Another Look at the Aesthetics of the Popular Arts

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About twenty years ago, Abraham Kaplan delivered a lively and memorable paper to the American Philosophical Association on the aesthetics of the popular arts. Appearing during the heyday of formalist criticism of the arts in America, the clear condemnation of the popular arts in his opening paragraph surprised no one. "Aesthetics," Kaplan said,

> is so largely occupied with the good in art that it has little to say about what is merely better or worse, and especially about what is worse. Unremitting talk about the good, however, is not only boring but usually inconsequential as well. The study of dis-values may have much to offer both aesthetics and criticism for the same reason that the physiologist looks to disease and the priest becomes learned in sin. Artistic taste and understanding might better be served by a museum of horribilia presented as such. It is from this standpoint that I invite attention to the aesthetics of the popular arts.1

But many things have happened in the last twenty years to make us want to rethink the casual identification of popular art with "dis-value" that Kaplan takes for granted: the rise in popularity of folk music, the transformation of rock and roll by the Beatles and others, the advent of poster art, the ever increasing sophistication of advertising, the power of television, the seriousness of film critics, the strong presence of modern dance, and full-scale attempts (at least in the 60's) at street theater and guerilla theater. All this, during the gradual eroding of the dominance of formalist criticism, ought to make us reevaluate popular art once more. Moreover, there is a special reason why professional educators should think carefully about popular art. To a significant degree, teachers transmit cultural tastes. If they have nothing to say about the art that a vast majority of students are already committed to, they will lose credibility in recommending the exploration of the so-called high arts. Although I am not advocating an acceptance of the position, it is clearly the case that for the majority of children through young adults, Springsteen, not Bach, is the boss.

What I would like to do is ask you to question the sometimes rigid distinctions within the arts that are often too easily accepted. Ask yourself, for example, if the dancing of Fred Astaire during his prime was high art or popular art? How about the dancing of John Travolta in Saturday Night Fever? How about the break dancing in the movie Flashdance? The questions here are interesting partly because of what they overlook--namely that the three cases of the "art" of dancing I mention were all "movie dancing," and it is perhaps questionable if movie dancing is really a performance of dance at all.2 But let us ignore the question "Is it live, or is it Memorex?" for the time being and concentrate just on the liveliest authentic cases of the popular and the high arts.

High and Popular Arts

How might we go about trying to distinguish the high arts from the popular arts? First we might think of the nature of the communication we get through the arts. It is a venerable tradition to think that high art somehow ennobles people, and puts them into contact with the great human themes that enlarge

their sensibilities. Though the more abstract arts (dance and especially music) have had more trouble fitting this model than representational painting and literature, all the arts have had this claim made on their behalf. In an important way I think that this view is true. Power and glory, despair and wretchedness, the triumph of the spirit, the betrayal of country, family or lover, ambition, radical ingratitude, hope and pain, and the healing of the community: are these not the very substance of the high arts over the centuries? But are these themes not present in popular arts? Are all the popular arts filled with the trivial sensationalism of the moment? I do not think we can distinguish high art from popular art by saying high art has noble or serious themes and popular art expresses base or trivial ones.

Current students tell me that the secret knowledge of the "true way" of life is contained in the music of Prince. I had a student several years ago, who now has a major fellowship in the English department at the University of Virginia, who left as his thank you to me a tape which contains the music of Leonard Cohen, Van Morrison and Iggy Pop. Such students are young adults who have read widely, have strong interests in the arts and have refined sensibilities. Again, the hit song "We Are the World" was thought sufficiently meaningful to be the motif and shining example of a recent speech by a U.S. Congressman to the graduating class of the College of Arts and Sciences at Oklahoma State University. If we focus on music, a pervasive and dominant popular art form, we certainly find a lot of triviality and mindlessness, but even when we are not in a period of burning social questions (like the late 60's) we can find popular artists trying to produce music with important human themes in them, anywhere from the exotic anti-discrimination themes of Culture Club to the familiar simple themes of the heart that country music is so famous for. I am not trying to convince anybody that Boy George and Loretta Lynn are the artistic equals of Pavarotti and Sills, but only to call attention to the undisputed fact that their music contains important human themes.

