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Philosophy as/and/ of Popular Culture

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WHAT IS POPULAR CULTURE?

Before we can usefully consider philosophy's engagement with popular culture, we need to know what popular culture is. Is popular culture the same as low culture? The fleeting (as opposed to the classic)? Popular art? Mechanically produced art? Mass art? Mass culture?

Woody Allen once quipped that art is entertainment for intellectuals.[1] Of course this oversimplifies the point, but it nicely reflects the elitist connotations of *art*.[2] Following Allen, perhaps popular culture is entertainment for the people, "art" for the masses. "Intellectuals" do sometimes enjoy popular culture, but perhaps they are just "slumming" when they do so. High culture includes high art, and low culture includes low art, and popular culture is just another name for low culture and its art. Does that make sense? As Ted Cohen captures this reasoning, "What makes the high art high? Is it that its appeal is mostly to high audiences? Then what makes the audience high? That its taste is for high art? Well, of course, that makes a circle. Is something wrong with that?"[3] While it might be possible to mark an audience as high on the basis of something other than its taste for high art, such as socioeconomic status or level of education or familiarity with the art world, this approach nonetheless does not hold much promise.

Even if we were to excuse the circularity, the facile dichotomy between high and low art is problematic in its application to borderline cases. Though Rachmaninov and Beethoven are unambiguously high art, while *Rocky and*

Bullwinkle are unambiguously low art, other cases are not so clear. Where does jazz fit? Clearly jazz was at one time (not long ago) regarded as very low art indeed, though this perception has changed or is changing. We may dare to think that the same fate awaits rock music, at least some of it.[4] Today's lowbrow can be tomorrow's highbrow.

Indeed, much that we think of as paradigmatic high art was once popular, low art. Attic comedy and tragedy survived thanks to a shift in its perception from low to high art, or, more accurately, some of the most extraordinary instances of Attic drama survived while the most ordinary have been lost, probably at no great aesthetic loss.[5] The same may be said with regard to the survival of the extraordinary plays of Shakespeare and the loss of most ordinary Elizabethan drama. Perhaps the examples of Aeschylus and Shakespeare simply show that we do not always recognize high art—the classic—when we see it. Popular culture, by contrast, is fleeting, not classic, not timeless, so the argument goes. But Dickens, for example, undoubtedly wrote for the people and was popular, though he has survived to become classic. We must be mindful that there can be instances of good (popular) low art, such as *The Simpsons*, and there can be instances of bad high art, such as Stoppard's *Jumpers*.[6] And, of course, not all high art, not even all good high art, is classic. Most is lost and forgotten. So popular culture is not simply that which is not classic, because much that is not classic is not necessarily popular, and some that is popular may indeed become classic.

Another way of salvaging the distinction between high and low is in terms of availability and means of production. The value of high art might be said to derive in part from its one-of-a-kind status with its attendant aura, as Walter Benjamin calls it. There is only one *Mona Lisa*, one (Michelangelo's) *David*, one Parthenon, etc. Similarly, theatrical and orchestral performances are always unique. By contrast, popular culture "in the age of mechanical reproduction" is generally mass produced and ready for virtually identical mass consumption.[7] Movies and television shows are seen in essentially the same way by people in theaters and living rooms around the world; rock music is heard on CDs in essentially the same way by people all over the world. By contrast, mass production copies of the *Mona Lisa* or *David* do not provide essentially the same experience as the originals; they are mere copies, not tokens of types.

So should discussion of "popular culture" be replaced by discussion of "mass art"? Mass art would presumably be what Benjamin speaks of as "art in

the age of mechanical reproduction," art that is mass produced and distributed for mass consumption. But although most (if not all) the art of popular culture is mass art in this sense, not all mass art in this sense is popular culture. With modern technology, new symphonic music can be mass produced for mass consumption in just the way rock music can, if not ordinarily with the same commercial success.[8] Discussion of mass art would make sense if, as Benjamin believes, the use of mass technologies does something to essentially change the kind of art that is produced. Benjamin valorizes distraction and lack of concentration in perceiving mass art, free from aura, as empowering the audience.[9] But it is clear neither that all mass art encourages distraction nor that distraction is necessarily a salutary effect. Unfortunately, then, Benjamin's account specifies nothing essential about the art he considers.

Noël Carroll does not believe mass art is essentially different from art in general. Nonetheless, he holds that it is useful to speak of mass art as "roughly popular art produced and distributed by mass technology,"[10] "a necessary feature of [which is] that it is designed to be accessible to masses of people."[11] Carroll's account distinguishes mass art from the popular art of past eras, which (generally) was not produced and distributed by mass technology, and from folk art, which is often not produced and distributed by mass technology. With its necessary condition of mass production and distribution, "mass art," unlike "popular culture," would unfortunately exclude some works that do not fit neatly into the ordinary language categories of folk or avant-garde, such as unrecorded, unbroadcast punk rock, tattoos, and graffiti.

The necessary condition of accessibility is meant to distinguish mass art from what most regard as contemporary high art, the avant-garde.[12] But by defining mass art as necessarily accessible, Carroll embraces ease as a criterion of mass art. As he says, "avant-garde artworks are not structured for ready assimilation and reception by mass audiences."[13] "Mass art, in contrast, is designed to be easy, to be readily accessible, with minimum effort, to the largest number of people possible."[14] Carroll is explicit in stating that, despite the ease associated with it, he does not regard *mass art* as a derogatory term.[15]

Photography, then, which Benjamin takes as paradigmatic of art "in the age of mechanical reproduction," would not necessarily be mass art for Carroll. Despite its reproducibility, a photograph without ease of accessibility would not be mass art. This would seem to define mass art in such a way as to make it a misnomer, but perhaps that is not a problem.

