

1. Introduction

The Great Divide came about in a time of change by industrialization. Before industrialization there was no point in discussing the divide between high art and mass culture, as the very notion of art implied limited access, this meant that art was only accessible to a very small amount of people. But by the turn of the 20th century, the concept of art began to change and with the rise of new technologies mass culture came about. It is this very historical context which is so important in understanding this Great Divide, as means of distinctions in a time concerned with different kinds of revolutions.

Huysen concentrates mainly on the divide between modernism and mass culture, which he describes as the Great Divide and how the breakdown of this divide led to postmodernism. Modernism was a cultural era, which celebrated originality and genius, with focus on innovation and breakthrough within art, literature and music, defined through exclusion of mass culture, by stressing the autonomy of art. Mass culture on the other hand was a child of the new technologies with its reproducibility and spread of information as some of the main features, aimed at the masses and branded as being low culture by modernism. This divide between modernism and mass culture can also be described in means of a high/low dichotomy, which also resulted from the rapid growth of developments in the cultural sphere, by various factors in that developing society, such as an increasing reading public and commercialization of culture . Huysen explains this when he says “This dichotomy then became politically charged in decisive ways when new class conflicts erupted in the mid-19th century and the quickening pace of the industrial revolution required new cultural orientations for a mass populace” (Huysen 1986:17).

The high/low dichotomy was also Theodor Adorno’s main target in his theories about the cultural industry, which Huysen also includes in his book, when explaining certain theories that contributed to the discourse of the Great Divide. According to Adorno there has to be a total separation between the cultural industry and modernist art, which is an elaboration of modernism and it being autonomous. It is important to keep in mind that

the Great Divide according to Huyssen “is the kind of discourse which insists on the categorical distinction between high art and mass culture” (Huyssen 1986: viii). This definition of what the Great Divide is all about, will be thorough through the whole exam paper. It is a discourse precisely, because the Great Divide is a way of talking about the distinction. Theoreticians, contribute to this discourse by keeping it alive, by talking about it. Adorno also insisted upon the categorical distinction between high art and mass culture, because the contrary would end in total manipulation from above, as many with him mean to suggest that “modern mass culture is administered and imposed from above and that the threat it represents resides not in the masses but in those who run the industry” (Huyssen:48). It is certainly understandable that Adorno takes this standpoint, when taken into account the era of various political threats by totalitarian regimes and dictators who knew how to exploit mass culture in their propaganda, at the time of his writings. On the other hand there were movements on the other side, that were trying to tear down the distinctions between high and low cultures in the name of the avant-garde, but I’ll come back to that later, when discussing pop arts role in the breakdown of this divide.

I have chosen to use the fundamental characteristics of the Great Divide to elaborate how pop art could play a role in the breakdown of this divide. I will examine if and how pop art makes use of the characteristics identified and try to compare pop art to its forerunner the historical avantgarde. I find this useful, because I identify some of the same traces in the historical avantgarde, as I do in pop art. I will build up my up my discussion about how pop art has played a role in the breakdown of the Great Divide by comparing pop art to the historical avantgarde, as I explained in my introduction. I have therefore chosen three aspects of the respective cultural movements, which I see as fundamental for this change, namely the historical context in which the movements took place, the respective viewpoints on the role of art and what the respective objects of art actually looked like. By having established three important aspects, I will try to put them into perspective and finally see if I reach to some conclusion about why pop art played a role in the successful breakdown, while the historical avantgarde failed.

2. The fundamental characteristics of the Great Divide

The fundamental characteristics of the Great Divide apart from it being a kind of discourse is the notion of dichotomy. It makes distinctions between high and low culture and polarizes their respective features. The characteristics can be stated as follows, in a more or less random order: elite culture/popular culture, bourgeois/working class, old media/new media, masculinity/femininity, institutionalized/non-institutionalized, autonomous/non-autonomous, legitimate taste/taste of necessity, and individual/masses. The Great Divide is precisely that span reaching from two opposite poles.

