

Jozef Kovalčík and Max Ryyänen, eds. *Aesthetics of Popular Culture*. Bratislava: VŠVU; Slovart, 2014, 254 pp. ISBN 978-80-89259-86-1

WHITHER THE AESTHETICS OF POPULAR CULTURE?

One of the results of the international conference *Aesthetics of Popular Culture*, organized at the Academy of Fine Arts and Design, Bratislava, in late November and early December 2012, was an essay volume of the same name, published two years later. Its aim, according to the editors, Josef Kovalčík and Max Ryyänen, is to present 'philosophical reflections about popular culture' (pp. 11, 43–44). Although philosophical aesthetics was present at the founding of the study of popular culture, the role of aestheticians in the current debate about popular culture is, according to the editors, 'virtually non-existent' in comparison with cultural studies (p. 42). Consequently, the book under review is meant to contribute to the revitalization of the study of popular culture from the point of view of philosophical aesthetics (p. 44).

A key question, however, is how can philosophical aesthetics meaningfully contribute to the study of popular culture. Instead of a systematic interpretation of what the editors understand by philosophical aesthetics, its questions, its methods for answering them, and what exactly they mean by the term 'popular culture', they have, in the introduction, chosen to provide a historical overview of philosophers who have in some way been interested in the theoretical reflection of popular culture (popular arts) and its conceptual, semiotic, or hermeneutic analysis.

Before commenting on the individual essays, I will consider a crucial problem of the introductory essay and indeed the whole book – namely, the insufficient definition of the term 'popular culture'. First, there are several vaguely similar terms that could have been used – for example, mass culture or mass art – and the editors' choice of one of them needs to be explained. The editors note that 'popular culture' is a term widely used by researchers all over the world (p. 16). This, however, does not suffice as an explanation, because it fails to provide any substantial reason for the choice of this term. The editors reject the term 'mass culture' because it is, they claim, burdened with negative evaluative connotations, which are in conflict with the position of aesthetic meliorism that in principle admits the aesthetic potential of works of popular culture.¹ The question arises, however, why the editors did not use the term 'mass art', whose value-neutral definition has been developed by Noël Carroll.² The editors would probably

¹ Richard Shusterman, 'Form and Funk: The Aesthetic Challenge of Popular Art', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 31 (1991): 203–13.

² Noël Carroll, *A Philosophy of Mass Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

explain that they wished to avoid the complicated term 'art': 'Popular culture [...] definitely points to a more enthusiastic vision of the nature of the field, still without leaning on the complicated concept of art.' (p. 16) If, however, by the complicated nature of the term they meant its evaluative connotation, some definitions of the term 'art' are evaluatively neutral, for example, Dickie's institutional definition of art.³ And anyway, the term 'culture' is no less complicated than the term 'art'. Just try to explain to someone what culture actually is!

Another weakness is the editors' silence about the content of the term.⁴ As a theoretical term, 'popular culture' has several possible – often incompatible – meanings, which predetermine not only the scope of its research but also the choice of suitable methods.⁵ Popular culture can, first of all, mean culture that is popular among most people at a particular time. Second, it can mean poor-quality culture, which does not meet the demands placed on what is known as 'high culture' (aesthetically valuable culture). Third, popular culture can be conceived of as mass culture (that is, commercial), produced by mass information technology and intended for mass consumption. Popular culture can, fourthly, be conceived of as folk culture, that is, culture created spontaneously by people and intended for the local community. Fifthly, from a neo-Marxist perspective, popular culture denotes the products of the culture industry, which spreads amongst its recipients an ideology, and thereby contributes to the cultural and social dominance of the political elites. And, lastly, some scholars in cultural studies understand popular culture as the way people consume (use, interpret) products of the culture industry.⁶ Simply with regard to the semantic variability of the term, it needs to be defined in any research on popular culture.

The definition of 'popular culture' which is implicitly advocated by the editors can be surmised from the remark that the distinguished thinkers in the history of the aesthetics of popular culture were concerned with the study of 'professional artistic production that stands institutionally outside of the confines of the art world' (pp. 15–16). This characterization, however, cannot dispense with a definition of the term 'art'. Yet that definition is rejected by the editors (p. 16), without further explanation. Consequently, it is unclear what makes the selected

³ George Dickie, *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974); *The Art Circle: A Theory of Art* (New York: Haven, 1984).

⁴ The editors of the volume under review might reply that in the introduction they are concerned with the history of the term 'popular culture' in philosophical aesthetics. In that case, they may get by without an initial definition of the term, but the question of what the object of the research of the subsequent articles actually is would then remain unanswered.