Most mass art is readily accessible in precisely the way Carroll specifies; think of Top 40 radio and television sitcoms. Still, some of what should surely count as mass art is not readily accessible. There is no a priori reason why popular, or mass, art cannot be difficult and inaccessible. With a large enough public, mass art can aim to appeal to a small fraction of the public rather than as many as possible.[16] Some popular musical artists, for example Slipknot, Dimmu Borgir, the Sex Pistols, (early) Metallica, and (much) Frank Zappa, actually aim at being inaccessible to most, thus generating great appeal among others, largely because of that inaccessibility.[17] Carroll says, "Mass art has to be comprehensible for untrained audiences, virtually on the first go-around,"[18] but virtually no one in 1976 could claim to comprehend the Sex Pistols "on the first go-around," or, mutatis mutandis, Dimmu Borgir and Slipknot today. Yet they have vast followings. We might then be tempted to classify the songs of the Sex Pistols, Dimmu Borgir, and Slipknot as avant-garde, but surely they are both too popular and too unlike other avant-garde artworks, even those produced and distributed by mass technology, such as the works of John Cage. "The question is about what *masses* of untutored people find easily accessible,"[19] Carroll says. But what does it mean to be tutored? And what exactly does it mean for an artwork to be accessible? Surely a Dimmu Borgir or Slipknot fan is in some way tutored to appreciate their music in a way that the average person is not.[20] Is Carroll's accessibility criterion akin to acquired tastes in food? Appealing to an untutored palate? If so, isn't *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* an acquired taste that some take to quickly while others never find palatable? Perhaps the Sex Pistols, Dimmu Borgir, Slipknot, and *Buffy* are avant-garde mass art. Certainly this could be correct if all we mean by "mass art" is art produced and distributed by mass technology, but this is not what Carroll means. He considers mass art and the avant-garde to be mutually exclusive categories, necessarily differentiated in terms of ease of accessibility.[21]

In response to John Fisher's objection that most examples of important rock music, notably the work of the Beatles, Bob Dylan, and Jimi Hendrix, do not satisfy the accessibility condition,[22] Carroll clarifies: "According to my theory, accessibility is a cognitive affair. It is a matter of whether audiences comprehend the works in question without tutoring, not whether they approve of or like the works."[23] So, Carroll is saying, while the contemporary audience may have needed repeated listening to acquire a taste for, say, the experimental sound of *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Heart's Club Band*, or Hendrix's use of

feedback on *Are You Experienced*, these works were cognitively accessible. People may not have liked them the first time they heard them, but they nonetheless understood what they were about.

I believe Carroll is mistaken. The average person in the contemporary audience for rock music of any vintage is untutored in the sense of lacking the knowledge and cognitive delicacy required to comprehend some of the best and most important music of the genre. There simply is no meaningful sense of *accessible* in which *all* popular music is accessible. The very reason that many among the contemporary audience for the Beatles and Hendrix did not like their music is precisely the same reason that many among the contemporary audience for the Sex Pistols did not like their music and that many among the contemporary audience do not like Slipknot. They did not fully comprehend what the music is about. They had only a partial comprehension of the music, which in fact was a misunderstanding of the music, leading to a negative evaluation of the music. Although they were panned by many benighted music critics at the time, no one knowledgeable of rock music today would gainsay the greatness of the Sex Pistols. Much the same, mutatis mutandis, can be said of Black Sabbath and Metallica. There is no guarantee, of course, that proper comprehension will lead to proper appreciation, but in notable cases, full appreciation is impossible without proper comprehension.

The cognitive and the affective are linked. The Sex Pistols, for example, like many bands before and since, were misunderstood as simply loud, rebellious, and obnoxious for the sake of it, and thus were easily dismissed by rock fans and non-rock fans alike. The music requires repeated listening and background information to "get it." There is more to understanding the music than simply realizing that it is intended to be transgressive and offensive. One did indeed need to be tutored to comprehend the conventions the Sex Pistols were employing and the icons they were smashing in the attempt to recapture the true spirit of rock music. While the tutoring was part of the subculture for some young punks, it would require for others an advance placement course at Jack Black's "School of Rock." Though much of what was revolutionary about the Sex Pistols has today become nearly mainstream, many among the untutored continue to miscomprehend and dismiss the authentic punk of the Sex Pistols, as if it were cut from the same cloth as the pseudo-punk of Green Day. Worse, the untutored often miscomprehend and thus like Green Day and reject the Sex Pistols. Still worse, the truly soulless comprehend and nonetheless like

Green Day, who, to mix a metaphor, are but shadows on a wall standing on the shoulders of giants.

If we are to disagree with Carroll, we are left with the unhelpful understanding of mass art, à la Benjamin, as simply that which is produced and distributed by mass technology, a definition that does nothing to essentially differentiate mass art from other art. We return, then, to the distinction between the high and the low (or popular).

The low is the popular in the sense of being what the people like, even if it isn't what the people, in the sense of the *Volk*, produce.[24] It seems we can't live with or without the distinction between high and low art; it is, as Ted Cohen says, indefensible but indispensable.[25] Even if we could neatly delineate between high art and low art, by whatever names, equating popular culture with low art would not be correct. *Culture* refers to leisure, things done or made for entertainment or interest (Aristotle's *schole*): "things which are not done or made for explicitly practical, utilitarian, or survival-related concerns."[26] Accordingly, popular culture includes, but is not limited to, popular art. Rather, it includes baseball, fast food, fashion, cars, commercials, crystals, astrology, self-help, home design, dieting, UFOs, video games, cell phones, blogs, Disneyland, Las Vegas, serial killers, pornography, televangelists, court TV, spring break, Halloween, Mardi Gras, wrestling, and reality TV, among other things. While some of these examples may arguably involve art, not all do.[27] Perhaps they all involve entertainment, and so popular culture is "mass culture," entertainment for the masses? But it would be inaccurate to say that entertainment motivates consumption of fast food and interest in crystals, astrology, self-help, and UFOs. We are left with a vague notion of popular culture as often, though not necessarily, involving entertainment and art.

