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Literaire intolerantie

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Summary

This dissertation tries to discover why and on the basis of what standards modern theories of literature and art should discriminate so rigorously between 'real', 'high' literature and so-called 'low' or 'trivial' literature. Why should certain authors and genres be taken seriously by literary critics, whereas others are systematically ignored or even preconceived to be anti-literary?

In finding an answer to these questions, special attention is paid to four aspects. First, of course, the *literary and aesthetic* norms determining this bipartition, this dichotomy in literature are described. Its more general *ethical-philosophical motivation* and its possibly *social grounds* are also gone into - aspects and argumentations that are always situated in their *historical contexts*.

The inquiry concentrates on the modern, 20th-century theory concerning this problem, and especially on the ideas of Theodor W. Adorno and Pierre Bourdieu on the nature and function of the dichotomy.

Preceding the inquiry proper, the second chapter outlines how the modern dichotomy could originate. After a brief discussion of the literary-historical status of the late medieval chapbook, attention is paid to the drastic changes in literary and cultural relations at the end of the 18th century, especially in Germany and France. The system of patronage made way for the 'free', market-dependent writer, and increasing literacy as well as secularization gave rise to a relatively large reading public with little classical education and a great appetite for light, entertaining novels and similar reading matter. These developments were supported by the introduction of large-scale reproduction techniques and of a mass medium like the 19th-century daily (of which the serial was a vital component). The social isolation in which many an intellectual had (perforce) found himself after the disappointments of the French Revolution also played a part in establishing the categorical division between real and bad literature.

All this is illustrated by a description of the crisis in the poetics of the early Enlightenment, in which literature was valued for its humanizing, civilizing effects on its readers, every human being was supposed to possess an innate sense of taste, and the layman had just as much right to judge and speak as the expert. In Germany the immediate cause of the change in poetics was the so-called *Modeliteratur* ('fashionable literature'), which, according to the literary pedagogues and philosophers, was sabotaging the pursuit of civilization for all by its exaggerations and its sensuality, considered anything but elevating. As a matter of fact, this problem derived straight from

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the ideal of generality in the Enlightenment. And because the 'general public' proved to be unwilling or unable to renounce its obvious need of sentiments, sensations and what were considered to be animal enjoyments, the idea originated that there existed two 'races' of readers: good ones and bad ones, critical ones and dumb ones, readers with an unselfish eye for refined and objective beauty and those with incorrigibly gross tastes - each race with its own favourite genres.

Follows an examination of how the father of the aesthetics of autonomy, Immanuel Kant, reacted to this development. Were his distinction between the beautiful and the pleasant, and his notions of the universality and of the 'as-if'-objectivity of the judgment of taste, perhaps an implicit response to the rise of the new public? Attention is also paid to the ambivalence Friedrich Schiller felt towards the popular *Modeliteratur*. Of this ambivalence little was left in the Romantic criticism of Friedrich Schlegel and E.T.A. Hoffmann; according to them, good poetry and popularity were mutually exclusive almost by definition, which resulted in excluding the public from serious participation in modern literary communication. In spite of the efforts of popular pedagogues, and of Zola's plea for a public-oriented and market-oriented high literature, this attitude determined literary relations throughout the 19th century (e.g. in French Aestheticism and in the later circle around Stefan George), during which the phenomenon of 'real', 'high' literature was strikingly often defined in opposition to 'democracy', 'mass', 'bourgeoisie', 'industry' and 'actuality'.

In the third chapter, Adorno's point of view concerning the dichotomy is discussed. For Adorno, the difference between what he calls 'the culture industry' and 'authentic art' is a sad, but perfect example of how the Enlightenment betrayed its humanist ideals. According to the writers of the *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, the Enlightenment had promised the individual adulthood, autonomy and subjectivity, but in reality it changed him into a slavishly consuming pseudo-subject, into a manipulable object of commerce and demagoguery - an analysis serving the special purpose of enabling us to understand the 'ratio' behind the atrocities of national socialism. Essential to this view is the great, almost unbridgeable gap that Adorno feels to exist between (human) truth and dehumanized (empirical) reality, a reality that can perhaps solely be rehumanized by radical theoretical and artistic (self)-criticism of all forms of utilitarian thought.

From this Enlightened perspective Adorno sharply criticizes all forms of culture submitting, even if only slightly, to commerce or ideology - the more so if they are said to gratify the wishes of the public (a public considered childish and kept so) - since such culture more or less deliberately 'cures' the public of the longing for intellectual and aesthetic development. For Adorno the culture industry is 'anti-Enlightenment', even though he understands the

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social need of cliché entertainment, amusement and adaptation. This is illustrated by his views on the concept of identification in aesthetic and psychological theory - views criticized by Schulte-Sasse and Jauß.