⁵ John Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction* (Harlow: Pearson, 2009).

⁶ See John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture* (London: Unwin, 1989).

works or cultural forms that are then analysed in the subsequent chapters part of popular culture. The conceptual connection between the introduction and the subsequent chapters thus remains without clarification.

The lack of a sufficient definition of the term 'popular culture' is, I believe, problematic for another reason as well. The editors have left out a philosophical critique of the legitimacy of the terms 'popular culture' and 'popular art'.⁷ Although both of these terms are generally used in common parlance and in the language of theory, no set of cultural artefacts or art works is, according to their critics, distinguished by essential characteristics on whose basis one could single out all the works of popular art (culture) and only those works. Definitions of 'popular culture', which imply its lower aesthetic value in comparison with high culture, are, considering the existence of so many counterexamples, unconvincing, not only from an empirical point of view but also from the point of view of their a priori normative character and function for social stratification.⁸ Since the volume under review seeks to undertake a philosophical analysis of popular culture, one would have expected at least considerations of this fundamental objection to the terminology and to the sole existence of the subject its chapters consider.

Let's leave aside the question of the terminological fuzziness of the introduction, and consider instead the individual case studies. What can we say about their analysis of the aesthetics of popular culture? Most of the articles are concerned with analysis of the aesthetics of selected works or genres of popular culture. Two articles deal with theoretical questions: the essay by Jörn Ahrens, concerning the legitimacy of the hierarchical distinction between high and popular culture from the sociological point of view, and the article by Carsten Friberg, about the role of aesthetics in investigating the perception of objects of everyday use, among which Friberg ranks works of popular culture.

Ahrens, in his article, first points out the continuing survival of the tendency to signification of the evaluative distinction between popular and high culture. He defines these terms on the basis not of the immanent properties of the art works but of the structural opposition between the two types of culture. The symbolic dominance of high culture was, according to Ahrens, until recently manifested by the fact that the cultural recognition of works of popular culture

⁷ David Novitz, 'Ways of Artmaking: The High and the Popular in Art', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 29 (1989): 213–29; Ted Cohen, 'High and Low Thinking about High and Low Art', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 51 (1993): 151–56. And that despite the fact that one of the participants who gave a paper at the Bratislava conference, the late American philosopher Ted Cohen, advocated the idea that the term 'popular culture' actually refers to nothing, indeed that popular culture does not exist (p. 37).

⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

depended on the extent to which their creators imitated the creative techniques of works of high art. Though this resulted in an expansion of the field of high culture, the principle of differentiation based on the signification of the aesthetics of high culture and the symbolic degradation of the aesthetics of popular culture remained unchanged. Ahrens, however, notices that this kind of 'symbolic violence' is currently becoming weaker as a consequence of the ascent of a new culture, called 'matched culture', characteristic of which is an absence of aesthetic hierarchism, together with a plurality of art works, cultural forms, and approaches, which are linked by their distribution and reception by means of mass information technology.

Sociologists concerned with the historical development of the relationship between cultural and social distinctions in European societies and in the United States, like Thorstein Veblen, Pierre Bourdieu, Richard Peterson, Douglas Holt, or Tony Bennett, have described and critically analysed the ways the social hierarchy in a given society has been strengthened and legitimized through the cultural hierarchy. According to Ahrens, the hierarchy between popular and high culture has been gradually vanishing. But he does not base his hypothesis on either extensive qualitative or quantitative research, and it must therefore first be demonstrated empirically. Moreover, he is not the first to claim that the division of culture into high and low is losing its symbolic power. The sociologists Richard A. Peterson and Roger M. Kern, for example, already in the 1990s demonstrated, using quantitative research into the popularity of music genres, that the hierarchical division of culture into high and low had, in the United States, been substituted for by a new distinction between, on the one hand, omnivorous consumers of various forms of popular and high culture and, on the other, consumers with 'univorous' tastes in culture, who limit themselves to a few favourite styles or genres of popular culture.⁹ The traditional distinction between the two types of cultural object is thus being substituted for by a new cultural distinction between various ways of consuming. In his research, another American sociologist, Douglas Holt, has demonstrated that distinctions between high culture and popular culture, rather than vanishing, are shifting into another area of cultural consumption. Whereas the democratization of the various genres and styles of art and the rehabilitation of hitherto overlooked creative practices are characteristic of the current field of art production, in the area of sport, ways of dressing, and tourism this hierarchical distinction is still powerfully applied.¹⁰

⁹ Richard A. Peterson and Roger M. Kern, 'Changing Highbrow Taste: From Snob to Omnivore', *American Sociological Review* 51 (1996): 900–907.

