

The Birth of Contemporary Culture: The Unwanted Child? Or, Contemporary Reactions to The Emergence of Postmodern Culture

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Abstract

The paper proposes to investigate two threads that eventually intersect. On the one hand it aims to look at the evolution of contemporary global (consumer) culture, more specifically the culture of neoliberalism. On the other hand, it looks at some of the critical reflections that pondered upon these phenomena at the time they came into being. One of the major questions I will try to contextualize is how “subversive sensibilities” became “conventional sensibilities.” In terms of the contemporary, i.e., 1960s, 1970s critical reflections upon the then emerging consumer culture I will specifically look at some of the works of Enzensberger, McLuhan and Sontag. All three of them contributed, in major ways, to how we try to make sense of various cultural phenomena today (mass media, the political potentialities of culture, the role of the social and economic context, etc.). These thinkers are the most significant but by no means the only ones who supported and theorized the kind of culture that was emerging in their time. Today we call that culture “(global) consumer culture.” I will examine and reconstruct the shift in their thinking that marked the realization of the potential transformation of “subversive sensibilities” into “conventional sensibilities.” The 21st century context of my investigation is provided by the process that has witnessed the most recent changes in culture (the shift from classic to global culture industry; the effects of the 2008 crash on culture; the theories about the end of neoliberalism etc.).

Keywords: global consumer culture, culture of neoliberalism, subversive sensibilities, conventional sensibilities

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In the early hours of Monday, February 29, 2016 almost the whole country of Hungary was, very impatiently, sitting in front of the TV sets or computer screens because a Hungarian movie was shortlisted for the Academy Awards. Sometime between 2 and 3 a.m., local time, the miracle did actually happen: *Son of Saul* won the Oscar. A very artsy film by first time director László Nemes Jeles.

The film had already opened in cinemas when an article appeared in the flagship Hungarian cinema journal *Filmvilág*, stating that “the history of European film art came to an end on July 30th, 2007” (Földényi, 2015, p. 5). That was the day when two undisputed masters of European cinema died: Michelangelo Antonioni and Ingmar Bergman.

The two unrelated but synchronic events have symbolic value for me: they show, in unambiguous terms, the deep seated uncertainty as to how to relate to the scene of contemporary global culture. Like most readers of this paper, I am sure, I simply cannot accept such apocalyptic views and prophecies. Globalization and consumerism have surely changed contemporary culture, but these—often dramatic changes indeed—do not necessarily imply the end of anything, however fashionable it has become since the end of the 1980s to envision the end of this and the end of that: history, capitalism, nature and most recently neoliberalism.

Few would doubt that the phenomenon of what we commonly refer to as postmodern, contemporary consumer culture is tightly linked to the emergence of globalization. Theories of culture in the postmodern age thus need to engage in theoretical and critical questions pertaining to the notion and practice of globalization. While some welcome the challenge and try to work out new concepts and strategies that help us better understand the conjuncture of the present, others would still prefer to work using somewhat older, more traditional conceptual frameworks. This paper proposes to investigate two threads that eventually intersect. On the one hand it aims to look at the evolution of contemporary global (consumer) culture, and, on the other hand, it looks at some of the critical reflections that analyzed these phenomena at the time they came into being. In other words, I would like to describe the present through an analysis of the past forces that created it, using some of the most significant voices of that historical moment, e.g., the work of Susan Sontag, Marshall McLuhan and others.

Recently, the very idea of the postmodern seems to be having an unlikely renaissance.¹ One is tempted to read, for example, Jeffrey Nealon’s *Post-Postmodernism* (2012) in this vein. In the first chapter of the book he says that his “project makes no claims to overcome Jameson’s analyses or displace them. Rather, *Post-Postmodernism* follows his analyses precisely through intensifying them [...]. Postmodernism is not a thing of the past [...] precisely because it’s hard to understand today as anything other than an intensified version of yesterday” (p. 8).

Modification and intensification of past phenomena are also important to Scott Lash’s and Celia Lury’s understanding of the contemporary cultural scene (which they characterize as the product of global culture industry). What Jameson is for Nealon, Horkheimer and Adorno are for Lash and Lury. As they argue, “moving on” means change on the one hand, and intensification on the other. The global culture industry is a modified and an intensified version of Horkheimer and Adorno’s classic culture

¹ For more on this phenomenon see the essay “Postmodernism Revisited” in Leitch.

industry. They claim that the famous Frankfurt School description of the contemporary cultural scenario in 1945 holds equally true in 1975, but no longer in 2005 (p. 4). In my reading, intensified aspects of the kind of culture that began to emerge in the 1960s and 1970s constitute our present.

