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## Art, adrenalin and power

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*I have had the pleasure of knowing Donald Broady since the late 1970s, when we first met in the context of the Nordic Summer University, an organisation of radical young scholars. Donald is a truly learned and very professional scholar, whose work is marked by strict intellectual and methodological discipline. But otherwise he may seem to flirt with chaos or at least disorder more than his impeccable academic output would suggest. I vividly remember his lax response to his then five or six year old daughter, apparently a close relative of Pippi Longstocking, jumping around on a nicely set lunch table for some twenty people in the journal KRUT's space at Skeppsholmen in Stockholm. Later, when enjoying his hospitality at his Lidingö home on a couple of occasions, I noticed with pleasure that perfect order was not the most striking feature of his off-duty everyday life. It is true that a degree of messiness at home is often to be seen as a sign saying "these people are intellectuals". Intellectuals, however, are not among the most obvious fans of adrenaline-pumping, intensely kinetic action movies where chaos reigns most of the time. Donald loves to watch films like that. As he once put it on our way to a Schwarzenegger movie: "Something's got to happen, all the time. If they start talking, I fall asleep". This aesthetic norm of his was at the back of my head when I decided to contribute the following text to this volume. The original version of it was presented to an international conference marking the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of a very social-democratic cultural organisation in Norway, involved in the distribution of high culture to as many as possible. I had been asked to talk about "art and power". Even without much depth and with no specific references to Bourdieu, it may hopefully signify my gratitude for what Donald's work has taught me over the years and for his sharing my appreciation of art that works directly on our bodies as much as on our brains.*

### 1.

I think one way of approaching the question of how art is related to social power is to ask whether art itself is powerful. And one could start an attempt to answer that question by asking what art can do for, or to, each and every one of

us, as individuals. My answer is that it can indeed be very powerful, and if you will allow me to be a little bit personal, I'll explain why.

You see, an interesting thing sometimes happens on my way to work: I am transformed into a sort of person I have often despised. This is interesting since I am normally on pretty good terms with myself. What happens is that I turn up the volume of my car radio so much I end up appearing to outsiders as one of those idiots with enormous stereo systems in their cars who just have to bother everybody else with their lousy taste in music. This is not the sort of thing you normally associate with university professors who have turned fifty. But I just can't help it: certain songs, melodies, solo performances, voices, beats or whatever simply demands to be turned up loud so that they can perform their massage of my body and soul better.

My use of the word 'massage' here was spontaneous. I decided to keep it in this text because it begs the question: Is such normally short, but still rather intense, experiences of musical pleasure as a form of mental and bodily massage an experience of art? The answer could be "yes" or "no" according to which definition of "art" one chooses to rely on.

## 2.

One possibility is the institutional definition, popular in the sociology of art but also in a pragmatic definition now widespread among for instance art historians and other academically trained people within the arts. It goes, as you presumably know, like this: Art is that which the institution of art chooses to accept as art at any given moment.

The music that makes me behave in the way I just described is largely not art in this sense. It does happen that I turn up the volume when I hear a piece by Mozart, Bach or Benjamin Britten – music officially recognized as Art with a capital A. Some sorts of jazz – from Miles Davis or Chet Baker to Cassandra Wilson – may also lead to a similar behaviour. But it is most often some variety of popular music, anything between Eminem and the Beatles, the Beastie Boys and Aretha Franklin.

I am now talking specifically about my experiences in my car, particularly on my way to work. These are short trips. What I most often need and want there, is energetic music, some sort of legal amphetamine, the dope precisely known as "speed". At other times, say, very late in the evening, I may want other kinds of music, music that works more like opium, for example, to remain within the dope metaphor. Or full bodied, well-aged red wine. But these substances are also powerful.

