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**THE AMERICAN INFLUENCE
ON POP CULTURE AND CULTURAL
NARCISSISM IN POST-COMMUNIST
ROMANIA**

INSTITUTUL EUROPEAN
2023

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*Chapter 1***Definitions and Theoretical Framework****1.1. The Blurring of a Conceptual distinction:
High vs. Pop Culture**

First of all, pop or popular culture is a correlative phrase that requires other terms to explain it. John Storey considers that popular culture is always defined, implicitly or explicitly, in contrast to other conceptual categories: folk culture, mass culture, dominant culture, working-class culture, etc. Thus, the ideological interpretations directly and inevitably link pop culture to comparative terminology, such as high culture, folk or traditional culture, counter-culture (8).

When considering popular culture by comparison, the first aspect that stands out is the apparent gap separating high and popular culture, the culture of the elites and that of the masses. Identifying the latter with “an American Art”, Jean Baudrillard opposes it to the “culture of transcendence”, which, he says, belongs to the past:

Whereas all art up to pop was based on a ‘depth’ vision of the world, pop regards itself as homogeneous with this immanent order of signs [...] Pop signifies the end of perspective, the end of evocation, the end of testimony, the end of the creative act and, last but not least, the end of the subversion of the world and the curse of art. Its aim is not merely the immanence of the ‘civilized’ world, but its total integration into that world. There is in this a crazy ambition, the ambition of abolishing the splendours (and foundations) of a whole culture, the culture of transcendence. (*The Consumer Society* 116-117)

The ontological opposition, axiologically resignified, between the immanent and the transcendent originates in the philosophy of the Frankfurt School, whose representatives rebuked the rampage of the “mass culture” (which, after World War II, was to become almost equivalent to pop culture). Thus, in his famous essay, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1935), Walter Benjamin decried the vanishing of the “uniqueness” and “aura” of artistic works and the liquidation of the traditional, authentic value of cultural heritage. Benjamin comes to these conclusions after analyzing the new arts of

his time, particularly photography and cinematography. The exit from the domain of transcendence and the losing of the unique character of an artistic work results in its being taken over by the realm of politics: “the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice – politics” (244).

The emergence of culture within the realm of politics was not a novelty. What was new was the commitment of culture, in this case the pop culture, to the political enterprise of legitimizing power. Moreover, Benjamin realized that art itself, when taken over by politics, became secular and instrumental, ready to be exploited and manipulated.

Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, representatives of the Frankfurt School, contended that the distinction between high and pop culture had been perpetuated, transformed and manipulated within pop culture itself so as to introduce qualitative differentiations between different cultural artefacts. Thus, they noticed that the serial production of culture blurred the distinction between the logic of the work of art and that of the socio-economic system, any hierarchical, *vertical* differentiation actually being falsified and turned into a *horizontal* difference:

Sharp distinctions like those between A and B films, or between short stories published in magazines in different price segments, do not so much reflect real differences as assist in the classification, organization, and identification of consumers. Something is provided for everyone so that no one can escape; differences are hammered home and propagated. The hierarchy of serial qualities purveyed to the public serves only to quantify it more completely. (96-7)

The critical theory generally bemoaned the loss of the transcendence of art and its accapuration by the culture industry. This approach was so persuasive that the positive appreciations of the new popular cultural forms would almost be dismissed until the middle of the 20th century. However, after the Second World War, in the light of the rapid material progress of the humankind, the perspective changed and the emphasis was conversely laid more on the conservative, hence negative, traits of high culture. According to Herbert J. Gans, Herbert Marcuse, also a representative of the Frankfurt School, was amongst the first to insist that the idea of high culture had been capitalized on by the ruling class so as, through its oppressive nature, to prevent left-wing revolutionary movements (Gans 5). Yet, one of the most conclusive remarks to that effect came from Raymond Williams, a member of the Birmingham School, who emphasized that the idea of defining pop culture as a lower culture

pertained to the upper classes, whereas pop culture was, first of all, the culture made by the people for the people:

Popular was being seen from the point of view of the people rather than from those seeking favor or power from them. Yet the earlier sense has not died. Popular culture was not identified by the people but by others, and it still carries two older senses: inferior kinds of work (cf. popular literature, popular press as distinguished from quality press); and work deliberately setting out to win favor (popular journalism as distinguished from democratic journalism, or popular entertainment); as well as the more modern sense of well-liked by many people, with which of course, in many cases, the earlier senses overlap. The sense of popular culture as the culture actually made by people for themselves is different from all these. (Williams, *Keywords* 180)

The view Williams advocates is that pop culture is produced by the people and is essentially positive. The aristocracy's loss of privileges after the French Revolution of 1789, the rise of the bourgeoisie and, subsequently, of the masses of working people, dramatically changed the Western societies, leading not only to universal suffrage, but also to the right of the commoners to step on the stage of culture. Inevitably, the cultural product no longer belonged to an exigent aristocracy only, but, increasingly, to the more flexible bourgeoisie and the mass of individuals. In addition, Williams speaks about new practices and values that spring up and differ from those of the former aristocracy (Betts 6).

