

“Is it still possible to distinguish between ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture? Referring to examples from art and/or media.”

The concept of culture is something that has always been in the center of human society. Its meaning is now more than ever brought into question. Culture is generally considered to be defined as *“the arts and other manifestations of human intellectual achievement regarded collectively”* (New Oxford American Dictionary, 2005-2009). It is seen either as something that determines our social environment, or, in the opinion of the Frankfurt School, as something that is determined by society. Over the course of history, the understanding of culture has been under constant change and theoreticians came to make distinctions between different levels of culture. We saw the emergence of the concepts of High and Low culture.

How can one define these ideas? Is it still possible today to make a clear distinction between the definitions of High and Low culture?

These concepts cover a broad area of study and we could look into many themes, including Bourdieu’s ideas of cultural capital. We will however focus on certain aspects of the subject matter. Firstly we will explore the traditional definitions of High and Low culture, their connection with the audience and how they can be differentiated. Secondly, we will analyse the effect of technological reproduction, the potential links between High and Low culture and the grey areas in between.

The differentiation between levels of culture is generally seen as an elitist perception of culture. High culture is considered to encompass a set of products, especially in the arts, of a higher status, held in the highest esteem. On this cultural level *“the emphasis is on the work’s cultic value”* (Benjamin, 2008; p. 12). Products of High culture are mostly viewed as belonging to the long-established forms of art, such as painting and sculpting. Examples of these products include paintings by Michelangelo and symphonies by Mozart.

On the other hand, there is what is commonly referred to as Low culture or in a less derogatory term, Popular culture. On this level the emphasis is instead on the work’s *“display value”* (Benjamin, 2008; p. 12). It is considered the lowest form of art, often completely lacking in creativity. The most obvious examples of Popular culture include Pop music and reality television shows. This level of culture can also be associated with Mass culture or, as Theodor Adorno calls it, the *“Culture Industry”* (Adorno, 2001; p. 98) as it is created not by the masses but for the masses.

We can see that the main difference between High and Low culture is their content and the original purpose and meaning behind their respective products. According to Benjamin, creations of high culture are intended for immersion, they call for the viewer to enter the work with a critical and reflective perspective. (Benjamin, 2008; p. 33) The effect they have on the audience is meant to be one of enlightenment and conscious development. Works of Low culture on the other hand are, as Benjamin puts it, source of *“distraction”* (Benjamin, 2008; p. 33), which is what the masses look for. The effect of Low culture (or ‘Culture Industry’) on the viewer is one of *“anti-enlightenment”* (Adorno, 2001; p. 106).

The idea of conscious or even spiritual development can be most directly represented with products of religious (or sacred) art. Indeed, symbols have played a major role in human belief systems throughout history. The Cross for example is best known in the Western world as a Christian symbol, but it has been widely used in the rest of the world for different reasons: as a symbol of the Earth for the Chinese, as a representation of the Assyrian sky god Anu, etc... (Fontana, 2003; p. 85) Psychologist Carl Gustav Jung argued that symbols are *“abstract shapes, which arise directly from the unconscious without any allusion to the natural world”* (Fontana, 2003; p. 84-85). A major example is the connection Jung makes between the Buddhist diagram called mandala and the shapes spontaneously drawn by people in psychotherapy. These shapes (combinations of triangles, circles and squares) are thought to be attempts by the conscious mind to access higher material of the unconscious. (Jung, 1978; p. 169) These designs, widely present in Eastern religions, are used to meditate upon in order to access and become aware of deeper levels of meaning. (Fontana, 2003; p. 99. - Jung, 1978; p. 267-268) In Buddhism it is believed that the best mandalas are given to a disciple directly by an enlightened teacher who creates the mandala himself after undergoing a period of fasting and meditating on its design. (Santiago, 1999; p. 10) This uniqueness and genuineness is what Walter Benjamin calls a work's *“aura”*, something that the work would lose if it were to be reproduced using technological means. (Benjamin, 2008; p. 7). We can therefore view these creations as definite forms of High culture; they are representations of the epitome of human creativity.