In retrospect there seems to be a pattern discernable in the writings of some important figures of cultural and media criticism from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s. The pattern in question is a gradual, sometimes subtle, but—looking at the end result—always dramatic change in their thinking about the nature, function, relevance and major characteristics of contemporary culture. My hypothesis is that the most sensitive cultural critics of the period in question took note of some radical changes in the deep structure of contemporary culture(s) that were generally invisible not only for the “public,” but also for the less tuned-in critics of the era.² It is not “only” that they took note, but they were the ones who were at least partially responsible for the implementation of these rather consequential changes. What also unites these diverse thinkers is that after the initial enthusiasm with which they welcomed, recognized, described and promoted the changes as they were taking shape, they seemed to step back and stare, bewildered, at what the changes brought into existence. A couple of decades later a critic described this as the shift in their thinking that marked the realization of the potential transformation of “subversive sensibilities” into “conventional sensibilities” (Kennedy, 1995, pp. 80-82)

Marshall McLuhan, the “high priest of popcult,” for example, did not like popcult, to say the least. He viewed it with “total personal dislike and dissatisfaction” (McLuhan, 1995, p. 267) and had “nothing but distaste for the *process* of change” (McLuhan, 1995, p. 267). Around the turn of the millennium Michael Denning argued that even some leftist “champion[s] of cultural studies” (2004, p. 75) claim that the discipline, and more generally, the phenomenon that is often labeled as “cultural turn,” dangerously (and “uncritically”) flirts with the “market’s own *infatuation* [emphasis added] with the popular” and “wallow[s] in cheap entertainment” (2004, p. 75-76).

The way a certain thought is expressed is important and telling, and—especially in academic writing—not a matter of chance. Viewed from this angle, it might indeed be seen as more significant than just a question of lexicon, that the way Denning describes the phenomenon in question is very similar to the way it was described thirty years earlier by one of its most fierce critics and adversaries, Irving Howe. In his “The New York Intellectuals: A Chronicle & A Critique” (1968) he writes the following: “Others felt that the movies and TV were beginning to show more ingenuity and resourcefulness [...] though no one could have anticipated that *glorious infatuation with trash* [emphasis added] which Marshall McLuhan would make acceptable” (p. 35). Howe, and many others, for the record, were not really aware of how McLuhan felt about pop culture.

² It is almost always artists who first recognize that something new seems to be emerging. Sontag, as a fiction writer, will be cited later in the essay to this effect, but one could also refer to the mid century Italian genius, Pier Pasolo Pasolini, who, on the very first page of his recently released novel *Petrolio* (written in the early 1970s), observes that in 1960 “neocapitalism” [i.e., postmodernism] was just beginning to show its features, and that the new kind of knowledge it afforded was the privilege of so few people that the general perception of reality had not yet changed.

In 1969, when asked in the famous *Playboy* interview about the contemporary changes, McLuhan confesses that “I view such upheavals [i.e., the cultural transformations taking place in the period] with total personal dislike and dissatisfaction” (p. 267). He adds, however, that

I do see the prospect of a rich and creative retribalized society—free of the fragmentation and alienation of the mechanical age—emerging from this *traumatic period of culture clash* [emphasis mine]; but I have nothing but distaste for the *process* [emphasis in original] of change. [...] I do not personally cheer the dissolution of that tradition through the *electronic involvement of all the senses* [emphasis mine]. (p. 267)

He was heavily criticized by leading contemporary Cultural Studies scholars, including Raymond Williams himself, who claimed that “McLuhan’s technological determinism acts as an ideological justification of dominant social relations” (Stevenson, 2010, p. 26). McLuhan only saw any value in the emerging (postmodern/consumer/electric) culture in so far as he could regard it as a stepping stone in a long process that would eventually lead to the establishment of a “retribalized society.” He was *not* interested in the political potentialities of certain elements of the emerging new culture, most prominently that of electronic mass media, the spread of which, by the way, seems absolutely unstoppable in our own time.