We can loosely define popular culture as artifacts and subjects of mass interest and appreciation.[28] Popular culture does not exclude people from appreciating it on the basis of class or formal education. This is perhaps a necessary, though not a sufficient, condition of popular culture. "Mass interest and appreciation" is admittedly indeterminate, though hopefully not troublesome. How popular does the popular have to be? No fixed answer can be given. One size does *not* fit all. The British sense of "pop" sheds light on the issue. In the British sense, Ozzy Osbourne and the Grateful Dead, for example, are considered "pop stars," even though they have cult followings. Cult followings may be large or small, but they are still part of popular culture as I conceive it.

As long as we have a general idea of the extension of "popular culture," as this preliminary survey has provided, this definition, though imperfectly specifying the intension of the term, will be enough to begin. We need not worry the vexed question of whether it is possible, and if so how, to differentiate between popular culture and high culture (if that is even the appropriate name for the companion concept). Without any theoretical advantages to the contrary, it makes sense to follow ordinary language, speaking of *popular culture* rather than *mass art*, *mass culture*, or any other alternative.

PHILOSOPHY AS POPULAR CULTURE?

Philosophy[29] is *not* popular culture, not an artifact or subject of mass interest and appreciation, but it could be. At various times in the past, indeed, it was. Arguably rocketry and the U.S. space program were elements of popular culture for a time in America, as dinosaurs and the Internet are now. Astronomy and computer programming *could* become popular culture. So could philosophy. Freud and Einstein were among the *People*/VH-1 top two hundred popular-culture icons.[30] Why not Russell and Sartre?

Consider books such as *The Tao of Pooh*, *The Consolations of Philosophy*, *Wittgenstein's Poker*, *Sophie's World*, *Socrates Café*, *Plato not Prozac*, *If Aristotle Ran General Motors*, and *The Metaphysical Club*. Arguably, none of these is either philosophy or popular culture, but their very existence evinces some popular interest in philosophy. So how can we get people further interested in philosophy? The answer, to paraphrase a British philosopher, is "we need a spoonful of sugar to help the medicine go down." We need to start with popular culture and use it to bring people to philosophy. This is what I have attempted to do in editing *Seinfeld and Philosophy* and related books. Even if these books are, in some loose sense of the word, philosophy, they are surely not in themselves popular culture. They simply make use of popular culture.

There is no instance of philosophy that is also popular culture in America now. Is there any reason to want philosophy *as* popular culture? The obvious objection is that it would cheapen great treasures. "Books for all the world are always foul-smelling books," Nietzsche said.[31] Though it may often be true, only the most cowardly snob could believe Nietzsche's statement is necessarily true. Actually, there is a long tradition in philosophy of making exoteric the esoteric, carried on by the likes of Socrates, Aristotle, Boethius, and Descartes.

Is there any harm in Americans knowing a lot about popular culture and relatively little about philosophy?[32] Yes. Americans hungry for knowledge and wisdom have turned to sources such as astrology, motivational speakers, and self-help books. While these sources are of varying value, none matches what philosophy has to offer. Philosophy needs to replace pseudo-philosophy (crystals, astrology, tarot cards) as science must replace pseudo-science (often surrounding interest in things such as bigfoot, the Loch Ness monster, UFOs, and other paranormal phenomena). Pseudo-philosophy, like pseudo-science, is attractively packaged and readily available, and so philosophy needs similar packaging and availability if it is to compete.

Shortly after World War II, with interest in science low, the United States found itself falling behind the Soviet Union. Thanks to a government-sponsored public relations campaign, rocketry was popular culture for a time in the 1950s and 1960s. But it is foolish and precarious to rely on the government to spark interest in science. As Carl Sagan says,

> In all uses of science, it is insufficient—indeed it is dangerous—to produce only a small, highly competent, well-rewarded priesthood of professionals. Instead, some fundamental understanding of the findings and methods of science must be available on the broadest scale.[33]

Sagan's point about science is well taken. Science must be made available to all, and it is scientists, not governments, who must take science to the people.[34]

Part of the difficulty in interesting people in philosophy is that it deals in abstractions. Of course, so do physics and mathematics, but people more readily and easily see the payoff for studying math or physics, with their clear applications to technology that makes life easier and supposedly better. The value of living the examined life through the pursuit of philosophy is much more difficult to demonstrate than the technological and pecuniary payoff of studying science.[35] Still, for the benefit of the individual and the discipline, though not everyone needs to be a scientist, ideally everyone should be scientifically literate. Similarly, though not everyone needs to make a vocation of formal philosophical study, ideally everyone should be philosophically literate, having a sense of the history and questions of philosophy.[36] Citizens of a democracy are better citizens for their knowledge of philosophy, as it teaches them to think critically and encourages them to dissent responsibly. Unenlightened elected officials will never see it as in their best interest to encourage the popular study of philosophy, so philosophers must take the message to the people. To sample Chuck D. of Public Enemy, we have to rock the bourgeoisie and the boulevard.