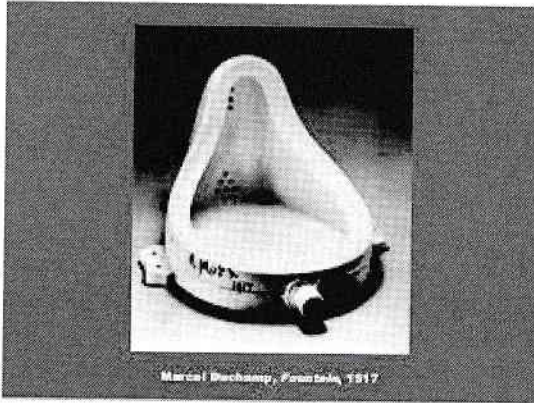
The prevalence of popular culture over the so-called high culture or, rather, the blurring of this distinction has many significations, one of them being the acknowledgement of mass culture as a legitimizing force in the political sphere. By losing its dominant status high culture would partially turn into a counter-culture later on, in the beginning of the new millennium. In the 1960s, Marshall McLuhan drew the attention to the high culture crisis and its transformation into a kind of counter-culture by referring, for instance, to the novel "Ulysses" by James Joyce, the plot of which takes place in a single day. In McLuhan's interpretation, Joyce's book was a literary response to patterns of writing focused on fleeting daily events and promoted by newspapers and other media of mass communication, therefore it acted as a sort of anti-medium (McLuhan, *The Making* 74, 267).

After the Second World War, the high culture crisis and the rise of pop was seen in apocalyptic terms, as the end of culture itself. Nevertheless, critics like Michel Foucault could still find justifications and significations for paintings such as René Magritte's *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* [*This is Not a Pipe*] (Picture 1), which passed from the rendition of a man smoking a pipe, through the isolation and frameworking of the pipe in a semiotic system, to the projection of the object alone (another example is Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*, shown in Picture 2), or to the projection of its serial character (for instance,

Andy Warhol's *Campbell's Soup Cans* and *Elisabeth Taylor* portraits (Pictures 3 and 4, respectively).²

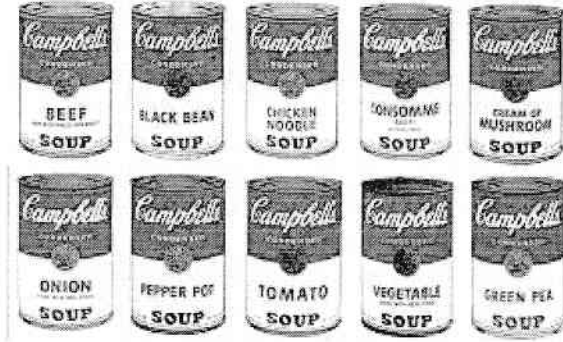


Picture 1

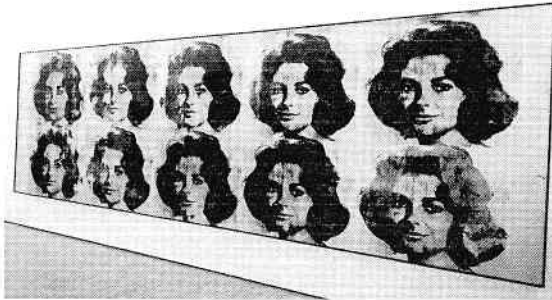


Picture 2

² See Works Cited at the end of the paper for picture references (Duchamp, Magritte, Warhol).



Picture 3



Picture 4

Foucault understood the new changes in arts, interpreting artifacts such as Duchamp's *Fountain* and the caption *This is Not a Pipe* under Magritte's painting by saying that, in general, painting has ceased to affirm something (Foucault 50; 53). Furthermore, he considered that "A day will come, when by means of similitude relayed indefinitely along the length of a series, the image itself, along with the name it bears, will lose its identity. Campbell, Campbell, Campbell, Campbell" (54). Thus, in his compositions, the famous American pop art figure Andy Warhol, shows the cynical turn taken by the confiscation of the meaning of objects by the advertising industry and the end of the fine arts author. All that remains for an artist to do is to reproduce the publicity rhetorics by repetitive and serial techniques, this new re-positioning going to the extremes, as a technical aspiration to objectification.

