will bring us new needs.

Today shock is central for us, but it is no longer about bumping into strangers on the street, in the fashion described by Edgar Allan Poe, one of Benjamin’s favorite authors (Benjamin 2006).^[7] It is about horror movies, extreme websites, and war footage on TV. We are atomized into our homes, working places, and trains with our laptops and mobile phones, both sharing with and being distanced from oth-

ers. More importantly, we are cultivating a tradition where our bodily reactions to popular and media culture are becoming, culturally, such a big phenomenon that we can no longer ignore it. But before entering popular culture itself, I want us to take a short ride into the philosophy of passivity, activity, and pedagogy.

2

In Jacques Rancière's *The Ignorant Schoolmaster (Le maître ignorant, 1987)*, the philosopher recalls the story of Joseph Jacotot who, at the beginning of the nineteenth-century, worked as a teacher in the University of Louvain. Jacotot's great innovation was that he noticed he could teach disciplines which he did not master himself. He did this in practice by teaching Flemish (which he could not speak).

Jacotot was a radical predecessor to the contemporary pedagogical paradigm. He activated the students and helped them to teach themselves. This resulted in a revolutionary practice. Jacotot visited houses of the poor neighborhoods and explained to parents who could not afford education for their children how they could educate them themselves. This is one of the top referent points in what Rancière calls intellectual democracy. And, it came as no surprise that, this practice, together with teaching subjects unknown to the teacher, was considered to be scandalous. Jacotot lost his job (Rancière 1991, 8-18).

Intellectual democracy has been something Rancière has been working on since his earlier study of letters written by workers in the nineteenth-century, *Proletarian Nights: The Workers' Dream in Nineteenth-Century France* (2012). These letters showed how the workers were, by themselves and without studying Marx, conscious of many of the structures of society which Marx thought that a middle class man (he himself) had to lead them to understand. A common paradox of the Marxist theory is that the proletarians get the understanding and consciousness needed for the revolution very naturally through

the dialectic process (master / slave), practically through being oppressed, but that they need a richer and more educated man to help themselves to understand this.

In *Le Philosophie et ses pauvres* (1983), *The Philosopher and His Poor*, Rancière studied the history of philosophical arrogance towards people who do manual work, starting from Plato the censor, the philosopher who debased craft (like painting) and thought that theatre was dangerous – foremost because it showed gods doing immoral things, and this could have a negative effect on young men. And naturally philosophy fought for power in these times: by debasing visual representation, visual art and theatre, philosophy elevated itself (Rancière, 2004).

Since ancient times, lower parts of society have encountered analyses and pedagogical control from the wealthy and the educated, and in a way which takes it for granted that the lower ones cannot reflect on their situation and, for example, their consumption of culture, in modern times commodities.

Marx believed, enchanted by some key fragments in G.W.F. Hegel's system, in a dialectical manner that the consciousness that is born through the master and slave relation, develops into an anti-thesis which later on leads to a synthesis, a higher form of society. But already in Theodor Adorno we find the masses unable to change anything. No synthesis is on the way, because Western culture is stuck in negative dialectics. Here the reason is motorized by something we would today call (in English) popular culture (Adorno talks about mass culture). It is the key element in the culture industry, although culture industry also includes most of the so-called high art. Although no evil capitalist lurks behind the system (it is more a question of Hegelian, historical non-subjective forces), in this hedonistic fake exchange of culture the masses are controlled with pleasure, and so keeping the unbearably unequal society from falling apart, feeding the passive consumers with pleasing series of classical music and TV sit-coms.^[8]

Adorno's concern revolved around all culture, but his attitude was applied to images only in Guy Debord's situationist work. In the society of spectacle, images are the only way of connecting people. Like scholars in cultural studies before the Gramscian turn, Debord saw the masses as passive, and created resistance against the system of spectacle and images. Marx had been dreaming of activating the workers, and he had used plenty of philosophical ammunition against types of 'opium' like religion – which, afterwards, have, in Marxist theory, become swapped for communication, entertainment, mass production and mass distribution.

Traditional pedagogy, wherein the masses are seen as idiots that the teacher should activate and cultivate, shares quite the same attitude. It all comes together – this is my intuition – in Rancière's *The emancipated spectator* (2009). It is within theatre, which is here Rancière's main topic of discussion despite its not having been a very active part of the previously mentioned works, that the fight against the passive viewer has been the strongest of all the arts. We find Brecht, inspired by Chinese theatre and Russian formalist thinking, alienating the viewers (and so activating them), even while, on the other hand, as Rancière reminds us, ritualists like Artaud fought to pull the viewers out of their safe solipsism into a living community. And the story has continued... we, the audience, have been attacked, picked up on, and used in performances to make the experimental theatre professional happy.