Some of you may be uncomfortable by my discussion of the high, noble truths of popular art because you may think that popular art treats themes commercially, in a way so clearly tied to an appeal to the mass market that the comparison with the themes of high art is artificial of sophistic. In that case you may be thinking about the difference between high art and popular art as the difference in seriousness of purpose of the artists. It is something like this that Ted Kachel, past scholar-in-residence for the Tulsa-based American Theater Company, had in mind in a two-part article in the newsletter of the Tulsa Arts and Humanities Council. There, in distinguishing the popular arts from the serious performing arts, he says of the relationship between artists and audience that "In one case, the transaction is primarily a business relationship, a monetary exchange, a quid pro quo, while in the other, it is primarily a spiritual encounter."3 I will avoid commenting on how much economics enters into the minds of serious performers, leaving that to your meditation on human nature, but when I consider popular artists , I would insist that a central motivation for most popular artists is to perform according to standards of the craft (however it is conceived). I am reminded of this fact in a very powerful way by the brilliantly choreographed movie Fame. Perhaps it is the black magic of art, but that movie is wonderfully convincing

that the motivation of serious and popular artists are of a piece. This can be corroborated by a plenitude of independent evidence. It is surely impossible to imagine that the concerts of Janis Joplin were not spiritual encounters, just as it is impossible not to believe that something special is happening at a Bruce Springsteen concert. These popular artists and most of the others one can think of are hardly cynical about their activities. They are surely not indifferent to the business aspects of their profession, but that does not stop them from being concerned about the quality of their work and about the satisfactions and changes it effects in their audiences. Because popular art is fleeting (being absorbed into the category of high art if it stays around too long), there is little of the self-conscious sense of participating in a cultural institution the way there might be for someone who was about to direct Hamlet. Nevertheless, the seriousness of commitment, the motivation to excellence, the concern for the quality of reception in an audience can present us with no strong line to demarcate high and popular arts.

Perhaps a promising way to distinguish the high and the popular arts is to argue that the greater concern for formal beauty in high art and the relative lack of form in the popular arts is enough to explain the intuitive division. The point deserves a bit of explanation since it is almost a truism among aestheticians that form and content are inextricably wedded and that formlessness is not a logical possibility.

Consider the helpful framework that Meyer Abrams uses to categorize critical approaches. Those critics who are concerned to say how far the art work represents or resembles the wider world take up a <u>mimetic</u> orientation. Those critics who concern themselves with the special character of the artist-producer of the art work take up an <u>expressive</u> orientation. Those critics who concern themselves with the effect of the art work upon the audience take up a <u>pragmatic</u> orientation. And those critics who concern themselves with the intrinsic pattern or logic of the art work take up an <u>objective</u> orientation.[4] Although the orientations are full of overlapping interests and each orientation contains critics who are in many ways very different from one another, the schema can help clarify the frequently made distinction between high and popular arts made on formalist bases.

During the 20th century, the objective orientation has been dominant in criticism of the arts of high culture, often battling the pragmatic orientation. We might think of the Clive Bell-Roger Fry school of formalism in the visual arts and the school of New Criticism that had such a heavy influence on literary criticism during the middle decades of this century. Both movements had the effect of concentrating attention on the patterning of aesthetic elements in seeking the key to the value of the art object. Both were highly critical of art objects which sacrificed coherence and harmony of the organic art object in order to create isolated "special effects" in the audience. Very often in criticism of this sort, works were criticized as "sentimental," meaning that they were making efforts to get a reaction of the audience that was not "earned" through the manipulation of aesthetic materials.[5]

