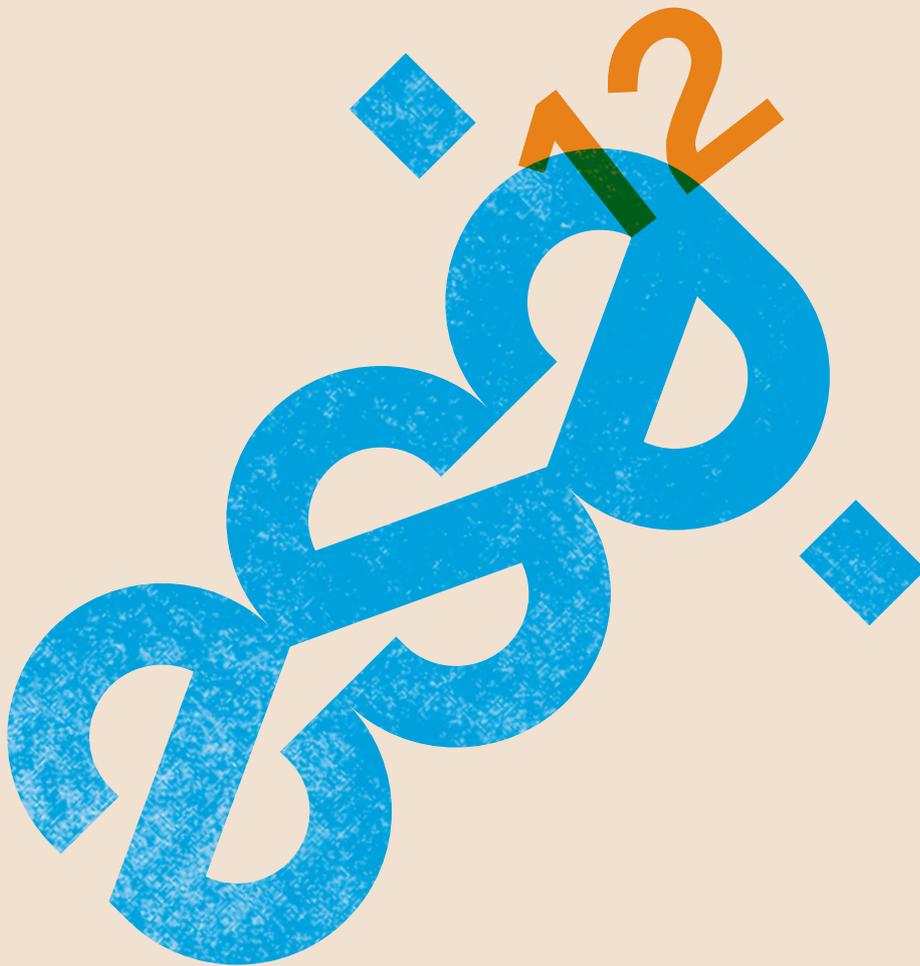


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Against the High Culture – On Leo Tolstoy’s Aesthetics

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ABSTRACT. Leo Tolstoy, the author of *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*,² dedicated fifteen years of his life to exploring aesthetical theories and the phenomenon of art.³ Starting with critical thoughts about modern aesthetics, Tolstoy developed his own conception of art and its role in society, some of which are presented in his work *What is art?*, first published in 1897. Unfortunately, in the English-speaking world, there was not much attention paid to Tolstoy’s book.⁴ What stands out in the critical literature is Tolstoy’s exclusion of famous artworks from the world of art, like those of William Shakespeare and Richard Wagner. My objective in this essay will be to show that *What is art?* has much more to offer than the topic of exclusion. Tolstoy not only extended the category of things belonging to art. He also

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2 On how Tolstoy’s fictional writings and his essays are connected see Šilbajoris, Rimvydas, *Tolstoy’s Aesthetics and his Art*, Bloomington: Slavica Publishers, 1991. Her judgement is: “Tolstoy’s personal quest for moral value invariably extends to the very act of writing fiction, of breathing life into people who must then seek answers to the questions that plague their own creator. As these answers emerge, they become a kind of metalanguage about art itself and can ultimately be articulated also in theoretical terms, as Tolstoy finally did in his essay [*What is Art?*]” Ibid., p. 9.

