The evidence of “dumbing down”
in the fields of popular culture, music and human soul
and its key factors

Introduction

Our time is overloaded with technological novelties, constantly growing diversity of approaches and increasing global interdependence. It is a real challenge to grasp our time in all of its complexity and it seems excessive task to piece together different tendencies in a comprehensive picture. One way to digest complexity is to view it in snapshots. If we try to analyze definite layer in a snapshot, we can find out much about the layers beneath it. On the other hand different snapshots should be brought together to build up the whole picture. In order to comprehend what’s really going on in a definite field, usually one must step aside and look at the broader context, so that the details could not overshadow the basic trends. Some reflections on the processes taking place in popular culture, music and human soul under the influence of media are presented here which could be helpful to build some overall picture of currents our cultural life is carried by.

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Considering popular music we see it as an integral part of a popular culture. We can trace the same basic tendencies, characteristics, trends and factors at work here as they are in popular culture in general. These factors and phenomena have their own origins, which should be considered also, in order to comprehend all the mechanism they operate and reveal final targets of their effect. So we start exploring phenomena in popular culture and basic factors, making impacts on it.

As described in online source – wikipedia - popular culture changes constantly and occurs uniquely in place and time. It forms currents and whirlwinds, representing a complex of mutually interdependent perspectives and values that influence society and its institutions in various ways. Its items most typically appeal to a broad spectrum of the public. Thus representing some mainstream on a local or global scale it gives an expression, reflects something which in itself has a quality of an average, dynamic ordinary standard, more or less accepted by a vast majority for that particular moment. What is the process of its formation?

According to specialist on media studies, Roy Scuker, popular culture has a symbiotic relationship with the mass media; he thinks that each depends on the other in an intimate collaboration. One of the results of this “collaboration” is definitely not very positive. Many critics recognize newly emerging „Culture of Consumption“. First, the shift in consciousness had to occur in order to create a demand, a customer for this kind of culture. Critics emphasize the roles played by marketing, the mass media and advertising in shaping the required consumption-oriented consciousness, as a basis for this kind of culture to appear. According to Anglo-American poet W.H. Auden: „What the mass media offers is not popular art, but entertainment which is intended to be consumed like food, forgotten, and replaced by a new dish. This is bad for everyone; the majority loses all genuine taste of their own, and the minority becomes cultural snobs.”

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1 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Popular_culture
Richard Hoggart’s book was the earliest (1957), attempt to understand changes in culture caused by “massification”. His critique is not of popular culture, but of mass culture, culture of consumption with its downward trends in taste. He distinguishes it from popular culture as something that is imposed on the population from above. The value of “popular culture” is that it is self-created and so has a fundamental integrity, it is broadly self-generating, evolving according to its own laws and dictates rather than at the promptings of the mass media. We must wonder he claims, whether, in this definition, there is any popular culture left; eliminated by the mass culture that has replaced it.  

In fact, all that Hoggart predicted has happened with speed. Consciousness was influenced largely. We live in a world defined by the values we import from the media and our patterns of behaviour and relating.

The author and contributing editor at Harper's Magazine Thomas de Zengotita argues that the media age has crushed any area of authenticity and spontaneity. The result is action, speech, language, posture, thought, and emotion based on cliché. Our lives are mediated (what he means is: seen through the lens of various media) to such an extent that we experience reality in a completely artificial way. This makes us resemble actors always immersed in our roles. Thus, we have lost any sense of quality or greatness.

Besides, by the means of modern advertising techniques, mass media deliberately shapes consciousness and changes contemporary cultural climate. Advertising bases itself on the evocation of desire and also serves machinery that is rooted in capital, the market, commercialism and consumerism. It propagates their ideologies in an indirect, not obvious way and deceptively bends every alternative message and ideology towards its own purposes. Advertising is all about the manipulation. It responds to people only inasmuch as they are consumers, and its relationship to its audience is based on valuing them only in so far as they are able to consume. These values and perceptions then enter the culture and influence people’s day to day life, their relationships and values. Advertising is hugely successful and powerful tool and it is not generally understood, that it has made the values, and valuing, of consumption and possessing, not necessarily with any effort, the indication of social success.

Thus popular culture - the culture devised by ordinary people for themselves – has been pushed aside by the mass culture imposed on them from above in the second half of the last century. Richard Hoggart states that its production offers nothing which can really grip the brain or heart, that they assist a gradual drying-up of the more positive kinds of enjoyment, in which one gains much by giving much. American writer, social critic Dwight Macdonald specifies this in these words: „mass culture offers its customers neither an emotional catharsis nor an aesthetic experience, for these demand effort. “ These ideas express ultimately a defence of individual freedom and integrity in the face of the centralizing tendencies of the machine age that reduces culture to stereotyped commodities.