While every content necessarily has come packaged in a form, the popular arts are often thought to sacrifice the coherence and integrity of their form for the rhetorical impact of content. As the director depicted in the movie <u>Sweet Liberty</u> explains his fail-safe formula for making successful movies, no matter

what else you do, be sure to "defy authority, destroy property and take off your clothes." This charge of a relative lack of concern for form in the popular arts versus the high arts is commonly made. Soap operas are not really candidates for high art because they have no beginnings, middles and ends, though they do have a high degree of intensity in dramatic conflict (so high that it is almost ludicrous). Popular music cannot be sustained for any longer than 2 1/2 minutes at a time because of the lack of complicated musical structure, yet its rhythms are vital and insistent (mindlessly so, say its critics). Many movies depend upon the personal appeal of the actors rather than aesthetically created "characters" so that it is easy to remember that Jennifer Beals played the lead character in Flashdance, but impossible to remember the name of her character (which suggests we are less interested in the fiction presented for aesthetic pleasure than for the social or moral pleasure of knowing the actual personality and beauty of the actors). In the end, this charge of a sacrifice of form to the more commercial possibilities of content is really a logical extension of the two previous criticisms; the distinction between substantial and trivial themes and the distinction between varying artistic motivations. But from the point of view of the formalist, it is not a question of whether popular art does not have important themes or even that the artists are more interested in money than aesthetics. The formalists just want to know what gets wrought with the themes by the seriousness. Whether the artists have the dedication to submit to rigorous training, whether they have a desire for money and an indifference to their art, the point of those who make this kind of distinction is simply that popular art forms are just simplistic or motley, and therefore should not be admitted to the ranks of high art.

This kind of criticism seems to me often correct, and extends to a much larger percentage of works of popular art as opposed to high art. Nevertheless, we make a crucial mistake, especially serious for pedagogy, if we think that this way of drawing the lines distinguishes two kinds of beast: the high art which has form and the popular art which does not. Rather, the distinction operates within both high art and popular art, and we are forced in the end to realize that high art and popular art are terms which are externally descriptive of aesthetic items, not insights into the essence of distinct categories. Some of the simple songs of Robert Burns are only read in classes of literature, but have the small form and simplicity of a typical pop hit. Some albums of popular music and certainly many films which are aimed at a mass audience are exceptionally well-crafted and exhibit a sophisticated artistic intelligence.

It is more typical to recognize the minor gems of high art than it is to recognize the more formidable works of popular art. So, if you will indulge me, I will do a little formal analysis of the movie Flash dance to demonstrate my point that popular art can be well-formed and complicated. I choose this example for a number of reasons: 1) it is a combination of many arts: music, dance, drama; 2) it centers around a theme of the high arts versus the popular arts; and 3) it has rarely been taken seriously as worthwhile art.

Analysis of Flashdance

The action of Flashdance is minimal. An eighteen-year-old girl, on her own, and improbably employed as a welder in a steel mill, works at night as a popular dancer in a blue-collar bar and yearns to dance in serious ballet. In spite of her

lack of training, she summons the courage to try out for the classical repertory in the steel town of Pittsburg. The real point of the movie is the theme of striving for and risking for higher things without losing your humanity. The theme tightly concentrates the action and the characters. It is played out not only in Alexandra, the central character, but in two parallel characters. Jeanne, Alexandra's good friend, practices for two years for an ice skating competition which she loses because she falls twice during her performance. Richie, the cook in the blue-collar bar where Alex works as a dancer and Jeanne as a waitress, wants to be a stand-up comedian. With only a little success locally, he takes off late one night for Los Angeles to try to make it. He comes back quickly, a failure, for reasons which are obscure. All three of these characters think of their attempts to succeed as a move to a higher reality. Alex especially admires the classical ballet to which she aspires as a wondrous and out-of-reach life.

The move to a higher reality is symbolized visually in the movie by a number of shots where the characters are moving through long, expansive corridors. Once, when Alex first stops to pick up an application for the repertory, she walks down a comparatively narrow corridor where the dancers are stretching and warming up. The room in which she finally has her audition is unlike a stage by being significantly longer vertically than horizontally. We find her developing her love for Nick, her steel mill boss, by running with him through warehouses or old buildings. She lives at the end of a narrow alley in whose distance we see her bicycle several times. Even the stage at Mawby's on which she does her flashdance is a thrust stage -- almost a walkway.

