

Art and Contemporary Culture

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The phrase “The fate of...” often suggests fear about the topic in question, without committing to it. Fears about the fate of the arts in contemporary society include the possibility of the death of art, or the loss of art’s meaning and significance. These fears stem from many sources, including globalization, debates about multiculturalism, technology, and the growth of mass media, to name but a few.

Social theory has raised important questions about what we mean when we say “the arts.” What counts and who decides? Once we know what counts, how do we decide which art is good? Why do human societies produce art? Does art serve a social function? Answers to these questions remain elusive and contested. And the failure to articulate such answers is itself a source of concern regarding the place and future of the arts.

These fears come at a time when countries in the West enjoy more art than ever before. If art is dying, as some have claimed, artworks are certainly not dwindling in number. Nor is public support for the arts on the wane. Surveys of American opinion indicate a consistent endorsement of art museums and art education—and even of government arts funding. Controversies concerning the arts continue to capture media attention, and history indicates that these controversies are nothing new.

Many of the scholars who are fearful about the future of the arts also find great hope in new artistic movements—from the revolutionary capacities of film to the environmentalism of eco-art. One source of hope stems from a renewed interest in the social purposes of art and of the capacity for culture to achieve public interests. But other scholars decry this move as reducing art to mere function and as compromising aesthetic standards.

Whether art is made for its own sake or for the sake of public purposes, its relationship with the social world is complex and dynamic. Art can at times be reflective of society—though often in a distorted or misleading way—but it can also transform society. This bibliography serves as a guide to the wealth of scholarly literature on the arts, particularly in the face of cultural change. The works listed here are rooted in an array of fields, including art history, literature and literary theory, sociology, philosophy, and cultural policy studies. As we consider the fate of the arts, it is helpful, on the one hand, to

remember that art museum collections are growing rapidly, and, on the other hand, to be mindful of the recent decimation of museum collections in Iraq. If the overall fate of the arts is not a source of worry for all, the fate of some art is perilous indeed.

The Frankfurt School and Its Heirs

Sometimes identified with the label “Critical Theory,” this group of German-Jewish scholars from the mid-twentieth century offers an interdisciplinary approach to examining cultural vitality. In the 1920s and 1930s, Frankfurt School writings were dominated by a sense that something awful was looming in contemporary culture. They divided the work of investigating this fear among them; key members included Walter Benjamin studying literature and art; Theodor Adorno examining music and, with Max Horkheimer, mass culture; and Gershom Scholem investigating religion and mysticism.

In many ways, the Frankfurt School’s fears about the forces at work in early twentieth-century culture came to fruition in World War II, the Holocaust, and the release of the atomic bomb. But after the war ended, much of Western art and culture was still the same. And so, the fears continued. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer focus on “the culture industry,” the matrix of corporations that produce commercial culture—books, magazines, television programs, movies, recorded music, etc. This industry, they warned, becomes a filter for all forms of culture. No art form is safe from being reduced to its market value. But Herbert Marcuse, another member of the Frankfurt School, insisted that the only escape from the growth of markets would come from the arts.

- Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. New York: Schocken, 1968.
- Bloch, Ernst, et al. *Aesthetics and Politics: The Key Texts of the Classic Debate within German Marxism*. London: Verso, 1980.
- Horkheimer, Max, and Theodor Adorno. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002.
- Jameson, Fredric. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981.
- Lowenthal, Leo. *Literature and Mass Culture: Communication in Society*. New Brunswick: Transaction, 1984.
- Lukacs, Georg. *Studies in European Realism*. London: Hillway, 1950.
- Marcuse, Herbert. *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics*. Boston: Beacon, 1978.

Commercial Culture and the Commodification of Art

The market governs an enormous and rapidly expanding segment of contemporary culture. We tend to think of television, film, and rock music as being qualitatively different

from painting, opera, and ballet. But how do we justify such distinctions? Is it a matter of quality or of social class? Of taste or power? Many cultural products fall at the boundaries of these categories. Is art that is sold on the market commercial? Do art-house films qualify as high culture? Herbert Gans's *Popular Culture & High Culture* analyzes these categories as they operate both in theory and in practice.