3 Dörr, Paul: “Nachwort,” in: Tolstoi, Leo, *Was ist Kunst?*, München: Eugen Diederichs Verlag, transl. in German by Michail Feofanov, 1993, p. 316.

4 See, Diffely, Terry, *Tolstoy’s ,What is Art?’*, London: Croom Helm, 1985, here p. 1f.. Tolstoy’s reception in Russia was clearly tainted by his works as a writer. More on this see Zurek, Magdalena, *Tolstoj’s Philosophie der Kunst*, Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 1996, p. 105. In France, the country from which most of the literature criticized by Tolstoy originated, he was declared an “old madman.” Ibid., 115ff.

developed a definition of art which must include previously excluded titles into the concept. Above all, Leo Tolstoy's conception was directed against the tendencies of autonomy of the art in aesthetic theories of his time. Referring to more than 60 modern philosophers of art,⁵ he pointed out significant disadvantages of beauty as fundamental in art. In order to follow his arguments comprehensibly, I will start with a short abstract about autonomous aesthetics. Then I shall move on to Tolstoy's understanding and its most important terms and concepts, including a critical perspective on Tolstoy's approach.

1. The Modern Aesthetics

Putting Tolstoy aside for a moment, it is important to recall the historical setting: the French Revolution and the Industrialisation shaped the 19th century. Especially the industrial revolution brought a lot of cheap and commercial art with it from which the high art wants to distinguish itself.⁶ Owning a piece of art did not prove the membership to upper classes anymore, so the taste in choosing a work of "art" became the distinctive factor. The result was a deep gap between high and low art – and between the people who identify themselves with them. Since the raising of literacy in the 18th century,

5 Among them: Baumgarten, Schiller, Hegel, Lessing, Goethe, Winkelmann, Hutcheson, Burke, Diderot, Humboldt, Fichte, Schelling and Schopenhauer. It is important to point out that Tolstoy was not in general against European intellectuals, like those examples might suggest. He positioned himself against high art regardless its origin. See, Tolstoy, Leo, *What is Art?*, transl. R. Pevear and L. Volokhonsky, London: Penguin Books, 1995, pp. 17–30.

6 Mounce, H. O., *Tolstoy on Aesthetics. What is Art?*, Albershot and Sydney: Ashgate, 2001, p. 14f.. Important to notice, Russia was not as far industrialised as the Western Europe in the 19th century. Most people still lived in the countryside without many options of media to spread art. Ibid., p. 16. But the Russian aristocracy lived a Western live style, often socializing in French.

the group of people being able to consume literature expanded, but the reaction of many artists and philosophers to these developments, for example Hegel and Herder, was to divide the public into ordinary people (*Volk/Nation*) and the mob (*Pöbel*) – with the second one being unable to appreciate art at all.⁷

This phenomenon of social and cultural exclusion was also pointed out by Pierre Bourdieu. The upper classes constantly try to distinguish themselves from lower classes via taste – only the well-educated understand what is good art.⁸ Cultural goods go hand in hand with economic distinctions or as Mukařovský states: “It may seem that the hierarchy of aesthetic canon is directly related to the hierarchy of social strata.”⁹ The art operating on the basis of social exclusion is linked to the autonomy of the art.

It was Immanuel Kant who transferred the term of autonomy from its political and legal origin into philosophy. Autonomy in general is an expression of self-legislation of pure reason. In his *Critique of Judgement* Kant states that autonomy in aesthetics is defined by a disinterested pleasure. He further maintains that beauty is not defined by a priori rules. What is considered beautiful is therefore contingent. But Kant also points out that, if we are free from needs and viewing a

7 See Hecken, Thomas, *PoP. Geschichte eines Konzepts 1955–2009*, Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2009, p. 17.