According to Theodor Adorno, Low culture does the exact opposite: we are witnessing a 'dumbing-down' of the masses with the constant increase of mass culture, in particular mass media. This is a product of capitalism, where all that matters is profit, to the detriment of quality and substance. *"The customer is not king, as the culture industry would have us believe, not its subject but its object"* (Adorno, 2001; p. 99). Mass corporations create culture, mass media is used to make the public conform and buy into capitalism and specific ideologies. As Adorno puts it: *"each product of the culture industry becomes its own advertisement"* (Adorno, 2001; p. 100). In modern days we experience the never-ending growth of mass media, and comfort and ease become the main points of focus: people can have access to hundreds of television channels without having to leave their homes. Low culture is more widely and more regularly available, with for example the soaring popularity of television reality shows. We are constantly bombarded with new ideas and trends that the masses adhere to: *"the power of the culture industry's ideology is such that conformity has replaced consciousness"* (Adorno, 2001; p. 104).

However, the concepts of High and Low culture cannot solely be considered in such a black and white manner. There are indeed some exceptions and grey areas.

With the modern age of technological reproduction, we have reached new levels of art and culture. Works of art have always been reproducible, various methods have been used throughout history, from casting and embossing to etching and lithography. (Benjamin, 2008; p. 3-4) It is with the invention of film and photography that the meaning of art took a new step. Although photography was at first seen by

some as *“soft, gutless painting”*, Weston affirmed that it is a matter of *“revealing to others the living world around them [...] showing to them what their own unseeing eyes had missed”* (Sontag, 1979; p. 96). Photography holds the power to show the public works of High art that they might not have access to otherwise. It therefore widens the availability of such creations. Photography can even, using enlargement and other techniques, show certain aspects of a work of art that might escape the naked eye, to the point of going *“beyond natural optics”* (Benjamin, 2008; p. 6). This is especially true today with the use of highly advanced equipment and software, people can analyse works in great detail and become more familiar with products of so-called High art.

This leads us to another aspect of photography as an art form in itself. With the use of both film photography and digital imaging, there is the possibility of unlimited reproduction, making every copy the same. This therefore undermines the concept of ‘aura’, as we cannot talk about the ‘original’ of a photograph. The *“aura is bound to [...] here and now; it has no replica”* (Benjamin, 2008; p. 19). This applies to other sorts of technologically reproduced art forms as well, such as film and music, with platforms like DVD, CD, MP3, etc... The reproduction of works of art *“makes it possible for the original to come closer to the person taking it in”* (Benjamin, 2008; p. 6). Today one can buy a recording of an orchestra performing a Mozart symphony and listen to it at home, or even download the piece from the Internet and listen to it on the bus. This goes beyond financial and social obstacles as it *“frees the work of art [...] from its existence as a parasite upon ritual”* (Benjamin, 2008; p. 12). Technological reproduction therefore brings into question the definition of High culture, making it less of an elitist exclusivity.

In modern days we witness a merging of what is considered High and Low art forms. The most common form of such merging is the act of copying an existing High culture product into/onto a Low (or popular) culture product, such as putting a picture of the Mona Lisa on a T-shirt or sampling a piece of classical music into a hip-hop track. There are nonetheless artists that find themselves somewhere in the middle, or rather in both levels of culture at the same time, by originally creating a piece that incorporates both elements of High and Low culture. One example is Rhys Chatham's *Guitar Trio 1977* which is a musical piece that combines elements of Punk Rock with aspects of contemporary classical music.