Huyssen wrote an essay about the dichotomy masculine/feminine, which he sees as one fundamental characteristic of this divide. Flaubert, the author of modernism per excellence, contributes to an association of woman with sentimentality and passivity as opposed to rationality and activity, when he describes Madame Bovary to be “more sentimental than artistic” (Huyssen 1986:44) and further positions woman as reader of inferior literature as opposed to man as writer of genuine, authentic literature (Huyssen:46). Here also the aspect of old media/new media comes into play, when authentic literature stands for old media and inferior literature expresses new media. This can also be expressed in the more common thought that it is much better reading a good old book, than reading glossy magazines. Women as reader of pulp literature, which also is being referred to as the false novel, where “the true novel by contrast is called “severe and pure” (Huyssen: 50) and is associated with man. Mass culture is from the 19th century on ascribed to feminine characteristics, which identifies women with the masses and hence as political threat. It can easily be seen that such an attribution of character works effectively in an age of mass demonstrations and the first feminist movements. Therefore “the autonomy of the modernist art work, after all, is always the result of a resistance, an abstention, suppression-resistance to the seductive lure of mass culture, abstention from the pleasure of trying to please a larger audience, suppression of everything that might be threatening to the rigorous demands of being modern and at the edge of time” (Huyssen: 55). In the above quotation the masses are described as being seductive, which can be seen as a metaphor for women. What he means by

autonomous/non-autonomous, can be seen as one of the most fundamental criterion in what modernism is about, when it claims than the modernist work is “autonomous and totally separate from the realms of mass culture and everyday life” (Huysen:53). And further modernism also separates itself from the masses by claiming “it is the expression of a purely individual consciousness rather than of a Zeitgeist or a collective state of mind” (Huysen: 53). This statement is also an expression of the individual/masses dichotomy. The essay on mass culture as woman shows all too clearly, how gender is being used as a legitimate argument, in the discourse of the Great Divide, in order to establish an approved male culture in the name of modernism and how gender relations also is used to approve all the other distinctions.

3. Discussion

3.1 Historical context

The historical context of the historical avantgarde and pop art was quite different. The historical avantgarde was a counter culture to modernism, in a time where there wasn't any other accepted culture than modernism. The historical avantgarde had its home in Europe at the time of WWI, the Russian Revolution and the inter-war period. In a revolutionary realm, many avantgarde movements took place, not surprisingly in Russia, but also in France and Germany. Such disasters as war, made artist want to reunite art and reality and break down the distinctions between high culture and mass culture. The socialist thoughts were present in very much of the avantgardes thoughts. Eventually the avantgardes lifetime was seriously damaged in the age of Stalin and Hitler when the threat of totalitarian control over all culture forged a variety of defensive strategies meant to protect high culture in general. Pop art on the other hand, is to be placed in a totally different historical context. WWII had been over for almost two decades, and Europe was building up its new confidence in society. Many of the West European countries had social democratic regimes and the USA was occupied with the Cold War. After WWII new optimism replaces polarization along with new trends in economy. In addition alternative cultures began to develop. Young people began to educate themselves more

than ever before; hence the universities began to grow. Feminism was on its lead, as women began to emancipate themselves and new youth cultures gave the younger generation a whole new culture to anchor their rebellion towards a society, where values and moral had to be build up again. Pop art as opposed to the historical avantgarde was an American phenomenon, as the whole art scene had made a shift from Europe to New York after WWII. Especially in Europe in the 1960s there was major student and political movements, along with mass demonstrations that demanded shifts in society. Similarities between the two different historical contexts were the major political happenings that took place, and the developing mass culture into a commercialization of culture. Whereas the historical avantgarde had to deal with mass culture and technological development in a much earlier phase than pop art, these issues were of current interest in both eras.