8 More on this see Bourdieu, Pierre, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985.

9 Mukařovský, Jan, “Aesthetic Function Among other Functions,” in: John Burbank and Peter Steiner (eds.), *Structure, Sign and Function. Selected Essays by Jan Mukařovský*, New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1978, here p. 46. Mukařovský also noticed that the hierarchy is not only up-down (high-low), but also horizontal.

thing without interest and then consider it beautiful, we may assume that all people refer to that object as beautiful.¹⁰

Soon after the concept of thinking art out of itself, not as embedded in the society, gives ground for intellectuals and artists to produce art for an elite circle only. Creating *art pour l'art* became the desirable goal. The German poet Stefan George, for example, handed out his works only to close friends in order to avoid the dictate of the taste of the public. Rubén Darío, on his side, maintained that the majority of readers is simply lacking the mental elevation necessary for his art.¹¹ Oscar Wilde tried to establish a sharp line between everyday life and the world of art and states that: “[...] Art should never try to be popular.”¹² The decadent art is another example for art excluding the mass public from its consumption. It refers to mostly French artists like Théophile Gautier.¹³ For him the aim of art is to produce beauty, not paying any attention to the audience's will or even referring to it at all.¹⁴

Tolstoy started reading about some modern points of view of art to find an answer to his question what art is and if it is important enough to consume so much time and labor in its creation.¹⁵ But

10 Kant, Immanuel, *Critique of Judgement*, (ed.) Nicholas Walker, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

11 Einfalt, Martin and Wolfzettel, Friedrich, “Autonomie,” in: (ed.) Karlheinz Barck, *Ästhetische Grundbegriffe. Historisches Wörterbuch*, Vol. 1, Stuttgart, 2000, pp. 431–479.

12 Hecken, Thomas, op. cit., p. 24.

13 See Mounce, H. O., op. cit., pp. 40–48.

14 Ibid., p. 16.

15 Tolstoy, Leo, op. cit., p. 8. It is important to notice that Tolstoy's criticism against those Western approaches to art is deeply embedded in his overall criticism of the West and their lifestyle.

despite the fact that their definitions of art failed to answer his questions, they opened Tolstoy's eyes for the major problems coming along with *art pour l'art*.¹⁶ Not only does this decadent approach to art divide the upper and lower classes with only 1 % of humans having access to art or are able producing it. But it also pushes the artists of the different styles of the high art fight against each other, claiming that their approach to art is the best.¹⁷ Oddly enough, the upper classes postulate that their art is the best and only true art, judging all art from other nations or classes as poorly.¹⁸ As we shall see, for Tolstoy, one of the main objective of art is the opposite: uniting people.

2. Tolstoy's Conception of Art

For Tolstoy the reason behind those aesthetics approaches lies not in the developments of the 18th and 19th century, but in the upper classes losing their connection to religion,¹⁹ starting in the Renaissance. They failed to fill this lack and focussed on beauty

16 Interesting to mention, Tolstoy himself was at a certain point in his life quite close to the *art pour l'art*, when he planned to publish a magazine for art's purpose only, without paying attention to readers opinion, but with the aim to educate them. See Eismann, Wolfgang, *Von der Volkskunst zur proletarischen Kunst. Theorien zur Sprache der Literatur in Rußland und Sowjetunion*, München: Otto Sagner Verlag, 1986, p. 28.

17 Tolstoy, Leo, op. cit., p. 8.

18 Ibid., p. 55.

19 Important to notice to understand Tolstoy's connection to religion better: after finishing *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy found himself questioning his life and its value. This turned into a life crisis including thoughts of suicide. It was the Christian teaching, not the church that helped him finding a way to live on. In this process Tolstoy even translated the New Testament from Greek to Russian.

instead.²⁰

Reading through the aesthetic theories of prominent modern authors, Tolstoy provides two definitions of beauty: the first one being objective, but mysterious, connects beauty with the absolutely perfect; the second one, being subjective, defines beauty as something pleasurable.²¹ Both definitions are clearly harmful for art development.