Philosophy as popular culture would be of tremendous service in this regard, and such democratization of philosophy need not be dumbing down. Popular science is not necessarily pseudo-science; in fact, it rarely is, as the magazine *Popular Science* attests. Most popular science simply explains scientific theories and discoveries sans mathematics. Of course popular science risks oversimplifying and misrepresenting the science, but that is a much lesser risk than depriving the public of a comprehensible account. Popular philosophy does not have to be pseudo-philosophy, as the periodicals *Philosophy Now* and *The Philosophers' Magazine* attest. To democratize philosophy is not necessarily to "dumb it down" but to make it available in at least some form for all. Wouldn't it be wonderful if the lives of Socrates and Buddha, the thought of Aristotle and Descartes, were better known as a result of being related in pop-cultural art forms? Though not a panacea, such sources would not only inspire philosophical musing but would foster critical, skeptical thinking.[37] And by starting with children, we have a greater chance of interesting future generations of adults in philosophy, whose increased interest in philosophy cafes is a good sign.[38]

The fact is that currently neither popular science nor popular philosophy is popular culture or a subject of mass interest. The reality is that we may not need, or at least may not realistically hope for, philosophy *as* popular culture. We may be satisfied with increased and increasing popular awareness of and interest in philosophy. And for that, all that may be necessary is the successful combination of "popular culture *and* philosophy."

"THE CLOSING OF THE AMERICAN MIND," OR JUST "THE END OF THE WORLD AS WE KNOW IT"?

Before we advocate philosophy *and* popular culture, we should consider the potential partner more closely. Despite the promise of popular culture for spreading philosophy, it may just be too dangerous a liaison. Warnings of the closing of the American mind and the dumbing down of America have been heard for some time; we would be foolish to ignore them. To be clear, my aim is not to defend popular culture or popular art per se.[39] Rather, I am considering whether

any of the intellectual, political, or moral concerns about, or criticisms of, popular culture are such as to outweigh the good that can come of the connection.

From the beginning, there has been disagreement among philosophers about leisure-time stimulation and entertainment. Plato condemns Homer; Aristotle champions Homer. Aristotle advocates going to the theater; Epictetus cautions against it. Ironically, Plato makes ample use of Homer, and Epictetus uses the metaphor of the actor in a play. One doesn't have to approve of popular culture to make use of it.

One serious concern is that America has become a nation entranced by popular culture, devoid of interest in classical liberal learning and art. Students come to high school and to college less and less well prepared, with less and less interest in and respect for the treasures of the Western tradition they are asked to study. "Here we are now, entertain us," they seem to say, as Neil Postman prophesied and Kurt Cobain sang. Entertainment is the opiate of the masses;[40] the problem is not Big Brother but soma. As Postman paraphrases Huxley, "People will come to love their oppression, to adore the technologies that undo their capacities to think."[41] Everything is entertainment, or it had better become entertainment if it would survive.

> Our politics, religion, news, athletics, education and commerce have been transformed into congenial adjuncts of show business. . . .[42]
>
> . . . It [television] has made entertainment itself the natural format for the representation of all experience.[43]

As the argument goes, when we pander to passing interest, replacing the rigorous study of canonical texts with the "anything goes" discussion of the philosophy of the latest fad, we only devalue what has classic, enduring value. All of life becomes entertainment, and teaching, an amusing activity.[44] The very existence of the pop-culture-philosophy hybrid devalues the traditional, posing as a fast, easy, genuine substitute. The rigor of classical liberal education is lost to the languor of phast-phood philosophy's empty-calorie high. To combine philosophy with popular culture is to give in, to concede, and to do harm to those we are trying to help.

While concern with the pervasive American demand for entertainment is well founded, it is not sufficient reason to dismiss the pairing of philosophy and popular culture. No one, least of all myself, wants or advocates that the

pop-culture-philosophy hybrid be a substitute for the study of canonical texts any more than we want watching television to be a substitute for reading books. Nor is there serious danger of this becoming an unintended consequence of the hybrid.

Difficulty is not a virtue in its own right. Ease isn't always necessarily bad when it comes to art; nor is difficulty necessarily good. The same is true, mutatis mutandis, of philosophy. Philosophy written in cumbersome, abstruse prose is not necessarily profound. Teaching and lecturing is not necessarily better when it makes learning and understanding more difficult. But fervent interest in something, even a bad situation comedy or wrestling, can encourage critical thinking about it, rather than intellectual passivity.

We are "amusing ourselves to death," Postman laments. A steady diet of popular culture leaves us weak and vulnerable, not just to outside threats but to internal deceptions. An educated and philosophically astute citizenry is the friend of a vital democracy but the foe of the elected official. Marxists such as Adorno have warned that popular culture is beset with traps and controls. For example, in "Revolutions Reloaded," Slavoj Žižek argues that the *Matrix* films, rather than suggesting and inspiring political and economic solutions, simply perpetuate capitalist ideology.[15] Far from freeing our minds, popular culture ensnares them, making them weak and colonizing them with capitalist ideology.[16] The prepackaged, predigested art of popular culture disables our ability to think for ourselves and leaves us vulnerable to the techniques of mass persuasion.[47] First we lose sight of political and economic reality, and eventually we blur the very line between fiction and reality.[48] Ironically we become prisoners of a Matrix or unwitting stars of our own *Truman Show*.