I should very briefly mention another contemporary reading of McLuhan, this time by the leading contemporary West German Leftist thinker, culture critic, author, public intellectual Hans Magnus Enzensberger. Because of the lack of any potentially politically active Marxist interpretation of the emerging new culture, Enzensberger claims that this oversight (on the part of the contemporary Left) creates a “void” that necessarily invites other types of interpretations. McLuhan’s is the most visible, misleading, and self-deceiving of these. It is dangerous and to be avoided because it lacks any political valence, maintains Enzensberger. That missing political grounding, in his frame of mind, can only be Marxist -- and McLuhan is most certainly not Marxist. This is why the Canadian media and culture theorist was so fiercely rejected and ridiculed by some on the Left; it was not only his supposed “apolitical” stance that provoked the Left but also more importantly his anti-Marxist leaning. Enzensberger also claims that McLuhan “promises the salvation of man through [...] technology” (p. 17), very much implying the lack of human intervention in the development of technology.³ On top of the fact that McLuhan does not advocate for a (Marxist) political intervention, his understanding of the function and mission of the new culture, including the electronic media points in a radically different direction from that of Enzensberger and the engaged Left of the period in question.

Another very good case in point is the work of Susan Sontag. In 1996 she wrote an afterword to the Spanish translation of her most well known book *Against Interpretation* (1966). Looking back on the essays collected in that volume, written between 1961 and 1965, she melancholically muses over the changes that had happened to “culture,” “the arts,” and “values” during the thirty-odd year period that

³ In the scholarship McLuhan is repeatedly accused of “technological determinism,” see for example Kittler.

had elapsed since she wrote the essays. What for me is the most interesting in these melancholic notes is that she does not take credit for the initial implementation of the changes, and furthermore, does not even appear to be aware of her own role in it. What she sees in contemporary (postmodern) culture is met, on her part, with dislike and dissatisfaction. Describing the contemporary, in 1996, she uses the very term that Irving Howe used in 1968 (partly against the work of Sontag): “barbaric” (Sontag, 2001, p. 311).

Liam Kennedy rightly observes that “[w]hereas in the early and mid-1960s Sontag pushed herself to some optimism about the ‘shock’ value and ‘transgressive’ impetus of the new sensibility arts, by the mid-1970s she is sharply critical of the value of such ideas in a post-industrial consumer society” (p. 80). Andrew Ross also claims that this kind of attitude is already present in Sontag, even in the early essays that make up *Against Interpretation* (p. 147). According to Sontag, under the consumer capitalist conditions, “subversive sensibilities” become “conventional sensibilities,” and this neutralization is due to the democratizing effect of consumer capitalism on culture (Kennedy, 1995, p. 80-82).

The way Sontag describes the new and emerging culture of 1965 could, without any difficulty, be applied to our contemporary culture as well:

What we are witnessing is not so much a conflict of cultures as the creation of a new (potentially unitary) kind of sensibility. This new sensibility is rooted, as it must be, in our experience, experiences which are new in the history of humanity—in extreme social and physical mobility; in the crowdedness of the human scene (both people and material commodities multiplying at a dizzying rate); in the availability of new sensations such as speed (physical speed, as in airplane travel; speed of images, as in the cinema); and in the pan-cultural perspective on the arts that is possible through the mass reproduction of art objects. (“One Culture” p. 296).

She talks about the birth of a “new sensibility,” based on which a “scientific culture” comes into being and defines the contemporary. The new culture is preeminently tied to and based on (new) sensory experiences. The conviction that the new emergent culture is/will be based on the ever expanding field of (new) sensory experiences found its way into her first fictional work as well, the novel *The Benefactor* (1963). Hippolyte, her main character, says that “I am extremely interested in revolutions, but I believe that the real revolutions of my time have been changes not of government or of the personnel of public institutions, but *revolutions of feelings and seeing, much more difficult to analyze*” (*The Benefactor* 6-7, qtd. in Kaplan, 2012, p. 118, emphasis added).⁴ Although Sontag does not yet make the connection, looking back from the 21st century and taking into consideration the major changes that have taken place since the mid 1960s, one can, I think, do it: it is the universally available (ever new) sensory experiences that are responsible for the process, the end results of which she so vehemently disapproves. The transformation of, for want of a better term, modern/pre-postmodern culture into the postmodern, consumer culture as we now know it is the same force that neutralizes the “subversive sensibilities” and makes

⁴ Note the similarity in tone and content of this quote with the paraphrase from the Pasolini novel on the first page of this paper.

them “conventional sensibilities.” This transformation was possible (actually unavoidable) because of the democratizing force of the contemporary cultural context that was, by the way, very much anticipated and welcomed in the 1960s. High hopes were, as we see, followed by harsh disappointments. Sontag, for example, was convinced that the “non-literary” “pan culture” will challenge the “conventionally accepted boundaries”: “not just the one between the ‘scientific’ and the ‘literary-artistic’ cultures, or the one between ‘art’ and ‘non-art’; but also between many established distinctions within the world of culture itself—that between form and content, the frivolous and the serious, and (a favorite of literary intellectuals) ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture” (“One Culture” p. 297). On the list of the generally accepted characteristics of our own, i.e., contemporary global consumer culture these items would surely sound more than familiar.