Above all, beauty cannot be the fundament of art,²² because it is not a clear, but subjective term and based on conventions.²³ Tolstoy also mentioned that beauty in Russian language (*красота*) refers not to, for example, music, but only to things which can be *viewed* with one's eyes.²⁴ Calling all sorts of art beautiful (*красивый*) is therefore not quite correct and also indicates the strongest argument against beauty as fundamental in arts: the confrontation of beauty against the good and the truth. The unity of those three – beauty, good and truth – is a mistake, because the more beautiful something is, the less good it will be. For Tolstoy, “[t]he good is the eternal, the highest aim of our life.”²⁵ In contrast, beautiful is simply what one likes, what pleasures. In fact, pleasure is linked with lower

20 Ibid., p. 47f..

21 Ibid., p. 31.

22 This topic of beauty as the objective of art was picked up by Arthur Danto in the 1990s again. See Danto, Arthur, *Beyond the Brillo Box: The Visual Arts in Post-Historical Perspective*, Berkley: University of California Press, 1998.

23 See *ibid.* pp. 32–35 and Eismann, Wolfgang, *op.cit.*, p. 59. Exactly this lack of a clear definition makes beauty as a basis of high art appealing. More on this see Poljakova, Ekaterina, *Differente Plausibilitäten. Kant, Nietzsche, Tolstoi und Dostojewski über Vernunft, Moral und Kunst*, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013, p. 297.

24 Tolstoy, *Leo*, *op. cit.*, 13f..

25 Ibid., p. 52.

animal instincts²⁶ and the good is the force preventing humans from following them.²⁷ Tolstoy concludes that the current aesthetic theories, grounding on beauty, are constructed to justify artworks as works of beauty, only justifying the already built canon.²⁸ However, other thinkers, for example, Platon, Tolstoy is not advising to abandon art for the well-being of society, but to renew it.

In this connection, it is important to clarify Tolstoy's main terms: feelings and religious perception. The Russian word *чувство* is translated with *feeling* and just as any feeling it is something abstract which can be considered directly measured. The term covers impressions, intuitions, feelings of all sorts – in short; everything arising from a source other than thoughts and objective reasoning.²⁹ The role of feelings in Tolstoy's conception of art could not be more important: works of art transport feelings and connect people this way. He further compares this system of communication with language. Language communicates thoughts from one to another

26 Zurek, Magdalena, op. cit., p. 299.

27 But Tolstoy is not totally banning beauty and pleasure from the arts. The artist may feel pleasure while creating an artwork, and beauty can be, but does not have to be, a characteristic of an artwork. People of different backgrounds like to surround themselves with beautiful things. So, one conclude Tolstoy's position towards beauty in art: It cannot be the scale for judging art, but it can be a characteristic of good art. In this Roger Fly sees a major achievement of his theory: "It was Tolstoy's genius that delivered us from this *impasse* [of beauty], and I think that one may date from the appearance of *What is Art?* the beginning of fruitful speculation in aesthetic." Diffely, Terry, op. cit., p. 3.

28 Tolstoy, Leo, op. cit., p. 33.

29 Jahn, Gary R., "The aesthetic theory of Leo Tolstoy's what is art?", in: *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 34(1), 1975, pp. 59–65.

just like art does with feelings.³⁰ In other words; works of art express something about the soul of human beings that language cannot express.³¹ The two are equally important for humans to feel united through space and time.³² The greatest feelings communicated this way roots in religious consciousness. Tolstoy also insists that understanding the religious consciousness of the time is understanding the meaning of life, what he considers the highest good. Interestingly enough, authors like Zurek suggest that instead of using the critical term “religious consciousness” one should refer to a “philosophical” one.³³

For Tolstoy, there is also another kind of feelings, which can be communicated through a work of art: particular everyday feelings. On the basis of these feelings humans are able to empathise. In short, Tolstoy states that everyday feelings like sadness, happiness or anger can be shared through a work of art as well.

