Notes on the Predicament of Humanist Culture: From the Italian Renaissance to Today's Crisis[1]

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1.

In 2010, the Italian Minister of Economy, Giulio Tremonti, made this public announcement: "Culture cannot be eaten." To which he added defiantly: "Try to make a sandwich with Dante."[2] The literal meaning of his claim sounds admirable. Unfortunately, Tremonti meant something decidedly more banal, not to mention disputable—you cannot make money with culture. To this last interpretation of Tremonti's dictum, many retorted: *culture is Italy's oil*. That is, if we cannot eat culture, we can in any case consume, burn, exploit, and sell our so-called cultural deposits, and make a great deal of money with them. In contrast to this last position, I would prefer the literal but unintended view expressed by Tremonti: culture cannot (and should not) be eaten.

The tangible evidence of Tremonti's convictions—which are widely shared throughout Italy, perhaps more so than in other countries—were the results made public by Eurostat in April 2013, referring to 2011 (the year after Tremonti's declaration): Italy spent less on culture than any of the 27 other European Union member states.[3] The private sector invests even less in culture and research, but does not lack its opinion makers. For example, journalist Massimo Gramellini—vice-director of the respected newspaper *La Stampa* (owned by FIAT), bestselling author, and politically correct TV commentator—recently wrote an article that struck me. He asked himself:

> Why does Dante's *Inferno* inspire Dan Brown and not Sandro Veronesi? Why have the deeds of the Gladiator been narrated by Ridley Scott and not by our own epic film director Giuseppe Tornatore? [. . .] Why do we refuse to be the *gigantic open air museum—enhanced by theme shops and restaurants—that the rest of the world wishes we were?*[4]

Thus, according to Gramellini, the world wants Italy to become a Disneyworld of its own past, and Italians yield to this ecumenical desire. This, apparently, is the sad (or merry, depending on one's viewpoint) state of culture in Italian contemporaneity.

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Another case in point that is likewise symptomatic of this widespread attitude: Laura Donnini, the editor in chief of the largest Italian publishing house, Mondadori, was recently interviewed by Simonetta Fiori, a journalist from *La Repubblica*, about the success of the *Fifty Shades* trilogy by E.L. James. Fiori asked her whether, in her opinion, we would be overwhelmed by this sort of erotic romances in the near future.

> *Laura Donnini*: Sure. There is already a team of female writers at work [. . .]. In Italy the trilogy has been a huge success, much more than elsewhere (with the exception of the United States and the UK): two million copies sold in only 3 months.
> *Simonetta Fiori*: How do you explain that? A deeply depressed population?
> *L.D.*: No, it is more a question of editorial strategy. When I was working at *Harmony* [a subsidiary of Mondadori, specializing in sentimental romances], I learned that female readers of this kind of fiction are afflicted by a form of addiction. So we decided to launch the three volumes with an interval of only a few weeks separating each one from the next.[5]

Finally, Fiori asked what has happened to the "cultural mission" of publishing, apparently confident that it could still be distinguished from the sphere of soft-porno romances. Here is Donnini's answer:

> It [the "cultural mission"] is less visible, but I assure you that it exists. The problem is more general, and goes beyond Mondadori. This year we witnessed a new phenomenon. Successful non-fiction has been written by actors, sports and TV celebrities who laid themselves bare, telling their most painful stories. [. . .] While serious or 'committed' non-fiction is suffering a lot. Perhaps we need to escape, although, paradoxically, through the pain of others.

According to these examples, so-called "culture" would promote a sort of mass narcissism, an imaginary identification with an ideal image (produced mainly by women yet hopefully consumed by all), where the ideal image does not coincide with traditionally and generally understood socially legitimate values, but rather with the frustrated protagonists of soft-core porn. Furthermore, it promotes mechanisms of addiction to disputable forms of satisfaction (also including voyeurism into the pain and suffering of the rich and famous).

It is important to stress the literal meaning of the word *addiction*: it is not a casual term. Addictions are one of the most alarming, widespread, and sometimes devastating symptoms of contemporary societies, what psychoanalysts call

the "new symptoms," the new "malaise of culture."[6] Most of us are addicted to something, and perhaps it is inevitable. One could say it is better to be addicted to these kinds of (supposedly cultural) products than to nicotine, alcohol, or other substances. That may be true. Yet it is at least paradoxical that precisely these "cultural" products (being founded on addictive consumption, anxiety etc.) encourage a non-cultural relation with themselves. One should linger on cultural products; they should arrest our attention and make us suspend our usual activities, dominated by the logic of means and ends.