What better way to expose capitalist traps in popular culture than to bring philosophy to bear in discussion of the very traps?[19] Retreating from the battleground of popular culture is no way to win the war. As Danny Goldberg argues in *Dispatches from the Culture Wars: How the Left Lost Teen Spirit*, popular culture is too important to American youth to be ignored.[50]

To suppose that popular culture is apt to brainwash us into accepting an ideology we would otherwise reject is misguided. As Carroll says,

> For audiences who do not already accept the ideological propositions and concepts of a given mass artwork, and who realize that they do not accept them, the ideological address of the mass artwork, no matter how skillful rhetorically, is

apt to seem unintelligible or ridiculous or distorting and, perhaps, worthy of indignation.[51]

Much popular art can be used as fodder for philosophical discussion, and some naturally inspires thought and political resistance. For example, Douglass Kellner argues that *The X-Files* presents a critical vision of the U.S. government, that the show "instill[s] distrust towards established authority"[52] and "articulates fear and distrust of dominant institutions."[53] Carroll offers Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* as leaving the audience actively questioning whether Martin or Malcolm had it right. I would add the music of Rage Against the Machine. Adorno would likely reject these and other such examples as works of pseudo-criticism,[54] a note that rings hollow, a pseudo-criticism itself.[55]

Even if we could intellectually and politically survive the pop-culture-philosophy hybrid, perhaps we could not morally survive it. While in the *Republic* Plato was worried about morality connected with the emotions of pity and fear, contemporary Platonists tend to be worried about morality connected with aggressiveness and sexuality.[56] Indeed, this is a concern of Allan Bloom, who takes Mick Jagger to be symbolic of all that is corrupt about popular culture in *The Closing of the American Mind*.[57] While Bloom's use of (the now grandfatherly) Jagger is dated, his concern is timely, as Britney Spears, Janet Jackson, and gangsta' rap attest (examples which soon will themselves become dated). Images of sex, violence, and immoral behavior fill the big screen and the small screen; they pour from the speakers of CD players and iPods. Undoubtedly these images have at least some detrimental influence on their—often young—audience. So perhaps the moral costs of partnering with popular culture are more than philosophy can bear.

The concern that popular culture is too morally corrupt is well founded. Plato thought the popular culture of his time, Homerica, too corrupt, and perhaps he was right; the depiction of the gods in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* leaves much morally to be desired. To some extent, the story of popular culture in twentieth-century America was the cyclical tale of the older generation railing against the moral corruption of the younger generation's music and movies, which often depicted the moral failings of the elder generation. That there is a long history of generational disagreement about the morality of popular culture certainly does not mean we may simply dismiss concerns about the

morality of current popular culture. Though the cause-and-effect relationship between art and morality remains difficult to establish,[58] these concerns are indeed valid. But taking the moral high ground of rejecting popular culture has the unwanted result of rejecting its fans, to whom it is often dear. We must meet people where they are. Philosophy combined with the most popular, and often the most morally dubious, popular culture reaches the audience that needs it most. Taking philosophy to the public through liaison with popular culture even provides some small hope that future popular culture will not be as immoral.

Concern about the pairing of popular culture and philosophy is not much ado about nothing; it is a genuine concern. But it is not indicative of "the closing of the American mind." "It's the end of the world as we know it, and I feel fine."

PHILOSOPHY AND THE USE OF POPULAR CULTURE

Reflecting on the pernicious influence television has had upon American thought and communication, Postman Platonically purports, "In courtrooms, classrooms, operating rooms, board rooms, churches and even airplanes, Americans no longer talk to each other, they entertain each other. They do not exchange ideas; they exchange images."[59]

The most neglected part of the celebrated allegory of the cave is the escaped prisoner's return. Once he has come to true knowledge in and of the higher world, he is not to remain there but to return from whence he came to "share the knowledge." This is the duty of the philosophically educated guardian in Plato's *Republic*, it is the way of Socrates, and it is the duty of philosophers generally. Plato tells us that the returning prisoner must be prepared to be mocked and persecuted, for he will be talking of a strange and unlikely world. What's worse, he will appear to be damaged goods, as he will no longer be able to see clearly the shadows on the wall as he once did. How then is he to succeed in conveying his message? Plato offers little hope that he will. For the answer, we must turn to Socrates, who, despite losing his life to the cave dwellers, was able to communicate with some.

What did Socrates do, start off talking about a higher level of reality? Of course not. He met his interlocutors where they were, often using agricultural analogies and references to Greek culture, commonly known at the time, though the stuff of scholars today. He then gradually led them from what they

knew or thought they knew to higher knowledge. The example of Socrates makes clear that one must not only return to the cave but must learn to see the shadows again in order to tell the prisoners of the world outside in terms of the shadows.[60] They are unlikely to understand or listen if the message is delivered any other way. Those who criticize Americans for being immersed in popular culture but show them no way out and provide no motivation are like escaped prisoners who simply sneer at those stuck in the cave, haranguing and ridiculing them. Why would they listen?

But isn't there too much danger in sinking back to the level of the troglodytes? Adorno worries that the prefab art of popular culture encourages only further passive reception rather than active learning.[61] Isn't the pop-culture-philosophy hybrid so prefab and predigested as to thwart real thought? Postman worries that *Sesame Street* doesn't so much encourage children to like school as to want school to be like *Sesame Street*.[62] Does *The Simpsons and Philosophy* make philosophy attractive? Or does it just encourage the demand that philosophy be phun? Hannah Arendt cautions, "The danger of mass education is that it may become very entertaining indeed; there are many great authors of the past who have survived centuries of oblivion and neglect, but it is still an open question whether they will be able to survive an entertaining version of what they say."[63]

Jeremiads aside, popular culture *and* philosophy is like a bike *with* training wheels. The idea is to become comfortable enough to no longer need the training wheels. We kick away the ladder once we have ascended. Popular culture and philosophy is akin to a philharmonic orchestra performing Beatles songs. People will come to the philharmonic who might not otherwise. They'll enjoy it, and some, who would not otherwise, will come back to hear Beethoven. There is a pragmatic, American spirit in using popular culture to spread philosophy. It works.

