

Music and consumerism; the aesthetics of an urban capitalistic society

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Abstract: *In the following pages, we propose an analysis of the urban capitalistic society we live in; it is an environment where real value is often subdued to the dictatorship of commercial principles; consequently these true values receive an expiry date and a convenient price established according to negotiable criteria. With echoes in politics and media culture, consumerism implies several – often contradictory – meanings. Rooted in America (hence the terminological connection), consumerism has its own effects in the art product, extending its echoes towards music as well. Following the American example, smaller societies expressing capitalistic views and finding themselves in a so-called economic ascension will pervert their integrity and spiritual values one by one, yielding in front of materialism and discontinuity. By analysing the specific language elements, the historical and social contexts and their effects, we choose to discuss the moment when music tends to transcend the border of an artistic act in order to become an act of consummation.*

Key-words: *Consumerism, capitalism, society, ideology*

Daily life in an urban environment can be referred to as being stereotyped. Starting with the first gestures in the morning, attentively measured in time, and finishing with the major choices that define our existence, we let ourselves slide along stylized paths, culturally, ethnically, politically induced or merely dictated by the moment's fashion. Even the music we listen to (intentionally or not), or the books we read are part of a trend, of a category of objects labeled as “valuable” in the context of what we are or believe to be. Who decides what is worth it or not? Who builds the temples of value to which we devote ourselves? How do certain works become canonical? What phenomenon determines a part of the society to revere a “celebrity” that for a specialist totally lacks substance? How does such a “celebrity” manage to impose a trend, limited in time as it may be? When and where starts the isolation from the grand tradition?

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In the following pages, we propose an analysis of the urban capitalistic society we live in; it is an environment where real value is often subdued to the dictatorship of commercial principles; consequently these true values receive an expiry date and a convenient price established according to negotiable criteria. In an supply-submitted context (the ideal relationship would be that in which *demand* and *supply* are perfectly balanced, but the situation is somewhat opposed, because the public is determined to have needs meant to correspond to the flow of objects), the consumerism's existential principle lies with an economic ideology that encourages the permanent acquisition of goods and services in the largest amounts possible.

Tightly connected to consumerism, the ideology seems to start at the same time with the development of the cities, once the switch was made from rural to urban life. The huge mechanism that starts, at the beginning of the XXth century, to move the tentacles of urban life, the redistribution of forces, the emergence of new social categories or the industrial civilization focused on economic forces, all have their share in the dramatic change of the face of society. The so-called ascending urban capitalism opposes the dominating bourgeoisie to a supposed working-class, while the global nature of this movement exploits individual anxieties in extreme pluralistic artistic gestures.

Expressionism, Impressionism, Neoclassicism... the world formed by these categories perpetuates art as a mean of expressing one's self (not through Romanticism though), putting man to display without any consideration whatsoever. Essential and abstract synthetic forms, driven by the aesthetics of ugliness, which deforms and exaggerates even the most intimate feelings, explode in countless manners. Vital instincts and social misery become in fact an inspiration.

The automation of the surrounding environment, the development of transport and communication means, the run for ascending technology determine the world to reconfigure and the forces inspired by the capitalistic idea outshine any other preliminary interest of the society. "Capital and its expansion was the story of modernism, and government survived only in so far as it could mold itself to the interests of capital" (Brettell 1999, 56). The modern world can be divided between workers and managers, between bourgeois and the working-class. The social categories are determined through their simple access to capital. These struggles become obvious in art as well; "representational art, both mechanical and hand-made, played a central role in this capitalist system and has always been attached to urban centers" (Brettell 1999, 57).

The church will no longer be the meeting place for the congregation, the space and its functions are claimed by the newly established commercial galleries. Collective exhibitions, museums, evening parties represent the new form of devotion. Art thus becomes a trend and an exchangeable good like any other luxury product. A discrepancy takes place – in order to be valuable, art must be so considered and assessed. In order to be part of a rich industrialist's or merchant's collection art must officially be considered as valuable.