This kind of sensible reflection, this lingering-on, was described by Immanuel Kant as a reflexive pleasure without any determinate purpose or interest,[7] or more recently, by Giorgio Agamben, as the realm of pure means, unspoiled by further ends.[8] This kind of reflexive pleasure is just the opposite of a state of addiction or a craving: the addict—as the psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion remarked—is someone who cannot wait.[9] Consider bulimia, the addiction to binging and purging: the emptiness and void a person feels within and without is filled with compulsive consumption. Now think of anorexia: the same compulsion to binge and purge takes over one's own self-control. Thus, normal and necessary activities—eating, or exercising one's self-control—are displaced from their usual regulative functions and become compulsive. This investment of our usual activities with compulsions is widespread. Many commentators, for instance, have spoken about compulsive politicians, affected by a sort of bulimia for power, money, sex, and success. In all these cases—and in many others—a primary drive, unmediated by cultural or symbolic constructions, takes possession of one of our otherwise legitimate needs, roles, or functions in society, and transforms it into a compulsive addiction (in affluent societies, health itself sometimes becomes an addiction of this type). Hence why it is particularly poisonous to extend the mechanisms of addiction to those very products and activities—what we call "culture"—which should work as antidotes.

Culture is not a class of objects or activities, but is rather a certain relationship that we can have with these objects, the world, others, and ourselves. And since culture is a relationship, it is not the kind of object or product that we relate to that makes the relevant difference, but our attitude towards them. If we entertain a cultural relation with certain "objects"—other subjects and ourselves included—we are not supposed to consume them, but linger on them, taking pleasure in their existence. It is a relation which should not be caught in the oscillation between compulsive control and loss of control, which increasingly seems to characterize our public and private lives.[10]

2.

It is in this Italian context that I pose these questions: What is the predicament of culture today? Is there a humanistic heritage that is still relevant and able to help us understand what we mean by this term?

Naturally, one can define culture in many ways and from many points of view. For the sake of brevity, we could say that we usually identify culture within three main fields: (1) human civilizations in all their forms (as opposed to nature); (2) certain products and activities which cannot be reduced to the satisfaction of primary needs, or better put, the many ways in which certain groups of humans confer particular shapes to the satisfaction of their needs; (3) the subjective appropriation of these products (as when we say "a cultivated person"). In German there is a difference between the word *Kultur,* which encompasses both the scope of civilization and the more restricted meaning of "cultural products," and the word *Bildung*, typically translated as "education" or "formation," which refers to the assimilation and the elaboration of *Kultur* in any given individual.

My proposal, as a working hypothesis, is to conceive of culture in two complementary ways: *formally*, as a certain relation we entertain with the world, ourselves, and others (a relation—as previously mentioned—characterized by a suspension of the logic of means and ends); and *materially*, as the indefinite set of products, works, and activities that are the variable results of this relation and which flesh it out materially. Human animals have an indeterminate nature, and cultures shape it. That is, the material aspects of culture—institutions, products, behaviors, bodies, landscapes, personal relationships, public life, art, etc.—are the ways in which certain groups of men and women choose, under certain conditions, which traits of their potentiality to actualize, which traits to drop, which traits to value, which other traits to consider as taboos, and so on. In order to explain what I mean, it is helpful to go back to some primary theses of humanist culture, which I believe are still valid today, though they are often manifested in corrupted forms.

3.

Let us take one of the most famous texts of the late fifteenth century, imbued both with humanist culture and Renaissance Platonic and neo-Platonic philosophy: Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's *Oration on the Dignity of Man*. In the neo-Platonic tradition—in Marsilio Ficino, for example—it was customary to characterize human nature as situated at the center of the world and in the center of the chain of beings, between the angelic intelligences and the animals. Pico retains the anthropocentric core of this tradition, but adds the decisive element of the indeterminacy of the human being:

> Now the highest Father, God the master-builder, had, by the laws of his secret wisdom, fabricated this house, this world which we see [. . .]. But, with the work finished, the Artisan desired that there be someone to reckon up the reason of such a big work, to love its beauty, and to wonder at its greatness. Accordingly, now that all things had been completed, [. . .] He lastly considered creating man. But there was

