

# Popular Culture

*A Reply to Shusterman and Małecki*

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**ABSTRACT** The article is a response to criticism of my two recent articles on Richard Shusterman's view of popular culture by Shusterman and Małecki. The former maintains that I have misrepresented his view on Europe, the USA and popular culture. But I point out that he talks as if there is no popular culture in Europe due to Europe's aristocratic traditions, and that the USA is a hotbed of popular culture thanks to its egalitarian traditions, and that Europe can be treated as a country comparable to the USA. He also says that I falsely think he is talking about popular culture while he is really talking about popular art. But I show that it is meaningless to talk about popular art without talking about popular culture and that as a pragmatist Shusterman should have understood that. I show that Małecki grossly misrepresents my article, maintaining that I am against all forms of popular art and against everything Shusterman says about popular art. I show that this is blatantly wrong.

**KEYWORDS** Popular culture, Shusterman, Europe, USA, high brow, low brow

My two recent articles on Richard Shusterman's view of popular culture have provoked responses both from Shusterman himself and from the Polish scholar Wojciech Małecki. Shusterman has replied to my criticism of his view of 'Europe', the US, equality, and popular culture in this journal.<sup>1</sup> Małecki has responded to an earlier article of mine.<sup>2</sup>

## **Shusterman's Response**

It is only fair that I start with Shusterman's own response. He maintains that I have wrongly attributed to him the belief in four hypotheses that I criticized in "Shusterman on 'Europe', Equality, and Entertainment."<sup>3</sup> These were the following: (a) The more egalitarian a country is, the stronger the position of popular culture within that country; (b) American popular culture enjoys world-wide popularity because of its egalitarian style or because everything American is associated with egalitarianism, or both; (c) Europe has no popular culture to speak of; (d) Europe is an entity of the same kind as the US. The US is more egalitarian than Europe.<sup>4</sup>

But I never said that he believed in all four hypotheses. I only said that it is hard to understand his statements about 'Europe', entertainment, equality, and the US unless they are regarded as entailments of these four hypotheses. I was not talking about Shusterman's beliefs. So the fact

that he says he does not believe in any of them does not matter for my argumentation. My fault was not saying that some of these statements are implicit. These implicit or explicit statements are the following: (1) Even though far from classless, America's social structure is arguably more flexible and more decentred than the structures of traditional European societies; (2) Americans have tended to be sceptical of European high culture because they had to fight for their independence from Europe;<sup>5</sup> (3) being a country of immigrants, there has been no unique national tradition of high art. The fact that the American educational system is not centralized has weakened whatever possibilities there have been for enforcing cultural uniformity; (4) highbrow elitism has a much stronger position in 'Europe' with its feudalistic traditions than in democratic and egalitarian America. Aristocrats invented the notion of high art to ensure their social privilege; (5) there are national churches in the European countries. This ecclesial tradition provided a strong and institutionally entrenched ideal of spiritualized experience and a tendency to a pious attitude toward works of art; (6) American popular culture embodies a rebellious attitude against the cultural hegemony of intellectuals in Europe. This is appealing to Europeans, especially the young, who find American popular culture an invaluable tool in the struggle for liberation from cultural domination.<sup>6</sup> It is very hard to understand the texts referred to here unless we interpret them as containing these six assertions and underlying beliefs that the four hypotheses entail. Let us take a characteristic statement by Shusterman:

Certainly we *Americans* take neither philosophy nor the *cultural hegemony of intellectuals* as seriously as the French and *other Europeans* do. This insouciantly *rebellious* attitude embodied in *American* popular culture is, I believe, a large part of its captivating appeal and genuine value for *Europeans*, particularly for *the young* and *culturally dominated*. For it provides an invaluable tool for their growing *liberation from* a long entrenched and stifling cultural domination by an *oppressive* tradition of disembodied intellectualist *philosophy* and high *courtly art*.<sup>7</sup>

This text can only make sense if we attribute a belief in (4) and (d) to the writer.

