

Adorno Was Right?

By William Eaton

Review of Daniel Horowitz, *Consuming Pleasures: Intellectuals and Popular Culture in the Postwar World* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012)

Daniel Horowitz's *Consuming Pleasures: Intellectuals and Popular Culture in the Postwar World* is not all that interested in consumption, popular culture or the postwar world, and the many pleasures it indeed offers are entirely intellectual, stemming as they do from the writings of about twenty-five brilliant European and North American culture critics. The text is a series of 10-15-page recapitulations of leading works and salient assertions produced by each of these critics, particularly toward the beginnings of their careers. The critics are presented more or less in chronological order, beginning in 1950 with Theodor Adorno and the Frankfurt School, passing through such thinkers as Roland Barthes, Umberto Eco, C.L.R. James, David Riesman and the members of London's Independent Group, to arrive, finally, at Reyner Banham's *Los Angeles: The Architecture of the Four Ecologies* (1971) and Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi's *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972).

Along the way Horowitz traces the movement of ideas from Western Europe to North America and the gradual transformation of these elitely educated critics' attitudes toward popular culture. Thus, on page 23, he notes that Bernard Rosenberg's essay beginning the highly influential *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America* (1957)

excoriated contemporary American mass culture. . . . "Never before have the sacred and the profane, the genuine and the specious, the exalted and the debased," [Rosenberg] asserted, "been so thoroughly mixed that they are all but indistinguishable." . . . "Shakespeare is dumped on the market along with

Mickey Spillane,” . . . [Rosenberg] indicted “sleazy fiction, trashy films, and bathetic soap operas, in all their maddening forms.” Anyone who justified “organized distraction,” he insisted, had to understand that it exploited rather than fulfilled human needs. Whenever “*kitsch* pervades the atmosphere,” it made virtually impossible “a genuine esthetic (or religious or love) experience.” Rosenberg realized that his attitude toward “cultural pap and gruel” might be “dismissed as snobbery, an egghead affectation,” but he defended his position as democratic, offering as it did an aspiration of all people for higher things than the “sub-art and pseudo-knowledge” of mass culture.

Seven years and 300 Horowitz pages later we have come to Susan Sontag’s “Notes on Camp” (1964), which offers Tiffany lamps, *Flash Gordon* comics, feather boas and *King Kong* as a challenge to previous generations’ ideas of the superiority of high over low culture. (These are the best examples she could find? one is tempted to ask. What about, say, Patsy Cline’s voice or Count Basie’s orchestra, or the Frisbee, Woody Guthrie, Charlie Chaplin, Dr. Seuss?) Sontag, Horowitz writes, “appreciated the exaggeration and sexual suggestiveness of ordinary images, what she called ‘the good taste of bad taste.’”*

Along with these recapitulations, Horowitz, a professor of American Studies at Smith and author of two previous works on attitudes toward consumer culture, offers some biographical and historical information to put the critics’ work in context, and he intervenes at various moments to offer his own assessments of strengths and weaknesses of the work under consideration.

I came to review this book because of a great interest in its central if unstated question: Is consumer culture worth anything, or is it, as Adorno says, “a medium of undreamed of psychological control”? Or, perhaps I should rephrase this: Does consumer culture offer much of anything besides its capacities for psychological control—of others, the masses, or of we ourselves, as individual consumers of the cultural products, self-medicating, self-controlling? I think, for example, of the high volume which is the most salient feature of some forms of rock music.

* Horowitz earlier presents the other side of this coin, in quoting from a 1950 student paper by the future anthropologist Herbert Gans. There Gans confessed that he thought the songs of Frank Sinatra were “trash, but as a researcher I am beginning to realize that they are unsatisfactory only for me, and that I have not right to force” anyone “to participate in what I think is good, or to give up what I consider bad.” This is cultural relativism mixed with (undergraduate?) self-abnegation.

My son Jonah is now 12, and he takes in a fair amount of the stuff, be it reading *The Hunger Games* and many another work of “young adult fantasy fiction,” playing fantasy football on an ESPN website, going to the movies, chilling out watching what we call “stupid TV” on an iPad, or lying on the couch with his dad watching the advertising-laden packaged entertainment products (PEPs) that still retain the label “sports.” One day I mentioned to him that Sontag, in her 1964 essay “Against Interpretation,” had vaunted “film” as “the most alive, the most exciting, the most important of all art forms” because it reached us so directly, it blocked us from interpreting, from “thinking about” what we were experiencing. “Yeah right,” Jonah said, unimpressed. “You sit back in the big chair and eat your popcorn and you don’t think.”