> nothing in the archetypes from which He could mold a new sprout [. . .] [e]verything was filled up; [. . .] [f]inally, the best of workmen decided that that to which nothing of its very own could be given should be, in composite fashion, whatsoever had belonged individually to each and every thing. Therefore He took up man, a work of indeterminate form; and, placing him at the midpoint of the world, He spoke to him as follows:
> "O Adam, We have given you neither visage nor endowment uniquely your own, so that whatever place, form, or gifts you may select after pondering the matter, you may have and keep through your own judgment and decision. All other creatures have their nature defined and limited by laws which We have established; you, by contrast, unimpeded by any such limits, may, by your own free choice, [. . .] establish the features of your own nature."[11]

One of the principal sources of this view was the Hermetic tradition. At the beginning of his oration, Pico quotes what he presents as the famous remark of Hermes Trismegistus: "A great wonder, Asclepius, is man."[12] The Hermetic idea of man as a "great miracle" is repeated by all Renaissance authors influenced by the Hermetic texts, which were believed to be Egyptian sacred texts more ancient than Moses (but which had actually been written in the first centuries of our era): Giordano Bruno, and Tommaso Campanella, for instance, both thought of man as a potential *magus*.

On the other hand, a pessimistic anthropology, such as the one proposed by Luther, represented the opposite of the conviction that men can build and control their own nature. Think of the violent anti-Lutheran positions adopted by Bruno, and his celebration of the human hand as the specific organ that makes the human animal human. Philosophers like Bruno and Campanella cultivated the idea of the wise man as *magus*, someone who could "command the stars and the fates." These last words are actually taken from Niccolò Machiavelli, who in 1506—several decades before either Bruno or Campanella was born—sketched a very different picture of man in an enigmatic and troubled letter to Giovanbattista Soderini:

> I believe that as Nature has given every man a different face, so she also has given each a different character and imagination [. . .] [b]ut because the times and affairs are often transformed, both in general and in particulars, and men do not change their imaginations nor their methods, it happens that one man has in one instance good fortune and in another bad. And, truly, anyone so wise as to understand the times and the order of things and be able to accommodate himself to them would always have good fortune [. . .]: the wise man can

> command the stars and the fates. But since such men cannot be found, men being only short-sighted and unable to discipline their characters, it follows that Fortune changes and commands men and keeps them under their yoke.[13]

Despite Machiavelli's critical role in the Italian and European traditions (or, again, the influence of Luther's pessimistic view, though this is alien to Machiavelli), I would say that the humanistic image of man—linked to the idea of freedom and progress—is the one that prevailed up to the nineteenth century. For example, Giambattista Vico, who was born a century later than Campanella and who was obviously aware that the so called *prisca theologia* of the Hermetic texts was not so ancient at all, and moreover argued that the first men were not wise men, but similar to wild beasts.[14] These important differences notwithstanding, Vico still sustains two of Pico's core theses: that the human mind is indefinite in nature, and that men—to a certain extent—make their own history. In the usual interpretation, Vico's famous principle *verum et factum convertuntur* means that men can properly know their own history because they made it, and men can only know what they themselves have made. In this view, nature, being the work of God, will always hide its impenetrable secrets from us, while history and human products are in principle transparent to us because we are their authors.

4.

This confidence in a rational grasp of the historical world will be repeated, albeit in very different forms, up to nineteenth-century idealism, for instance in Hegel. It is only at the advent of the Industrial Revolution that doubt first arises. A characteristic example from the beginning of the twentieth century is the essay by the German sociologist Georg Simmel, "The Tragedy of Culture." Simmel describes a troubling, uncanny feeling experienced by modern human beings: their subjective culture proves to be inadequate to their objective culture and we, as individuals, are no longer able to understand, to grasp, to comprehend, what we ourselves have made.[15] Nowadays we are completely accustomed to this experience, which contradicts Vico's confidence in the intelligibility of our cultural world: today, all of the technological products we depend on in our daily life are well beyond our individual comprehension. What *we* have made—our history, our technological, political, institutional, and economic realities—is, for the most part, beyond our grasp. And not only beyond our individual grasp, as Simmel believed, but sometimes beyond our collective grasp. The mechanisms of the world we undoubtedly made escape us.

Schematically, in the first half of the twentieth century there were two main currents of critical theory, one stemming from Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud, the other from Martin Heidegger. On the one hand, there is Hannah Arendt, Günther Anders, Hans Jonas, and also Herbert Marcuse—all of them more or

less heretical pupils of Heidegger—and, on the other, the protagonists of the Frankfurt School: Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, the same Marcuse, to cite only the most famous.

