

# **A Critique of Aesthetic Hierarchism and its Consequences for the Theory of Art, Art Criticism and Aesthetic Axiology\***

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**ABSTRACT.** First I will deal with the question whether the distinction between high and popular art can be convincingly defended. My goal is to point out the basic reasons why the distinction is untenable on aesthetic grounds. If the distinction between high and popular art cannot be defended on the basis of aesthetic criteria, there must, nevertheless, be some explanation of why we use this distinction. For sociologists, the answer to this question must be found in the realm of relational properties that belong to works of art on the basis of their relationship to the social context in which they occur. Therefore, what follows will be an explanation of the social function of this distinction in Western society. The second part of the text will discuss the recent attempt by the American aesthetician Noël Carroll to rehabilitate the notion of popular art (in his redefinition Carroll uses the term “mass art”) independently of the hierarchical dichotomy between high and popular art. The last part of the text is devoted to a brief consideration of the implications and the new challenges that emerge from the discussion about the legitimacy of the distinction between high and popular art for art theory, art criticism and aesthetic axiology.

## **1. Introduction**

In this essay I will first address the issue of the conceptual distinction between high and popular art from a philosophical point of view. This means that I will address the question of its legitimacy. This distinction started

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to be used by cultural critics and theorists in connection with the development of mass production, distribution and reception of cultural objects in the second half of the 19th century. The basis of this distinction was the belief that there are two distinct types of works of art, or cultural objects, which differ essentially not only in their constitutive properties but also in terms of their value: "There are theoretical reasons why Mass Culture is not and can never be any good" (MacDonald 1957, 69). Thus, while works of popular art were attributed low or no aesthetic value, works of high art represented "the best that is known and thought in the world" (Arnold 1993, 85). For completeness, we should add that this distinction divides general categories of cultural production, i.e. artistic types, genres and styles. At the same time, the value difference between high and popular art was – whether explicitly or implicitly – interpreted as a difference in aesthetic value in the texts of cultural critics and theorists. Richard Shusterman (1991) convincingly demonstrated that a critique of popular art which is based on its negative social consequences is also logically based on criticism of its aesthetic value. For example, the fact that works of popular art lead the audience, according to Adorno and Horkheimer (1988), to political and civic passivity is logically based on the belief that works of popular art dampen the mental abilities of their recipients through their aesthetic shortcomings (dullness, easy predictability and simplifying schematism). The basic issue of the first part is therefore the question whether the distinction between high and popular art can be convincingly defended, or rather, whether the basis for this distinction lies in the works themselves, or whether it is an artificial social construction that has no basis in reality. The first part of the article will summarize the main reasons why I consider the distinction unsustainable from the aesthetic point of view.

However, if the difference between high and popular art cannot be justified on the basis of aesthetic criteria, there must be another explanation for why we use this distinction. According to sociologists, it is necessary to look for the answer to this question in the domain of the relational properties attached to works of art on the basis of their relationship to the social context in which they are located. In the second part, therefore, I shall briefly address the interpretation offered by cultural historian Lawrence Levine and sociologist of culture Pierre Bourdieu about the reasons for the creation and social function of the distinction between high

and popular art in the USA and Europe at the turn of the 19th and 20th century.

In the last part of the text, I will discuss the implications and challenges that arise from the discussion about the legitimacy of the above-mentioned hierarchical distinction for art theory, art criticism and aesthetic axiology. Firstly, I will discuss the question whether the concept of popular art can be removed from its hierarchical dichotomy and rehabilitated for the purpose of empirical examination of works of art. I will try to answer this question using the example of a recent attempt by Noël Carroll to redefine the concept of popular, or rather mass, art independently of the hierarchical distinction between high and popular art. Secondly, I will try to justify the basic rules which emerge from the discussion about the legitimacy of the difference between high and popular art for the practice of art criticism. Thirdly, I will try to outline the basic challenges faced by aesthetic axiology as a consequence of the debate about the legitimacy of the distinction under examination.

At the outset, it is necessary to mention the essential foundations and assumptions on which I will base the following discussion. The distinction examined here relates to the arts, despite the fact that cultural critics and theorists sometimes deal with a difference between the two types of culture (high versus low culture), alternatively between genuine art and mass entertainment or pseudo art. (1) The question “what is art” therefore arises. If we do not know what art is, we cannot even accurately determine the meaning of the concepts of high and popular art. (2) In addition, the question presents itself whether it is acceptable that a hierarchical distinction that takes on diverse conceptual forms in texts of cultural criticism can be limited exclusively to the difference between high and popular art. (3) Finally, the question can arise of what the aesthetic value actually is, or rather, what are the boundaries of the aesthetic. If the difference between high and popular art is here interpreted as primarily an aesthetic distinction, how do we know that it is the aesthetic distinction? And how then, if we deny the aesthetic hierarchical distinctions between high and popular art, can we be confident that we have exhausted all possibilities of aesthetic justification?