Another strong visual image is tied to the crucial theme of character strength. The movie pits the honesty and hardworkingness of the blue-collar character against the sleaziness of the pornographic world into which one can fall and also against the artificially and smugness of the higher class territory which comes with success. The idea of character strength is underscored by the strong geometrical images if architecture which punctuate the film. Mawby's Bar and the Carnegie Music Hall in Pittsburg are shown several times in foursquare frontal images which last several seconds in the screen. In contrast, the only images we get of Zanzibar, the topless dive to which Jeanne gravitates in her short-term loss of self-respect, are oblique. In fact, the facade of Zanzibar itself is curvilinear, not cleanly geometric like the strength exhibited by the Music Hall or Mawby's. Another interesting reinforcement of this theme is Grunt, Alex's dog, who looks more like a cross between a pig and a small bull than a dog. The dog is strong and loyal and reflects the ideals that we are supposed to admire in the characters.

At one point in the film, when Alex, true to her hard work ethic, refuses to attend the audition that Nick has set up for her through his connections on the Arts Council, Nick says, "You give up your dream, you die." Nick seems to have almost given up his dream, when in his youth, he married an upper-class blonde because, as he says, "It was the safe thing." But somehow, he realized that one should not go on with the safe thing and divorced her. It is one of the worst defects of the film that the essence of Nick's success is extremely vague. He comes off as a weak character (and surely has the weakest lines) compared with the two women and the puny cook-comic, Richie. Richie

takes a punch which breaks his nose to help Alex out of a jam. Alex goes and fetches Jeanne from Zanzibar because she is her friend. And Hannah, a kind of European godmother to Alex, takes the time and patience to encourage Alex into her possible career in the classical ballet. Hannah, by the way, is the only human evidence that the strength of character is part of the high culture ethic. Her house is shot foursquare by the camera. She knows ballet from the inside and speaks well for it. There is a hint, however, that like the younger characters in the movie, she is a failure. But it is Hannah, Alex, Richie, and Jeanne who are the people in the movie who are supportive, loyal, and honest. And insofar as that is the case, they represent strong human values which remain superior to any kind of success. Therefore, Nick is importantly wrong when he says, "You give up your dream, you die." A superficial analysis could take that as a tag line for the movie and assume it is a simplistic moralizing to "strive, to seek to find, and not to yield." But this moral is crucially conditioned by the theme of retaining friendship, humanity, and self-respect.

At the same time that it encourages the dream of the higher reality, the movie celebrates the best of the lower class,precisely insofar as that best embodies the spiritual strength that the theme spotlights. At one point in the film, we see Alex and Jeanne walking home and stopping to watch some street break-dancers. It is a great delight and a stroke of great wit to see Alex incorporating the flashy back spin of break-dancing in her audition at the classical repertory.

Most viewers of the movie assume Alex succeeds in getting accepted into the repertory school after going all out at her audition, but the facts are left ambiguous. We see her at the end laughing and running out of the audition hall to Nick and Grunt who are waiting for her. Earlier, Alex asked Hannah if the principal dancer always got flowers at the end of her performance and how that felt. Hannah said, "You let me know." Nick and Grunt wait for Alex with the bouquet of roses and she extracts one and gives it to Nick just as it happens with classical dancers. Since Nick has bought the flowers before he knows if Alex has made the company, it is clear that the symbol of actual dance success has been transmuted into a symbol of courage and character. It is that which the movie makes important, not <u>mere</u> striving to follow one's dream. Many aspects of character, parallelism of plot, symbols and images have cooperated to make a picture with complex and substantial form.

<u>Flashdance</u> has its flaws, no doubt; in its inability to handle clearly the character of Nick, in its failure to give a satisfactory explanation of Alex's initial situation of independence, and in its caricature of the upper-class figures who appear in the film. But it is a strong and reasonably well-integrated film. The point I an trying to make is that there are analyses of these popular works of art which are of a piece with what we might do with serious ones.