The institutional definition of art is of little help if we want to understand "the power of art" in this sense. It is in fact without any reference at all to the qualitative specificities of the phenomena normally associated with the term 'art'. It sim-

ply transfers the logic of all social institutions to the institution of Art, and is, obviously, also correct in doing so. But the point here is that the very abstract, purely sociological definition has its limitations. It is not only unable to throw any light on the very immediate psychological and bodily effects of some sorts of art on virtually any human being. Since it of course also, in principle, is totally independent of any specific normative ideas about the nature of art, it is also of little help if one is interested in understanding the distinctions between the bad, the good, the better, and the best among the phenomena that are granted access to the institution. In order to function as gatekeepers and judges, people within the institution of art will of course have to apply normative definitions of art that may refer to craftsmanship, conceptual creativity, 'values' or whatever. In other words, there are definitions that are necessarily operative in practice which do not, however, have their parallels or equivalents in current theory. I am inclined to think this should be seen as a problem by those of us who are interested in theory.

### 3.

A traditional, non-sociological – some would say essentialist – definition of 'art' would hold that "art" can and should be defined in qualitative terms in two steps, so that the term "art" does not simply refer to music, painting, photography, literature, film and so on but to products within these various arts that are particularly good, that is to say intelligent, creative, clever, etc. As in "that novel is just simpleminded entertainment; this one, however, is really a piece of art."

Officially, this sort of understanding is the basis for selections made at the gates of the institution of art: Not just any amateur's work can expect to be published or exhibited or performed. Officially, this is also the basis for the exclusion of popular culture from the institution: since it is produced in a manner which to outsiders might appear reminiscent of industry rather than handicraft, it is a given that it is lacking in quality. That is to say, it is believed to be particularly lacking in the sort of quality that comes first and foremost in the romanticist understanding of art which still is the basis of our Western worlds of art: the mark of an authentic genius, a truly unique spirit. But popular culture is also thought to be generally lacking in complexity and intellectual ambition: it does not address important issues in ways that are on a par with current, say, philosophical and scientific views and insights. It is not worthy of well-educated, sophisticated people's time, other than as a quick little brainwash at bedtime, perhaps.

### 4.

The latter may take us from the perspectives of production and texts or products back to the perspective of reception, use or consumption, that is to say back to the distinction between different contexts for the use of art, e.g. the

distinction between my car in the morning and my living room at night. Different contexts in other words call for different sorts of music, different sorts of art, if you like.

This is precisely what Umberto Eco once wrote about when reflecting on the value of art: Someone who prefers to listen to some sort of light music in his lunch break may want to sit down with a rather demanding symphony in the evening. According to Eco, the value of the two forms of music is decided by the contexts of their use, i.e. the purposes they are made to serve: pure relaxation versus some form of listening which is tied to a degree of concentrated intellectual activity. In our culture, as I would guess is the case in most of the world's cultures, reflection is considered more important, more worthy of respect than relaxation, even if that is also recognized as a necessity.

While this is proposed as a pragmatic understanding of what art is, in opposition to more essentialist conceptions, what follows from Eco's argument is that some artworks (or art objects or whatever you prefer to call these highly diverse phenomena) – some pieces of art are simply better suited than others for the purpose of serious reflection, more suitable as food for educated thought in some way or other. Eco talks about open texts versus closed ones, a much misunderstood metaphorical distinction, and chooses examples that are clearly in line with traditional aesthetic hierarchies.

But we know from other work of his, e.g. his analysis of *Casablanca* and his writing on television series such as *Columbo* that he is clearly also fascinated by objects within popular arts. So, as I see it, Eco suggests a way of thinking that grants that there is a considerable degree of sense in traditional hierarchies or canons within the arts while at the same time refuses to exclude all popular culture from the realm of the serious and the interesting – plus he acknowledges the value of the sorts of pleasures that can *only* be provided by the popular arts. In other words, when we think like this, respect for the borders of the traditional institution of art is considerably reduced – but does not go away completely. Some of the most culturally valuable and interesting art ever produced is indeed at the heart of the art institution – or the institutions of the various arts. But these institutions also contain an awful lot of art that is clearly less valuable in every conceivable way than much of the popular art which the institution excludes.