Adorno's complaints about the culture industry emphatically do not concern 'the masses'' supposed desire for sensation or their bad taste; he locates the problem in the fact that the culture industry systematically abuses, but never satisfies, the legitimate human desire for happiness. Unlike other critics of modern 'mass' culture Adorno does not explain the dichotomy from the current contrast between the intellect and the senses, which he considers to be untenable, especially in matters of art and literature.

Nevertheless the ascetic intellect is an important moment in the evaluation of the authenticity, of the 'truth content', of art and literature. The main condition for the authenticity of a work of art is its autonomy in relation to any non-artistic utility. But this autonomy does not protect from abuse; Adorno also denounces the 'culture consumer', who sees art as an intellectual form of possession and who imputes to art a 'higher' usefulness. But he realizes as well that 'after Auschwitz' the pure beauty of completely autonomous art has become sterile and therefore inauthentic, and that the respect for art possesses superstitious (unenlightened) dimensions. Also, the fact that even the most authentic work of art partakes of (false) reality stands in the way of an unconditional appreciation. Adorno solves this problem in two ways: on the one hand he no longer places delight in beauty, but the displeasure of shock at the heart of the aesthetic experience (which is thus de-aestheticized); on the other hand, he declares the ambivalence of authentic art to be its essence. In seeing its autonomy as the critical negation of any heteronomy (the heteronomy of the culture industry in particular), art is also a *fait social*. This view leads to a strong preference for ambiguous, enigmatic, difficult and inaccessible art. That is how contemporary authentic art betrays the Enlightened ideal of generality - an effect Adorno highly regrets. Still, for him this is not a motive to plead for an art that will adapt itself to the public-'friendly' techniques of the culture industry, because that would entail abandonment of any hope that the public will ever be invited to critical reflection.

In Adorno's dichotomy the two parts, low and high art and literature, the culture industry and authentic art, are to a large extent each other's complement; they are usually defined as each other's contrast. At least in a qualitative sense; as is illustrated with the aid of the category of the utopic in art (in which context work of Bloch and Jameson is discussed), the human need of art (of the *promesse du bonheur*) surpasses the boundaries of the dichotomy. But Adorno believes that the culture industry fulfils this promise in an 'absolutely false' way, which means that, contrary to many of his later critics, he cannot be tempted to discover anything positive whatsoever in its products. Therefore he may indeed be reproached for being a very rigid theorist of the modern dichotomy. Yet it should be pointed out that his strictness

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does not arise from any traditional aristocratic fear of the masses, or from an intellectual need to set himself apart from the 'common people', but from an Enlightened concern for their fate, something which has by now become almost unusual.

Next, the most important features of the culture industry and of authentic art having been schematically opposed, attention is paid to the question in how far Adorno's analysis may be called outdated, e.g. in connection with Eco's postmodern comments on modernism (of which Adorno is an important representative) and with Peter Bürger's 'postavantgardism' - two examples of not very convincing criticism. Nevertheless Adorno's strictness remains a problem, as does his relation to empirical reality. But, as will be shown in greater detail in connection with Bourdieu's theory, this may well be a sign of his being *right*.

The fourth chapter deals with Bourdieu's sociological analysis of the difference between high and low art, between culture considered to be legitimate and culture considered to be illegitimate, as it was expounded in particular in *La distinction* (1979). Bourdieu is especially interested in the social *importance* of (high) art and literature, even though (and because) he knows that merely to look for this is barbaric and blasphemous in the eyes of the supporters of the prevalent aesthetics of autonomy. After a discussion of central concepts like '(class) habitus', 'charismatic ideology', the metaphorical '(cultural) capital' and of his views on the relation between theory and empiricism, his description of the low 'taste of the *nécessité*', the 'popular aesthetics', is analyzed. Bourdieu explains the observed preference of the members of the lower social classes for cultural forms focusing on emotional identification from the functional and practical-ethical attitude to which their lack of economic and cultural capital forces these classes. Arguing from the opposition between form and function (which I consider a very doubtful point of departure), he also tries to explain the popular aversion to social formalities and to artistic experiments with forms, which the lower classes, not entirely without justification, experience as ways to exclude the common people - an analysis Bourdieu borrowed from Ortega y Gasset.