¹⁰ Douglas Holt, 'Does Cultural Capital Structure American Consumption?', *Journal of Consumer Research* 25 (1998): 1–25.

The question therefore arises whether the shift in the cultural distinction into another area of cultural consumption has not occurred also in the emergence of matched culture, or whether it has not changed qualitatively. Consequently, Ahrens's article fails to place the research on the distinction between high and popular culture into the wider context of the transformation of the field of cultural production and consumption practices.

Carsten Friberg's contribution to the volume goes beyond the boundaries of mainstream aesthetic research. Friberg focuses his attention – as do proponents of the aesthetics of everyday life (including John Dewey, Thomas Leddy, and Yuriko Saito) – on the phenomena of daily routine, which philosophical aesthetics has previously overlooked. Unlike those proponents, however, Friberg does not seek the aesthetic dimension in these neglected natural phenomena or utilitarian objects: 'My concern is not about an aesthetic appreciation of everyday phenomena, which is central in many works on everyday aesthetics where aesthetics is a matter of an intensified and rich perception coming from an art-context; my concern is about how ordinary phenomena exert an influence on us in forming our perception' (p. 71). He is concerned to rehabilitate aesthetics in Baumgarten's sense of the study of sensorial cognition or perception. Friberg proposes that philosophical aesthetics should be concerned with the description of sensorial and perceptual phenomena, the way they affect us, and the way they are influenced by social institutions (including popular culture) with the aim of 'increasing our awareness of how we feel, perceive and interpret the world' (p. 72).

Regardless of whether Friberg's contribution should have been included in a publication on the aesthetics of popular culture, reading this essay makes one wonder whether Friberg expects something from aesthetics which it cannot provide. These doubts are based on a consideration of the object and the methods of aesthetic research. Since the eighteenth century, a chief task of philosophical aesthetics has been to define the nature of aesthetic experience and thus to distinguish it from sensory experience. Many aestheticians agree, for example, that to be able to call a specific sensory experience 'aesthetic', the attention of the recipient must be focused on distinguishing and assessing forms, sensory qualities, and meanings for their own sake.¹¹ Also in the expanding field of cognitive aesthetics research approaches of the empirical and experimental sciences are used to investigate the special nature of aesthetic experience and its cognitive content. Friberg's suggestion is therefore in conflict with what the vast majority of contemporary aestheticians are endeavouring to

¹¹ Roger Scruton, *Art and Imagination* (London: Methuen, 1974), 148; Robert Stecker, 'Aesthetic Experience and Aesthetic Value', *Philosophy Compass* 1 (2006): 1–10.

do. That in itself does not yet disqualify Friberg's efforts. Sensory perception is an important part of aesthetic experience. Nevertheless, its description and analysis – that is, the answering of questions about how sensory perception takes place, which levels and parts of it can be distinguished, what influences it, and so forth – are the focus of other academic disciplines, first and foremost psychology, which for this purpose has at its disposal a number of research methods, ranging from introspection to cognitive neuropsychology. Why in this respect should aesthetics compete with phenomenological psychology regarding the description of qualitative properties of perceptual experience, bodily sensations, emotions, and moods, or with phenomenological philosophy regarding the description of necessary structures of experience? Does it have at its disposal methods and conceptual tools that promise new information about perception other than those that psychology or phenomenological philosophy can provide? Friberg offers no answer. Similarly, his call for critical research into the influence of social institutions on our sensorial cognition is, I believe, like beating a dead horse. This kind of research has been conducted for a number of years, for example, in phenomenological sociology and in sociological research on the emotions, which is concerned with the influence of social norms, role expectations, institutions, discourses, and ideologies on the emotional experience of social actors.¹²

Despite my criticism, I believe that Friberg's essay contains hints of the direction in which the aesthetic investigation of the 'culture of everyday life' could go in future. Another area still insufficiently researched is the aesthetics of consumer culture, even though the aesthetics of everyday life has taken a similar course since the 1990s.¹³ The study of aesthetic qualities of consumer goods – whether from the synchronic or the diachronic perspective – must, however, be carried out with methodological deliberation and the careful selection of suitable research methods. In that regard, the conceptual tools and methods of the humanities (including aesthetics), originally developed for the interpretation of works of art, can be very useful. Their application to artefacts of consumer culture helps us to understand the symbolic values of these artefacts, that is, their communicated images, stories, emotions, and values, and can, in the wider context, also contribute to substituting an interpretative approach for the one-sided way of looking at consumer culture as an instrument for the manipulation and indoctrination of the consumer.