Compounding these definitional problems are the changing dynamics of the commercial culture industry. Globalization and technology are generating new creative styles. Despite their frequent critiques of capitalism, artists often find themselves within the culture industry and insist on preserving the artistic integrity of the creative process—even as they incorporate the need to produce profit. Henry Jenkins, for instance, asks us to recognize the artistic qualities of television and other forms of popular culture, as he identifies the creators of these works as artists who have embraced new technology. The pivotal question in these debates is: how long can art maintain its creative character when it is subjected to the demands of the market?

- Cowen, Tyler. *Creative Destruction: How Globalization Is Changing the World's Cultures*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002.
- Gans, Herbert J. *Popular Culture & High Culture: An Analysis and Evaluation of Taste*. New York: Basic, 1999.
- Gitlin, Todd. *Inside Prime Time*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.
- Jenkins, Henry, et al., eds. *Hop on Pop: The Politics and Pleasures of Popular Culture*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.
- Ohmann, Richard. *Selling Culture: Magazines, Markets, and Class at the Turn of the Century*. London: Verso, 1996.
- Orvell, Miles. *The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1880–1940*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989.
- Pryke, Michael, and Paul du Gay, eds. *Cultural Economy: Cultural Analysis and Commercial Life*. London: Sage, 2002.
- Radway, Janice A. *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997.

Aesthetic Theory and Social Theory

Aesthetic theory looks at the frameworks through which we make sense of art and make judgments about art. These frameworks are value systems that are in dialogue with larger worldviews. We could identify Marxist aesthetics, feminist aesthetics, Christian aesthetics, and even anti-aesthetic aesthetics. Aesthetic theory encompasses literary theory, art theory, music theory, and all of the ways that we explicitly develop interpretive frameworks for culture. Aesthetic theory has an important relationship with social theory—first, because aesthetic theory often incorporates social theories, and second, because social theory poses powerful challenges to aesthetic assumptions.

Social theories such as Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, as discussed in *Distinction*, seemingly provide a more objective, less value-based framework for engaging art. Through social theory, we might discover the functions of art or the role of art in class conflict. Works of art also illustrate social theories, especially the novel, which can present a social world that is filled with implicit rules and complex social forces.

Many theoretical projects are both social and aesthetic in nature. Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* presents a set of propositions about how race works in novels by white authors. The book also illuminates how such fiction powerfully shapes racial reality. John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* is both an aesthetic theory about how we perceive commercial, as compared to high cultural, images, and a social theory about how markets are transforming culture.

- Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1972.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984.
- DeNora, Tia. *After Adorno: Rethinking Music Sociology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.
- Griswold, Wendy. *Cultures and Societies in a Changing World*. London: Pine Forge, 1994.
- Harrington, Austin. *Art and Social Theory: Sociological Arguments in Aesthetics*. Cambridge: Polity, 2004.
- Knight, Christopher. *Last Chance for Eden*. Los Angeles: Art Issues, 1995.
- Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992.
- Williams, Raymond. *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977.
- Wolff, Janet. *The Social Production of Art*. New York: New York University Press, 1984.

Controversies in Contemporary Art

In recent decades, two specific incidents have fostered debates about the meaning and social purposes of the arts. The first was an uproar over decisions made at the National Endowment for the Arts in the late 1980s. NEA monies given to the Southeast Center for Contemporary Art (SECCA) were partially used for an award to Andres Serrano, whose photograph "Piss Christ" was subsequently placed in a traveling exhibit for the awardees. "Piss Christ," a large image of a crucifix photographed in a jar of yellow liquid—ostensibly urine—sparked anger from religious communities who felt that the government was subsidizing sacrilegious art. When NEA monies were linked soon after to a retrospective of Robert Mapplethorpe's photography—including a selection of sexually explicit images—some critics called for the NEA to be abolished. Others raised doubts about the value of contemporary art.