(1) One of the assumptions of this paper is that we can define the meaning of art. For the purposes of this examination, I will use the institutional

definition of art that does not set out (aesthetic or artistic) the properties that a particular object must have if it is to be considered a work of art but rather describes how an object becomes a work of art, namely by the fact that a representative of the artworld has conferred upon an artifact the status of candidate for appreciation.<sup>1</sup> The advantage of this definition of art is the fact that it is not evaluative, i.e. it is not based on any specific idea about artistic merit and the evaluation of works of art is left to the actors themselves using primarily the concept of art in everyday language in an evaluative sense (for more on this, see Lüdeking 1988). This definition therefore respects the fact that although we know what it means when an object is labeled a “work of art”, we need not agree on what objects deserve that label.

(2) I consider the reduction of the hierarchical dichotomy (the difference between “high and low culture” or “genuine art and mass entertainment”) to the difference between “high and popular art” for the purpose of greater clarity in the discussion justified, because here the distinction being examined describes two basic conditions for aesthetic hierarchism, which were shaped in the texts of cultural criticism in the first and second half of the 19th century: first, this distinction implies an essential difference between the constitutive features of two different types of works and, second, it also implies a difference in value. In this context, the fact that a certain conceptual distinction is expressed in various ways in language is irrelevant.

(3) What led me to characterize the value difference as a difference in aesthetic value is the fact that the supporters of the hierarchical difference themselves write about the aesthetic merits or shortcomings of high and popular art but do so without explicitly drawing on any definition of the aesthetic. Considering the vacillations and volatility of the concept of the aesthetic according to different theories, it is also unlikely that the advocates of aesthetic hierarchism will agree on a single definition of aesthetic value. Nevertheless, I believe that it is possible on a formal level to define at least the basic features of aesthetic value. Aesthetic value is an intrinsic value that an object has on the basis of our direct experience with

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<sup>1</sup> For details of the discussions regarding clarification of individual parts of an institutional definition of art, I will refer the reader for example to Dickie 1984.

the object (it cannot be deductively derived or calculated quantitatively) as opposed to an extrinsic value that an object has thanks to its impact or relationship in the social, political and economic sphere, and its assessment does not require direct experience with the given object.<sup>2</sup> The question remains, how we can be sure that we have once and for all refuted the possibility of an aesthetic justification for the distinction between high and popular art. We can never be absolutely certain, because the rebuttal of aesthetic hierarchism has the character of an inductive argument. But if all previous attempts known to us to justify the essential difference between high and popular art have been refuted on the basis of counterexamples or challenged by revealing their questionable normative basis, it is clear that we should look for another explanation for this cultural dichotomy.

## **2. Aesthetic Hierarchism from an Empirical Point of View**

I believe that the aesthetic hierarchism is unsustainable from both an empirical and from a normative point of view. In other words, such a distinction cannot be justified by pointing to the existence of two different types of artwork, or even by pointing to some valid *a priori* reason. I have tried to show the unsustainability of the hierarchical dichotomy from an empirical point of view in my work *Vysoké versus populární umění [High Art versus Popular Art]* (2009).<sup>3</sup> Here I will give only a brief overview of the most significant attempts to justify aesthetic hierarchism and question their le-

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<sup>2</sup> The formal definition of aesthetic value as experiential (i.e. intrinsic) allows us to separate on the abstract conceptual level the aesthetic value from other extrinsic values, some of which – such as the art-historical value (the contribution and importance of the work for the development of art) – are factors that are often relevant when examining works of art. I leave open the question of whether evaluating the successful mastery of certain artistic techniques, or genre conventions, is part of aesthetic value, or whether it is necessary on the conceptual level to define this evaluative aspect as a separate (e.g. artistic) value. While the fact that it is an experiential value speaks for the first option, the second option is supported by the fact that this value is relational, i.e. it is ascribed to the work on the basis of knowledge of the rules of its genre or comparison with other works. For completeness, we should add that the conceptual distinction between different types of value does not mean that we experience them separately or that these values do not mutually overlap and influence our experience of the work.