And what is this lower human being we need to teach and care for, this passive viewer? Most theorists using the word seem to concentrate on the intellectual, the discursive. In his work on film, Carroll constantly repeats that we should not underestimate certain films, for example Spike Lee's, because they "activate the audience to think about problems in the society".^[6] Weirdly, he uses this to point out that Spike Lee's films are art. Both Brecht and Artaud stated that their audiences would not be like basic film audiences.

But what if we, to get back to experiencing oneself just like being

an object, forgot discursive practices, active discursive thinking, and what if we leaned on the body – where we began this text. Though let us not, in doing so, forget intellectual democracy or the theme of intellectual passivity.

Watching a movie or a TV series, at home, on the couch, just receiving, the brains turned off, kinesthetic reactions followed up by chills in the spine, tensions in the neck (then, in most films, relief) or somatic atmospheres caused by the audiovisual material – could we think that these make us objects of the film (and not vice versa)? We are the objects of stimulation, we are stimulated to laugh, or to react strongly to what we see. Often we experience ourselves just being in a deep state. We are sometimes just extensions of the film, a cold end of plugs from which the film leaks in. This stage of experience, still perceived by many as merely passive, is a quasi dream-like stage where the body is often more active than not: A hot TV dinner from 9 to 11 can include fears, erotic stimuli and awe, without any discursive thinking. It is not thinking through the body, but the body thinking without conscious reflection – the total opposite of what most modern and contemporary artists want from their audiences.

Sometimes this is mixed with thingness. Some directors have made a whole career of films that give us a cold, impersonal touch. Stanley Kubrick's shells and masks, in *Clockwork Orange* (1971) and *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999), touch us in just such an inhuman and impersonal way. Yet it seems to me that David Cronenberg has made even more of an art out of this way of implementing atmospheres, and helping us to cope with our feelings of being just things. He cuts deep into our flesh with his abject scenes, and the whole way the film runs is very deterministic – not really seducing us to think about narratives or discourse. At the same time, soundscapes keep the atmosphere of the film narrow and strong, and they hit our body more than our taste for music. Here, the activation happens mostly in the body, and our relationship to it. We sometimes talk about disgust, but mainly there are no emotional, feel-

ing-based or experiential heights, only a quite passive stream, including a feeling of being both in and out of the movie. These films have been avant-garde in body art, but in a very weird way, are mass-art at the same time (for instance, some of Cronenberg's early films have been shown in mainstream theaters). They have dragged us out from humanist metaphysics by letting us experience and imagine what it might be like to be only a thing, machine, or object. If Cronenberg did not exist, we would need to invent him.

The beauty of thingness or machine based experience of intellectual passivity can, of course, be found in less stimulating, merely indifferent audiovisual consumption: programs without any challenges, which are insignificant to us yet alluring enough that we keep on staring, programs where no destinies – whether we talk about the lives of the nurses in a British series played out in the 1950s or the everyday lives of the cops in an American police station – really touch us. It is just we, loose flesh on the couch, being stimulated a bit. We receive, we register, and my intuition is that this is something very natural, maybe something we did already when we roamed the Savannah; there might not be that big of a difference between watching the trees in Kenya and watching the stream of TV programs. This is what I believe Raymond Williams was already hinting at in his classical remark that I will here paraphrase: it is not important what you watch; it is about having the TV on or off (1975, 86, 93). (Today we need to see this in a wider scope, not forgetting the internet or any other technological mass media devices.)

The animalistic mode is, I think, often somewhat close to experiencing oneself as a machine or a thing. When we conceive ourselves as animals or machines we hint at being somewhat active but not reflective. This is why Perniola's introduction to the theme of the thing is so important. It stresses passivity but does not let us forget how this way of being can still be active, as long as we keep in mind how discursive the whole idea of activity is.

Cronenberg, horror, slapstick, and the shocking montage and fast violent scenes in the contemporary film cut our body into pieces experientially, or stimulate it like it were a machine. "Long live the new flesh", the protagonist of Cronenberg's *Videodrome* (1983) shouts, becoming a cocktail of man, machine, and media image. We don't need to go this far, but we need to acknowledge that a big chunk of our use of the everyday culture is about connecting our body to a game of bodily stimulations where the brain needs, in a way, to be hibernating. If we believed Benjamin, we would probably think that this is analogous to the process that once connected avant-garde, Tivoli, factory work, traffic, and film, a process where we created a new type of experience needed for the (aesthetic) survival in contemporary culture. But I would not go that far. Maybe this form of auto-communication is just producing a feeling of being only a thing and, at the same time, it could be about reflecting on this. Thingness might not be a major issue for contemporary culture, but I definitely think it is at least one horizon that marks our era.