Now, it might not have been Shusterman's intention to assert (1)–(6) or he might not believe in (a)–(d). But then he should have qualified what he said in such a manner that it would have been hard to interpret him in this way. He could have said that Britain has a great rock and pop tradition, that there has been a commercial film industry in most 'European'

countries and so on. He could have added that while some 'European' countries have a rigid class structure, others do not. I mentioned some of the Nordic countries as an example and added that their basic problem was oppressive egalitarianism, which definitely is not America's problem. I could have added that the Netherlands seems to have a similar oppressive egalitarian tradition, at least if it is to be judged by the storyteller of Dutch novelist Harry Mulisch in his novel *The Procedure*. The protagonist experiences his moving to the US as a great liberating experience (and I do understand him!). Be that as it may, do people living in countries suffering from oppressive egalitarianism need liberation from "the cultural hegemony of intellectuals"? I think not.

Shusterman could also have said that youngsters in 'Europe' regard not only American popular culture as liberating but also the great, earth-shattering British rock tradition. The Beatles certainly liberated my hair, the Stones my sexuality! And the arch-British punk surely embodied a rebellious attitude against "the cultural hegemony of intellectuals." Shusterman actually lived in Britain during the punk age and must have noticed this rebellion. He would also have done well to have added that in some 'European' countries, most notably Iceland and Norway, there is deep-seated scepticism of highbrows and intellectuals accompanied with a veneration for ordinary folks, similar to the American variant. These nations certainly do not take "the cultural hegemony of the intellectuals" more seriously than the Americans! And like most European nations they have, so to speak, no philosophical traditions, and thus there is no danger that they will take philosophy more seriously than Americans do. These nations share a Protestant tradition with the US, and I think Protestants tend to be anti-intellectual because of the Protestant idea of the universal priesthood. The original Protestant plan was to eliminate the class of the clergy. In predominantly Catholic France, the situation is quite different; the eggheads are venerated like bishops used to be. It is not by chance that Julien Benda called pundits *les clercs*, i.e. the clergymen.<sup>8</sup> This shows how different the 'European' countries are; such arch-Protestant places as Norway, Iceland, and Friesland (divided between Germany and Holland) have no aristocratic traditions to speak of, while Polish males still kiss ladies' hands, like the Polish nobility of yesteryear. The non-aristocratic countries and regions of 'Europe' do not need any liberation from high-court art because they do not have any tradition for such art.

Now, Shusterman maintains that he has actually criticized hypothesis (d) when he said that there is greater cultural diversity in 'Europe' than in the US.<sup>9</sup> But that is not convincing because he is actually discoursing

as though the US and 'Europe' were commensurable entities. They are not, basically because there is a strong national identity in the US, but hardly anything resembling such an identity in 'Europe'. What would be the 'European' equivalent of American flag-waving patriotism? There is no lack of nationalist sentiments among the different nations of 'Europe', sometimes of the flag-waving kind, sometimes even of a murderous kind (the Balkans!). But how many people dance in the streets, waving the EU flag, chanting some 'European' anthem? Maybe in fifty years this will become usual, but not now. The US is a country with continent-like qualities; 'Europe' is a continent slowly acquiring country-like qualities. Americans actually created their own identity by othering 'Europe', creating the latter phenomenon in the process. Nowadays, a European identity is slowly coming into being, not least because of the othering of America.<sup>10</sup> 'Europe' and the US are becoming the other of each other.

Now, Shusterman maintains that I am paying insufficient attention to the particular context of his arguments; that I do not see that he is talking about the fact that the French have been less receptive of popular culture than the Americans; that I have misunderstood him as talking about 'Europeans' when he is talking about the French when criticizing Bourdieu. But he talks in no uncertain terms about the increased recognition by "Bourdieu's own Europe" of the popular arts, thanks to American mass-media culture.<sup>11</sup> So he was obviously talking about 'Europe', not just France. And it is hard to understand this statement other than meaning that Americans somehow brought popular art to 'Europe'. If not, he should have mentioned the possibility that the advent of the Beatles and the Rolling Stones in the UK increased recognition of popular art in 'Europe' (but not in the communist countries where rock was banned for quite awhile!). It certainly did in the place I come from.