¹² Eva Illouz, *Why Love Hurts: A Sociological Explanation* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012).

¹³ Yuriko Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Sherry Irvin, 'The Pervasiveness of the Aesthetic in Ordinary Experience', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 48 (2008): 29–44. In their analyses, scholars of the aesthetics of everyday life focus mainly on a description of the aesthetic experience of natural or everyday urban phenomena which are not directly linked to consumer culture and consumer commodities.

The remaining contributions in the volume are concerned either with the interpretation of selected works of popular culture or the analysis of popular genres, or kinds, of art. A typical feature of these interpretations is that their authors look at a 'popular' text from the point of view of a certain 'high' cultural theory.¹⁴ The result is a productive clash between reading Derrida and watching Nolan's Batman film *Dark Knight Trilogy*, between Bakhtin's theory of the grotesque and Carroll's theory of mass art on the one hand and horror stories for children on the other, between Marxism and critical theory and sci-fi films, between Peter Bürger's theory of the Avant-garde and music videos parodying 'Gangnam Style', between the aesthetics of everyday life and the opening-title sequence of the *Dexter* TV series, between reading Adorno and Lacan on the one hand and film as an art form on the other.

My intention is not to take issue with the individual interpretations. Rather, I want to think methodologically about the purpose of these interpretations from the viewpoint of philosophical and empirical aesthetics. Whereas the introduction of the volume under review reflects on the history of aesthetics of popular culture 'from above', the individual articles represent so-called 'aesthetics from below'. On the one hand, the object of investigation in these articles corresponds to the object of investigation of the specialized aesthetics concerned with the description or assessment of the aesthetic qualities of works, genres, or kinds of popular culture. Furthermore, theory in these articles provides the foundations for the interpretation of a given popular text or popular cultural form. Nevertheless, I do not see in these individual articles any explanation for how the authors have come to their conclusions. To put it more precisely, the authors do not work with a method that would help the reader to obtain the same results.¹⁵ No philosophical or empirical investigation, however, can get by without methodological deliberation and a methodical approach. This condition must be met even by art critics, whose tasks are not only to describe a work, to interpret and assess it, but also to properly justify its assessment. Methodological naivety and the absence of method is manifested, for example, when the authors make claims about the effect of a popular text on the reader, without conducting an analysis of the relevant audience.

In his article about the Batman trilogy, for example, Philip Freytag claims: 'Apparently, the movie brings forth the experience that contamination is an

¹⁴ In the following, I use the term 'popular text' to mean works of popular culture as a subject of interpretation. For more on the metaphor of culture as text, see Clifford Geertz, 'Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight', in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 412–53.

¹⁵ That is not to say, however, that the work has only one right meaning which can be reached if the right method of investigation is chosen.

impossibility of justice, but also an experience of justice as coming. [...] Facing the ethical question in the form of “performative powerlessness”, the audience of Nolan’s *Batman* is ultimately embraced by what Derrida was looking for: a “messianicity without messianism” (p. 118) Only someone who has read Derrida, however, can interpret the trilogy in this way. To present this interpretation as a generally authoritative reaction is, I believe, not only a methodologically unsupported claim, but also an intellectual overinterpretation.

In her article ‘Lower than Low? Domesticating the Aesthetics of Horror in Childish Remakes’, Susanne Ylönen, the author of this stimulating analysis of the aesthetics of horror stories for children, describes the paternalistic domestication of the horror genre in children’s literature. The result, she argues, is a loss of the genre’s subversive potential to interfere with our routine perception of the social reality and kitschy social stereotypes, for example, our idealized notion of childhood. The author makes these claims, however, without analysing the very young audience of this genre. She does so even though she realizes that ‘the power of a sign also changes according to the situation in which one experiences it. [...] Furthermore, children are usually thought to be frightened by things that adults do not find frightening at all, while adults may be disgusted by something that children find interesting.’ (p. 126) But to draw conclusions about the aesthetic qualities of a certain work or genre without asking the recipients of this work or genre for their opinion is problematic if we admit that aesthetic value is formed in the interaction between the intrinsic properties of a work and the needs, interests, knowledge, and values of the recipients.