But anyway, relax, scholars of cultural studies and philosophers. Let us just gaze half-heartedly, like sleepy lions, at what happens in Emmerdale, or let us just be nothing, not even flesh, but just things, things that maybe, even just for a second, magically overshadow our holistic human being, the one so many thinkers have been fighting for. The fact that we can experience ourselves differently from the classical human-centered, humanist, organic, or just holistic paradigm is by no means a sign that we would not be able to feel that we are whole human beings. It is just that life is about oscillations, from one side to another, one experience to another. And sometimes we find our self, at least for a moment, in thingness. Although one must say that experiencing oneself as just a thing can really be a negative experience and that we must work to lessen the commodified use of people in the media as much as in society, we sometimes just enjoy being things. This intellectual passivity is a fresh perspective for a culture invaded

by obsessively holistic humanist thinking, by leftist thinking on active critical citizenship, and by capitalist thinking on active production.

3

We have not shared a single philosophical punchline, but I believe we have mapped out a peculiar contemporary margin of experience. It is time to return to Chopin's heart. The story is uncanny.

Chopin's sister Ludwika Jędrzejewicz had heard Chopin's request for dismemberment. She preserved the heart in a hermetically sealed crystal jar filled with (probably) cognac. The vessel was covered with an urn. It was made of mahogany and oak. In 1850, a few months after her brother's death, Ludwika smuggled it to Poland, hiding the vessel under her cloak. In 1879 it was placed in its present position in the Holy Cross.

During the German occupation the heart was nearly lost. At the time of the Warsaw Uprising, there were harsh battles around the Holy Cross. The building suffered damage. During the fight, a German priest named Schulze asked his Polish colleagues whether they would let him take the heart out of the city. The priests agreed. Heinz Reinefarth, a high-ranking SS officer who was a Chopin admirer, took care of the urn. For the rest of the period of the uprising, Chopin's heart was kept at the headquarters of Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski, the brutal commander of German forces in the region.

Then the priests took the urn with them to Mińskówek, not far from Warsaw. Fearing that the Germans would change their minds, they hid it. The container was opened. It was possible to see the organ. It was "incredibly big", one of the observers recalled. On October 17, 1945, the heart was returned to the church.

Weirdly never filmed by the masters of the mainstream abject film, Roger Corman, David Cronenberg, or Nicolas Roeg, the story of Chopin's heart, even as a narrative, has a slightly inhuman touch about

itself. It is not just the dismembering of Chopin, it is the fetishizing, the sickly, religious idea of a great (male) artist, i.e. genius, and maybe also the obsession of saving and taking care of the heart, that builds a chilly, perplexing and somatically unpleasant web of reactions in us. One could, perhaps, ask if the contemporary abject film merely made an art out of this type of experience or if it has just been aesthetically documenting our thing-driven experience, which is, maybe even in the heart of this story, the reason why it is fascinating. It is like the engine of a car had been removed.

At least films analyze this and help us to cope with our feelings of fragmentation and thingness. And so they have done a great deal more than theories, at least so far. They have given us new, fascinating experiences and reactions, and dragged up a lot of experiential attitudes that we have had, hidden deep in ourselves. By breaking our ice with mutilation, intersections of man and machine, soundscapes which make us feel sick, and narrations (like the one above, though it is not yet a film) which help us mark some of our main traits of alienation, they have shown the way for philosophy. If this is a part of our everyday and if we really spend a lot of time enjoying art and popular culture which stimulates this side in us, we need to study this experience. Of course, some trendy ways of thinking today, like post-humanism, have already, in a way, showed where this could lead, philosophically speaking, but I would rather go back to the basics, and end this by paraphrasing Benjamin. If the Art Work essay did not just discuss the new of the era but rather the whole change of experience, one might today ask what it really means that we are becoming so conscious about our experiences of being non-human, and moreover, not even animals, just things? Will their (assumedly) increasing impact change the way we see even older things, and, in the end, will they lead us to see things that are just things as something humanesque? This might be *the* question for the future. Time will tell. And we might want to interpret our whole culture in a new way, with all our pleasures of

being just a thing showing for a whole new conception of what culture is – from make-up to aesthetic surgery. Experiences do not lie. They show us who and what we are. Sometimes just things, desiring things.

Notes

- [1] More on this and our way of accentuating excess in art history writing, see Rynnänen2015.
- [2] More on this in my article "Throwing the Body into Fight: The Body as an Instrument in Political Art" (2015).
- [3] E.g. 'excretion machines', as stated in the beginning of the *Anti-Oedipus* (1972). Deleuze and Guattari 1983, 1.
- [4] Carroll 1998 portrays thinkers from Benjamin to Jaron Lanier who are enthusiastic about the technological revolution.
- [5] See e.g. Volli 1997, 36–39, for a concise introduction to Freud's ideas on the fetish.
- [6] These thoughts form the base of *The Writer of Modern Life* (from Benjamin 2006).
- [7] Poe's short stories form the literary background for a lot of Benjamin's thinking on urban life.
- [8] See my and Jozef Kovalcik's short introduction to Adorno's popular culture theory in Rynnänen and Kovalcik 2014, 22–25.
- [9] Carroll talks, though, also critically about this 'protestant ethics of aesthetics'. See Carroll 1998, 48.