I know that Shusterman has battled American domination in philosophy, and so one cannot accuse him of American chauvinism. But I am not sure that I want to fight alongside him; after all, most of the best philosophers on the planet are either Americans or are based in the US. But he could dispel any doubt about his thinking that there has never been any popular culture in 'Europe' simply by mentioning some 'European' popular artists. He could also have admitted that some 'European' countries have an ideology of equality that matches the American one. Thus, he could have dispelled any possible misunderstanding of what he wanted to say about 'Europe', the US, equality, and popular culture.

I want to add that he criticizes me for attributing to him beliefs about popular culture when he is in fact only talking about popular art.<sup>12</sup> But

I cannot see how a pragmatist can draw a clear-cut line between the art form and the culture. An art form is part of a form of life. After all, the basic tenets of pragmatist aesthetics are that art can only be understood as part of human practices, in other words, cultures. This point is even clearer when it comes to popular art than more elitist art forms. People eat popcorn while watching movies and hamburgers while playing video games. Can rap music be dissociated from the hip-hop lifestyle, and can disco music be understood apart from dancing? And what about that wonderful movie *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, based on the British musical with the same title? There are practices connected with it, such as going to see the movie dressed up as the characters, or throwing confetti in the theatre when there is a wedding scene on the screen. If Shusterman maintains that a consistent pragmatist aesthetician can in any fruitful way separate the concept of popular art from that of popular culture, then I challenge him to do so.

### **Les Fleurs du Mał(ecki)**

Apparently, Dr. Małecki<sup>13</sup> was in a malevolent mood when he wrote his criticism of my paper “Pragmatism and Popular Culture.” His article is written in a let-me-thrash-this-guy tone. To say that he is fair to my position would be far too generous; he grossly misrepresents it. Thus, he talks as though my article contains a wholesale condemnation of popular art and of Shusterman’s aesthetics. But nothing can be further from the truth. I said in no uncertain words: “...Shusterman’s criticism of charges (a)–(f) is quite convincing.”<sup>14</sup> The charges in question are those often levelled against popular culture: (a) that this culture is spurious; (b) that it necessarily makes us passive; (c) that it is superficial; (d) that it is not autonomous and that this lack is a bad-making feature; (e) that it lacks form; (f) that it lacks originality.

Despite this, Małecki has the nerve to write as if I were against Shusterman’s criticism of those who think that popular culture only provide a spurious or washed-out aesthetic sensation, i.e., his countering against charge (a). But, as we have seen, I expressed agreement with his criticism of charges (a)–(f) on page four. Not only do I express agreement with Shusterman’s criticism of (a)–(f), I even add some examples of my own that support this criticism, pointing, for instance, to an episode in *The Simpsons* which shows that popular art can contain complex, sophisticated allusions.<sup>15</sup> Further, I wrote on page seven, “[t]he message (the content) of TV programs often has a lot of redeeming qualities. Think about the originality and sophisticated wit of the Simpson cartoons.” On page

nine I stated, “[w]e have seen in this article that Shusterman defends popular culture in quite an inspiring way. He demolishes the arguments of the high brows against popular art.” On page ten I mentioned that “[Shusterman] is a very interesting philosopher...”

These quotations ought to show conclusively that I neither condemn popular art nor Shusterman’s philosophy; both have their good and bad sides. Małecki is plainly wrong in saying that I paint “a very bleak picture of today’s popular culture.” True, I paint a bleak picture of certain sides of it, but there is no wholesale condemnation to be found in my article. My basic criticism of Shusterman was that even if his criticism of (a)–(f) was valid, then it does not necessarily save popular culture from that which I label ‘*charge (g)*’, i.e., that popular culture, not least its visual variants, could be a danger to education, high culture, and civilization in general.<sup>16</sup> I then used the rest of the article to show that the charge indeed is well-founded and that the great consumption of visual entertainment is endangering reading and literacy. Further, I pointed out that such art forms as classical music and the theatre could disappear owing to the predominance of popular culture.<sup>17</sup>