It is not just that we can or may, but that we should and must bring philosophy to the public in terms that they will know and find attractive and interesting, not for the sake of joining the crowd in the cave but for the sake of showing them the way out. Willie Sutton was a criminal mastermind, a genius of sorts. Once asked, "Willie, why do you rob banks?" he replied pragmatically, "Because that's where the money is." Why would a philosopher write about popular culture? Because that's where the people are. And as the goal is to bring the prisoners from the shadows to the light, so it is the goal to bring the

public from popular culture to philosophy. In his controversial book *Cultural Literacy*, E. D. Hirsch contends that there are certain pieces of cultural information that "every American needs to know" to communicate effectively and comprehend others.[64] I contend that this can be extended to the realm of pop culture. The idea of adding pop-cultural literacy to cultural literacy may seem contrary to the intentions of the father of intentionalism, but it is not. Hirsch never intended cultural literacy to be a conservative notion, despite its embrace by political conservatives. Hirsch duly recognizes and accepts that the shared body of knowledge—that is, cultural literacy—is not stable but changing.[65]

Popular culture is the common language of our time, and knowledge of popular culture has become necessary for effective communication, like it or not, good or bad. Goldberg makes this clear concerning politics in *Dispatches from the Culture Wars: How the Left Lost Teen Spirit*. American presidential candidates are obliged to display some knowledge of popular culture and appear on certain television shows: *Oprah*, Letterman, Leno, and *Saturday Night Live*.[66]

Assuming that, like politicians, philosophers have a vested interest in using popular culture to reach the public, what is the proper use for this purpose? It is the same as the proper use of literature, which, as Peter Jones argued well in *Philosophy and the Novel*, is to open the imagination and to aid philosophy by providing vivid examples.[67] Martha Nussbaum has argued for the importance of literature in theorizing ethics.[68] Good literature may be more helpful than bad literature or shallow popular culture in displaying the intricacy of moral problems and moral reasoning, but not always and not necessarily.[69] There is a virtue in appealing to what is commonly known; what is not great literature or fiction can still be a great example. Metaphysics, epistemology, and other areas of philosophy have been neglected. They, too, benefit from the use of literature—particularly science fiction (if it is classed as literature)—and popular culture. Thought experiments have long been valued in philosophy, and popular culture can supply us with thought experiments that are sometimes more helpful and less contrived than those cooked up by philosophers. Certainly they tend to be at least more entertaining and better known,[70] sparking thought and argument. People are often very knowledgeable about their favorite piece of popular culture, and in very sophisticated ways, whether it be comic books or baseball. And this can be used to lead them to sophisticated thinking about philosophy.[71]

PHILOSOPHY AND THE ABUSE OF POPULAR CULTURE

What constitutes the abuse of popular culture in philosophy? *Studying* popular culture *as* philosophy rather than *using* it for examples and communication would be abuse, at least abuse of philosophy. It is the kind of abuse that some mistakenly fear is already taking place in the pop-culture-philosophy hybrid, an understandable mistake, given that other academics, notably literary theorists, have begun study of popular culture for its own sake, or, more correctly, for the sake of interpretation. Cultural studies,[72] as it is commonly called, takes popular culture too seriously, often just telling bad stories about (sometimes bad) stories.[73] Practitioners take themselves and their subject matter too seriously. The tendency to value a creative reading of a text[74] more highly than the text itself leads to accepting that the text itself need not even be aesthetically valuable as long as the interpretation is aesthetically pleasing, interesting, or ideologically correct.

Such interpretation for the sake of interpretation has become the bane of literary studies, though thankfully it seems to have made no inroads into philosophy. In philosophy, we can justify examining a piece of popular culture, even inferior popular culture, to illustrate a philosophical point or issue, but we cannot justify *studying* an inferior piece of popular culture for the sake of philosophical interpretation. And when we do offer a philosophical interpretation of popular culture, we must be clear that we are offering the philosophical significance of the film, show, or song, not its authorially intended meaning, lest we misrepresent its creator(s), truly abusing popular culture.[75] Some literature, for example *Nausea*, may be philosophy, and it is theoretically possible that some element of popular culture could be philosophy, but to my knowledge, no instance yet exists.[76] Until and unless someone manages to create a piece of popular culture that is also philosophy (or vice versa), we must limit ourselves to interpretations that give the philosophical significance of popular culture.

PHILOSOPHY *OF* POPULAR CULTURE

Dictionaries and encyclopedias of philosophy and aesthetics have no entry under "philosophy of popular culture." Although "philosophy and popular culture" may some day be worthy of an entry, the addition of "philosophy of popular culture" will not be necessary. We could for practical purposes have a "philosophy of popular culture," but that would likely have the undesirable consequence of perpetuating the distinction between the high and the popular. There are methodological questions for the study of popular art that might come under the heading of "philosophy of popular culture," such as the nature of fictional worlds, expression, and interpretation, but these are just the same methodological questions and issues raised by aesthetics generally and the philosophy of literature, painting, theater, film, music, and so on more specifically. There are interesting ontological issues related to popular art, but these are the issues owing to mass production raised by Benjamin and Carroll under the heading "philosophy of mass art." Questions raised by pop-cultural phenomena other than popular art, such as baseball and fast food, can be studied under the headings of philosophy of sport and philosophy of food.

Let's close with a note of caution: "philosophy of" is not for the public but for the academic. The surest way to lose a comedy fan's attention is to discuss philosophy of comedy, and so too the surest way to lose the public's attention is to talk about philosophy of popular culture, if there even is such a thing. And if there is, I suspect its only unique question is the one we began with: What is popular culture?