One of the tenets Heidegger's pupils all shared—along with all of twentieth-century philosophical anthropology (Max Scheler, Helmut Plessner, Arnold Gehlen, etc.)—was not so different from Pico's or Vico's ideas. In their own terms, they believed that human animals do not possess a given world, that they do not have an environment properly assigned to them, to which they react with certain responses predetermined by their nature. By way of contrast we may consider the tick: the latter will always respond to its environment, to the stimuli offered to its receptors, in a predictable, systematic fashion. If a tick senses the temperature of a mammal, it will attach to it and suck its blood. Human animals are different: they do not have a determinate nature but have indefinite ways of responding to the overabundant quantity of stimuli coming from the external world, and they are forced to organize them, to interpret them, to make choices, creating hierarchies, choosing to retain and shape certain stimuli and overlook others. As such, human animals do not have a pre-determined environment. They must construct a world, a culture. In this respect, culture is the product of a selective attention to a world that offers an indefinite and ever-changing quantity of stimuli.[16] Yet, differently from the humanistic picture, the cultures we build are no longer conceived of as intelligible, or even imaginable. If we take the two greatest traumas of the last century—the Holocaust and Hiroshima—it is clear that what we as human beings have been able to make is beyond our comprehension. Anders spent his life insisting on the discrepancy between our capacity to produce, and our incapacity to imagine and comprehend what we have produced: we can produce an atomic bomb and kill thousands of people in an instant, but actually imagining the death of these people is impossible and beyond the capacity of our imagination. We can mourn one, two, twenty people, but it is not within our capacity to mourn 60,000 people, or worse yet, millions. And if we are not able to do so, we are also not able to take responsibility for our actions.[17] Therefore, even if human animals are endowed with no fixed nature—being instead flexible, adjustable, and creative, thanks to their indefinite minds—their capacity to adjust is limited: their bodies, their sensible faculties, like their cognitive and moral imagination, cannot be expanded to the point of comprehending many of their own products and the consequences brought forth by them. The problem, again, is that if they cannot imagine them, they cannot take responsibility for them.

The other tradition of twentieth-century critical theory comes from Marxism and Freudian psychoanalysis, and can largely be exemplified by the Frankfurt School. Horkheimer, Adorno, Benjamin, and Marcuse are not so much concerned with the lack of a specific human world, but with the forces—rather than the reasons—which condition our ways of thinking, acting, and living. One of the central enigmas they wanted to understand was: How was Nazism

possible? How did it happen that one of the cradles of European culture—the nation of Lessing, Kant, Goethe, Schiller, Beethoven, Hegel, the country of *Kultur* and *Bildung*—became the most terrible expression of modern barbarity? What is culture, if it could be swept away in just a few years, without being able to contrast or contain Nazi barbarism? A partial answer could come from Freud:

> Men are not gentle creatures who want to be loved, and who at the most can defend themselves if they are attacked. They are, on the contrary, creatures among whose instinctual endowments is to be reckoned a powerful share of aggressiveness. As a result, their neighbor is for them not only a potential helper or sexual object, but also someone who tempts them to satisfy their aggressiveness on him, to exploit his capacity for work without compensation, to use him sexually without his consent, to seize his possessions, to humiliate him, to cause him pain, to torture and kill him. [. . .] As a rule this cruel aggressiveness waits for some provocation or puts itself at the service of some other purpose, whose goal might also have been reached by milder measures. In circumstances that are favorable to it, when the mental counter-forces which ordinarily inhibit it are out of action, it also manifests itself spontaneously and reveals man as a savage beast to whom consideration towards his own kind is something alien.[18]

As we know, starting in the 1920s, Freud was exploring the introduction, among the primary drives, of the death principle, *thanatos*, as a drive beyond the pleasure principle, *eros*. One of the faces of the death principle is comprised of aggression and self-aggression, the sadistic surplus towards others, and the masochistic torments performed by our superego on ourselves. Other suggestions could come from Marxism: while cultures may be the way in which we channel and organize the overabundance of stimuli in which we live immersed, or the way in which we give forms to the indefinite nature of our minds (what Marx call the "General Intellect"), we are, nonetheless, not free to create culture however we please. We conform to these tenets without even knowing that we are doing so.

5.