A week or two later, in an “Against Sontag” vein, he was offering me an interpretation of some TV show he’d been watching, and I interrupted him with a counter-interpretation, or perhaps an anti-interpretation, based on a term from our computer lives, the idea of “wiping” a hard drive, eliminating everything—viruses, junk, programs, data—so that one can start again afresh. Perhaps, I proposed, these stupid TV shows and so forth should not be thought of as having any specific content or even any direct propaganda value. Above all, the purpose they serve is to wipe our hard drives. We come home from a stressful day at the office or at school and zone out with our electronic devices, fantasy fiction or simulated warfare (sports again), and by the time we get up from the couch, our hard drives have been wiped. It’s as if the day never happened or had left nary a trace, had had no content.

So questions of the role and value of popular culture are of great interest to me, and I am prepared to interrupt both children and Smith professors to talk about them, but before continuing in this vein, and drawing on some of the many insights offered in *Consuming Pleasures*, I would like to talk about the book’s idea of pleasure. In the Introduction Horowitz confesses that he himself does not care much for popular culture, preferring Renaissance to modern art, Mozart to contemporary pop music. And it would seem for this reason that his book has so little actual pop culture in it, not even bits from some of the ingenious pop culture send-offs of pop culture. “(I Can’t Get No) Satisfaction” comes quickly to mind, as does Allan Sherman’s “Chim Chim Cheree”:

There's Orlon and Korlan, and there's Accutron,
And Teflon, and Ban-Lon, and so on and on.
These wonderful words spin around in my brain;
Each one is a mystery I cannot explain. . . .

I've lived all my life in this weird wonderland;
I keep buying things that I don't understand,
'Cause they promise me miracles, magic, and hope,
But, somehow, it always turns out to be soap.

Clearly what Horowitz really likes is reading books—books by bright, engaged, outspoken people. It would have been interesting if, in the conclusion, say, he had ruminated on this: on the pleasure (rather than any “value,” social worth) of reading intellectual books, and as compared, for example, to going to see the architecture of Las Vegas or playing for real money at one of the poker tables. A reviewer might also harp on the self-indulgence of (the present essay or of) *Consuming Pleasures*, and even while noting the mountains of careful reading Horowitz appears to have done in developing the text. Much of the logic behind why Horowitz picked the particular writers he picked to discuss seems to be: These are the writers who I personally have found engaging and have wanted to read and write about. (He himself notes that he has ignored Bakhtin, Raymond Williams, Jean Baudrillard . . .) I was less clear as to why Horowitz choose to concentrate on the early or breakthrough works of his chosen writers, rather than offering us the best of their entire *œuvres*. Pages are devoted to Tom Wolfe's student papers and political connections, and about as many pages on Sontag's sexual life, while there is much less and less juicy biographical information about most of the other writers.

In a sense what I am calling Horowitz's self-indulgence echoes that of certain of his subjects (e.g., Wolfe and Barthes), who indulged themselves by slipping away from the “high” culture of their social class in order to read *Elle* and *Paris Match* or hang out with car customizers, and bathe in, . . . In what? Did they (though not Horowitz, who is reading the works of great minds) enjoy, among other things, feeling superior, of a higher class, of more refined tastes? Or did their pleasure, somewhat like Horowitz's, lie in the richness and complexity of the cultural artifacts they were examining? (And Wolfe and Barthes were explorers, finding previously unimagined wonders in the *terra incognita* of the commonplace.)

In what may come to seem one of the great moments in the intellectual history of the twentieth century, in the opening pages of *La pensée sauvage* (1955) Lévi-Strauss calls

attention to the extraordinary taxonomic capacities of a range of technologically-unadvanced societies and insists that all of *homo sapiens*' seemingly primitive or seemingly sophisticated pursuits of knowledge are motivated by a common psychological need: to impose some order on the chaos of our perceptions, of the world outside our sciences. This need to classify and organize to an absurd, or almost absurd, degree comes before (Lévi-Strauss argues) any other practical uses to which the knowledge (or systematization) might be put. E.g., it comes before using botanical classifications as a way of finding more food or medicines, before using Galilean and Bohrian models of physical processes to increase projectiles' destructive success.