These controversies were still in place in 1999, when the Brooklyn Museum of Art hosted the “Sensation” exhibit. All of the works in the exhibit—such as Damien Hirst’s “The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living,” a dead shark preserved in a glass box—were meant to raise questions about how art is defined. But for some, Chris Ofili’s “The Holy Virgin Mary” went too far, with its use of both elephant dung and magazine clippings of women’s breasts and buttocks in a portrait of the Madonna. New York City mayor Rudolph Giuliani attempted unsuccessfully to withdraw funds and even to evict the museum from its city-owned building.

Cynthia Freeland’s *But Is It Art?* provides an excellent analysis of these debates from the perspective of art theory, offering among other things, a survey of the many possible interpretations of these complicated works. Controversies reveal how much we take our definitions of art for granted and provide an opportunity for social scientists and cultural analysts to examine closely the dynamics of art in our changing social world.

- Arthurs, Alberta, and Glenn Wallach. *Crossroads: Art and Religion in American Life*. New York: New, 2001.
- Bolton, Richard, ed. *Culture Wars: Documents from the Recent Controversies in the Arts*. New York: New, 1992.
- Bradford, Gigi, et al. *The Politics of Culture: Policy Perspectives for Individuals, Institutions, and Communities*. New York: New, 2000.
- Danto, Arthur C. *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997.
- Dubin, Steven C. *Arresting Images: Impolitic Art and Uncivil Actions*. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Freeland, Cynthia. *But Is It Art?* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Hunter, James Davison. *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*. New York: Basic, 1991.
- Rothfield, Lawrence, ed. *Unsettling “Sensation”: Arts-Policy Lessons from the Brooklyn Museum of Art Controversy*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001.
- Zolberg, Vera L., and Joni Maya Cherbo, eds. *Outsider Art: Contesting Boundaries in Contemporary Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Cultural Policy—Funding and Regulation of the Arts

Cultural policy is often an invisible influence on artists. It consists of public policies at the federal, regional, and local levels that shape how art is created and enjoyed, and its two major prongs are funding and regulation. Cultural policy varies widely from country to country, with European states enjoying the most centrally managed culture, often under the leadership of a minister of culture. In the United States, funding for the arts is greatest at the local level, although a number of federal agencies—including the National Endowment for the Arts—also provide subsidy.

Cultural policy, broadly defined, includes educational curricula, media policies (such as new debates about music piracy), and even tax law. As Chin-tao Wu explains in *Privatising Culture*, the United States and Britain have used tax incentives to promote private support for the arts by rewarding donations to museums, foundations, and awards programs. When cultural policy becomes too centralized, it risks totalitarianism, and when it becomes too dispersed, it risks cultural irrelevance. The best source for comparative data about the arts in different countries is the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), which publishes regular reports on its web site (www.unesco.org), but the sources below provide a broad overview of the major themes and theoretical approaches of cultural policy studies.

- Alexander, Victoria D. *Museums and Money: The Impact of Funding on Exhibitions, Scholarship, and Management*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996.
- Biddle, Livingston. *Our Government and the Arts: A Perspective from the Inside*. New York: American Council for the Arts, 1988.
- Feld, Alan L., et al. *Patrons Despite Themselves: Taxpayers and Arts Policy*. New York: New York University Press, 1983.
- Larson, Gary O. *The Reluctant Patron*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983.
- Levy, Alan Howard. *Government and the Arts*. Lanham: University Press of America, 1997.
- Miller, Toby, and George Yudice. *Cultural Policy*. London: Sage, 2002.
- Pankratz, David B. *Multiculturalism and Public Arts Policy*. Westport: Bergin & Garvey, 1993.
- Wu, Chin-tao. *Privatising Culture: Corporate Art Intervention Since the 1980s*. London: Verso, 2002.

The Public Purposes of Art

Debates about the value of art for achieving public interests have been around at least since Plato and Aristotle. Centuries later, Alexis de Tocqueville emphasized the value of poetry for democracy. Dewey extended the analysis by focusing on the transformative power of the arts in everyday life. More recently, artists and cultural policy makers have discussed the concept of “public culture”—art that is specifically geared towards shared interests and public purposes. Debates about public culture often center around the field of government-funded art, where public claims are strongest, but the discussion extends across the breadth of the arts.