Let us now make our last historical jump: Freud wrote *Civilization and its Discontents* in 1929, about ten years after the First World War. Thirty years later, in 1960, hence fifteen years after the end of the Second World War, we witness—both in Europe and the United States—a surprising convergence of reflections on the so-called "crisis of culture." I will only mention a few of these reflections, but each of them emerges from a larger context of similar texts: in one and the same year, 1960, Adorno publishes his *Theory of Halbbildung* (Theory of "half-culture" or "half-education"), Hannah Arendt her essay on *The Crisis in Culture*, Lacan

holds his seminar *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, which comes closest in Lacan's thought to a dialogue with Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents*, and Hans Georg Gadamer—the "urbanizer of the Heideggerian province,"[19] as Habermas called him—publishes his most important work, *Truth and Method*.

I shall begin with some remarks on the last of these texts, because there Gadamer tries to re-propose some of the keywords of the humanist tradition as if nothing special had happened in the twentieth-century: *Bildung*, *sensus communis*, judgment, and taste. Gadamer acts as if these notions had not lost their credibility as guide-posts; as if society had not become in the meantime a mass society, characterized by previously unimagined problems. It is an important work, but one could say it is a work marked by denial, the unwillingness or the incapacity to see the deep crisis of culture that was right under everyone's eyes.

That same year Adorno published an essay which from its very title seems to be the countermelody to Gadamer's book: *Theory of Halbbildung*, that is theory of half-culture, half-education, half-formation. In this text, Adorno acknowledges the failure of *Bildung*, the failure of eighteenth-century bourgeois promises of emancipation. He describes the new state of generalized *Halbbildung*, which is not ignorance or *Unbildung*, a condition which would precede a *Bildung*, but something that comes after *Bildung*, its decomposition or perversion: "in the climate of *Halbbildung* the reified and fetishized elements of *Bildung* survive at the expense of their truth content and of their living relationship with living subjects. This could correspond to a definition of it."[20] Culture is both emptied of its content and meaning, despised, and fetishized at once. Telling contemporary examples of this contradictory position are the recent cases of German and Italian politicians who were forced to resign because they lied about their academic achievements, boasting of academic titles they did not possess. And these are the same politicians who never hide their populistic anti-intellectualism, their public contempt for the university "barons" and the allegedly invented problems of professors and intellectuals.

Typical of the climate of *Halbbildung* is a resentment of, and aggressiveness towards, the cultural goods which money cannot buy. Money is never sufficient to buy a *Bildung*, a culture, nor is sheer willingness sufficient to acquire one. Culture requires a peculiar kind of labor; it needs a suspension of definite ends and goals and also an indefinite amount of time which cannot be compressed. Culture implies an element of spontaneity; it is an "essentially secondary effect," which cannot be attained by intentionally and consciously aiming at it.[21] There is no way to cut corners. Moreover, social injustice, both old and new, ensures that the only people who could potentially buy culture (if such a thing were possible) are those who already have it.

Another symptom of the same paradox (anti-intellectualism *and* the fetishization of culture) is the increasing need to evaluate and control cultural achievements: with the passage of time, there are more and more tests, more and

more evaluation agencies. Yet, if culture has a moment of spontaneity—an element which reveals a whole attitude towards the world, oneself, and others—then it must necessarily escape any pre-determined form of standardized evaluation: "the moment of spontaneity, which indicates in *Bildung* something different from the social mechanisms of the dominion of nature, is spoiled in the strident light of testability."[22] The contradiction is that testing or evaluating culture reveals the idea that culture is a type of "value," and that this "value" must be measured by standards which are not its own.

Hannah Arendt, in her 1960 essay *The Crisis in Culture*, maintains that the discontents that we perceive today are due to a sort of categorical mistake that does not concern logic but our daily existence. The categories of life that pertain to the private sphere, the sphere of the household, of the *oikos*, and of the *oikonomia*, overflow into the public sphere. The *oikonomia*, the pre-political sphere of necessary consumption of goods, invades the public sphere, which Arendt calls the world. This common ground has been privatized:

> Culture relates to objects and is a phenomenon of the world; entertainment relates to people and is a phenomenon of life. An object is cultural to the extent that it can endure; its durability is the very opposite of functionality, which is the quality which makes it disappear again from the phenomenal world by being used and used up. The great user and consumer of objects is life itself, the life of the individual and the life of society as a whole. Life is indifferent to the thingness of an object; it insists that every thing must be functional, fulfill some needs.[23]