From this perspective, I believe, we can best understand the pleasure of Horowitz's project, and of the Barthes', Wolfe's, Sontag's, Adorno's, etc. In a world no less complex, chaotic and violent than the one in which our stone-wielding, cave-dwelling ancestors found themselves, scholarly writing and cultural criticism offer the pleasures of classification, simplification and calm. And when the object of study (e.g., professional wrestling, detective novels, Hollywood movies or casino architecture) is itself rather more bounded and simple than the larger world of which it is but one part, the student's or critic's pleasure may be redoubled. In *Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby* (1965), Wolfe writes about a designer of Las Vegas signs: "Free form! Marvelous! No hung-up old art history words for these guys. America's first unconscious avant-garde! To hell with Mondrian, whoever the hell he is." In an article about Wolfe, Richard Hoggart, one of the pioneers of cultural studies, wrote that poise was "the impulse behind much in the behavior of young people [and of magazine writers and of older intellectuals?] in commercial mass societies, the urge to find a stance before all the free-floating and un-ordered offerings".

In any case, the word "pleasure" in Horowitz's title speaks above all to a professor's pleasure *and* to the pleasure that some readers—me, for example!—may find in lingering with Professor Horowitz on this or that set of ideas. *Consuming Pleasures* offers an opportunity to revisit beloved works and to get to know or to know better some other works and authors. To reprise my son's proposition, one might sit back in a big chair and eat one's popcorn (or heart-healthy almonds or flaxseed) and read and think, with the same sort of all-consuming (=self-consuming/exhausting/fascinating?) pleasure of a good movie (or stupid TV show?).

A few snapshots and a panorama to give readers an idea of just a few of the verdant hills and valleys over which their minds might range:

For most of the twentieth century, commentators saw mass culture as female (soft, passive, sentimental, artificial) as opposed to the masculine high culture (hard, active, and somehow more real).

“No other minority has depended so heavily on commercial enterprise to define itself,” remarked the scholar and gay rights activist Dennis Altman, speaking mainly of male homosexuals. “One of the ironies of American capitalism,” he continues, “is that it has been a major force in creating and maintaining a sense of identity among homosexuals.”

For [Umberto Eco] the initial question was not whether a text belonged to high or low culture, or somewhere in between, or whether it represented good taste or bad. Rather, he wondered whether any texts, including those in the realm of popular culture were closed or open. . . . [A] closed work (music by Johann Sebastian Bach or Giuseppe Verdi, biblical exegesis by scholastic philosophers, medieval art, Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, or contemporary mass media) was predictable, unambiguous (or when ambiguous, fixed by conventions), and univocal. The plots were repetitive, the formulas set, and the characters one-dimensional. Drawing on Norbert Wiener’s contributions to information and communications theory, Eco explained that formulaic productions were wrapped “in a number of conventional reiterations” that ensured the constancy of their meanings.

In contrast stood open works [*opera aperta*], key modernist texts such as the novels of Franz Kafka or James Joyce, the music of Karlheinz Stockhausen, paintings by Jackson Pollock, or the sculpture of Alexander Calder. . . . [T]hese works placed the audience in an active position, capable of interpreting an ambiguous or unfinished text in multiple ways. Open works . . . were open “to constantly shifting responses and interpretative stances. . . . In contemporary society most people “unable to elude the systems of assumptions that are imposed” from the outside and lacking the shaping experience that came from “a direct exploration of reality,” were part of a conformist mass society shaped by “a passive acquisition of ways of understanding the world that came from the acceptance of conventional wisdom. In contrast, open texts could play a “liberating role” by pointing people “toward the reconquest” of “lost autonomy at the level of both perception and intelligence.”*

Foreshadowing my son’s and perhaps many another jaded youth’s view of consumer culture, the British artist and art critic Richard Hamilton in 1957 offered a definition of a phenomenon he called Pop Art. In anachronistic retrospect, the definition

* The quotations within the Horowitz text are from several Eco essays that are available, in translation, in Eco, *The Open Work*, trans. Anna Cangogni (Harvard University Press, 1989). I extirpated two “he wrotes” from Horowitz’s text.

seems not so well suited to the eventually high-priced and much-studied work of “Pop Artists” such as Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Roy Lichtenstein or Andy Warhol, who made much of their work in the 1960s United States, but the definition does seem well suited to a whole range of products—pop music, commercial movies, television shows, mass-produced clothes, furniture, bric-à-brac—

Popular(designed for a mass audience)/Transient(short-term solution)/Expendable(easily forgotten)/Low cost/Mass produced/Young(aimed at youth)/Witty/Sexy/Gimmicky/Glamorous/Big business.