<sup>3</sup> See also Novitz 1989; Shusterman 1991; Carroll 1998.

gitimacy through counterexamples.

(a) The different modes of creating works of high (independent and autonomous creator) and popular art (collective cooperation subjected to external pressures and leading to creative compromises) according to Macdonald (1957, 65) have distinct aesthetic impacts on the creative outcome. While works of high art are coherent, works of popular art lack this positive aesthetic quality. This statement, however, contradicts a number of established works of artistic canons (architectural buildings, folk tales, Renaissance paintings from workshops or films) that are the result of collective work. At the same time, among works of so-called high art we will find many examples of works which are of average or below average quality, which were created by an individual author.

(b) Other proponents of aesthetic hierarchism defended the idea that works of high and popular art have different emotional effects on their recipients. While popular (or entertaining) art serves as a technical means to induce a predetermined and well-known emotional state (fear, sorrow, emotion or lust), genuine art expresses the unique and initially confused emotional state of the artist (Collingwood 1969). Again, the problem with this argument is that the effect of inducing well-known emotions can be attributed not only to popular works but also to works of high art. For example, the religious paintings of medieval painters should arouse in the viewer predetermined feelings of awe or fear. On the other hand, many works of popular art can evoke in the viewer a number of unique and extraordinary emotions, such as the commercially successful television series *Desperate Housewives* based on the blending of various film genres from comedy to soap opera to detective thriller.

(c) Abraham Kaplan (1966, 353–356) sees the aesthetic difference between the two types of artworks in that, while the creators of works of popular art mechanically and slavishly use proven creative processes, makers of high art try to experiment with these processes and to innovate them continuously. The complaint about using well-tried and stereotypical creative approaches can, however, apply not only to works of popular art, but also to high art. Medieval works of art or works of academic realism can serve as a counterexample. Their creators sought to express certain religious beliefs or imitate ancient classical design through pre-established rules of production. On the other hand, we do also meet with creative

innovation in works of popular art. For example, the comic book stories of Frank Miller (*The Dark Knight Returns*) and Alan Moore (*Watchmen*) lead to the deconstruction of and taking a fresh look at the superhero genre. In them superheroes find themselves in conflict with the majority society, ageing, are vulnerable and face many psychological problems and obsessions.

(d) An influential argument in favor of an aesthetic distinction between high and popular art was presented by Clement Greenberg in his essay *Avant-Garde and Kitsch* (1939, 44). According to him, popular art (*kitsch*) is not complex as compared to high (genuine) art and therefore does not place great demand on the recipient. Genuine art, the paradigmatic example of which Greenberg considered avant-garde art, by contrast, requires considerable active participation, i.e. reflective and interpretive effort, from the audience due to its complexity. The problem with this argument is that simplicity and complexity are not intrinsic properties of works but relational characteristics, i.e. belonging to one object on the basis on its relation to another object, or more precisely to the cultural competence of the recipient. Since, however, the cultural capital of the society is distributed unevenly, one and the same work (works of classical music, comics) can be difficult for one person to understand (high), while for someone else it is easily accessible and understandable (popular).

(e) Proponents of the theory of mass taste ascribe popular art less aesthetic value because it is regarded as a commodity that is inherently designed for mass consumption. Popular (or mass) art as an object of mass consumption must be focused on something that is common to the largest possible number of consumers. The common denominator is mass taste, which, in its more convincing variant, is interpreted by critics of popular art as average taste (i.e. undistinctive). Even here, however, we face the counterexamples of widely popular works of art, which, nonetheless, go beyond the notion of average taste. An example would be the high degree of popularity of rap songs that defy the general notion of what is socially acceptable (they are vulgar, directed against mainstream society, the theme is often sex and violence, and their lyrics often make use of slang).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The notion of a mass audience with average taste is thus a mathematical construction, which in reality does not correspond to anything. Recipients of popular art can

Advocates of aesthetic hierarchism might avoid the problem of counterexamples by claiming that their justification for the distinction between high and popular art is not descriptive, i.e. it does not try to capture the original extension of the two concepts through the semantic analysis (Hempel 1952), but represents a normative proposal about how to correctly use both concepts (more on the methodology of explication see Carnap 1967). Thus, the newly selected dividing line between works of high and popular art would, of course, not run between artistic styles and genres, but them across, i.e. between individual works of art. However, proponents of a revisionist conception of aesthetic hierarchism would then have to explain why we should accept their redefinition of concepts of high and popular art, or, more precisely, what advantages we would obtain from such a revision. If we accepted this revisionist proposal, then the distinction between high and popular art would become equivalent to the distinction between good and bad art. What good, however, are two distinctions, which have the same function?