Another question discussed is why what I call the popular 'zero-culture' should sometimes appeal so strongly to culturally so much wealthier groups like artists and intellectuals. Somewhat contrary to his reputation Bourdieu warns - although not always consistently - against the romantic-populistic idea that 'the people' have a coherent and unspoiled taste of their own. In his opinion popular aesthetics are either a point of negative reference within the legitimate aesthetics of autonomy, or a strategic argument in the dispute about those aesthetics.

Basic principles of the legitimate, high, 'pure' taste are luxury, freedom and independence, and these can best be measured by means of their *distance* to

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the restrictions that the different kinds of poverty impose upon a great part of the population. 'Distance' is a central concept in the bourgeois habitus, in which individuality, originality, uniqueness, exclusiveness, singularity, etc. are positive values, as opposed to negatively coloured 'popular' values such as simplicity, accessibility and generality. A certain emphasis on form and (personal) style is also considered to be typical of the legitimate taste.

On sociological grounds Bourdieu distinguishes two conflicting varieties of the legitimate taste, viz. the (grand) bourgeois fancy taste, and the intellectual, 'free' taste. The fancy taste wants art to display class, solid quality, professionalism, established success and material exclusiveness, so as to express the social-economic power of its exponent - an analysis Bourdieu (in spite of his denials) seems to owe in large measure to Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class*. The 'free', Kantian taste belongs to the part of the dominant class that has hardly any economic capital at its disposal, but does possess a considerable amount of cultural capital: the (young) artists and intellectuals. Bourdieu holds that the social conflict between these two class fractions about the exchange rate of their kind of capital is the main factor determining the dynamics of culture, which is mostly about (sometimes very indefinite and flexible) contrasts such as 'commercial success' versus 'acclaim by experts'; 'refined enjoyment' versus 'asceticism'; 'complacency' versus 'criticism'; 'tradition' versus 'innovation', and 'heteronomy' versus 'autonomy'.

Essential for Bourdieu's view on the dichotomy is the idea that Western, differentiated culture is driven by the (unconscious) urge to distinguish oneself from The Others and that its movements therefore run their course according to a 'dialectic of distinction and pretension'. This cultural law is held to explain why widely spread ('popular') forms of art are fairly automatically despised as vulgar by the experts. This of course evokes the question of how to relate this to the ideal of widespread culture also advocated in high cultural circles. How the distinction drive works is illustrated by the *goût moyen* (a rather problematical concept in Bourdieu's work) of the despised petty bourgeois or middle class, whose fate seems to be the tragic inversion of that of king Midas's. A social group that Bourdieu likes even less is formed by the rising *new bourgeois*, who deal in cultural merchandise and in the vulgarized ideals of the Enlightenment.

Thus, Bourdieu too shows the existence of a strongly negative interplay between the various (social) varieties of taste and culture. Yet it does not seem correct to maintain that high art and culture can *always only* be meaningfully interpreted as expressions of an aversion to popular taste: as pointed out in connection with statements by Broch, Lotman and De Swaan, they do not only tend to exclude, but also to integrate. That Bourdieu has overlooked this paradox may partly be blamed on the fact that he is too apt to equate sociological categories with literary-critical ones.

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Also, it is becoming ever more doubtful whether the cultural preferences of the lower classes are as strongly driven by an aversion to or criticism of the legitimate taste as seems to be the case the other way round. Is popular taste not far more non-Kantian than consciously anti-Kantian? How 'active' is the popular rejection of high culture? Might art vandalism be an expression of it? Does popular resistance express itself aesthetically as well? And what is the relation of such an expression to Adorno's culture industry? Or is there, perhaps, also a *well-*considered culture that is generally accepted and assimilated? Does the popular variant of taste actually take part in the cultural battle at all? Is that battle, speaking in sociological terms, not much rather a matter of clashes between the bourgeois taste and the intellectual taste, between the established bourgeoisie and the new bourgeoisie?

Having schematized Bourdieu's delineations of the most important dichotomies and added a final comment, work by Crego and Groot is discussed in a subsection dealing with Bourdieu's interpretation of Kant's *Kritik der Urteilskraft*: his debatable reading of that work as the conceptual foundation of the dichotomy, particularly in connection with the distinction between the sensuously pleasant and the formally beautiful.