Ironically enough, thirty years later, writing in the mid 1990s, Sontag’s melancholic and sadly wistful phrases echo those of the 19th century intellectual whom she so fiercely criticized on more than one occasion, Matthew Arnold. If one puts the following two quotes next to each other, one just cannot help recognizing the very close similarities. Sontag, in 1996, says “How one wishes [...] its [the 1960s] disdain for commerce had survived” (“Afterword” p. 311). Matthew Arnold, many decades earlier, expressed the same kind of contempt: “Consider these people, then, their way of life, their habits, their manners, the very tone of their voices; look at them attentively; observe the literature they read, the things which give them pleasure, the words which come forth out of their mouths, the thoughts which make the furniture of their minds; would any amount of wealth be worth having with the condition that one was to become just like these people by having it?” (quoted in Jenks, 2004, p. 23). Equally ironic is the fact that Sontag refers to the 1960s era (in which for her and for some others the “new” showed its features) as a “bygone age” (“Afterword” p. 312), as a world which “no longer exists” (“Afterword” p. 311)—without realizing her own role in the process that ended so sadly and so hopelessly (for her).

She either does not take credit for the changes (implying the results of those changes as well) or claims that her aims were very different: “The ever more triumphant values of consumer capitalism promote—indeed, impose—the cultural mixes and insolence and defense of pleasure that *I was advocating for quite different reasons*” (“Afterword” p. 311, emphasis added). Thirty years later she understands certain very serious implications, which she claims was not aware of when writing the essays of *Against Interpretation* in which, by the way, she does promote “the cultural mixes” and a “defense of pleasure.” She writes: “What I didn’t understand [...] was [...] that some of the more transgressive art I was enjoying would reinforce frivolous, merely consumerist transgressions” (p. 312).

My point here is to show that there was a group of critics, theorists, intellectuals like McLuhan and Sontag who did indeed initiate the implementation of the radical changes that resulted in what is known today as “consumer culture,” “contemporary culture” or “postmodern culture,” but—contrary to some widely held beliefs—they were not the ones who eventually fulfilled the implied promises, or rose to the task of fully embracing and academically analyzing and interpreting the “new.” What is more, they—directly or indirectly, implicitly or explicitly—turned away from it and criticized it. In sync with its emergence they saw the features of the “new,” welcomed it, but eventually distanced themselves from it. By that time, however, and with their

significant help, the genie was already out of the bottle—and nobody had the power to return it. The newer generations of scholars, critics and (in growing numbers) academics could only whole-heartedly accept and embrace that which was eventually rejected by prominent members of the previous generation of scholars, who had first recognized the newness, relevance and potential of, for want of a better term, postmodern culture.

At the risk of over-simplifying the rather complex process of the birth of contemporary consumer culture, one could describe it as the process in which the ever more translucent mask of modernism begins to fade away and give way to the true features of the real face behind it: those of postmodernism. Martin Bull recently argued, in a most articulate way, that what we today commonly refer to as “postmodern culture” or “postmodern features” or “postmodern characteristics” have *always*, always already, been part of modernism. The signs, the fault lines have always been there: they just remained invisible for most. What the decade between the mid-1960s and the mid-1970s brought into light, for those who had the eyes and intellect to see and sense the tectonic movements in the depth of contemporary culture(s) was “just” an *accelerated* and *intensified* phase of the process. Bull presents modernism as a cultural epoch that *always* had this kind of duality: the synchronic presence of the experimental, the avant-garde *and* the commercial, the kitschy, the market- and profit oriented. Before the 1960s, 1970s the latter kind of culture was called “mass culture,” and after that, “postmodern” culture. What many (including the Hungarian film theorist quoted at the beginning of this paper) see as a dramatic and tragic caesura could also be seen as nothing else but the tipping over of the balance of the dual tradition of modernity. The driving forces behind this shift are not very hard to identify either: intensification and extensification of electronically-mediated culture; the rise of multiculturalism; the triumph of commodity culture; the world wide spread of consumer societies; the birth of infotainment; sociological changes; democratization on a world wide scale, etc. To put it simply: the real face of modernity has always been that of the postmodern, or as Clement Greenberg puts it: “commodity culture and classicism [classic, experimental, avant-garde modernism] were manifestations of the same thing, the former merely a debased version of the latter” (quoted in Bull, 2001, p. 101).