One could also point to the fact that the presentation of counterexamples is always dependent on our pre-theoretical understanding of the concepts of high and popular art, or rather on the original extension of both terms. This extension, however, is often highly variable, depending primarily on the period and society concerned (Zolberg 1990, 144). One of the first to highlight the historical volatility of the hierarchical distinction between high and popular art was American historian Lawrence Levine in his book *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (1988). Levine shows using the example of Shakespeare's plays and opera that one and the same work (or genre) can at one time be seen as a work of popular entertainment and at a later time can become part of high culture. While in the United States in the first half of the 19th century Shakespeare's dramas were an integral part of popular entertainment, in the second half of the 19th century they were transformed (partly due to the establishment of permanent theaters as a specific institution with the

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actually be divided for example in terms of their social, ethnic origin, or in terms of educational attainment into various groups whose members are characterized by specific taste. These groups then often defy the notion of average taste and at the same time they are sufficiently numerous to make possible mass production, distribution and sale of these works (for more on this see Shusterman 1992).



rules of proper behavior and dress, and partly due to the fact that Shakespeare became part of the compulsory school education) into works of high culture, which, like opera, became the protected property of the intellectual and economic elites.<sup>5</sup> The boundary between high and popular art, however, is permeable in both directions. Today, for example, we are witness to the iconic popularity of the television series *Twin Peaks*, which was originally directed by screenwriters David Lynch and Mark Frost as an art project parodying lowbrow genres and was not successful with audiences at the time it was originally broadcast. Similarly, comedy films of the Czechoslovak new wave (*Homolkovi* [*Ecce Homo Homolka*], *Černý Petr* [*Black Peter*], *Hoří, má panenko* [*The Firemen's Ball*]) emerged as innovative cinematography inspired by New Wave films from abroad, but over the decades have been embraced as “people’s” comedies.

The historical volatility of the extension of the concept of high and popular art leads us to believe that the distinction between high and popular culture is a social construction that has no basis in the properties of the works of art themselves, but in the way we approach these works. If the boundary between high and popular art is permeable in both directions, it seems very unlikely that the difference between the two types of artworks has its basis in any intrinsic properties of the works themselves. The criterion of distinction is to be found rather in the relational properties attached to the works of art on the basis of their relationship to the social context in which they are consumed. According to sociologists (Bourdieu, 1984, 11–96; DiMaggio 1991) the essence of the difference between high and popular art lies in social distinction, which, as a result of the democratization of education and imitation of the cultural consumption of higher classes by lower classes, is constantly shifting and changing. Bourdieu in his extensive book, *Distinction* (1984), demonstrated through his own empirical research that cultural goods – which due to their qualities (ambiguity, stylization, abstraction, aesthetic formalism) were difficult for a mainstream audience in France in the sixties and seventies of the last

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<sup>5</sup> A similar transition from the category of popular to the category of high art took place with the film noir genre, which consisted of films which at the time of their creation in the first half of the 20th century were low-budget B films when compared to the main studio hits and only later moved to film clubs when they attracted the interest of academics and critics.

century to approach because they lacked the necessary cultural competencies and education – were labeled as high (legitimate) culture, which represented the generally accepted standard of cultivation and good taste, and in return legitimated and reproduced the existing social divisions. By contrast, the objects of cultural consumption of the lower social strata reflected their socially and economically conditioned lifestyle, and therefore lacked a distance from practical life, i.e. they were unambiguous, realistic, favored function (e.g. ethical or emotional) and were symbolically degraded as manifestations of popular, barbaric or vulgar culture.

### **3. The Normative Basis of Aesthetic Hierarchism**

The reservations presented above about the general validity of the hierarchical distinction between high and popular art and the revelation of its social dimension points to the elitist attitude which is to be found at its base. This position is predicated on habitual opposition to the genres and forms of popular art. It can be aptly summed up with the words “my taste is better than yours”.<sup>6</sup> The fundamental problem with this attitude which considers popular art to be an aesthetically inferior field of cultural production, however, lies in the fact that it is very difficult to present an argument which would prove that a certain set of values is superior to another set of values. In fact, this leads to the way in which cultural preferences are hierarchically arranged being determined by the existing social hierarchies, e.g. the visual arts, theater, classical music and other cultural activities preferred by higher social classes are considered more aesthetically valuable than movies, rock music and video games.