When those feelings are transported, they infect the audience/the spectators or readers – this is how an artwork is to be understood. This understanding is a universal one: Every person, regardless of her/his age, her/his intellectual background or her/his class attachment should be able to get infected with the transported feeling of religious consciousness or everyday emotions.

30 See Milkov, Nikolay, “Aesthetic Gestures: Elements of a Philosophy of Art in Frege and Wittgenstein,” in: (eds.) Wuppuluri S., da Costa N., *WITTGENSTEINIAN Yadj.. The Frontiers Collection*. Basel: Springer Cham, 2020, pp. 505–518.

31 Eismann, Wolfgang, op. cit., p. 61.

32 Tolstoy, Leo, op. cit., p. 40.

33 Zurek, Magdalena, op. cit., p. 317.

The term *infection* is causing problems for understanding Tolstoy's theory. Normally used to refer to diseases, it does not have a negative connotation for Tolstoy. Like people get infected with laughter, the same works with successful art. Zurek defends Tolstoy's use of the term, underlying its dimension and the inevitability of infection via artworks, whereas Diffely reminds the reader of the randomness of infections, which stands in contrast to the deliberately process in art creation.³⁴

Taking a closer look at the way people get infected with feelings shed light on this discussion. If the audience or spectators are consuming a successful work of art, it can get infected with the feeling that the artist once experienced herself/himself, or with that she/he imagined to experience.³⁵ Specifically, the spectator or listener of an artwork is "brought to a similar state of mind."³⁶ To do so, the artist recalls memories or imaginary ones and transforms them into a piece of art. She/he willingly reproduces the feelings, which creates a distance of art to the real life.³⁷

In this way, some unconsciously encountered feelings are consciously brought into art, allowing in this way to learn something about life from art – looking through art at the world.³⁸ But the empathy needed to get infected with feelings of others is a skill also needed to keep societies together. Getting infected by art is also

34 Ibid., p. 288.

35 Tolstoy, Leo, op. cit., p. 39.

36 Mounce, H. O., op. cit., p. 24.

37 Zurek, Magdalena, op. cit., p. 273f..

38 Mounce, H. O., op. cit., pp. 65–72.

training social skills of living together. Moreover, it helps to reflect on one's own feelings and life-experiences.³⁹

An argument often stated against Tolstoy's conception of infecting via artworks, is the passive role of the spectator or listener or reader and the risk of becoming a victim of propaganda intentions this way. Tolstoy himself was aware that the infection of art is not morally unproblematic. The feelings transported via artworks can be either good (uniting) or bad (dividing), but they infect the same way. Besides, uniting in a feeling can also result in questioning it. Art consumers are not passively consuming the artworks. It can also reflect on their own feelings that they got infected with.

But while an artwork can be good or bad, depending on its ability to unite or divide, what about its aesthetic value? Importantly enough, moral judgement can only be applied to a successful (*gelungene*) piece of art: if it has certain aesthetic value.⁴⁰ Due to its involvement with moral issues, art needs to be involved in every area of life and therefore feeds upon life itself. Magdalena Zurek, in this context, points out that ethics and aesthetics go often hand in hand.⁴¹

The important role of the connection between life and art was underlined in Tolstoy's conception of art, when he is referring to the ordinary people (*мужикь*), especially children, as natural, unspoiled art consumers.⁴² The people of the lower classes often produce good

