

INFLUENCES OF AUDIENCES ON THE ARTS

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Summary

Audiences are usually seen as groups of people who collectively or individually read, watch or hear works of arts. This mode of relationship is referred to as reception as opposed to creation, which is supposed to be the productive stage of the artistic communication process. Art becomes the product of an independent elite, which does not respond to an audience's demands but opposes the dominant values and needs of society.

The influence of the audience is, therefore, rather negative in the sense that the artist deliberately wants to deceive their expectations. Yet, conventions create a set of expectations. These expectations can be those of limited groups: an elite, an ethnic community, a class or a kinship. These groups can participate in elaborating the conventions or can be educated into them. Ultimately they shape audience expectations and also represent constraints on the creation of art.

1. Introduction

Audiences are usually seen as groups of people who collectively or individually read, watch or hear works of arts. This mode of relationship is referred to as reception as opposed to creation, which is supposed to be the productive stage of the artistic communication process. It is our contention that audiences do not have just a passive role in their relationship to arts. We intend to emphasize their influence on the production of works of art. We shall first explain why it is still possible today to speak of audience influence on art, then we shall analyze the channel through which audiences influence arts, and finally we shall show how even reception is an active process in the constitution of meaning and therefore a way of influencing the fortune of works of art.

2. Post Romantic Conception

To speak of the influence of audiences on art is not easy, because one has to legitimize such a discourse, since it seems to contradict the dominant western post-Romantic conception of art.

Terry Eagleton (1983) uses the concept post-Romantic not to mean posterior to Romanticism, but product of Romanticism. The Romantic conception of the artist has been best expressed by the German philosopher and writer Friedrich Schlegel. He proclaims the absolute arbitrariness of the artist, who transcends all influences, all constraints and creates only out of his subjectivity. In Schlegel's view, art is considered as the attempt of a relatively isolated person to preserve his individuality. The privilege accorded by the Romantics to the "creative imagination" is more than just the expression of idle escapism. "On the contrary" literature" now appears as one of the few enclaves in which the creative values expunged from the face of ... society by industrial capitalism can be celebrated and affirmed. 'Imaginative creation' can be offered as an image of non-alienated labor. The intuitive, transcendental scope of the poetic mind can provide a living criticism of those rationalist or empiricist ideologies enslaved to fact". (Eagleton 1983, 19) The spontaneous rather than rationally calculated, the creative rather than mechanical character of arts make it not only a technical mode of production, but also a whole alternative ideology featuring the imagination as a force whose task is to "transform society in the name of those energies and values which art embodies"(Eagleton 1983,20). "If the artist claims to be the voice or the heart of the people, it is not because he is expressing anything the people have asked him to express, but because he is acting in the name of the genuine interest of the people who are not even aware of this interest and who need to be educated through the art to perceive their own profound aspiration. Art is therefore extricated from the material practices, social relations and ideological meanings in which it is always caught up, and raised to the status of a solitary fetish" (Eagleton 1983, P. 21). (see *Creators*)

The claim of artists that they represent all mankind resulted from the idea that art was supposed to bring about the self-realization of the artist as human being and to express, therefore, the potential of humanity as a whole. In this context, art becomes the product of an independent elite, which does not respond to an audience's demands but opposes the dominant values and needs of society. The influence of the audience is, therefore, rather negative in the sense that the artist deliberately wants to deceive their expectations.

This conception of art resulted from a historical experience: the development of the capitalist mode of industrial production, which uprooted not only economic relationships, but also the values and the social situation of many groups. Utilitarianism became the major ideology, and human relationships were reduced to market exchanges. Anything which could not be transformed into a commodity for the open market was dismissed as useless. Thus art came to be considered as an unprofitable ornament. The artists turned this marginalization into a virtue, proclaimed the aesthetic autonomy of the art and even attributed to it "a capacity to resolve the kinds of tension and oppositions entailed by the historical process of functional differentiation" (Hjort 1992, XXI). (see *Outsiders, Nomads*)

This conception is historical in the sense that it emerged at a period of history and in the sense that it is not universal but belongs to Western culture. This culture has been influencing art production, mediation, reception and process all over the world, because of the integration of all regions of the world into a global capitalist world market. However, there are still local areas which resist or subvert the dominant trend.

This conception represents a break from classical art, but although it upholds the principle of violating all conventions, at the same time it creates new conventions. Two major macro-conventions of this conception can be identified: an aesthetic convention and a “polyvalence” convention. The former claims the autonomy of art and suspends all considerations having to do with the truth or falsity of artistic representations, with the second feature lending legitimacy to a plurality of interpretative responses (Schmidt 1992). The principle of violating all conventions is also a convention. As a form of self-realization, even post-Romantic art requires competent judges, otherwise it becomes a private language: “Since each artist wants to be judged by others, he has no incentive to deviate from the common framework that makes competent appreciation and self-realization possible. playwrights or painters who violate the conventions are not simply neglected: they are booed, ostracized and persecuted. If people who buy unfashionable paintings are subject to sanctions by their peers, so are those who make them. On both sides of the market, in fact, we find the same interminable ballet of conformism and one-upmanship, with some individuals making the conventions ever more elaborate and others desperately trying to keep abreast” (Elster 1992, 33-34). This is the way conventions function even in the post-Romantic art system.

This means that even if the audience consists solely of an elite of artists, critics and customers, it participates in the functioning of a field regulated by conventions which exert constraints on the artist and therefore on art.

One of the conventions of the post-Romantic art that we have not yet mentioned is the distinction between high and low, between products which can be called art and those which are regarded as trivial, folk or popular culture, produced for or by the mass or by non-Western communities. The latter are said to be under religious, traditional, technological or commercial constraints and are therefore dismissed as arts, even though some of them, through the decision of the elite, can be eligible to attain the status of art. All of these distinctions have been criticized in the postmodern discourse, but they are still dominant. Art, and especially post-Romantic art, is accompanied by a discourse which shapes its borders, organizes its reception and in this way exerts influence on it. In spite of the claim to the contrary, it is, therefore, still possible to speak of the influence audiences have on the arts. (see *Visionaries*)

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