The unjustified normative basis of aesthetic hierarchism can also be revealed by critical examination of some of the arguments of its advocates.

(a) Why, for example, should having a greater number of individuals involved in the creation of a work of art have a negative impact on its aesthetic qualities, such as its formal unity? If the connection between collective creation and the negative aesthetic impact is valid, then we would

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<sup>6</sup> Bourdieu considered taste to be a social construction that is constituted on the basis of a definition that is in opposition to the cultural consumption and taste of other social groups (cf. Bourdieu, 1984, 30–32).

also have to question the aesthetic legitimacy of Greek temples, Gothic churches or stories handed down orally.<sup>7</sup>

(b) The claim that widely shared and ordinary emotions induced in the recipient of popular art are aesthetically inferior when compared with the unique and unusual feelings that arise from the reception of high art also rests on the unjustified normative foundation. Why, then, should we accept this assertion? The widely shared feelings of falling in love, disappointment in love, hostility or grieving the loss of a loved one after all play an important role in human life.

(c) Similarly we can question the difficulty as a criterion of aesthetic value. What is about difficulty that makes it aesthetically so valuable? Why should a difficult to access work be considered genuine art, i.e. aesthetically more valuable than those that are simple? In his essay *Avant-Garde and Kitsch*, the protagonist of the claim above Clement Greenberg does not respond to this question. The higher aesthetic value of complexity as such could be defended by claiming that complexity, in contrast to the simplicity, requires active reception and leads to the development of our mental abilities. This assumption was held, for example, by some advocates of aesthetic hierarchism, who argued that the clarity and accessibility of the popular works of art leads the audience to the mental and political passivity (Adorno – Horkheimer 1988). This position, however, is currently unsustainable, since it relies on a false conflict between intelligibility and an active audience. For example, using numerous examples of “popular” art (detective novels, horror films, radio plays, etc.), American aesthetician Noël Carroll (1998, 37–47) convincingly showed that their reception requires the active participation of the audience, including interpretation, prediction, filling in empty spaces in the narrative chain, moral evaluation, emotional reactions, etc. Comprehensibility and activity on the part of the audience are therefore not mutually exclusive.

(d) Finally, the theory of the mass (average) taste also rests on a normative foundation. The key assumption of the theory of mass taste is the claim that what is intended for a wide audience, cannot also be the bearer of an original artistic expression. From a formal logical point of

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<sup>7</sup> The connection between individual creation and the positive aesthetic qualities of the work produced has its origin in a mistaken notion of artistic creation, which emerged from the romantic literary tradition of the 18th century (cf. Woodmansee 1994).

view, however, is not clear why work with a distinctive and unusual artistic expression could not be an object of interest and reception to a wide audience. If something original or unusual, it does not mean that it is also incomprehensible and uninteresting for most people. It seems that the false contradiction between the attempt to attract a mass audience and distinctive artistic expression is a remnant of mistaken romantic notions of artistic genius, who creates in social isolation and has contempt for the values of the society. The makers of art are, however, also a part of the audience for which they create. They often share with him needs, values and beliefs. The distinctive intention of the artist, therefore, is not in any way contrary to the intention to engage the appropriate audience.

#### **4. Implications and Challenges for the Theory of Art, Art Criticism and Aesthetic Axiology**

The hierarchical distinction between high and popular art seems to be aesthetically untenable.<sup>8</sup> A historical perspective highlights its origin in the second half of the 19th century, and a sociological perspective stresses social function, or more precisely function of social stratification. Today the hierarchical divide between high and popular art has become a historical anachronism. Contemporary sociological studies of cultural consumption in industrialized countries show that today neither popular nor high culture can serve as a reliable indicator of the social status of its consumers. The way in which cultural hierarchy currently reproduces and legitimizes the social hierarchy has changed due to the rise in living standards, the democratization of education, media coverage of high culture, greater social and geographical mobility and aesthetic pluralism (cf. Peterson – Kern

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<sup>8</sup> Criticism of aesthetic hierarchism through counterexamples, however, does not mean that there is no work of “popular art”, which has the aforementioned aesthetic shortcomings. There are undoubtedly a considerable number of such works. What is important, however, is the basic assumption that works in any category of cultural production (e.g. television romance, graffiti, comic strip, techno or naïve art) can have positive aesthetic qualities, and therefore it is necessary to grant an aesthetic potential to every artistic category or form which can be developed regardless of its existing faults and failures. This position was labeled by Richard Shusterman as “aesthetic meliorism” (cf. Shusterman 1991).