NOTES

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1. Stig Björkman, *Woody Allen on Woody Allen* (New York: Grove Press, 1993), 103.

2. Though we here consider "intellectual" status as the potential distinguishing criterion between high and low, class status could also be considered and similarly rejected. Cf. Noël Carroll on "Elimination Theory," *A Philosophy of Mass Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 176–84.

3. Ted Cohen, "High and Low Art, High and Low Audiences," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 57 (1999): 142.

4. For some excellent, serious aesthetic consideration of rock music, see Theodore Gracyk, *Rhythm and Noise: An Aesthetics of Rock* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996); and *I Wanna Be Me: Politics and Identity in Rock Music* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2002).

5. Paul Cantor, "The Art in the Popular," *Wilson Quarterly* (2001): 26–39.

6. Or choose your own example of bad high art. See the Museum of Bad Art, www.museumofbadart.org, for food for thought.

7. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Continental Aesthetics: Romanticism to Postmodernism*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Richard Kearney and David Rasmussen (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 166–77.

8. Carroll would not count such music as mass art. Cf. (1998), 189.

9. Benjamin, 176.

10. Carroll (1998), 3.

11. Carroll (1998), 8; cf. 196.

12. Not from high art from all eras. Carroll (1998) takes mass art and avant-garde to be mutually exclusive categories, 224.

13. Carroll (1998), 190.

14. Carroll (1998), 192.

15. Carroll (1998), 186–87.

16. Though the examples I'll give are from music, the same can be said to some extent of television. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* would be one example. For another, see Douglass Kellner, "*The X-Files* and the Aesthetics and Politics of Postmodern Pop," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 57 (1999): 161–75.

17. Carroll (1998) has a straw man in considering supposedly inaccessible mass art using Guns N' Roses as an example, 205; cf. 202. Guns N' Roses clearly aimed at a mainstream audience with radio-friendly singles and MTV-friendly videos.

18. Carroll (1998), 192.

19. Carroll (1998), 228.

20. For some tutoring, see Judith Grant, "Bring the Noise: Hypermasculinity in Heavy Metal and Rap," *Journal of Social Philosophy* 27 (1996): 5–30.

21. Carroll (1998), 224.

22. John Andrew Fisher, "On Carroll's Enfranchisement of Mass Art as Art," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 62 (2004): 58.

23. Noël Carroll, "Mass Art as Art: A Response to John Fisher," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 62 (2004): 64.

24. In a subsequent section, we shall discuss Adorno's rejection of *popular culture*, a term he thinks is misleading in suggesting the art and culture comes "from the people." Adorno prefers to speak of the "culture industry." Cf. Robert W. Witkin, *Adorno on Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 2003), 2.

25. Ted Cohen, "High and Low Thinking about High and Low Art," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 51 (1993): 151–52.

26. Douglas R. Anderson, "Culture," in *A Companion to Aesthetics*, ed. David Cooper (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), 101.

27. Carroll recognizes that his treatment of mass art does not include these other cultural phenomena but believes much of what he says about mass art can be applied to other mass cultural productions. Cf. Carroll (1998), 210.

28. This could include some elements of folk art, those in which there is sufficient mass interest, paintings of tigers or Elvis on black velvet, for example. Much of what in the past was or would have been folk art has become popular culture thanks to mass technology—the blues, for example.

29. I believe that what I say holds for nearly any definition or understanding of philosophy. Elsewhere I have argued that *philosophy* is a kind of family resemblance term, "Philosophy and the Philosophical, Literature and the Literary, Borges and the Labyrinthine," in *Literary Philosophers: Borges, Calvino, Eco*, ed. Gracia, Korsmeyer, and Gasché (New York: Routledge, 2002), 27–45.

30. *People and VH-1 Special Collector's Edition, 200 Greatest Pop Culture Icons* (New York: People Books, 2003).

31. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), sec. 30.

32. On American distaste for philosophy, see Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Vintage Books, 1962); and Aeon J. Skoble, "Lisa and American Anti-intellectualism," in *The Simpsons and Philosophy: The D'oh! of Homer*, ed. William Irwin, Mark T. Conard, and Aeon J. Skoble (Chicago: Open Court, 2001), 24–34.

33. Carl Sagan, *The Demon Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1997), 37.

34. See Sagan, 37, 333–36, 362–63.

35. I largely assume I am here preaching to the choir concerning the value of philosophy. For an opposing point of view, see Stanley Fish, "Truth But No Consequences: Why Philosophy Doesn't Matter," *Critical Inquiry* 29 (2003): 389–417.

36. Elsewhere, I have argued that basic philosophical literacy can be accomplished in an introduction to a philosophy course. "Philosophical Literacy: Are There Things Every Philosopher Needs to Know?" *American Philosophical Association Newsletters* 98 (1998): 128–130. The ideal I am arguing for here is for mass philosophical literacy well before college.

37. Philosophy may be more readily embraced by German and French society, though obviously it wasn't enough to prevent their involvement in the worst atrocities of the twentieth century. Still this does not obviously speak against the value of philosophy and the benefits increased philosophical literacy would have for American society.

38. On philosophy cafes, see Christopher Phillips, *Socrates Café: A Fresh Taste of Philosophy* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002). On the importance of philosophy for children, see Christopher Phillips, *The Philosophers' Club* (Berkeley, CA: Tricycle Press, 2001); Jostein Gaarder, *Sophie's World: A Novel About the History of Philosophy* (New York: Berkley Publishing Group, 1997); and Gareth Matthews, *Philosophy and the Young Child* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

39. Carroll has already ably defended such phenomena against concerns about emotions, morality, ideology, and freedom. See also Richard Shusterman, "Popular Art," in *A Companion to Aesthetics*, ed. David Cooper (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992) for discussion of six arguments against popular culture, 337–39.