A new category of critics thus emerges and acts in this direction. Between what was becoming fashionable and the avant-garde club for instance (exclusive, hard to understand, and sold as such, claiming a certain cultural level) an alienation takes place between the fashion trade and the artistic reality. Consumerism penetrates within the artistic capital area, privileging some directions instead of others. Let us not forget the essential characteristic of the contemporary urban capitalism, which is the ability to permanently generate capital, and “the value of capital is determined by the speed of its exchange” (Brettell 1999, 58).

Should we be amazed by the fact that Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* was booed in Paris or that the American musical had sold-out venues? That the Second Viennese School was for some time considered as being nothing more than an exclusive club or that Gershwin was loved from the very first moment, while jazz and pop music exploded in illegal bars? If we were to stop and consider for instance Händel's *Hornpipe* bit from the **Water Music Suite**, the famous *Ombra mai fu* Largo from **Xerxes**, the *Hallelujah Chorus* from **Messiah**, or the overture of *Zadok the Priest*, it is very likely that our mind will jump to the UEFA hymn, or to ambient music resounding in pretentious elegant spaces, with decorative cultural ensembles. No connection will be made with the rightful author of these scores, who is in fact Händel. Moreover, while I was walking around the park, I was surprised to discover that the children imitate in their games “stars” that they had seen on TV, pretending to be themselves contestants in *Romania's got talent* or *Voice of Romania*. Is this supply and demand, or is it simply spoiling people's taste? The examples can continue.

With echoes in politics and media culture, consumerism implies several – often contradictory – meanings. Rooted in America (hence the terminological connection), consumerism has its own effects in the art product, extending its echoes towards music as well. Following the American example, smaller societies expressing capitalistic views and finding themselves in a so-called economic ascension will pervert their integrity and spiritual values one by one, yielding in front of materialism and discontinuity. Criticized and explained by the American sociologist and economist Thorstein Veblen (1857-1929), ideology seems, as we have emphasized it before, to coincide with the rise of the middle-class, at the beginning of the XXth century. Whether it is focused on consumer protection, on politics related to the products' exchange market, or appears in the link between collection and globalization, the negative connotation of providing and consuming far more products than needed is an ever more noticeable certainty in daily life. The rise of the middle-class, anxious in building a better life, similar to the one of the stars promoted in the media, superposes itself over the vital and practical economic necessity – that of generating capital. “The pursuit of the ‘good life’ through practices of what is known as ‘consumerism’ has become one of the dominant global social forces” (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Consumerism>).

Compared to the past, the industrial era has launched an unprecedented situation in which the variety of offered products, all at a smaller price, seems to open to anybody the gates towards anything. The consumer thus becomes the slave of a brand, in order to maintain himself within the daily standards of a good life. People tend to identify themselves with the products they consume. Is this phenomenon obvious in art too? The trivialization of music by reducing its effect to the level of a product is an undoubted reality. The XXIst century's technology that places smartphones, tablets laptops, computers in anybody's reach, overwhelms us with music in lifts, waiting places, at the supermarket, in TV commercials...

The most unusual musical associations are made and commercialized products make our minds resonate with glorious fragments signed by Grieg or Wagner (all taken out of their original contexts), while we are trying to make up our mind what toilet paper or detergent brands to choose. Just as Rodica Zafiu declared, “we could deduce the existence of a subjacent meaning, most likely influenced by the synonymy between *consumerism* and *commercial*. This is linked not to the frenzy of buying, but to the lack of value of certain cultural products.” (http://www.romlit.ro/consumism/_consumerism). The danger of trivializing the concept has been perceived, the path towards mediocrity proving to be paved with good intentions. Hell is totally missing and can no longer be ideologically, aesthetically and morally identified.

The problem of the “consumer” is brought to attention by Umberto Eco's “open work”. “The Dialectics of order and adventure” - says Cornel Mihai Ionescu in his prologue to Eco's book *The Open work*, quoting *Joyce's poetics* by the same author - “is the condition itself of adventure, even though it provokes the ultimate crisis of order.” A part of the adventure is expressed in its relation to the idea of the consumer. We observe the digression from the original concept of public, towards another entity, much better formed, whose aim is not only to observe, but also to consume. Obviously, the sphere of masterpieces commented by Eco is of an intellectual nature, whether he refers to theatre pieces or modern art. But the idea of a good created in order to be used, transcends the line between intellectual and popular, having the receiver as a common element.