Even the classics, according to this view, should not be read for the apparent lofty purpose of self-perfection: "The trouble with the educated philistine was not that he read the classics but that he did so prompted by the ulterior motive of self-perfection, remaining quite unaware of the fact that Shakespeare or Plato might have to tell him more important things than how to educate himself."[24] This attitude, which, according to Arendt, characterized the bourgeoisie of the nineteenth-century, is still alive today in every new-age or self-help oriented appropriation of cultural elements. Every culture or work of art is used for one's own purposes, bent and distorted to satisfy unquestioned private and social needs. Yet, what troubled Arendt in 1960 was the tendency to "add to kitsch an intellectual dimension," in the words of Harold Rosenberg quoted at the outset of her essay.[25] For Arendt, the problem of the relationship of mass society with culture cannot be solved by invoking mass culture, which for her is a contradiction in terms. If mass society is a society of mass consumption, and if culture presupposes a relation to the world which excludes mere consumption, then there cannot properly be a mass culture.

Culture, like art and politics, belongs to the public sphere, but the public sphere presupposes individuals who take the responsibility to judge. Political and aesthetic judgments have the same nature, Arendt maintains, and—contrary to what Gadamer claimed in his 1960 book—the roots of these judgments are to be found in Kantian criticism:

> In aesthetic no less than in political judgments, a decision is made, and although this decision is always determined by a certain subjectivity, by the simple fact that each person occupies a place of his own from which he looks upon and judges the world, it also derives from the fact that the world itself is an objective datum, something common to all its inhabitants. The activity of taste decides how this world, independent of its utility and our vital interests in it, is to look and sound, what men will see and what they will hear in it. Taste judges the world in its appearance and in its worldliness [. . .]. For judgments of taste, the world is the primary thing, not man, neither man's life nor his self.[26]

This passage stresses what we can call the anti-humanistic attitude adopted by Arendt, inasmuch as she foregrounds the "love of the world," a phrase which could summarize her thought. But it is important also for another reason: because aesthetic and political judgments are conceived of—in a Kantian manner—not as scientific judgments, not as knowledge in the strict sense, something which could be left to experts of "the world" (experts in the fields of politics and arts, for example) to whom we may delegate our decisions and responsibility:

> Taste judgments, furthermore, are currently held to be arbitrary because they do not compel in the sense in which demonstrable facts or truth proved by argument compel agreement. They share with political opinions that they are persuasive; the judging person—as Kant says quite beautifully—can only "woo the consent of everyone else" in the hope of coming to an agreement with him eventually.[27]

The question of judgment is fundamental. In Arendt's account judging means participating in public life, in the life of culture, politics, and art. Yet contemporary societies are pervaded by a non-judgmental ideology, based on the misconception that judging means being intolerant or deaf to the reasons of others. For Arendt (as well as Kant) the opposite is true: judging means *sharing* the points of view of others. While thinking might be a solitary activity, one cannot judge without putting oneself imaginatively in the shoes of others.

In 1964, Susan Sontag published her famous *Notes on Camp*. Although published only four years later than the essays I have mentioned, and although these

notes apparently share a common ground with Arendt (that of taste), they seem to come from another age. Sontag writes:

> Though I am speaking about sensibility only and about a sensibility that, among other things, converts the serious into the frivolous—these are grave matters. Most people think of sensibility or taste as the realm of purely subjective preferences, those mysterious attractions, mainly sensual, that have not been brought under the sovereignty of reason. They allow that considerations of taste play a part in their reactions to people and to works of art. But this attitude is naïve. And even worse. To patronize the faculty of taste is to patronize oneself. For taste governs every free—as opposed to rote—human response. Nothing is more decisive. There is taste in people, visual taste, taste in emotion—and there is taste in acts, taste in morality. Intelligence, as well, is really a kind of taste: taste in ideas.[28]

A crucial difference, though, concerns the very question of judgment:

> Camp taste is, above all, a mode of enjoyment, of appreciation—not judgment. Camp is generous. It wants to enjoy. It only seems like malice, cynicism (or, if it is cynicism, it's not a ruthless but a sweet cynicism). Camp taste doesn't propose that it is in bad taste to be serious; it doesn't sneer at someone who succeeds in being seriously dramatic. What it does is to find the success in certain passionate failures.[29]

This kind of sensibility, for good or bad, is much closer to our contemporary sensibility. There is something liberating about it, a lightness, a permissiveness, a lack of tension, an acceptance of the world as it is, in its variety and heterogeneity. This new sensibility that "converts the serious into the frivolous" is a postmodern sensibility. There was a promise of happiness in camp, a promise of liberating ourselves from the feeling of tragedy, from the burden of seriousness, of conflicting choices.