The chapter ends with an attempt to situate Bourdieu's theory in space and time, e.g. by reflecting on the question of how 'French' his analysis is, or on the question of whether cultural relations have greatly altered in the thirty years since he did his empirical research. In how far has the new bourgeoisie, then rising, taken over in the meantime, and what has today's 'zap culture' left of the differentiations based on social factors that Bourdieu was still able to observe in *La distinction*? Is his theory, with its focus on the relations prevalent under 19th-century aestheticism, not out of date? And does he not demonstrate a very uncritical approach to conceptual oppositions like 'quality versus quantity'? Would it not be better to make a distinction between the concepts of 'relative quality' and 'absolute quality'?

For the major part, the final chapter consists of a comparison of the dichotomy theories of Adorno and Bourdieu, centring on the question of in how far these two theories overlap, supplement and preclude each other. To begin with, their characterizations of high and low art and literature are compared, bringing to light that the main lines of Adorno's dichotomy between the culture industry and authentic art correspond with Bourdieu's distinction between the intellectual variant of legitimate taste and the *culture moyenne* of the middle classes and/or the new bourgeoisie. Yet they differ fundamentally in their attitude towards high art's claim to autonomy. Also, the fact that Adorno approaches the problem primarily from the angle of production and Bourdieu from that of reception is of decisive consequence for their clashing views on the dichotomy. An allied difference is the fact that Adorno's sociology of art mainly focuses on the interpretation and evaluation

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of works of art (with regard to their truth content), whereas Bourdieu is chiefly interested in the sociological composition of their public and in their function as regards the cultural economy. Hence their theories and conclusions cannot simply be combined: what is essential for one, the other finds arbitrary or totally reprehensible. Peter Bürger explains this friction from the fact that Adorno's argument remains *within* the framework of a critical-idealist aesthetics, whereas in his equally critical role of 'barbaric' scientific observer Bourdieu places himself *outside* this framework. Adorno and Bourdieu do not only contradict each other; they supplement each other at the same time - a conclusion Gartman has drawn as well.

Another point of discussion is the question of how Adorno and Bourdieu (might) judge *each other*. It is found, for instance, that in his description of intellectual taste Bourdieu has not been able to take all the shades of Adorno's analysis into account. But the comparison of Adorno's criticism of Veblen and of 'positivism' with Bourdieu's ideas also shows that Adorno has not been able to put paid to Bourdieu's methods in advance.

A more successful approach to reconciling at least a number of contradictions between Adorno and Bourdieu is to view Bourdieu's insights as a *sequel* to those of Adorno's. Thus, Bourdieu's lack of interest in the truth content of art, his hypotheses about the unconsciously snobistic motive in culture and his extreme criticism of the concept of autonomy may be interpreted as tokens of the triumph of the culture industry, as proof of Adorno's prophetic talent. For if we see the present-day dichotomy as a distinction organized by the culture industry, and judge high art and literature to be a fetish with which the target group of more highly educated consumers hope to buy (pseudo-)subjectivity, the dichotomy, measured by 'old-fashioned' literary-critical requirements like truth and objectivity, has indeed become arbitrary and purely affirmative - a position taken up, albeit in other terms, by critics like Eco, Hassan and Fiedler as well. Bourdieu does not yet go as far as these postmodernists: on this point he takes up something of an intermediate position. One might say that, on a scientific level, he expresses the fictitious differentiation of contemporary culture, in which radically critical, authentic art has no more part to play, or at the most an exceedingly marginal one.

But this analysis has enormous consequences for the theoretical tenability of the dichotomy, dealt with in my personal look at its future which forms the end of the dissertation. Before that, the notion that all contemporary art and literature has already collapsed under the yoke of the culture industry and no longer possesses even a trace of criticism and/or authenticity is called in question. Also, doubts are cast on the power of the distinction motive as well as on the thought that all forms of distinction drive should give rise to dismay.

Next, the main props of the dichotomy are held up to the light. Thus, the contrasts between sensuous enjoyment and intellectual enjoyment, between

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the pleasant and the beautiful, between commerce and disinterestedness, between autonomy and heteronomy and between the masses and the élite are considered too vague (still) to justify a rigid dichotomy.

The Enlightened generality motive too is tested for topicality, chiefly leading to the conclusion that we should take leave of the notion, found to be naive, that the literary value judgment is *Einstimmung ansinnend* in nature. This does not entail an end to the Enlightened idea that the (critical) faculty of taste is universally human, but it does imply that we should not actually expect or want it to be uniform.

One requirement used by the author herself to distinguish between real literature and bad literature is *singularity*. This ties in with Benjamin's concept of aura and the concept of the literary epiphany, in which the (subjective) susceptibility of the moment is of essential importance. And of course she hopes that such an experience is communicable.

(Vertaling: Rudy Bremer)

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