Moving back toward a discussion of the central issue, I note that Horowitz’s grammar puts all the authors and work he discusses in the past—door shut, as it were. For example, he writes that Banham “**offered** an interpretation of Los Angeles,” or Adorno **asserted** that television resulted in “the very smugness, intellectual passivity, and gullibility and seem to fit in with totalitarian creeds even if the explicit surface message of the shows may be antitotalitarian.”* Often in scholarly works, however, the assertions in another written work are referred to in the present tense. E.g., we could revise Horowitz to note how in *The Lonely Crowd*, David Riesman **writes** that “the game of sex . . . provides a kind of defense against the threat of total apathy” that the routines of work and democracy **underwrite**. (I.e., they’re still doing this underwriting.)

I take Horowitz choice of tense to reflect both the fact that he sees himself as writing intellectual history rather than cultural criticism, and also a belief, which I share, that, while the phenomena and effects of consumer culture are ongoing, the intellectual period, or evolving set of ideas, that he is writing about are in the past. So this then raises the question, which is beyond the scope or closing date (1972) of Horowitz’s work: Where are we now? What do we now make of pop culture and its influence on society?

What I will propose is that we have reached a synthetic moment in a dialectical progression. **At first**, as per Matthew Arnold (*Culture and Anarchy*, 1869), the most esteemed products of elite culture were to provide a bulwark against the degraded and destructive forces of the uneducated or improperly educated. This was originally a conservative point of view, and included such conservative fears as that women and homosexuals might be taking

* I have quoted Horowitz quoting Adorno.

over. In Adorno and other members of the Frankfurt School, we find this point also being also being made from the Left, and expressing Leftist fears that Nazi Germany was but the raw tip of the totalitarian iceberg. Consumer culture is not about the exploration or realization of human potential, but rather about social control, brainwashing, “constant consumption training” (Jürgen Habermas), or about providing substitute satisfactions for the masses. Here, for example, is Horowitz writing about Habermas’s *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (first published in German in 1962):

Not unlike Adorno and Horkheimer in their discussion of the power of the culture industry, Habermas argued that a whole range of forces came together by the middle of the twentieth century to form a powerful mixture, including advertising, public relations, publicity campaigns, public interest groups, political parties, public bureaucracies, the commodification of news (“a system of other-directed consumption habits” in the “so-called consumer culture”), the erosion of the distinction between public and private, the power of the social welfare state (which he opposed from the left), large labor unions, and oligopolistic industries. These forces made citizens increasingly passive and undermined the possibility of “rational-critical debate” in “the manufactured public sphere,” with the commercialization of public space greatly weakening any prospect of participatory democracy. The expansion of modern media, he wrote pessimistically, gave “the masses in general access to the public sphere,” but did so by depoliticizing that realm. Under these power conditions, the citizen became a consumer, experiencing a sense of self not through democratic participation but by making purchases in an increasingly affluent society.

But then, **phase two** (the antithesis): Slowly but surely we see popular culture beginning to win over elite minds. From a Marxist perspective, this seems simply inevitable. Money and social status will be available to intellectuals and artists who support and develop the illusions that justify either the ruling system or a class that is coming into power, and, as Adorno once wrote, “the mind mold[s] itself for the sake of its marketability.”* And insofar as it is unable to do so, we can add, the mind—the human being—will have to seek not only money and social status elsewhere; it may be hard to find readers, or listeners; one may easily

* I wrote to an acquaintance who I knew to be a perceptive writer and someone who did not seem to be getting the opportunity to say all she had to say. Would she like to review a book for *Zeteo*? How much do we pay? she wrote back. Writing pays her bills (as it does not mine), and she had been hard hit by the collapse of the magazine industry in the era of e-publishing. Though she is (ostensibly?) a liberal, *The Weekly Standard* pays her \$800 per review. Well, *Zeteo* pays \$0, but (in theory?) you do not have to censor your views to conform to the ruling ideology. But my acquaintance cannot afford such a luxury. (And does she see it for the illusion that it is?)

feel as if one has fallen off the edge of the earth. In his poem “Players,” Al Young brings this point to life (and hardly just for African-Americans of the 1970s):

Yes, they’ll let you play,
let you play third base or fender bass,
let you play Harrah’s Club or Shea Stadium

Theyll let you play
in a play anyway: Shakespeare,
Ionesco, Bullins, Baraka, or Genet,
only dont get down too much
& dont go gettin too uppity . . .