39 Ibid., p. 65.

40 Ibid., p. 29.

41 Zurek, Magdalena, op. cit., p. 315.

42 Tolstoy, Leo, op. cit., pp. 115f. and 141f.. This focus on the ordinary people is also closely related to Tolstoy's life crises. His way out started with looking at farmers and why

art, which is directly linked to the feeling of religious consciousness or to everyday situations. The artworks they produce differs from the high culture, mostly in its form: folklore dances, songs, jokes, puns, children's plays.⁴³ Tolstoy is opening up the field of art this way, holding that art can be found everywhere.⁴⁴ The argument that by opening the world of art and making it universal one lowers its standards, can easily be shattered: allowing feelings to take new forms makes the field of art richer in expressions and also in themes. Tolstoy lists only three major indicators for a good piece of art: (i) the transported feeling must be well outlined; (ii) it should be communicated in a clear manner; (iii) the artist needs to be sincere.⁴⁵

Sincerity is the most important trade of the artist. For communicating a feeling, the artist also needs to understand herself/himself and her/him relations with everything surrounding her/him, even gaining this way a standpoint ahead of her/him time.⁴⁶ When she/he has the will to communicate this feeling, the artist also needs talent – sheer skills are not enough. The only skill required is

they do not question their existence. He came to the conclusion that they simply stand with both feet firmly on the ground and live their life. In contrast, people of upper classes get themselves lost in self-made paradoxes.

43 Not only children's play, but also theater performances and operas can be connected to Tolstoy's conception of art. Especially the acting theory of Stanislavski gives grounds to do so. More on this see: Daniel Larlham "Stanislavsky, Tolstoy, and the life of the human spirit" in: *The Routledge Companion to Stanislavski*, (ed.) R. Andrew White, London/New York: Routledge, 2013 pp. 179–194 and Hughes, R. I. G., "Tolstoy, Stanislavki, and the Art of Acting," in: *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 51(1), 1993, pp. 39–48, here pp. 40f..

44 Tolstoy, Leo, op. cit., p. 155.

45 Ibid., pp. 121ff..

46 Ibid., p. 90.

to transfer the feeling understandable for others.⁴⁷ In Tolstoy's art of the future, everyone is an artist, owning the basic knowhow from school; no further education is needed. There is no real need for the profession of an artist, as well as for art schools or art critics. Works of art created this way are able to enlarge our experience and increase the understanding of life – ours as well as those of others.⁴⁸

This understanding includes the most powerful feature of art – the ability to unite. Or as Israel Knox points out: "The dearest quality of art to Tolstoy is its power of union."⁴⁹ Through the transported feeling, the artist is connected with the audience and the listeners/spectators/readers are also linked to other listeners/spectators/readers through the artwork, regardless of their position in society, their cultural background and the time they live in.⁵⁰ Through art, we are able to realize the connections we have with others, independently from nationality, age, gender, education and other distinctive factors. The feeling of this uniting force is also producing a feeling of connectedness. Just recall the feeling of sitting together in a dark cinema room, getting lost in the good movie and being conscious about the others and their emotions surrounding you

47 Eismann, Wolfgang, op. cit., pp. 70f.

48 This social utopia underlying Tolstoy's theory of art is pointed out by Thomas Barran this way: Tolstoy's *What is Art?* "remains a profoundly political document." Idem., "Rousseau's Political Vision and Tolstoy's *What is Art?*," in: *Tolstoy Studies Journal* 5, 1992, pp. 1–12, here p. 1. For a connection between Tolstoy and Rousseau also see Zurek, Magdalena, op. cit., pp. 255ff. and Milkov, Nikolay, "Tolstoi und Wittgenstein. Einfluss und Ähnlichkeiten," in: *Prima philosophia*, Vol. 49, 2003, pp. 187–206.

49 Knox, Israel, "Tolstoy's Esthetic Definition of Art," in: *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 27(3), 1930, pp. 65–70, here p. 68.