1996; Šafr 2008). In addition, the social significance of cultural boundaries does not exist primarily in the arts, but mainly in clothing, food and leisure (cf. Holt 1998). Here, nonetheless, we are interested in the question of whether the debate about the legitimacy of the distinction between high and popular art leads to some other implications and conclusions relevant to the theory of art, aesthetics and art criticism. In the final part of the text, I will try in three basic points to outline these consequences and new directions for research.

(i) *Theory of Art*. I believe that the theoretical interest currently devoted to the popular art and its aesthetic rehabilitation should lead to critical reflection and re-evaluation of basic conceptual tools of traditional (post-) Kantian aesthetics and theory of art, such as “disinterested pleasure”, “free play of imagination and understanding”, “purposiveness without a purpose” (Immanuel Kant), “aesthetic contemplation” (Arthur Schopenhauer), “psychical distance” (Edward Bullough) or “gratuitousness” (Stuart Hampshire). None of these conceptual categories can serve as a tool which would adequately describe the aesthetic experience involved in the reception of some new forms of “popular art”, such as listening to slam poetry, or attending concerts of a rock and electronic music which require not only listening, but also physical reactions, such as singing or dancing.<sup>9</sup> For example, the excitement of a visitor of a Rolling Stones concert cannot be adequately captured by the concept of disinterested pleasure, which Kant (1983) regarded to be a kind of intellectual pleasure stemming from the appreciation of formal qualities of the perceived work that produces a harmonious interplay of cognitive faculties in the observer.

This also raises the question of whether the notion of popular art cannot be removed from the evaluative hierarchy, redefined and made into a useful conceptual tool for further empirical research. This step was made by Noël Carroll in his book, *A Philosophy of Mass Art* (1998).<sup>10</sup> Instead of

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<sup>9</sup> The first step in this direction was taken by Richard Shusterman, by submitting an aesthetic defense and rehabilitation of the concept of entertainment. See Shusterman 2003.

<sup>10</sup> John Fiske (1989) strove to bring about a new redefinition of popular culture within the context of cultural studies. The question therefore arises as to why I do not also deal in detail with his definition of popular culture here. Fiske defines popular culture as a

the notion of popular art, which in his view is ahistorical and simply designates the works which are most popular among recipients at a particular time and in a particular society, Carroll uses the historically specific concept of mass art and tries to define it in a value-neutral way. A work of mass art according to Carroll must meet all of three necessary and jointly sufficient conditions: 1. It must be a multiple instance or type artwork. 2. The work must be produced and distributed through mass communication technologies, by which Carroll means that one and the same work can be perceived in different locations simultaneously by means of tokens. 3. Works of mass art must be produced deliberately in such a way that its structural properties are accessible to the widest possible range of relatively untutored recipients with minimum expenditure of interpretative effort.

This definition of mass art, however, currently faces a number of challenges and uncertainties. Firstly, it is not entirely clear how we are to understand the condition of a relatively untutored audience. Does this mean that if the work is created in any particular language, it is automatically disqualified as a work of mass art, because the ability to understand any language is acquired on the basis of a learning process? Or should we understand the third condition to mean that understanding a work of mass art does not require any additional specific knowledge and interpretive skills beyond what is general knowledge shared at a given time in any given society? The problem with the second interpretation is that ignorance or cultural competence is unevenly distributed in society. Each individual is to a certain degree different in their knowledge of cultural conventions,

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subversive way in which recipients/consumers appropriate works of the cultural industry to pursue their own interests and purposes (cf. Fiske 1989). I think that the problem with this definition is that it completely misses our pre-theoretical linguistic intuitions about popular culture. Firstly, we think about popular culture or art from the perspective of objects of cultural production, not as a receptive activity or process, as John Fiske does. Second, Fiske's definition excludes from the realm of popular culture all works whose interpretation is consistent with the meanings intended by their creators, and thus not only leads empirical research to a unilateral search for different or subversive reactions to what we intuitively label "popular culture", but also ignores the fact that a prerequisite for any discordant interpretation of the work is a concordant interpretation, at least on the level of its basic meanings (for more on the criticism of Fiske's definition, see Carroll 1998, 236–241).

therefore, one and the same work can be easy to understand and straightforward for one person, while another person will be forced to expend considerable effort and undergo special training in order to understand this work (cf. Novitz 2000a; 2000b). For example, for a lover of classical music, metal music as an example of a mass art genre can be completely inaccessible. And although comics are most often considered works of popular art, many (mostly older) people find them hard to understand or refuse to understand them, because they cannot decipher their binary language and visual code, i.e. they have no experience with the specific means of expression found in comics. In addition, some genres of mass culture (such as the aforementioned metal music or fantasy novels) are intentionally designed so that they are unintelligible to the majority audience. It can therefore be difficult to imagine that simplicity could serve as an intersubjectively reliable criterion for the definition of mass (popular) art.