“The structure of an open masterpiece will not be the particular structure common to other pieces, but the general model describing not only a group of art works, but a group of works as long as they are put together in a relation of consummation with their receivers” (Eco 2005, 36).

Obviously, new branches of the cultural industry appear from here – those destined to entertain. We are talking about film music and the idea of TV as a mediator of information and a philtre of attitude. Umberto Eco searches for the presence of the aesthetic attitude even within live broadcasts. The succession of camera sequences

according to the development of the action is already an indicator of an artistic point of view - where one mind decides of the privileged angle.

Judgments are implicitly expressed, even though only events simultaneous to the broadcast are concerned. In case music is used, its purpose is to influence the public, using the roughest feature of this art – the one that “discusses” with human feelings. The marketing of the senses places music at the basis of seduction. Thus building trust, it also creates an atmosphere and, by appealing to the feelings, it stimulates sales. The power of Orpheus, regarded by posterity as dangerous (favours the emotional rather than reason, unleashes fears and deprives us of the imposed mental limits) seems to be in an eternal fight with order. The clear essence of a coherent language, discovered by Pythagoras and the universal system governed by numbers and synthesized in proportional sounds opposes itself. Science, algorithm, feeling? For everyone something different and for all the same – a pure expression of the experiences that makes time flies differently, at the same time subject and master.

“The fear that the senses – the body – might overwhelm the intellect – the mind – lies at the hart of Western attitudes toward the arts in general but particularly toward music, which more than any other art exposes the division between the mind and the senses” (Bonds 2014, 22).

What is the essence of music and which are the premises of the relations between content and effect? The debates are countless and substantial and come from the most different sources. Discussing whether music addresses itself to the mind or the senses, philosophers diverge. In St. Augustin's works, we discover the distinction between the force of the musical text (the one bearing appropriate harmonies and artistry in matching the sounds) and music for pleasure, at the end of the XVIIIth century Immanuel Kant regards the purely physical answer of the body to music as simply “pathological”. This point of view was shared by Eduard Hanslick who says that “consigned listening that bypassed the mind to the realm of the pathological” (Bonds, 2014, 22), thus deploring the rough appeal to the senses, deprived of the adjacent mental philtre, accessing primary resources of the organism, where the stimuli answer accordingly.

Is this the logic behind the commercial industry? Today, in the 21st century, a part of music seems to have become a social product, determined by context, influenced by trends and ideologies. Social movements explain in a certain measure the multiple dimensions of postmodern music. A heterogeneous physiognomy is constructed, a consequence of the plurality of tastes in a society dominated by consumerism. The permanent metamorphosis distinguishes itself in an aesthetic of the temporary, the result being often an artistic mockery.

The so-called elites of the intellectual genre barricade themselves in more and more difficult messages that are hardly enjoyed by the large public (the consumer),

the social dynamism of the big masses being dictated by different trends, most often traced by a consumer-type music. In Romanian, terms that designate these spheres are diverse, without being able to accurately name the phenomenon – consumer music, pop music. This music, now a simple product, is part of a multi-dimensioned whole – and implies a versed message, attracting new communication and dress codes and also new forms of behaviour. The industry understands this type of demand and offer, exploiting and educating at the same time the taste of what will become mass culture. Umberto Eco describes more degrees of opening an aesthetic descent upon the present society. He identifies what he names “poetics of necessity”. Thus a difference appears between the process of artistic creation, just as the history of art and culture have got used to identify it, by comparing it to what is identified as “the act of production”, which tries to create an object for an “act of consummation”.

We are trying to identify the cause and the consequences of this movement. Rooted in the United States of America (which also explains the etymology), consumerism has its effects upon the artistic product, including in the musical domain. The American model influences smaller societies impacted by economic ascension (or recession?) and adopting capitalistic intentions; it is also the example of Romania. The integrity and spiritual values of these societies are slowly perverted, capitulating in front of materialism and discontinuity. It is interesting to observe the interference of this phenomenon with the artistic world, the productions it develops and its resistance in front of the “good living”.