Indeed, it seems that Małecki has saved himself the trouble of actually reading my article. Why else would he label me a conservative enemy of popular culture, when anybody who has read the article seriously ought to see that I am not? To make matters worse, he does not seem to have a well developed understanding of the difference between serious and rhetorical ways of writing. Thus, he does not seem to understand that when I wrote on page one that it is not by chance that Shusterman defends popular culture because he is one of the few aestheticians around who enjoys any popularity; Małecki does not understand that I was sort of joking. It is an old convention that one starts an article in rhetorical, even jocular, fashion. However, Shusterman is quite popular, not least because of his writings on popular culture; we need only to note Małecki’s veneration of him.

But let us look at other aspects of Małecki’s article. When I say that there are hardly any highbrow enemies of popular culture left, he triumphantly points to Harold Bloom, A. S. Byatt, and Roger Scruton. But Bloom was born in 1930, Byatt in 1936, and Scruton in 1944. These people are part of a dying breed; I challenge Małecki to find any highbrow intellectual born after 1950.

Małecki talks in a sarcastic, let’s-have-a-go-at-this-guy fashion about my alleged moaning about the lousy state of culture instead of my putting forth any proposals about how to solve the problem. But in the con-

text I was writing, it would have been absurd to put forth such proposals, which would have made the article even more complex than it already was. I am certainly not in favour of banning the kind of popular culture I am criticizing; rather I am in favour of putting pressure on the firms that produce this pop-cultural stuff. I want to make education a bulwark against this danger and to urge parents to shield their children against this stuff. We need a global movement against this danger.

Some things that Małecki says border on being bizarre. He sort of admits that classical music might be in dire straits but hints that it is perfectly alright, because it might have outlived its artistic potential. After all, musical forms do come and go in history. It seems that he thinks that the truth of *it is ok that classical music dies* somehow obviates my contention that it might be in the danger of dying. Actually, by sort of admitting that classical music is in danger, Małecki acknowledges indirectly that high culture is in danger. But his basic point is that I am wrong about high culture being in danger! Is this man being logically consistent?

Let us look at another example of his penchant for bizarre *arguments*. In the article I discussed the fact that it is getting increasingly difficult to sell serious books, and I quoted a German publisher to this effect. I wrote that in the seventies a translation of a book by George Steiner sold in about 20,000 examples, now in only 9000.<sup>18</sup> Małecki responds to this by saying that some analytical philosophers might not think that Steiner's books are serious because of his love for that sloppy thinker Heidegger (!). And what is worse is that Małecki seems to think that he counters my arguments with this nonsense. Well, I myself did not care much for Steiner's little book on Heidegger, but by any definition it would count as a serious book because reading it is quite demanding. I guess that the same holds for his other publications.

Now this does not mean that Małecki's criticism is completely worthless. He points out that I should have defined some of the key notions in my article such as *high art* and *popular culture*. I should also have stressed the fact that there is an enormous gray zone between the two. I quite agree with Małecki that musicians such as Nick Cave and Björk cannot be easily classified as belonging either to popular or to high culture. He also has a point when he says that I focused too one-sidedly on the negative aspects of visual entertainment, forgetting, for instance, that new art forms are being created on the Internet. But, these new art forms have yet to show their mettle, and they have yet to produce their Shakespeare and not only their Bugs Bunnies. To be sure, both are necessary for any thriving culture; we need high, middle, and popular culture, preferably

engaged in a fruitful interaction. But my point is that popular culture is *at present* a threat to high culture. It has not always been so, and I want to add that I should not like it either if high culture was threatening the existence of popular culture. We need variety.