The second problem with Carroll's redefinition lies in the fact that almost no empirical scholars and art critics use it as a basis for research or evaluation of works of mass media culture. This, of course, does not automatically disqualify Carroll's definition. However, it does raise doubts as to whether Carroll's definition of mass art is at all useful. Even if we disregard doubts above concerning the third condition of the definition of mass art, it still seems that the concept of mass art is too general, and therefore, not sufficiently informative to be a useful analytical tool in examining works and genres of mass art or as a reference category within which a certain work is perceived and evaluated. I believe that this purpose is far better met by the particular categories of genres (sci-fi literature, fantasy literature) or styles (downbeat tempo, rock music), since these can determine the standard, non-standard and variable properties of the works falling under the category. The role of the general categories of cultural production in the perception and evaluation of works will be discussed in the next paragraph.

(2) *The Practice of Art Criticism*. Exploring the distinction between high and popular art has shown that no reason exists, on the basis of which we could assign one genre category (such as opera or psychological novels) a higher aesthetic value than any other genre category (such as rock music and sci-fi literature). There is therefore also no reason why the different cultural

preferences of different social groups with respect to these genre categories should be hierarchically structured into aesthetically more valuable and less valuable categories. The value hierarchy between cultural categories cannot be justified by the hierarchy in the social structure. I believe, therefore, that within art criticism it is necessary to accept the postulate of value equality between the general categories of cultural production.

It is further important to realize that rejecting hierarchical distinction between high and popular art does not also mean rejecting all hierarchical division in the field of production and reception of art works. This hasty conclusion can be avoided if we realize that our aesthetic judgments are linked to individual objects of our aesthetic perception and evaluation. Thus, while within the general categories of cultural production such as the “opera” or “rock music” the principle of value equality must apply, individual works of art can be aesthetically evaluated and compared under a common category. *Mr. Bean’s Holiday* can be compared to the film *Groundhog Day* in the common category of comedy film. In other words, value equality within cultural categories does not mean value equality between objects that fall into these categories. In the aesthetic evaluation of particular works, unlike with general cultural categories, it is possible to indicate intersubjectively verifiable reasons why we believe that one work is aesthetically better than the other.<sup>11</sup> The classification of works into some category (such as genre) permits us to recognize the purpose of the work (for example, the goal of a comedy film is to entertain, induce laughter or lighten the seriousness of a situation), and thus to determine the properties that contribute to the fulfillment of the goal, eventually make from a

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<sup>11</sup> A premise of this claim is the belief that there is a specific type of aesthetic perception and evaluation of objects that cannot be completely reduced to some other perceptual processes or non-aesthetic values. Another question, however, is whether a notion of pure aesthetic perception and evaluation which is truly independent of the context of the perception and of non-aesthetic factors such as the market price of a particular work or its art-historical value is sustainable. In the lived world, after all, it often happens that knowing the high sales price of a picture or its significant influence on the development of art intensifies our attention, and thus our aesthetic experience, and consequently our assessment of it. Thus, although on the conceptual level we can separate aesthetic value from other values, this does not mean that we experience the aesthetic value of an object separately, i.e. independently of the other, non-aesthetic values and factors.



particular work the successful example of a given genre.<sup>12</sup> Diversification of goals within general categories of cultural production, incidentally, retrospectively confirms the lack of validity of the hierarchical comparison of genres or types of art or of works belonging to different categories.<sup>13</sup>

Aesthetic examination of works of “popular” art, in my opinion, should focus primarily on an unbiased analysis of genres, styles and forms of mass media culture, that is on establishing the goals of the relevant cultural category, and subsequently the (non-)standard and variable properties of the works belonging to the relevant category of cultural production that influence the resulting aesthetic value of the work, and the knowledge of which may therefore be a useful tool for art criticism (Walton 1970). For completeness, we should add that for art criticism, determining the constitutive features and objectives of individual genres does not serve primarily for comparison of the value of works under the common category, but rather as a tool for interpreting the works and uncovering their qualities. If the art critics resort to the juxtaposition of works belonging to the same category, they do so largely to point out the reasons why the choice of a particular creative strategy is more effective in achieving a certain goal than alternative strategies in another work (Carroll 2009, 187).