50 Tolstoy, Leo, op. cit., p. 121.

or remember the last rock concert. Some critics claim that Tolstoy's conception of unity implies that by consuming art humans have to be in a sense identical to feeling the same. But the opposite is true: successful art is raising out of the differences between people. It articulates a feeling which is special and somehow new. Exactly because if this this special feeling is of interest to others and needs to be shared with them.⁵¹

3. Art for All

Summarizing, for Tolstoy art is a universal medium, which makes it possible to be understood by everyone. Art has the ability to transport feelings and infect people. Tolstoy conclusion is that “[t]he task facing art is enormous: art, genuine art, guided by religion with the help of science,⁵² must make it so that men's peaceful life together [...]”⁵³ Based on these arguments, Tolstoy holds that all theories pleading for the autonomy of aesthetics are inadequate. Art in its true form can only be approached as art for all: for all nations, all classes, all people.

After taking a closer look at Tolstoy's theory of art, I am going to pick up one of the most popular critical remarks held against it. As already mentioned in the introduction: Why is Tolstoy excluding

51 Poljakova, Ekaterina, op. cit., pp. 319f.

52 Science, just like art, should also not follow a science for science 's sake, but is underlying social responsibility Tolstoy, Leo, op. cit., pp. 157–167. Or as Eismann states: “This art [of the future] has the same aim as science: the well-being of all people.” (transl. by the author) Eismann, Wolfgang, op. cit., p. 48.

53 Tolstoy, Leo, op. cit., pp. 165f..

classics of the world of art like those of Richard Wagner⁵⁴ from the world of art? Apparently, because he was strongly convinced that artists like Wagner only produce a counterfeit of art that is made for a special group of people. For artists with an educated background those works of art are part of a canon considered good art, but what if those works are viewed from outside of the nation they are created in or with the eyes of next generations? Are those works of art understandable for people from different cultural backgrounds? The problem with a canon of good art is that at some point it is not questioned anymore. So, we cannot answer the question: Do we really think this is a good piece of art or are we just saying so, because we learned it that way? One way of reading Tolstoy today can result in questioning the art canon and in this way prevent nationalistic, one-sided views on art and artworks.⁵⁵ Important to notice, Tolstoy himself was also very concerned about the way of living that supports such a canon of artworks – the Western lifestyle of the 19th century.

Although Tolstoy's conception of art is rooted in his social and ideological criticism of his time, the idea of artworks as uniting force of all humans is still present in modern aesthetic theories.⁵⁶ Terry

54 Tolstoy dedicated a whole chapter to Richard Wagner's "Nibelungen" in *ibid.*, pp. 101–112.

55 Or as W. H. Auden pointed out correctly: "[O]ne can never again ignore the questions Tolstoy raises." Diffely, Terry, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

56 Another critical point against the autonomy of art is made by marxistic theories. They attack the growing dependence of artists on the market and its consumers. This market is enabling the autonomy, while at the same time it is also restricting it. See Einfalt, Martin and Wolfzettel, Friedrich, *op. cit.*, pp. 433f.. Another interesting attempt regarding high and

Eagleton, for example, states, referring to a stronger getting tendency of viewing art as autonomous, that art should not be viewed as an isolated field. In doing so, the ruling powers of society can build up a space for protecting their values of exploitation, owning property and completion.⁵⁷

Finally, a short digression on what can be said about Tolstoy's vision of the art of the future when looking at today's society? Thanks to modern technology the project of art for all is not accomplished, but we are getting closer: music can be produced from laptops at home, movies shot with mobile phones and virtual museums allowing excess for everyone.⁵⁸

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low art can be found in pop art theories. More on this see Hecken, Thomas, op. cit..

57 Eagleton, Terry, *Ideology of the Aesthetic*, New Jersey: Blackwell, 1990, p. 9.

58 Those points are also addressing a topic Tolstoy did not mention in *What is Art?*: not only the product, but also the process of creating art needs to be addressed when it comes to the demand of art for all. Prices of materials or access to machines or works are limited to specific groups of people as well.

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