In 1959-60, just four years before Sontag published her *Notes*, Lacan held his famous VII seminar on the *Ethics of psychoanalysis*, which addressed Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents*, along with Kant, Sade, and the tragedy of *Antigone*. I cannot presently go into the issues raised by this dense seminar, if not to point out how Lacan, discussing *Antigone*, draws a comparison between Kant's aesthetic judgment—linked to the disinterested free play of imagination and intellect—and Sade's "playing" with pain.[30] In essence, Lacan aims to stress that Freud's death drive is always involved in art and culture. Sublimation—the channeling of our primary drives into something valuable and cultural—presupposes both drives: the erotic, vital drive, and the death drive. Both drives, when sublimated in a

cultural product, leave a residue, something non-sublimated, so that beauty itself retains certain untamed elements of each of them.[31] The new sensibility described by Susan Sontag seems to be blind to these obscure aspects of culture. We have expelled from our so-called mass culture its seriousness, its relations to these non sublimated drives. But there is a price to pay, which brings us back to where we began this tortuous article: the indefinite nature of the human mind and the indeterminate potentiality the humanists discovered in it.

On the one hand, it seems that having expelled this potentiality—with all its dangers—from our cultural scenario, culture can be more easily consumed: we can "Disney-fy" Italy; we can create mild forms of addictions to soft-porno romances (but here things already become a bit more alarming, as we have noted); we can re-write the *Iliad*, omitting the cruel and apparently irrational actions of the gods (as Alessandro Baricco did some years ago).[32] We can simplify culture, and we can use it in a new-age fashion for our own self-perfection. Shouldn't we do these things? Why not? Perhaps because what we exclude from culture to make it more palatable comes back in other unpredictable and undesirable forms. I have already hinted at the painful and schizophrenic oscillation between an unbridled drive to control and an equally unbridled drive for the loss of control, which mark many individual, collective, social, economic, and political phenomena. Furthermore, it seems that our indeterminacy, our potentialities, our indefinite minds are put to work exclusively in the name of profit. The humanistically indeterminate nature of human beings has been transformed today into an ideology of work flexibility: we are always at work, adjusting ourselves to permanently and erratically changing economic demands. We are always connected and always alone; we work all day long. The indefinite mind—which we have renounced in the public and cultural spheres—becomes a human capacity to be exploited by the new demands of work. Politically, this mechanism is embedded in the permanent "state of exception" in which we live, while the invasion of the sphere of life (the metabolic reproduction of life, the sphere of *oikos* referred to by Arendt) into the public realm, allows the opposite invasion of the public realm into our private lives (what has been called "biopolitics").

If these are truly some features of the predicament of culture today, what can be done? Here I can only say that it would be delusory and wrong to look for shelter in the humanist tradition or in the ideal of *Bildung*, and that we ought to accept the challenges of globalization, with its new conformism and new illiteracy, but also with the new opportunities it brings with itself. For the time being, I believe that our efforts should be to (re)claim, and help create time and places subtracted from the logic of means-ends. Liberated areas of sorts, even small and circumscribed, where our indefinite minds can have the opportunity to flourish in unforeseeable ways. Any attempt to promote and monitor culture directly—through universal standards meant to test cultural production in schools and academies, or through financing determine and substantiate cultural

projects—is doomed to fail, given that culture is an "essential secondary effect" of other objectives, and cannot be deprived of its element of spontaneity, its risks, nor even its darker aspects, as highlighted by Lacan. Yet this does not mean that culture should simply be abandoned to its fate or to the invisible hand of the market. What a cultural politics can and should strive to do is ensure time and space for the flourishing of relations that are not means to other ends. It should re-construct a public fabric which has become evermore tailored towards consumers only (as evidenced by the proliferation of shopping malls, in all their variations—especially when they obscenely mime cultural artifacts of the past) and establish informal and welcoming places where people can gather and talk, read, cook, paint, play music, hang out, woo each other, and "waste" their time (such as squares, streets, public buildings open to everybody and financed by the public sector). In Italy it is said that the public sector funds culture, for instance, when the state financially contributes towards the production of a feature film. That may be true, but I believe this money would be better spent in creating the preconditions for the growth of culture: by keeping our public squares free from the invasion of corporate commercial activities (those promoting the same brands everywhere); improving the access to our cultural heritage (both for Italians and foreign visitors alike) by subtracting it from a logic of purely touristic consumption; by restoring the social and cultural dimensions of work (as opposed to reducing it to merely a means of precarious survival). When the urban and social fabric is destroyed, no manner or magnitude of financial intervention in the so-called "cultural sector" can have any real or lasting importance—to echo one of Arendt's ideas—for the life of culture.