## 5.

Let us now look at the distinction between proper art and popular art again, from a slightly different angle. According to dominating normative definitions of art, i.e. the modernist ones emphasizing reflection and/or contemplation, it is doubtful that the ability to function as a massage or amphetamine for someone is something that will qualify anything as proper art. Rather, it would disqualify

it. People within the institution would, at least traditionally, prefer some sort of a message to a massage.

On the other hand, music is a bit different, in that it is the art form which is the most abstract, the most far removed from easily formulated verbal 'meaning'. So what people get when they go to serious concerts with symphony orchestras could maybe well be described as a massage of body and soul. Most music produced through the history of mankind has actually been made in order to make people dance or simply enjoy themselves in some way. It is only certain stern varieties of modernist art theory – or ideology – that would seem to regard the denial of elementary, sensuous pleasure as quite a good thing and, moreover, as a criterion of "art".

So, in other words, if one applies some sensible normative theory of art, or of music as art, it may well be that the sort of popular music that I may sometimes enjoy intensely for 3 – 4 minutes in my car can actually be counted as art in spite of the fact that it is neither produced nor 'consumed' within the institution of art music. It does the same for me as other kinds of music does for other people, and on closer inspection, it might actually prove to be at least as complex as a number of very well-known pieces of so-called classical music.

It is, I think, possible to operate with a definition of art which is all-encompassing, one which refers to the totality of what one might problematically call expressive activities and products. Art is then an anthropological constant; it is something that in some form or other has been tied to mankind and human communities since primeval times. Such a definition of "art" would cover all amateur activities, from singing in the shower to snapshot photographs, from the telling of stories over a pint of beer to a child's attempts at drawing a cat. It does not wipe out differences between the professional and the amateurish or any other distinction one might want to establish, it simply points to the fundamental kinship between all of these activities and products. And with such a very generous definition, art becomes something obviously extremely important and powerful in the lives of human beings.

## 6.

As already argued, art of any kind can be powerful in our lives as individuals; it may make even people like me do silly things. But it not only influences behaviour in this quite direct way. It may also, perhaps more indirectly, influence more or less important choices in our lives.

I know that at least two important decisions I have made were clearly influenced by a novel and a film respectively, narratives that provided fictional models or illustrations of certain dilemmas and possible solutions. Poems or paintings or installations or advertising boards such as Benetton's or IKEA's or whatever can of course work in the same way. Pieces of art are tools for thinking, important

elements in our reservoirs of experiences, of images and ideas. And it is important here to note that this may be the case also for products that are not officially recognised as art: A cheap soap opera, a piece of trash literature or a country or western song so sentimental it's dripping – they may all contain some image, a line of text or some other exceptional quality that make them pop up in our heads when we reflect on some more or less serious issue, when we are in the middle of a very serious conversation or when voting in a general election.

With the all-encompassing definition of “art”, the total social effects of “art” become overwhelming. It covers anything from the depressing effects of ugly office buildings to the stimulation gathered from watching athletic breakdance outside a supermarket, the pleasures of listening to carefully selected, smooth classical music in the early morning and the bliss of watching your three-year old daughter imitate a ballerina. And it includes all forms of advertising and propaganda.

The power of proper art, that which is accepted within the Institution, is in itself much less important. But this is not to say that it is unimportant. Its power is, generally speaking, of two sorts. Firstly, it is the power of advanced aesthetics as source of new ideas, of creativity and social and cultural critique. Secondly, it is the power of class symbolism. I will try to say a little bit about both, and try to argue that these powers may be seen as the still valid reasons for the continuation of the work of an organisation such as Riksutstillingene or National Touring Exhibition Norway.

## 7.

I have tried to argue that there is a degree of sense in traditional hierarchies within the various arts – and within the institution of art as a whole – in that what they rank the highest, tend to be works which are well suited for reflection and contemplation. This means they are works that somehow can be said to function in some sort of dialogue with advanced thinking and advanced knowledge in general; such art is part of either the basis of today's intellectual life or the ‘cutting edge’, the scenes where tomorrow's dominating insights are prepared.