While in the West the blurring of the boundaries between high and pop culture focused on the inherent aesthetics and meanings of the works of art, in Eastern Europe the debate over these two types of culture took a political turn.

In theory, communism “sorted out” the issue of ideological and class struggle, giving the power to the working class and censoring high, “bourgeois” culture. On the other hand, because it did not manage to create a true form of elitist culture, it took over a part of the classical Western culture and made use of it in ideological terms. Romanian communism, for example, by means of its backward character, namely its references to the country’s glorious historical past and affiliations to the Roman Empire, or the French Revolution, as well as by its criticism of the “rotten” capitalist societies, simply perpetuated a difference between high and pop culture, stifling the latter and promoting, up to a certain point, classical authors and artists from the West, mainly those who vilified the political system. At the same time, the communist regime did not succeed in creating a true popular culture either. The mass artistic manifestations endorsed by the regime and laden with political slogans represented nothing else but a top-down imposed culture that did not stand for the real aspirations of much of the population. Consequently, there was a delay, a difference in the evolution of pop culture in the East compared to the West, but that gap and difference was going to disappear fast after the fall of communism, when the Eastern European countries followed in the footsteps of Western Europe and (particularly American) pop culture became the main legitimizing source of political and social power.

1.2. Popular versus Folk, Counterculture and Postmodernism

Besides its referentiality to high culture, the definition of popular culture is also tied to a differentiation from folk or traditional culture, and counterculture. In this context too, the question continues to be whether pop culture is produced by the people or it is produced by some interested circles or stakeholders to manipulate the people and trap them into a consumer’s position.

The term of folk culture was introduced by Johann Gottfried Herder against the backdrop of the 18th century French universalism (Casanova, 2006). In the 19th century, it was adopted by and applied to all nation states, including the Romanian principalities. The paradox of folk culture is that it was conceptualized and imposed ideologically by the nation states at the moment of their industrialization, that was when they were actually departing quickly and irreversibly from their traditional cultures. Thus, what was proclaimed in theory would be soon annihilated in practice, as the folk culture was going out of its originary environment, the countryside, and was entering the consumer society framework, represented by the city.

In fact, as a result of those developments, for example, much of today’s folk music is often integrated in the local and international pop culture:

American folk music, Argentinian tango, Portuguese fado, and Irish ballads often get into the pop charts, including Romanian traditional songs, which, particularly during the 1990s knew a lot of remakes in the popular style of dance music. Still, there are significant differences between folk and pop culture. Popular culture is oriented towards modernity and postmodernity and not towards keeping traditions, unlike folk culture. Pop is mostly an urban culture, belonging to industrialized and sophisticated cities, while folk culture usually represents an idyllic countryside. The authentic folk creations are anonymous many times, whereas pop culture, despite being produced en masse, is centered around stars, the (alleged) creators of the artistic work. The language is different many times too, English being dominant in pop texts, especially when a large international audience is targeted and a discursive uniformity is desirable. Pop culture is the culture of electricity, which makes everything visible and available (through the city lights, television, electric music instruments), whereas folk basically relies on unplugged means of expression. Last but not least, folk culture is usually ignorant of high culture and political institutions, while pop culture tackles political issues and appropriates much material from elitist cultural forms. Dwight MacDonald says that folk culture is an indigenous product, without reference to high culture, while pop culture is manufactured and imposed by specialized persons and sold by businessmen.

Folk art grew from below. It was a spontaneous, autochthonous expression of the people, shaped by themselves, pretty much without the benefit of High Culture, to suit their own needs. Mass Culture is imposed from above. It is fabricated by technicians hired by businessmen; its audiences are passive consumers, their participation limited to the choice between buying and not buying.... Folk Art was the people's own institution, their private little garden walled off from the great formal park of their master's High Culture. But Mass Culture breaks down the wall, integrating the masses into a debased form of High Culture and thus becoming an instrument of political domination. (MacDonald 60)

Although this is an somewhat idealistic view on folk culture, since folk culture is not always created in the private sphere and there are also pop culture artifacts that involve personal creation in seclusion, the fragment above emphasizes the lack of ideological content in folk creations and the equation of pop artifacts to mass culture, which seems to be a more appropriate term than pop culture because its output is directed at mass consumption (MacDonald 59). Moreover, it leads to another explanatory discrimination, of an intercultural nature, which marks off the limit between pop and counterculture this time.