Notes

1. This article is based on a public lecture given by Stefano Velotti on April 17, 2013. The lecture was organized by the UCLA Department of Italian while the author was the Visiting Speroni Chair in early modern Italian Studies. The author would like to thank Nathanial Peterson-More for his precious help in editing the article.

2. TV interview, October 14, 2010.

3. In 2011, the European average was 2.2% of the gross national income, while Italy spent a half of that amount, i.e. 1.1%. See http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu (accessed on April 10, 2013).

4. "La bella Italia che non seduce gli italiani," in *La Stampa*, January 17, 2013. Emphasis mine.

5. "La biblio-manager. L'intrattenimento sposi la saggistica," in *La Repubblica*, September 9, 2012.

6. See F. Borrelli, M. De Carolis, F. Napolitano, M. Recalcati, *Nuovi disagi nella civiltà. Un dialogo a quattro voci* (Torino: Einaudi, 2013).

7. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. E. Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), §§ 1-5.

8. Giorgio Agamben, *Mezzi senza fine. Note sulla politica* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 1996).

9. Wilfred R. Bion, *Cogitations* (London: Karnak, 1991), 299.

10. I will not further develop this hypothesis here, but I believe this oscillation permeates all spheres of our contemporary societies: economics and politics; the internet and surveillance; the production of images; and our private lives.

11. Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *On the Dignity of Man*, trans. Charles G. Wallis (Cambridge: Hackett, 1998), 4-5.

12. Ibid., 3.

13. Peter Bondanella and Mark Musa, eds., *The Portable Machiavelli* (New York: Penguin, 1979), 61-64.

14. Giambattista Vico, *The New Science*, trans. Thomas G. Bergin and Max H. Fisch (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1948). I questioned this standard interpretation of Vico's *verum-factum* in Stefano Velotti, *Sapienti e bestioni* (Parma: Pratiche, 1995).

15. David Frisby and Mike Featherstone, eds., *Simmel on Culture. Selected Writings* (London: Sage, 1997), 55-74.

16. See Emilio Garroni, *Immagine Linguaggio Figura* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2005).

17. Günther Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen Band I: Über die Seele in Zeitalter der zweiten industriellen Revolution* (München: Beck, 1956); *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen Band II. Über die Zerstörung des Lebens im Zeitalter der dritten industriellen Revolution* (München: Beck, 1980); *Hiroshima ist überall* (München: Beck, 1982). See Stefano Velotti, "Günther Anders: Worldviews, 'Models of Enticement,' and the Question of Praxis," *Humana.mente*, 18 (2011): 163-180.

18. Sigmund Freud, *Standard Edition*, vol. XXI (London: Vintage, 2001), 4503.

19. Jürgen Habermas, "Hans-Georg Gadamer: Urbanizing the Heideggerian Province," in *Philosophical-Political Profiles* (Boston: MIT Press, 1983).

20. Theodor W. Adorno, "Theorie der Halbbildung [1959]" in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 8. *Soziologische Schriften* I (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003), 97.

21. On "essentially secondary effects" See Jon Elster, *Sour Grapes. Studies in the Subversion of Rationality* (Paris: Maison des Sciences de l'Homme and Cambridge University Press, 1983); and Stefano Velotti, *Storia filosofica dell'ignoranza* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2003), 45-81.

22. Adorno, *Theorie der Halbbildung,* 100 (my translation).

23. Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1968), 208.

24. Ibid., 203.

25. Ibid., 197.

26. Ibid., 223

27. Ibid., 222

28. Susan Sontag, "Notes on Camp," *Partisan Review* XXXI (1964): 515-16.

29. Ibid., § 55.

30. I have attempted to further develop the relation between Lacan's VII seminar and Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment* in Stefano Velotti, "'I giochi del dolore' e

l'estetica. Note sulla *Critica della facoltà di giudizio* nel VII seminario di Lacan," in Paolo D'Angelo et al., eds., *Costellazioni estetiche. Dalla storia alla neoestetica* (Milano: Guerini, 2013), 463-70.

31. It is not by chance that so many synonyms of "beautiful" are connoted by an uncanny reference to fear: consider the words "terrific," and "formidable" (from Latin *formido*, "terror").

32. Alessandro Baricco, *Omero, Iliade* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2004).