Furthermore, the cultural status of a work of art can be variable over time. We associate different meanings with certain works depending on their historical and geographical context. As Walter Benjamin puts it: "*Tradition itself is of course something very much alive, something extraordinarily changeable*" (Benjamin, 2008; p. 10). Jazz for example used to be considered a very Low type of music when it first emerged, it was seen in white America as the 'black people's music'; it is now however regarded as a respected High culture music genre. Indeed, "*the manner in which human sense perception is organized [...] is dictated not only naturally but also historically*" (Benjamin, 2008; p. 8). This also applies to the use of symbols, whether it is for artistic purpose or not. The swastika for example, which has existed for thousands of years, is still regarded by Hindus and Buddhists as one of the most sacred symbols ever created, whereas it is now associated in the West with Nazism and fascism. Meaningful symbols are in fact often used in advertising and political propaganda to attempt to influence people; the outcome and level of influence can nevertheless not be calculated in advance. (Jung, 1978; p. 240). Furthermore, sacred symbols often become mass culture fashion accessories, with for example

Pop singers wearing crosses or other religious symbols for solely aesthetic purposes.

The concept of High and Low culture is in itself an elitist perception of culture in general. Some individuals associating themselves with High culture may show disdain towards works of what they call Low art by pure snobbism and prejudice, and vice versa. The definitions of these cultural levels (or arguably subcultures) are questionable and can be regarded as solely subjective. In both of these extremes there are cases of works of good and bad quality. A lot of High art has been created for aesthetic reasons alone, while some Low art has been produced with cultic or spiritual ideas in mind. One example is Rhonda Byrne's highly popular book *The Secret* which has been mass produced and even made into a documentary film; although it shows the signs of a Low culture product, it contains more meaning and spiritual material than most contemporary High art creations.

"Watching television or the latest Hollywood movie is not a sign that one has, after all, lost the capacity for reflection; that one can simultaneously see through the manipulation at work and sustain a critical distance from what is on offer" (Adorno, 2001; p. 12). There is a wide range of works of art and cultural products within the so-called Low culture, especially within the media, from TV reality shows to Hollywood blockbusters and smaller independent films. Many can be directly linked to Mass media, others however have more substance and can even after a while be considered 'cult', and therefore join the High art spectrum. The film *Easy Rider* can arguably be an example of that.

We can look at the concepts of High and Low culture in different ways. Firstly they can be seen from a strictly elitist perspective, with High culture containing the most 'intelligent', meaningful and usually long-established works of art, and Low culture encompassing all aspects of Mass media and Popular culture, grouped under Theodor Adorno's label 'Culture Industry'. This pictures the audience of Low culture as naive victims of capitalism, with no conscious autonomy. Secondly, High and Low culture can be regarded as unclear and subjective cultural statuses that vary and merge over the course of history. Technological reproduction, as expressed by Walter Benjamin, is seen as a positive evolution in bringing the two cultural levels together.

There is no definite answer to where one should draw the line between High culture and Low culture, or even define a middle ground. Meaning and sense can be found on both sides of the spectrum. A work of art may use elements from both High and Low culture, but its status cannot be confirmed until it receives a social response.

Although a difference is made in society between High and Low culture, that difference only exists because the public has allowed it to be made. In the end, all that matters is that individuals maintain a certain autonomy of consciousness, or the 'Culture Industry' will prevail and widen the gap all the more.

Bibliography

Adorno, Theodor W. (2001). *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*. London: Routledge Classics.

Benjamin, Walter (2008, orig. 1936). *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, 'Great Ideas' (trans. J. A. Underwood). London: Penguin Books.

Fontana, David (2003). *The Language of Symbols: A Visual Key to Symbols and their Meanings*. London: Duncan Baird Publishers.

Jung, Carl (1978). *Man and his Symbols*, conceived and edited by Carl Jung, written with M. -L. von Franz, Joseph L. Henderson, Aniela Jaffé and Jolande Jacobi. London: Picador.

New Oxford American Dictionary (2005-2009). Version 2.1 (80). [electronic] Mac OS X, Apple Inc.

Santiago, J. R. (1999). *Sacred Symbols of Buddhism*. New Delhi: Book Faith India.

Sontag, Susan (1979). *On Photography*. London: Penguin Books.