3.2 On the role of art

It can be seen out of the historical context that avantgarde art and pop art, as expressions of art had different starting points. The main concern of the historical avantgarde was to “reunite art and life through a blend of utopianism and a radical negation of Art” (where Art refers to the “institution art”), as well as “subvert art’s autonomy, its artificial separation from life and its institutionalization as ‘high art’” (lecture notes). Peter Buerger argues that the major goal of avantgarde was to close the gap separating art from reality. Art was seen as means of political change by the historical avantgarde. It worked against the concepts of modernism and bourgeois culture. It sought to level out the hierarchies existing so deep within the society. Walter Benjamin, also saw it as the artist responsibility to engage politically, and saw the new technologies of reproduction (film and photography) as having great revolutionary potential, as it had such a huge appeal to the masses. The emergence of new technologies in art not only played a huge role in distinguishing the historical avantgarde from preceding movements but even infiltrated the art work’s core itself. The historical avantgarde made much use of shock techniques in order to provoke. Pop art, like the historical avantgarde, sought to “subvert art’s autonomy, its artificial separation from life and its institutionalization as ‘high art’” (lecture notes). Like the historical avantgarde, pop art does this as a reaction to

modernism, in pop art's case the abstract expressionism. Everything in pop art might be seen as an opposition to abstract expressionism, with its non-figurative and experimental methods. Pop art also wants to reunite art and reality, which it does by incorporating the trends in society at that time, namely that of consumer culture and Americanism. But pop art differs from the historical avantgarde in a very crucial way. In its aim to reunite art and life, it does this by using the "Other", that is popular culture, without trying to provoke and shock. Pop art's fascination for popular culture is one of its most fundamental characteristics.

3.3 Examination of the art works

It is important not only to explain how pop art, by means of the historical context and its reasons, played a role in the breakdown of the Great Divide as opposed to the historical avantgarde, but also to examine the art works per se. What in the art works made such breakdown possible, or unsuccessful? Let's begin with Duchamp's *Fountain*, which was made in 1917. What happened when Duchamp declared a urinal to be work of art, and on top of it sign it with a pseudonym? He indeed achieved its intended effect of shocking and provoking, by exhibit a so-called ready-made, an everyday object. He also challenged the notion of art. He declared that whenever the artist declares something to be a work of art, it has to be that way. He tried to work against the increasingly commercialized art market. In 1919 he took a reproduction of the *Mona Lisa* and painted a moustache on it, calling it "L.H.O.O.Q" which when translated from French into English means to say something like "She has a hot ass". Duchamp took a bourgeois icon and tried to ridicule it. Or as Benjamin would say: "takes its aura away". On the contrary, pop art exploited consumer culture, which Dada and especially Marcel Duchamp had worked against. What pop art did was incorporating everyday life, mass culture and popular culture in its work of art, without necessarily trying to provoke.

Andy Warhol used silk screen prints to reproduce his motives, which was a relatively widespread technique within mass culture and advertisement. Besides, by reproducing his art work numerous times, he went away from the originality of the art work as something unique and autonomous. "Because this technique (silk screen) makes the unlimited

distribution of art works possible, it has the potential to assume a political function” (Huysen: 155). This was also done, when student movements saw American pop as protest towards a dysfunctional society. Further Warhol used the commodity market directly in his works of art, when he used coca-cola bottles and Cambell soup cans as motives. He also made much use of popular culture icons, such as Marilyn Monroe and Elvis Presley. Roy Lichtenstein, another pop artist, used comic strips as his major motif. Out of this one can see that it was the tendency, namely high art borrowing from popular culture that can be said to be pop arts main ingredient. Pop art differed from earlier avantgarde movements by the techniques used and its direct link to popular culture in its motives.

3.4 Putting things in perspective

“All of this, then, is not at all to say that postmodernism is merely a pastiche of an earlier continental avantgarde. It rather serves to point to the similarity and continuity between American postmodernism and certain segments of an earlier European avantgarde” (Huysen: 168). By having established this, I can go on elaborating on pop arts role in the breakdown of the Great Divide. It goes without saying that it is interesting to see why the avantgarde failed in the same project. Like Enzensberger says:” the historical avantgarde had failed to deliver what it had always promised: to sever political, social and aesthetic chains, explode cultural reifications, throw off traditional forms of domination, liberate repressed energies” (Huysen: 164). In addition avantgarde art eventually became exactly what it had worked against, that is high art. Avantgarde turned out to be absorbed by the institution art and praised by the elite. The problem was also that avantgarde art opposed itself so much from bourgeois culture and did not recognize that any attack made on it, the bourgeois culture was able to co-opt (Huysen:147). Another crucial factor was also, that the time was not right for such a breakdown by the avantgarde, as the avantgarde itself was broken down by the realm of totalitarian regimes in Europe at that time. There was absolutely no room for both affirmation and critique. These are only some of the reasons why the historical avantgarde failed in its project.