Pedagogical Implications

I hope the pedagogical implications of this argument are obvious. If popular art is not different in kind from high art, and if our students are inundated with popular art, it remains for us to exploit these facts rather than deny them. It might be worth our time to attend to the much vaunted organic character of art when thinking about our posture toward aesthetic education. If we think of each work of art as having a kind of life and personality of its own, then our task is not

to separate the high from the popular, but the better from the worse wherever it appears. It is equally obvious, I hope, that such evaluations must appeal to the works on their own terms. When, in our civics lessons, we hold up Abraham Lincoln to the admiration of school-children, his keen intelligence and wit, his strong moral fiber and his political sagacity, we do not thereby recommend that they lose personal affection for their own fathers, who may be below average in intelligence, lack a sense of humor, and not have much practical sense. When it comes to taste in human beings, we always recommend that we try to see the best that is in a person and that we make room for that in the economy of our assessment. While we might recognize a certain universality in the great souls of history, we do not stop loving our family and local friends even as we recognize a certain idiosyncrasy in our doing it.

If we can get students to think honestly, carefully, and cogently about what they locally encounter, then they may be able to use that general approach in opening up the more universal. But we must stop thinking that what is local is by that fact not worthy to be held in the pantheon. Even the greatest and most refined sensibilities have had quirks in their tastes. Take a great poet like Yeats and ask him to compose an anthology of modern verse (as Oxford Press did) and you may be surprised to find some very obscure Irish poets represented there.6 I don't think we should be in the business of making perfect tastes, but rather in helping people to appreciate the art they come into contact with and of putting them into contact with art which seems to have satisfied many over a long period of time.

That doesn't require that we take away their popular favorites. How can we avoid realizing that a fair amount of the clash between the popular and the high arts is a class matter? But even if we don't want to do away with class distinctions, we need to build a society in which everyone can respect the value that is truly enjoyed at every level of society. Years ago, C.S. Lewis wrote a lovely little book called An Experiment in Criticism.7 In it, he tried to conduct an experiment by using the hypothesis that there are no bad books, just bad readers. Those if us who love the art that is in the canon of the best and want our children to love it too, will have a much easier time of it if we can show them that we take what they like seriously. Then we can talk to them about it and make it more likely that they will be able to take what we like seriously. As we do that, we may discover that there is more to take seriously in the popular arts than we had previously imagined.

Footnotes

1 Abraham Kaplan, "The Aesthetics of the Popular Arts," in Modern Culture and the Arts, ed. by James B. Hall and Barry Ulanov, second edition, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972, p.48.

2 The technological advances of the last hundred years have complicated the high art/popular art distinction enormously. In addition to the new arts of technology, like film and photography, there has been an unprecedented delivery into popularly accessible forms of what is regarded as high art: from the reproductions of works of visual art in books to the presentation by radio, record and tape of great orchestras playing works by classic composers. To what extent the availability of art to masses

of people makes for a popular art regardless of content or form is a question I want to ignore. Like Kaplan, I am assuming a rough and ready distinction between works that fall into generally acknowledged classes of high and popular art while admitting that this distinction is easier to assume for Kaplan.

3 Theodore Kachel, "Where Are the Audiences for A.R.T.?," The Harwelden Letter, Vol.2, No.2, March-April 1985, p.3.

4 M.H. Abrams, The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1958, pp.3-29.

5 For a compact display of this orientation, see Cleanth Brooks, "The Problem of Belief and the Problem of Cognition" in The Well Wrought Urn, New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1947, pp.252-266, and Clive Bell, "The Aesthetic Hypothesis" in Art, New York: Capricorn Books, 1958, pp.15-34.

6 W.B. Yeats. The Oxford Book of Modern Verse 1892-1935. New York: Oxford University Press, 1936.

7 C.S. Lewis, An Experiment in Criticism, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969.

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