This means that professional so-called high art that enjoys critical attention from the public within the institution of art is potentially socially powerful in the way it may influence, first, certain segments of society's elites, and later, through these elites, the rest of society. One can imagine that art may confirm and support certain values or views – for instance encourage people who saw themselves as socialists in their student days to remain in touch with at least some of the values they held as young rebels even when way into middle age. Or one can imagine that art on the contrary provokes a reorientation in some people, say, toward a much greater appreciation of the sensual pleasures of aesthetic forms that may have repercussions on the understanding of existence in general.

Both of these examples are about art's power in relation to fundamental world views and values that are also formed and re-formed in other contexts than that of art, be it narrowly or broadly defined. But there are also ways in which proper art, possibly more than other forms or genres within the all-encompassing understanding of art that I have suggested, generally encourages thinking and creativity. Professional, contemporary visual art or serious music, along with, for instance, demanding forms of literature all encourage, by way of challenging, the attentive use of our senses, faculties or abilities: seeing, listening, reading in particularly concentrated, and yet possibly playful and therefore creative ways. This increased attentiveness is furthermore within the institution of art coupled with a norm for the experience of art which emphasizes distance, analysis, and reflection. This is obviously an important function, something that may make life richer, more varied and interesting, and ultimately also help people get a better grip on a society that is rapidly and constantly changing. And those who have the appropriate socialisation and education, in short *habitus*, will even have a chance to achieve physical and strongly emotional rewards out of art made for concentration and reflection as well: Schönberg does not work on just anybody's body.

All of this means that distributing examples of contemporary or, for that matter, ancient so-called 'high' art to as many people as possible, is still a good thing: It means trying to distribute as widely as possible the particular sorts of both sensual, cognitive and cultural resources that 'proper' art is tied to and which are essential to an understanding of why social and cultural elites form the core public for such art: It is simply helpful for those who exercise various forms of power – over their own lives as well as over the lives of others.

## 8.

There is, however, also another aspect to the role of art in the lives of elites in our society, and that is art in general's function as a symbol of different social classes and their lifestyles or values.

Many people now seem to believe that there are no longer social class divisions in our sort of society outside of those between the middle class and, on the one hand, the very poor, and, on the other, the very rich. The individual is free to choose his or her social identity at will. In fact, according to some, people may wake up in the morning and decide to be something radically different from what they were yesterday. Such is, these people claim, the freedom of post modern society.

But we all know what art means in terms of placing a person within a certain social category. This is a sort of everyday knowledge that confirms the existence of social classes in our country as well as others. When we guess where people we meet are coming from, socially speaking, our guesses will be all the more

correct if we know their preferences in art and art-related areas of consumer choice.

It is true that the growth in higher education has meant that well above 20 percent of the population in Norway now have exams from universities and colleges. This means a sizable growth in the key social groups for proper Art, and that is fine. The rest of the population is not at all formally excluded from what some call high art, but in practice many of them are. There is an asymmetry to the withering away of the borders between high and low art, since what it means is that well educated people are now able and allowed to enjoy both the high and the low, while most people are still to a considerable extent confined to the low. This may be considered an important informal reduction of their freedom of information, a key feature of democratic societies. Making high or proper art available to as many as possible is still a worthwhile cause.

The continued existence of social classes is perhaps most visible in the arts, in the patterns of tastes. In 1998 I, together with a young sociologist and specialist on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, studied the cultural preferences of students at all institutions of higher learning in Bergen. A large survey, followed by in-depth interviews revealed that differences in terms of educational, cultural, and economic capital could have striking consequences in tastes for music, television, literature – and, for that matter, food and travels. Classes may thus be less manifest today than fifty years ago, but you don't have to scrape the surface very much to find them just underneath.

Distributing high art in various ways may still be a contribution to the reduction of the effects of class differences on the freedom of individuals. Certain forms of art mean high class, as other forms, of popular art, means lower class. Visual art in particular is very much tied to the absolute upper class in this and other countries. The people who invest in visual art may be idiots when it comes to literature. These things are well worth further studies and reflection.

But this is as far as I got this morning.