In their article ‘Everyday Gangnam Avant-Garde – Remediations on YouTube’, the authors Mette Jensen and Sophia Smith focus on the remediation of the music video *Gangnam Style* by the South Korean rapper PSY. Using Bürger’s *Theorie der Avantgarde* (1974) they point to the application of avant-garde techniques – for example, montage, fragmentation of reality, coincidence, and shock – in music videos, which creatively imitate the original music video and are eventually uploaded to the YouTube server by their makers or prosumers (amateurs and professional artists). The authors point out that unlike contemporary neo-avant-garde works these video parodies succeed in co-making an aesthetic conversation and the practice of everyday life, and thereby achieve the original aim of the Avant-garde. Furthermore, the authors of this article add the interpretations of selected videos, which reveal their deeper meanings and their going beyond the sphere of entertainment by pointing out social problems or resisting gender stereotypes or political pressures. Although the interpretational analysis of videos in the style of *Gangnam Style* is perceptive and inventive, the authors – despite being aware that the meaning of a work consists in

the interaction between textual structure and reader (p. 168) – commit a methodological error: without conducting an audience analysis, they unjustifiably presume to know how the audience understands these videos: ‘This article examined YouTube from a micro perspective, since in this context we are interested in the particular aesthetic manifestations of remediations as they appear to the recipient’ (pp. 178–79).

The same methodological mistakes are also made by Adam Andrzejewski, Mikołaj Golubiewski, and Joanna Kulas, the authors of the article ‘Everyday Aesthetics of Popular Culture: Dexter’s Opening Sequence’. Though they claim to be applying the methods of the aesthetics of everyday life (p. 183) to the opening sequence of the TV series *Dexter*, they are in fact applying selected theoretical observations and concepts (contingency, repetition, ambivalence, and permeability). They then interpret the opening sequence – which shows the protagonist’s morning routine (shaving, having breakfast, cleaning his teeth, getting dressed) after being bitten by a mosquito – as a reconceptualization of everyday acts from the viewpoint of their hidden violent side, and they deduce the pragmatic – environmental, moral, social, and political – consequences of the visual representation of Dexter’s white shirt or his making breakfast.

This analysis, however, seems weak for several reasons. First of all, it is unclear why the aesthetics of everyday life should be a suitable theoretical instrument for the analysis of the medial representation of everyday life which employs formal approaches conceptualized by the traditional art-centred aesthetics that scholars of the aesthetics of everyday life are critical of. The creators of the opening sequence, for example, use close-ups and nonstandard shots from below and above to achieve the signification and defamiliarization of acts of a daily routine, with the aim of evoking aesthetic distance. Apart from that, the authors of this article make a category mistake, by confusing the analysis of the aesthetics of everyday life for the analysis of the aesthetics of the visual representation of everyday life. Secondly, the textual analysis of the opening sequence uses no method that would ensure the validity of its conclusions or distinguish interpretation from mere overinterpretation. Thirdly, the authors of the article speak in the name of the viewers, or wrongly attribute their own (over)interpretation of a popular text to them, without asking viewers how they understand the opening sequence. Thus we eventually learn, ‘The viewer has to respond to this ambivalence in the form of an aesthetic judgement that would include a moral judgement: Do I like Dexter (and *Dexter*) – a handsome perfectionist yet a sociopath?’ (p. 193)

It is generally true that specialized aesthetics, such as the aesthetics of popular culture, has to deal with aesthetic qualities of a specific work or genre of popular

culture always by a certain method, which leads either to investigation of the work itself or its audience. The aesthetics of popular culture can, in this respect, draw on the rich methodological storehouse of the humanities and the social sciences. If it does not, it runs the risk that its results will not be taken seriously by the academic community. In specialized aesthetics so far, the approaches and methods of textual analysis which are typical of the humanities (mostly in literary studies) have dominated. In the Czech Republic and Slovakia, this methodological inclination of aesthetics to the humanities is caused both by the institutional proximity of aesthetics departments to other departments of the humanities at the faculties of arts and by their spatial and mental isolation from the social sciences. This has been to the detriment of aesthetics (but also of the social sciences), because empirical aesthetics lacks complementary knowledge about how popular texts are understood by their audiences, how they are appropriated, and what aspects of these texts are aesthetically relevant to them. These meanings escape academic aesthetics, but this time not because aestheticians refuse to deal with analyses of popular texts that enjoy commercial success, but because the discipline is for the most part methodologically closed to the approaches of the social sciences. This weakness of contemporary aesthetics is also evident in the efforts to revitalize the aesthetics of popular culture. Though I appreciate the efforts of the editors and authors of this publication to establish a discussion about the future development of the aesthetics of popular culture, I believe that as a result of the lack of methodological deliberations and of the absence of a methodical approach to their analyses they have set out in the wrong direction.

Pavel Zahrádka

Department of Sociology, Andragogy and Cultural Anthropology,
Faculty of Arts, Palacký University Olomouc,
tř. Svobody, 779 00 Olomouc, Czech Republic
pavel.zahradka@upol.cz