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<sup>12</sup> Inclusion of a work into the correct genre category is not arbitrary and subjective, but is subject to three basic considerations that can be classified as structural, intentional and historical perspectives. (1) The structural aspect lies in the fact that the selection of the category must be such that the particular work has highest possible number of standard (i.e., typical for the given category) properties and the lowest possible number of non-standard properties for the selected category. (2) The intentional aspect means that the choice of category should correspond to the author’s intentions, i.e. the category in which the author created the work. (3) The historical perspective ensures that the chosen category was one of the categories that were widespread and well-known in the cultural and historical context in which the work was created. For a detailed interpretation of the reception and evaluation of works of art which is conditioned by the choice of categories, see Walton 1970.

<sup>13</sup> A meaningful exception in the context of inter-categorical comparison of works would be the evaluation of a work of bad quality from one category with a work, which occupies a leading position in another category, as well as comparing work which has had significant cultural and social influence (Beethoven’s *9th Symphony*) with a quality, but less important work of another category (cf. Carroll 2009, 192–196). Both of the ways of comparing works from different categories presented above, however, are based on scales that has nothing to do with constitutive properties of the categories themselves: (1) the status of the work within a given category, and (2) their social influence.

(3) *Aesthetic Axiology*. Sociological critique of the cultural hierarchy between high and popular art, however, also raises doubts about the epistemic status of aesthetic judgment. First of all, the deconstruction of the hierarchical difference has shown that this difference was based on dubious aesthetic judgments that were often influenced by non-aesthetic factors, such as the conception of social prestige or effort to differentiate oneself socially from other social groups.<sup>14</sup> The penetration of non-aesthetic factors into aesthetic judgment is eloquently described by Thorstein Veblen (2007). Veblen presents the example of a handcrafted silver spoon, which is generally considered to be a more beautiful object than a mechanically produced aluminum spoon. The reason for this is not, however, that the silver spoon is nicer to look at than the aluminum one, but the fact that it is rare. The second reason for the relatively high aesthetic value of a silver spoon according to Veblen is that, from the point of view of its primary purpose, it is less useful than an aluminum spoon. Through its practical uselessness, in fact, a silver spoon becomes socially useful, that is, it can be used in accordance with the strategy of conspicuous leisure to demonstrate high social status (Veblen 2007, 85–86).

Secondly, social scientists engaged in research on the relationship between social standing and cultural preferences of respondents have concluded that cultural preferences and the aesthetic judgments of individuals are conditioned by one's social background, educational level and the economic situation from which they come. In their descriptions of cultural consumption they then assign to a particular social group a particular type of cultural consumption and aesthetic assessment. Aesthetic axiology must therefore face the question of whether aesthetic judgments can legitimately claim general or intersubjective validity if they express causally a different form of life<sup>15</sup> and socially conditioned consumption pattern of an individual.

In its more moderate version, sociological relativism challenges the

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<sup>14</sup> The ideologically conditioned construction of the – seemingly aesthetic – category of junk literature in Czech literature and literary criticism of the first half of the 20th century was pointed out by Pavel Janáček (2004),

<sup>15</sup> I am borrowing the concept of form of life from the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein (2003, § 241, 242).

concept of the autonomy of aesthetic value in the sense that the criteria for the use of aesthetic value cannot be derived entirely from this value itself. In its radical version, sociological relativism leads us to question the autonomy of the aesthetic value in terms of its irreducibility to some other value or non-aesthetic factor. Is the question of aesthetic value a matter of power and social perspective? Does any work of art have any aesthetic function, or does it draw its function and value from social differentiation? Is, for example, the high aesthetic value attributed to Chekhov's plays the result of the high social status of their recipients? Is the validity of the aesthetic judgment which attributes high aesthetic value to Bergman films challenged by the fact that, according to statistics, Bergman's films are accessible only to people who have attained a college education? It seems to me that aesthetic axiology should address precisely these issues despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that part of our natural attitude is the assumption that it is possible to make an autonomous aesthetic judgement. The clarification of basic epistemological questions of aesthetic judgment would, for example, help define the boundaries and possibilities of art criticism, i.e. the claims and limits that can be meaningfully connected with aesthetic judgment.

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