Theyll let you be Satchmo,
theyll let you be Diz,
theyll let you be Romeo,
or star in *The Wiz*
but you gots to remember that
that’s all there is

That is what I am calling the Marxist view, which Horowitz does not explore. (As with most any self-respecting work of current American scholarship, Marx’s work is mentioned less than half a dozen times, although the Marxist ideas of some of the non-American critics Horowitz discusses might be said to somewhat inflate this number.) What Horowitz describes instead is how slowly but surely critics turn their attention to popular culture and find good things in it. In the beginning, we might say, there is the English critic F.R. Leavis, his wife Q.D and his many students who begin studying popular culture in order to understand its noxious influence. But then the critics begin to recognize that there is something about this alien, frightening culture that engages them more directly. Barthes’s 1957 *Mythologies* stands out as a key moment in this transition. Horowitz also mentions the *Les Choses* (*Things: A Story of the Sixties*), the first novel of Georges Perec (a student of Barthes’s). The novel begins in the conditional tense with a lengthy, half-mocking but also lavish description of all the stylish things the protagonists would *ideally* have in their apartment, or if and when they had more money.

Au-delà d’une petite table basse, sous un tapis de prière en soie, accroché au mur par trois clous de cuivre à grosses têtes, et qui ferait pendant à la tenture de cuir, un autre divan, perpendiculaire au premier, recouvert de velours brun clair, conduirait à un petit meuble haut sur pieds, laqué de rouge sombre, garni de trois étagères qui supporteraient des bibelots : des agates et des œufs de pierre, des boîtes à priser, des bonbonnières, des cendriers de jade, une

coquille de nacre, une montre de gousset en argent, un verre taillé, une pyramide de cristal, une miniature dans un cadre ovale.

That is to say, the protagonists' apartment *would* have such things as a prayer rug attached to the wall with decorative copper nails and all sorts of other carefully chosen items—a small, dark-red-lacquered set of shelves on which would rest stone eggs, little boxes, jade ashtrays, a crystal pyramid . . .

All this leads with a certain inevitability—the inevitable result of the workings of economic forces, of the culture industry and global capitalism more generally?—to critics embracing popular culture with less and less ironic distance. Thus by the end of the book we have arrived at *Los Angeles*, the work of a former British bicyclist (and architecture critic), Reyner Banham, writing, as Horowitz puts it, with “optimism, naiveté, and an excited sense of discovery, but apparently without a sense of irony.” The stacking of freeways on top of one another, along with signs for Jack in the Box and a Tahitian Village restaurant, become works of art; the freeway is the place where drivers “spend the two calmest and most rewarding hours of their daily lives.” (This could be true!) And, Banham proposed, the extreme concentration required of freeway drivers seemed to “bring on a state of heightened awareness that some locals find mystical.”

So now, it seems to me, we have reached **phase three**: the synthesis (and *Consuming Pleasures* would be an artifact of this phase). We are no longer so quick to insist on the superiority of cultural products admired over centuries by the well-to-do. As Horowitz puts it in his Introduction, in the post-World-War-II period intellectuals learned that the products of consumer culture were

symbolically dense, complicated, and susceptible to illumination through careful, probing analyses. In other words, the consumer's experiences, communicated to a wider world, were as full of multiple meanings as were a wide variety of other, often more highly regarded cultural offerings, such as literary poems or novels. . . . We see this all around us, how the objects we purchase and experiences we have convey who we are, as individuals and as a society.

And yet, at the same time, I believe that we, or some of us on the Left, have again become or are again becoming suspicious of popular culture, in the sense in which Adorno was suspicious of it, as “a medium of undreamed of psychological control,” of not allowing

consumers “any suspicion that resistance is possible.”* We might say that consumer capitalism now dominates human life and thinking much as the Catholic Church dominated life and thinking in the Middle Ages. It is not only the only way of life; it has become quite difficult to imagine other alternatives. Of course a few may try to live “off the grid,” but there is only one grid, and in the present era it seems as if there never will be, never could be another (and as if we will never again return to gridlessness). In the global struggle for the minds of human beings, consumer capitalism—aided by creature-comfort- and social-status-seeking artists, inventors, entrepreneurs and ideologues (culture critics, academics and book reviewers among them)—has won.†

This is not to say that having realized or realized again, and with however much or little horror, the role the consumer culture has played and continues to play in regulating human lives, feelings and thinking, intellectuals (who are of course among the regulated) will have the necessary economic or political power to alter the situation (which will, in any case, be evolving on its own). As Winston Smith, the protagonist of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* put it, “Either the future would resemble the present in which case it would not listen to him, or it would be different from it, and his predicament would be meaningless.”