From the onset, counterculture establishes an opposition to any mainstream cultural products and expands the range of contestation to ideologies that take a stand against the capitalism order. To a certain extent,

counterculture invites to a comeback to the initial definition of popular culture, which is that of a culture made by the people or for the people. This throwback reference means a re-authentication of the pop culture itself and a denial of its appropriation and domination by the capitalist system. On the other hand, counterculture, however subversive it might be, has always been part of the capitalist consumer industry. While claiming altogether that its articles are the expression of autonomous, individual creation, it is also subject to market laws. From this perspective, the position of counterculture and its representatives may be sometimes considered duplicitary or ambiguous, as if sitting on a fence. This double standard is explained through the commercial and political relations that are established between the capitalism of high consumption and the self-contained, autonomous discourses. These relations are different within a communist regime and any autocratic society. For instance, in communist Romania and other countries of the Eastern Bloc, the issue of subversive cultural manifestations was sorted out by direct intervention on the author, ranging from censorship, intimidation, social exclusion to physical annihilation, whereas the consumer societies had abandoned these strategies quite a long time ago, following a different path. The author's censorship had been eliminated and any type of discourse was eventually included into or embraced by the culture industry, thereby losing its possibly subversive potential.

At the same time, within a market economy and a consumer society, there is competitiveness. The cultural consumers are bombarded by countless integrative and cheap products, narrowing down their choice, hence the difficulty that they often encounter to tell and choose a fake over a real thing. This makes it hard but not impossible for an authentic piece of art to be produced, spotlighted, and celebrated. All counterculture representatives are faced with this positional question of being inside and outside the system at the same time, and of coping with the multitude of artifacts and stars, which they challenge, detest, or rebel against. Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter explain this awkward position by presenting the case of Kurt Cobain, the deceased leader of the iconic rock band Nirvana, one of the main exponents of countercultural trends:

While he thought of himself as a punk rocker, a man in the business of making 'alternative' music, his records sold in the millions. Thanks in large part to Cobain, the music that used to be called 'hardcore' was rebranded and sold to the masses as 'grunge'. But rather than serving as a source of pride to him, this popularity was a constant embarrassment. It fed the nagging doubts in the back of his mind, which suggested that he has 'sold out' the scene, gone 'mainstream'. (Heath and Potter 15)

Therefore, the authors conclude that Cobain came to the point of committing suicide as a way out of the deadlock he felt he was caught in, between his faith

in his authenticity and the shallow business interests, and he could not reconcile his allegiance to the alternative, rebellious music and the popular success of his band (16).

Nevertheless, from the very beginning, popular culture was associated with the consumer society and commodification. According to Dominic Strinati, “If culture can’t make money then it is unlikely to be produced” (10). The phrase “pop culture” itself establishes an inextricable link between art and postmodern consumerism, as Raymond F. Betts shows:

However, the abbreviated term “pop” as a qualifier is modern, appearing in England in the 1950s to describe art inspired by consumerism and then music directed to the young. Pop art was best defined by the British artist Richard Hamilton, who provided a list of adjectives to describe the term: transient, expendable, mass-produced, young, witty, sexy, gimmicky, glamorous, big-business. All of these terms apply equally well to contemporary popular culture. However, the one other that Hamilton lists – low cost – certainly is a variable, as suggested by the income figures for Spielberg and Tiger Woods. (2)

Indeed, although many pop products may be serial and cheap, they provide a good source of income for their producers thanks to the global chains of distribution. At the same time, as far as the 1950s are concerned, besides representing a rise in mass culture, that period of time is also considered to mark the beginnings of the postmodernism, which is deeply connected to pop art and culture.

Postmodernism changes the cultural paradigm, taking over Nietzsche’s philosophy about “God’s death” and Wittgenstein’s concept of language games and considering that the humankind has stepped into a new age of distrust in universal theories, in notions of absolute truth and, generally, in metanarratives (Lyotard 11). Initiated by the contradictory discussions on the significance of modernity, postmodernism has come to mean more than an intellectual debate: it represents a historical age in itself. This is noted by the critical thinker Terry Eagleton in a conversation with Mihaela Anghelescu Irimia, where he says that postmodernism as such is not only a question of theoretical approach but a mutation or a set of mutations at the cultural level. Consequently, postmodernism is difficult to be defined because it does not involve merely political, or philosophical judgments, but also a sum of manifestations, practically anything from Madonna [the singer] to neogothic architecture (Irimia 129).

Postmodernism also contributes to the dissolution of the difference between high and pop culture, between the formative and the commodified function of culture. The old principle according to which the accumulation of knowledge is inseparable from the education of the spirit (*Bildung*) will increasingly become obsolete. Knowledge is and will be produced in order to be