“The multi-prospective character and the dynamism of the baroque art as a prestigious manifestation of modern sensitivity represents a reflex in the poetics of the removal of geocentricism and the anthropocentric dimension of Copernic's revolution, passing from visual to tactile and from essence to appearance, an impression advocated by sensuality and empirics” (Eco 2005, 10).

By analyzing the specific language elements, the historical and social contexts and their effects, we choose to discuss the moment when music tends to transcend the border of an artistic act in order to become an act of consummation. The nature of music itself is thus questioned – the expression, the form, the quality, its independence towards other arts, to which is added its accessibility: constant rhythm, repetition, concision and simplicity of the message, melodic rudiments. Should we identify the origins of the cabaret and its traditional association with vice and illegal activities as a possible starting point? Ever since the opening of the Parisian cabaret “Le Chat Noir”, the organizers intended it to be a place where painters, poets, composers and performing musicians could not only meet each other, but confront the public, the bourgeoisie; an element of provocative artistic

statement was the essence of cabaret during its heyday (<https://archive.org/details/imslp-of-music-and-musicians-grove-george>).

This example is soon followed in the German area by the “Überbrettl”. Founded in Berlin by Ernst von Wolzogen in 1901 it sparked off many other smaller ventures (“Schall und Rauch” and the “Wilderbühne”) that preserved their intimate atmosphere. Yvette Guilbert, Marie Dubas, Marianne Oswald and Agnes Capri, the most famous stars of the time, define a sentimental and satiric musical genre; at the same time this style contains political elements but also sordid ones, a direction imposed by Kurt Weill, Friedrich Hollaender, Mischa Spoliansky or Rudolf Nelson.

Although the frivolous and accessible nature of this genre does not totally define it, it is not surprising that avant-garde experimentation often dominated the performances, providing collaborations with Satie, Lehár (*Giuditta*) or Korngold (*Die Kathrin*), etc. Daring, vulgarizing productions, the sensational deformation of the symphonic genre (Ravel’s *Bolero* choreographically transformed to imitate a sexual act) or the explosion of American musicals open the way to consumerist elements that transform the “performance” into “entertainment”, which leads to more or less devastating effects on the score.

Or maybe it is about sound and noise, the artistic movement of the Italian futurists who, in their Manifesto from 1911 announced their aspirations towards modernism and experiment, introducing daily noises in music: the industrial reality finds itself tackled again (trams, cars, factories, ships, train engines etc.) whose presence and imitative repetition will be materialized in various artistic combinations. Of course, we find ourselves in the middle of the Avant-garde, closer to the notion of experimentation than to the concept of mass production.

Then maybe, it is about John Adams’s minimalism or Philip Glass’s film music. The latter – another industry almost entirely destined for consumerism – could represent in itself the subject of an ample study. But in our research it is a central point because it unravels one of music’s characteristics that make it so necessary for this huge organism of entertainment. The study on Peter Kivy’s film music published in *Music, Language and Cognition* seizes this aspect:

“And if one should ask the question what the purpose of musical accompaniment was in the silent film after it ceased to be that of drawing out the projector’s noise (if that ever was its purpose), than one correct answer would be: to do all of the things for the silent moving picture that it does for sung drama, i.e. opera, or the spoken drama, i.e. melodrama: in general terms, to provide an expressively and dramatically appropriate musical fabric” (Kivy 2007, 68).

The musical background packages and humanizes the events. Although maybe “pathologic”, the sounds’ effects combined to verses or images result in a communication directly to the soul of the type of feeling recreated. Composers have

been exploiting this feature from the most ancient times in order to complete the words' significations. St. Augustin acknowledged in his thoughts on music that poetry had more force when sung than when only recited. He confessed he was afraid that the recipients would be distraught from the very essence of words because of the potential effects of the sounds. Music detains means of expression that transcend those typical for the spoken language. Today we would say that these are the means employed by our consumerist society to seduce the consumer. It packages the message, no matter how simple it might be – in attractive music (not necessarily of high quality) in order to address first the feeling and then reason. Just like flavour improvers added to food, the sonorous layer enhances the message of a society living out of sales and whose function has an expiry date.

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