Pop art on the other hand, did not really promise anything. One could almost say that pop art played straight in an honest manner, in that it was affirmative and critical at the very same time. They despised abstract expressionism, and made a count-attack by using very figurative and colorful motives in their artistic expression as opposed to abstract expressionism. As opposed to abstract expressionism, with its very notion of being abstract, pop art could easily be grasped and understood by everyone. It could be described as a “democratization of art and art appreciation” (Huysen: 142). In addition the 1960s differentiate itself from the 1920s, in the access of art museums and galleries. In the age of the historical avantgarde and modernism the bourgeois maintained its aesthetic and political dominance, with its salon culture, theaters, opera houses, art museums and concert halls, which by definition only was accessible for a small amount of people. But by the 1960s, with its developments in society, the accessibility to the people exploded. The developments in information technology and media also led to a more commodity fixated society and tendencies of nivellization of cultural hierarchies were apparent. When taking a look back on the basis of the Great Divide as being a discourse which insists on the categorical distinction between high art and mass culture, it can be seen that pop art does not insist on this categorical distinctions. Especially because it so deliberately takes from popular culture and turns it into high art. Almost all of the other categorical distinctions that characterize the Great Divide are also absent in pop art. The distinction that old media is better and more suitable to the work of art, are no longer apparent, as pop art supports itself by using new reproduction techniques. The dichotomy autonomous/non-autonomous also does not work any longer, as the originality of the pop art as one unique piece of work, has lost its ground by its capability of reproducing itself to the infinite number of times. The notion of modernism that elite culture regards itself as more dignified than popular culture, is also gone, as pop art, being an elite culture in itself, levels itself to the field of popular culture. This is also a crucial point, that pop art is an elite culture, as it has such direct access to the art museum and art galleries, but includes a lot of conventions, styles and icons of popular culture (lecture notes). What conclusions can thus be drawn?

4. Conclusion

I will not conclude with pointing to one crucial factor that made pop art play a role in the breakdown of the Great Divide, as it shows from the discussion, that this is a fragmented issue with many different reasons. But if I should try to summarize, it could look something like the following. As I have stated, the very notion of the Great Divide, implies the discourse of categorical distinctions between high art and mass culture. What characterizes the Great Divide is the above definition as well as dichotomy. Every dichotomy means to suggest that there is a distinction between high and low culture, that the first is better than the other, and that high culture is associated with masculinity, whereas low culture is feminine. The masculine/feminine dichotomy makes it easy to attribute other distinctions to both masculine and feminine, but always with the “good and pure” characteristics to the male and the contrary to women. Adorno stresses that there has to be a total negation of mass culture, in order for modernism to prevail its autonomy, while Benjamin tries to stress the revolutionary potential of mass culture by its new technologies of reproduction. The problem with these opposite theories, might be that they think too much either or. Nothing is just black or just white. Postmodernism, the era after the Great Divide, stresses the importance of both affirmation and critique. This seems evident in pop culture and might help to understand, why they were successful in breaking down the divide, contrary to their forerunner the historical avantgarde. Pop art borrowed elements from popular culture both in its techniques and motives and thus invited to a broader understanding of their works. Of course, they had its critics too, who criticized pop art to be nothing more than a product of western capitalist society by adding itself to the commercialized society. But at least it did so in the name of art by trying to integrate art and life and celebrate the common and popular (lecture notes). It also seems true, that the time in which political and student movements where at its height, made for fertile ground for art to contribute to a changing in discourse. Whereas the historical avantgarde maybe had been ahead of its time and tumbled down in the hands of totalitarian regimes, that undermined any attack on existing conditions by anyone other than themselves, pop culture gained support from general trends in their society.

List of reference

Huysen Andreas, *After the Great Divide* (USA: Indiana University Press 1986).

Power point presentations on Huysen from class lectures.