But meanwhile, in the midst of all this, we may feel free to admire the artistry and technological wizardry of the computer chip, or of twenty-first century hair coloring. We

* What does the word “Left” mean in 2012? A Leftist is someone who votes for Democrats? Believes in providing more legal and financial support to the less well-to-do, and reducing the level of support being provided to large businesses, the wealthy, major campaign contributors? Believes that preserving the existing non-human environment, its many species included, is more important than GNP growth?

As I was working on the present piece I wondered if it were possible to be a Marxist conservative, a conservative because one was a Marxist? That is, some of us could have conservative tastes and habits precisely because we recognize that in a capitalist system “*alles Ständige und Stehende verdampft*” (all that is solid melts into air) and human needs are scorned amid the compulsion to increase productivity and return on capital. Precisely because we can see what Marx was calling attention to, we cling to bits of the past, to past ways that do not seem to have quite melted yet, that continue to speak to “human” needs. (That is to non-economic needs: psychological, spiritual needs and physical needs.) I take Adorno to be an example of the breed. Horowitz quotes the British historian E.P. Thompson on “new Left” culture critics: “The whole lot may be dismissed . . . as the last intellectual waifs and strays in the long romantic grouse against industrialism”.

† It would be nice if the increased prominence of Islam and the anti-Western rhetoric and physical attacks could be read not only as a threat to Western hegemony and security, but also as a sign that consumer capitalism was not as dominant as I am suggesting it is. But, and while recognizing that there are aspects of consumer capitalism that are being called into question by Islamic leaders and their followers, I also believe that, underneath, a lot of the fighting is about oil, and that, in any case, the cultural front in this war is being overrun by T-shirts, cellphones and running shoes; American movies, TV shows and fast food; and the pop music of many lands. Similarly, while, Ferlinghetti-style, I am willing to be waiting for “the lost music to sound again in the Lost Continent,” and for American religious fundamentalists and leftwing educators and environmentalists to sing together in a chorus of non-economic values, this is not my sense of how the world has been working or will be working any time soon.

may appreciate the reassurances provided by fantasy fiction (and of Hollywood movies, Broadway shows, . . .), and our writers' talent for reworking old myths, old ideas of how good might triumph. There is the non-analog purity and minimalism of techno-pop music.

We found love in a hopeless place
We found love in a hopeless place
We found love in a hopeless place
We found love in a hopeless place*

There are our favorite sitcoms and dramas, quarterbacks and commercials. (My favorite these days is the street-smart E*TRADE baby.) And we have our universities and university presses, too, complete with intellectuals, such as myself, ready and willing to quote Juvenal, about how “we, the people, have abdicated our duties” and now anxiously hope for just two things: “*panem et circenses*”—to go with our partially hydrogenated fats, evaporated cane juice, state-of-the-art phones and video-streaming, and enjoyable, thought-provoking books, e.g., *Consuming Pleasures*.

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Addendum

Some months after completing this essay, I came across reflections on *Against Interpretation* which Sontag wrote thirty years after the book's publication. Some of her comments in the piece—**Thirty Years Later...**, *The Threepenny Review*, Summer 1996—are consonant with my assertion that cultural critics have now reached a third phase in their views of pop culture. I quote:

To laud work condescended to, then, as “popular” culture did not mean to conspire in the repudiation of high culture and its burden of seriousness, of depth. I thought I'd seen through certain kinds of facile moralism (as in the essays on science fiction films and on Lukacs), and was denouncing them in the name of a more alert, less complacent seriousness. What I didn't

* “We Found Love,” a song by recording artist Rihanna, was written and produced by Calvin Harris. In the United States, the song was the longest running number one single of 2011.

understand (I was surely not the right person to understand this) is that seriousness itself was in the early stages of losing credibility in the culture at large, and that some of the more transgressive art I was enjoying would reinforce frivolous, merely consumerist transgressions. Thirty years later, the undermining of standards of seriousness is almost complete, with the ascendancy of a culture whose most intelligible, persuasive values are drawn from the entertainment industries.