Art has been linked to many public interests. Recently, attention has focused on cultural diplomacy—the use of the arts in building international relations and promoting a positive national image. Cultural-diplomatic activities range from outright propaganda to educational exchanges. Other scholars focus on the importance of the arts for the economy. Richard Florida’s *The Rise of the Creative Class*, for instance, analyzes the need for

creatively trained workers in the new “economy of ideas.” Similarly, the arts have been used positively in economically struggling communities, a point illustrated by Jean Bethke Elshtain’s *Jane Addams and the Dream of American Democracy*.

Art and culture are instrumental in the formation of national identity, which both Benedict Anderson and Sarah M. Corse highlight in their analyses. While the arts can provide symbols of common identity, they also remind us of our differences and of social diversity. Arts are often set to political tasks—whether at the moment of creation, or after—and these should also be seen as public purposes. Suzi Gablik insists that the greatest purpose which art might address is the issue of environmental destruction.

- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 1991.
- Cherbo, Joni M., and Margaret J. Wyszomirski, eds. *The Public Life of the Arts in America*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000.
- Corse, Sarah M. *Nationalism and Literature: The Politics of Culture in Canada and the United States*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Dewey, John. *Art as Experience*. New York: Capricorn, 1958.
- Elshtain, Jean Bethke. *Jane Addams and the Dream of American Democracy*. New York: Basic, 2002.
- Florida, Richard. *The Rise of the Creative Class and How It’s Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life*. New York: Basic, 2002.
- Gablik, Suzi. *The Reenchantment of Art*. New York: Thames & Hudson, 1991.
- Pinsky, Robert. *Democracy, Culture and the Voice of Poetry*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002.
- Tocqueville, Alexis de. *Democracy in America*. New York: Anchor, 1969.

Art above Social Purposes

In the face of so much talk about the purposes and functions of art, it is important to recognize the lingering dominance of the view that art is above such purposes. Formalism, in particular, insists on the judgment of art in terms of artistic skill. Romanticism emphasizes the achievement of beauty. Matthew Arnold’s discussion of “the canon” is based upon assumptions about the obvious merit of certain works over and above others. Today, the defense of the canon is generally an insistence against judging art by social criteria.

It is from this perspective that claims about the death of art most frequently emanate. The title of George Steiner’s *The Death of Tragedy* is telling, as is Harold Bloom’s decision to open *The Western Canon* with a chapter entitled “An Elegy for the Canon.” These jeremiads are usually couched in larger concerns about the failures of contemporary education or the corruption of culture.

- Arnold, Matthew. *Culture and Anarchy*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1960.
- Barthes, Roland. *Image, Music, Text*. New York: Noonday, 1978.
- Bloom, Harold. *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*. New York: Riverhead, 1994.
- Kant, Immanuel. *The Critique of Judgment*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1969.
- Steiner, George. *Real Presences*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989.
- ----- . *The Death of Tragedy*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961.
- Townsend, Dabney. *Hume's Aesthetic Theory: Taste and Sentiment*. New York: Routledge, 2001.

Creative Explorations of the Fate of the Arts

Plays and films are beyond the purview of a bibliography, and fiction and memoir are beyond the purview of a scholarly bibliography, but some mention must be made of the many creative ways that artists and writers are addressing their concerns and hopes for the fate of the arts. Consider, for instance, the absence of creative works in the world depicted by George Orwell's *1984* or the destruction of books in Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*. Yasmina Reza's play *Art* expressed enormous frustration with contemporary art, featuring as its protagonist a plain white canvas. Tom Wolfe's *The Painted Word* provides an amusing and insightful critique of modern art.

The documentary film *Stone Reader*, which follows one man on his search for a loved author who has seemingly disappeared into obscurity, reminds us of the centrality of literature in contemporary life. Finally, Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* discusses the role of literary works in confronting an oppressive political reality in the context of revolutionary Iran. She suggests that: "[G]enuine democracy cannot exist without the freedom to imagine and the right to use imaginative works without any restrictions."¹ The fate of the arts may be unclear, but to these artists and writers, art's significance is plain.

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¹ Azar Nafisi, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (New York: Random House, 2003) 339.