Małecki also has a point when he mentions that I forgot the fact that using the Internet requires literary skills; it can even save literacy, some pundits say. But I am under the impression that the kind of reading on the Internet is basically the swift reading of short texts; the young who read in this way might not develop the skills to read long and complex texts. This at least is Sven Birkerts's conclusion in his interesting book *The Gutenberg Elegies*.<sup>19</sup> It might be of interest to know that in the college where I teach, some students got in touch with one of the professors and asked him to put more extensive Power Points on our website. When he asked why, they responded, "then we don't have to read the textbooks." Maybe they simply cannot focus on long texts, partly because they are not used to reading such texts and partly because their attention span is so short. I strongly suspect that students around the globe are just like the ones here in Lillehammer; witness Rebekah Nathan's (a pseudonym) interesting study of American college kids.<sup>20</sup> To this I want to add that the Internet is increasingly becoming a vehicle for visual entertainment and information, witness the rise of YouTube. So maybe its *honeymoon* with written texts is about to end.

Before the war, working-class children in Britain read on average six to seven books a month.<sup>21</sup> The chances are that British working-class kids nowadays will read fewer books than that for their entire life. Taking into account the central role of books in culture, this development spells a catastrophe for culture as we know it. My experience with students is that most of them lack general knowledge about anything but popular culture.

I quite agree with Małecki that using examples from popular culture is an excellent way to teach young students, especially because it is often their only frame of reference. Actually, I, the rigid conservative, do it all the time. One former student of mine said, "it is always so much fun to go to your classes because you talk so much about things that us youngsters like, such as movies and pop music." When teaching Plato's allegory of the cave, I always refer to *The Matrix*. When discussing if we can be sure whether our selves are permanent, I use the Schwarzenegger movie *Total Recall* as an example. What a strange rigid conservative! What a hater of popular culture! I, an allegedly bigoted enemy of visual entertainment, actually love watching *Seinfeld*, *The Simpsons*, and *South Park*, the three great S's! To say as Małecki does that I surely condemn techno

is preposterous; besides being a passionate lover of rock music, I really like it. I, an allegedly conservative hater of popular culture, have been a rock critic and I have written columns in the American Internet journal *PopMatters* (my columns can still be found on the Internet). Moreover, I have written a philosophical article on Bob Dylan and several essays on different aspects of popular culture. As a young man I thought that rock and the whole counter-cultural scene of the late sixties represented a new cultural beginning. I was busy trying to explain to my mother that Jimi Hendrix, Bob Dylan, and Cream were great, creative artists! And of course, I was a staunch opponent of those who criticized popular culture, and I accused them of being elitist highbrows. When reading Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death* in the late eighties, I brushed his arguments away as being hopelessly elitist. But as the nineties wore on, I became increasingly aware of the dangers of visual, popular culture because of the fact that it seems to diminish reading and even to hurt people's literacy skills.

There might be even worse things to come. There is a chance, however slim, that entertainment, especially of the visual kind, could become a threat to the very foundations of our economic system. It might be fruitful to talk about *the new cultural contradictions of capitalism*. I am alluding to Daniel Bell's famous thesis about the cultural contradictions of capitalism. He thought that the lifeblood of capitalism was the work ethic and discipline. But at the same time, capitalism's success has created an amplified hedonism, which is not compatible with the work ethic. He maintained that this hedonism would make Americans demand more governmental services and thus undermine the free market.<sup>22</sup> However, Bell's predictions did not come true; witness the political developments in the US in the years since the publication of the book. What he did not see is that the hedonism in question has made people shy away from anything intellectually demanding and made them look instead for instant gratification in the guise of superficial entertainment.

This observation brings us to the core of my argument about the *new* cultural contradictions of capitalism: capitalism has created the mesmerising entertainment industry, which has led to the diminishing of intellectual skills among young people, most notably the skill of reading, thereby turning them into barbarians of a new kind. But capitalism needs workers who are intellectually apt. Further, the lack of general knowledge among the new barbarians might hurt their creative abilities. Now, if creativity consists in combining insights from different fields, the narrow specialization of the barbarians might make them less creative.