So far we have seen two kinds of reactions to or reflections on the emergence postmodern consumer culture: one I would describe as the attitude of “recognition and rejection,” (Sontag) the other as “neutral recognition in retrospect” (Bull). Very consciously I do not deal with either contemporary or later evaluations of postmodern consumer culture that reject it wholesale (either on aesthetic, educational, political or any other grounds). In the remaining part of the paper I would like to look very briefly at some 21st c. reflections that I would label as “recognition and acceptance.” Using the broadest possible terms I would characterize this latter attitude as one which not only recognizes and accepts this kind of culture, but at the same time offers tools to better understand it.

Scott Lash and Celia Lury’s introduction to their book *Global Culture Industry* (2007) helps us see more clearly how the classic culture industry gave way, *no earlier than in the mid 1990s*, to the global culture industry. They make it clear that they disagree with Horkheimer and Adorno’s classic account of the culture industry on several grounds. First, just as in classic British Cultural Studies scholarship, they see the

realm of culture as the site *not only* for domination, *but* also for resistance as well. Second, as they phrase it: “things have moved on.”

In 1945 and in 1975 culture was still fundamentally a superstructure. As a superstructure, both domination and resistance took place in and through superstructures—through ideology, through symbols, through representation. When culture was primarily superstructural, cultural entities were still exceptional. What was mostly encountered in everyday life were material objects (goods), from the economic infrastructure. This was true in 1945 and still so in 1975. But in 2005, cultural objects are everywhere; as information, as communications, as branded products, as financial services, as media products, as transport and leisure services, cultural entities are no longer the exception: they are the rule. Culture is so ubiquitous that it, as it were, seeps out of the superstructure and comes to infiltrate, and then take over the infrastructure itself. It comes to dominate both the economy and experience in everyday life. (pp. 3-4)

The claims by Lash and Lury that in the era of postmodern global consumer culture the super- and the infrastructure collapse into each other and that *this is what defines* the age echo earlier claims of Fredric Jameson and Lawrence Grossberg. These claims also mean that the conceptual frameworks that have been in use to describe the cultural sphere are not necessarily relevant any longer. Although culture has undergone enormous changes due to the forces of globalization, (i.e., culture became commodity culture) the concept of culture has not changed accordingly. In his essay “Culture and Globalization” (2003), Imre Szeman states that “globalization has made it impossible to maintain any of the fictions that have continued to circulate around the Western concept of culture” (pp. 92-3). Such fictions include: the autonomy of culture; the role attributed to culture in identity formations, particularly that of national identity; the ahistorical and apolitical nature of cultural/artistic “values,” etc.

“Over the past 40 years, the legitimacy of the concept of culture that continues to underwrite the humanities has been under concerted attack—and not [only] from without, but from within the humanities itself. ... In the Western academy, the development of cultural studies has drawn attention to other blind spots” (p. 100)—declares Szeman in the same piece. A decade later, in 2012, one of the leading authorities in Cultural Studies, Graeme Turner approvingly observed that the discipline “has helped to place the construction of everyday life at the centre of contemporary intellectual inquiry and research in the humanities” and, as a result of that, “the landscape of the humanities and social sciences has been transformed by cultural studies over the past 30 years.” (p. 12)

In the past couple of decades, mostly due to work done by the discipline of Cultural Studies, the meaning of the term in academic discourse “culture” has significantly broadened. Furthermore, exactly those characteristics/features which were originally present in mass or popular culture have become more and more obvious. Yet the discipline claims that they have always been there: “culture has never been what we believed it to be; it has always had a different function than the guardians of the humanities would have liked to have assigned to it” (Szeman, 2003 p. 102).

My most important question in this paper has focused exactly on this issue: when did contemporary theorists note the transformation and how did they reflect on it? The

way I see this is that we are still struggling to come to grips with these phenomena and this uncertainty explains the diverse attitudes that we have heard about earlier in my presentation. Becoming "conventional," in this context, means that a given characteristic/feature of culture becomes part of the ubiquitous postmodern consumer culture. That, I think, is a given. The question that remains open is how one relates to that reality and in this paper I've tried to show a couple of possibilities. Certain, already existing phenomena get displaced into such a new context that they become more visible, more full fledged, more dominant. Simplifying it, these phenomena are those features that are associated with postmodern culture; and the context is that of the peculiar culture and cultural practices of global consumer capitalism. This is the contemporary constellation that replaces the previous ones and this is the one that needs to be understood and explained.

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