40. Cf. Neal Gabler, *Life: The Movie: How Entertainment Conquered Reality* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 16–17.

41. Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), vii.

42. Postman, 3–4.

43. Postman, 87.

44. Cf. Postman, chap. 10.

45. Slavoj Žižek, "Reloaded Revolutions," in *More Matrix and Philosophy: Revolutions and Reloaded Decoded*, ed. William Irwin (Chicago: Open Court, 2005), 198–208.

46. Cf. Witkin, 29.

47. Cf. Shusterman on Gans, 337.

48. Cf. Gabler.

49. See Norah Martin, "Peterman and the Ideological Mind: Paradoxes of Subjectivity," in *Seinfeld and Philosophy: A Book about Everything and Nothing*, ed. William Irwin (Chicago: Open Court, 2000), 139–47; James M. Wallace, "A (Karl not Groucho) Marxist in Springfield," in *The Simpsons and Philosophy: The D'oh! Of Homer*, ed. William Irwin, Mark T. Conard, and Aeon J. Skoble (Chicago: Open Court, 2001), 235–51; Martin A. Danahay and David Rieder, "*The Matrix*, Marx, and the Coppertop's Life," in *The Matrix and Philosophy: Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, ed. William Irwin (Chicago: Open Court, 2002), 216–24; and Martin A. Danahay, "*The Matrix* is the Prozac of the People," in *More Matrix and Philosophy: Revolutions and Reloaded Decoded*, ed. William Irwin (Chicago: Open Court, 2005), 38–49.

50. Danny Goldberg, *Dispatches from the Culture Wars: How the Left Lost Teen Spirit* (New York: Miramax, 2003). Cf. Postman against politicians entering the arena of entertainment, 132. Also cf. Gabler on politicians on late-night talk shows, 115–16.

51. Carroll (1998), 407.

52. Kellner, 169.

53. Kellner, 173–74.

54. Cf. Witkin, 65.

55. Popular culture may be criticized as contributing to a pernicious globalization la *Jihad vs. McWorld: Terrorism's Challenge to Democracy* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1995), but even if this criticism holds, it would not serve to invalidate the pop-culture-philosophy hybrid. See Paul A. Cantor, *Gilligan Unbound: Pop Culture the Age of Globalization* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001).

56. Cf. Carroll (1998), 251. In *The Laws*, Plato, too, is worried about music-induced sexuality.

57. Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 78–79.

58. Cf. Carroll (1998), 300–305.

59. Postman, 92–93.

60. Thanks to Bill Van Camp for that insight

61. Witkin, 129.

62. Postman, 142–43.

63. Hannah Arendt, "Society and Culture," in *The Human Dialogue*, ed. Floyd Mason and Ashley Montague (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1967), 352. Cf. Postman, 124.

64. E. D. Hirsch Jr., *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

65. It must be, as cultural literacy is empirical and descriptive, not prescriptive. See Hirsch, xiv, 82–93.

66. Goldberg argues that the left will continue to have difficulty as long as they continue to alienate the youth vote through neglect of popular culture. Bill Clinton, who actually appeared on MTV, successfully used popular culture. By contrast, Gore and Lieberman seemed unhip. Though it is nearly forgotten, Gore even had the anti–popular culture connection to the PMRC via his wife Tipper. Lieberman has taken a moral stand against much of Hollywood and popular culture.

67. Peter Jones, *Philosophy and the Novel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).

68. Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

69. On Nussbaum's elitism, see Jennifer L. McMahon, "The Function of Fiction: The Heuristic Value of Homer," in *The Simpsons and Philosophy: The D'oh! Of Homer*, ed. William Irwin, Mark T. Conard, and Aeon J. Skoble (Chicago: Open Court, 2001), 220–21. And see Judith Barad and Ed Robertson, *The Ethics of Star Trek* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000).

70. See, for example, Richard Hanley, *The Metaphysics of Star Trek* (New York: Basic Books, 1997).

71. See Karen Bennett's review of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Philosophy* for discussion of the different ways to do "and philosophy." *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews* October 10, 2003, http://ndpr.nd.edu/review.cfm?id=1320.

72. For a useful discussion, see Deborah Knight, "Aesthetics and Cultural Studies," in *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics*, ed. Jerrold Levinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 783–95.

73. Although I do not wish to be negative, putting down what others have done with pop culture, cf. Rhonda V. Wilcox and David Lavery, eds., *Fighting the Forces: What's at Stake in Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002). For critical discussion of *Fighting the Forces*, see Michael P. Levine and Steven Jay Schneider, "Feeling for Buffy: The Girl Next Door," in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Philosophy: Fear and Trembling in Sunnydale*, ed. James B. South (Chicago: Open Court, 2003), 294–308.

74. Or a nontext, as the tendency of cultural studies is to take everything capable of interpretation to be a text. Cf. Knight on cultural studies' pantextualism, 787.

75. See my *Intentionalist Interpretation: A Philosophical Explanation and Defense* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999); and E. D. Hirsch Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967).

76. Not by my understanding of philosophy. But in her essay in this volume, "Philosophy and the Probable Impossible," Carolyn Korsmeyer argues that the second season of the television show *Angel* meets her definition of philosophy. Stephen Mulhall, in *On Film* (London: Routledge, 2002), argues that the *Alien* series of films constitutes philosophy by his lights, 2.