But capitalism thrives on creativity, and so the very success of the entertainment industry might endanger the system that brought it forth. In fact, in a recent interview in an Icelandic newspaper, one expert said that the basic reason for boys dropping out of high school was their addiction to computer games. I have reason to believe that we are talking about a world-wide plague, endangering schooling and working discipline.

Admittedly, this is a pretty speculative argument as it stands. There might be ways of making this idea empirically fruitful, which I have not thus far had the opportunity to explore. But I can say that I have always emphasized the importance of balance and cross-fertilization between popular art and *high* art. As I said in an online article, we had that balance in the sixties and the seventies, but it was upset about twenty years ago because of the victory of popular culture:<sup>23</sup>

Popular culture triumphed decisively in the Eighties, while the Sixties and the Seventies were times of a fruitful interaction between popular and avant-garde culture. Examples of such interaction can be popart or progrock. One of the few examples of such interaction in the last two decades is the birth of techno out of Karl-Heinz Stockhausen's avant-garde compositions. Another example is the way in which the Icelandic group Sigur Rós (well known from MTV) has fused age old Icelandic epic poetry with modern pop.<sup>24</sup>

If I were a rigid, conservative enemy of popular culture, should I then write like this?

There was a time when fighting for the right to rock on Friday night was the right fight to fight. These were times when it was right to battle the highbrows (including my mom!). But today our tasks are different; we have to get the ying of popular culture and the yang of high culture in balance again. Echoing Obama, I say that this is the time and this is the moment when such a fight has to be fought. Or else, civilization might crumble.

### Conclusion

It does not seem to me that I need to revise my main arguments in the light of Shusterman's and Małecki's criticisms. Małecki seems to be a follower of Shusterman and ought to learn from him the noble art of criticizing people in a polite fashion. Then, perhaps, his *fleurs du mal*, his flowers of evil, would wither away.

### Notes

1. Stefán Snævarr, "Shusterman on 'Europe', Equality, and Entertainment," *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics*, no. 36–37 (2008–2009).

2. Stefán Snævarr, "Pragmatism and Popular Culture: Shusterman, Popular Culture and the Challenge of Visuality," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 41, no. 4 (winter 2007): 1–11.

3. Stefán Snævarr, "Shusterman on 'Europe', Equality, and Entertainment."

4. Ibid.

5. Shusterman says in no uncertain words that the US had to fight for "political and economic independence from Europe" (Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 197). But the fact of the matter is that the Americans fought for independence from Britain, and were aided by the very European Frenchmen. Would there have been any United States of America without the support from the French?

6. Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*, 196–8; Richard Shusterman, *Performing Live* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2000), 58–9.

7. Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*, 196–7, my italics.

8. The fact that he was Jewish is incidental. It is also incidental that Shusterman is Jewish. Despite its great diversity, the US is still a predominately Protestant country.

9. Richard Shusterman, *Performing Live*, 185.

10. But this identity will hardly ever become a nationalist one, American or Norwegian style.

11. Richard Shusterman, *Performing Live*, 59.

12. Richard Shusterman, "Context and Cultural Understanding," *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics*, no. 36–37 (2008–2009).

13. I am perfectly well aware of the fact that the barred *l* letter is not pronounced as the ordinary *l* letter.

14. Stefán Snævarr, "Pragmatism and Popular Culture: Shusterman, Popular Culture and the Challenge of Visuality," 4.

15. Ibid., 3.

16. Ibid., 4.

17. Ibid., 4–10.

18. Ibid., 7.

19. Sven Birkerts, *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age* (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1994).

20. Rebekah Nathan, *My Freshman Year: What a Professor Learned by Becoming a Student* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2005).

21. John Carey, *What Good are the Arts?* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), 209.
22. Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (London: Heineman, 1976).
23. It might be of interest for Małecki to know, that this article was actually one of the columns I wrote for *PopMatters*, and the column's theme was ... popular culture!
24. Stefán Snævarr, "The Thinker and the Rapper: Shusterman on Popular Culture," (2002), <http://www.Popmatters.com/columns/snaevarr/020605.shtml> (retrieved 19 November, 2008).

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