As a matter of fact critics started to lament the "replacement of high art and authentic folk culture by tasteless industrialized artefacts produced on a mass scale in order to satisfy the lowest common denominator.” This mass culture has led to the concentration of mass-culture power in ever larger global media conglomerates. Describing the essence of the processes born under the influence of the factors mentioned above, some British critics introduced a concept of „dumbing down“. It

4 Richard Hoggart, (1957) The Uses of Literacy, p.3-4
6 Day, Nancy Advertising: Information or Manipulation? (Issues in Focus) , p.23-25
7 Dwight Macdonald, 1983 Against the American Grain, p.23
points to a variety of different things. According to them it means, for example, programming to
avoid any intellectual challenge to one's audience (a classical music radio station that plays
individual movements, or no contemporary music, no or little vocal music, etc.). Or it can also be
commonly used to criticize attempts to reach a wider audience through some kind of presentation
gimmicks (laser light shows to accompany classical music, pop/classical shows such as the Three
tenors, Andrea Bocelli, etc.) The concept encompasses simplification of culture, education, and
thought, a decline in creativity and innovation, a failure to establish appropriate artistic, cultural,
and intellectual standards, and the trivialization of cultural, artistic, and academic products.\textsuperscript{8}

The same process was noticed not only by critics but also by psychologists. Susan Long, for
example, presented a paper at the Paris Symposium of International Society for Psychoanalytic
Study of Organizations, expressing her dread about ascendency of a culture whose most intelligible,
persuasive values are drawn from the sphere of entertainment. She states that even intellectuals,
one prepared to risk themselves for what was right and true, are now addicted to frivolous
entertainment. She sees "the devolution of literary ambition and the concurrent ascendency of the
tepid, the glib, and the senselessly cruel as normative fictional subjects" as symptomatic of this
retreat from a position of thoughtfulness and the degraded ability to recognize, and desire, greatness
and quality in cultural products.\textsuperscript{9}

According to online information, retrieved from the British site, called „no-muzak“, (which seeks
to unite citizen's efforts in their resistance against companies and public services using piped music,
(aural pollution) in the spaces occupied by their clients), the evidence for “dumbing down” can be
found everywhere. In their publications they state that the masses live in present occupied by
celebrity culture, fashion, a TV culture of diminished quality and range, an idealization of
mediocrity, and cheap pop videos. They claim, that as a matter of fact, speed and immediacy are the
greatest imperatives here, meaning that complex ideas are reduced to sound bites. That is why,
according to the site’s publications, high culture is represented by The Three Tenors and J K
Rowling and people spend their spare time listening to rap bands rather than Bartok and Stravinsky.
They express true anxiety about the fact, that a culture which values Footballers' Wives more than
Frescobaldi or Flaubert is being enthusiastically promoted as democratic and “anti-elitist”, leading
to the dumbing-down of culture into nothing more than a footnote to market-dominated consumer
culture and a poverty of thought and expression.\textsuperscript{8}

Mass media, once turned into a mouthpiece of market and business, operates in the framework of
the mindset which primary interest is the profit. According to Robert M. Young, historian of
science, professor of psychoanalytic psychotherapy, the problem at present with the mass media is
the cultural mindset of the authoritarian executives who make the decisions, taking no risks,
because all they want is to maximize the audience. One of them, he tells, had a chart on his wall
with three words: 'Good, Cheap, Quick. Choose any two'.\textsuperscript{10}

For all these reasons the way many contemporary artists, critics, scientists characterize the current
situation in cultural life differ in words, but share the same downhearted mood: „The traditional
cultural values of Western society are degenerating under the influences of corporate politics, the
commercialization of culture and the impact of mass media.“\textsuperscript{11} „Ours is the age of substitutes:
instead of language we have jargon; instead of principles, slogans; and instead of genuine ideas,
bright suggestions. “\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{8} Where the Stress Falls: Essays, \textit{On W. G. Sebald} p.1 ; Susan Sontag, ISBN: 0374289174
\textsuperscript{10} Robert M. Young, 'Dumbing Down? Publishing, the Media and the Internet', Talk presented as Distinguished Visitor
to the University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, 13 January 1999. p.3,7,9.
\textsuperscript{12} Eric Bentley. http://www.great-quotes.com
Pop music unfolds in the cultural framework described above. No need to wonder that the same processes of decadence permeate this sphere too. And though some critics are more optimistic when they talk specifically about music: “to my opinion the situation is not so bad about music, where various forms of popular music still all have their niches.”\textsuperscript{10} still many of them report the same tendencies as in popular culture in general.

One example is an online article of social critic Jason O’Connor. According to him, the music industry itself has changed drastically: no longer does the actual music quality drive the industry, he claims. Instead, the people with the money and power at the record companies notice some bad music selling well to young people and therefore decide that from then on they're only going to find and promote that type of bad music since it made a few bucks. According to him, they've totally stopped listening to the music and instead only listen to the dollars. He thinks that no longer does the music the band creates determine the success of a band. Instead, entertainment conglomerates tell fans what to listen to, and that determines the success. They do this, he claims, because they have such a strangle hold on the media. „We only have the illusion of choice now. A vicious circle has begun where the whole industry is inexorably spinning down, unable to find purchase on the sides of some slimy corporate funnel, circling downward uncontrollably into the abyss of painfully bad music, “– he says. According to him only a few bands occasionally slip through the vortex relatively intact, sidestepping the almost institutionalized process of "making it" set in place by music executives. But most other artists have to do what the people with the purse strings tell them to do. And that often makes for bad music.\textsuperscript{13}

Meanwhile, advancements in technology have enabled the emergence of so called “new media” Based on the process of converting all possible forms of data to its digital representation, new media empowered itself with new qualities, which it never had before. Some examples are the Internet, websites, computer multimedia, CD-ROMS, and DVDs.\textsuperscript{14} Digital formats offered the opportunity to copy at rates faster than real time with no degradation in quality compared with the original. The technological innovations converged with popularity of recorded music brought into existence a new form of social interaction via networks. There appeared social networks, fostered by the exchange of music. Thus the Internet, allied with digital reproduction has generated a new problem for music industry, because the ability to record is allied with the ability to distribute. “\textsuperscript{15}

Some critics found these innovations to be a possible breakthrough out of the dictatorship of corporate business interests via traditional mass media: „my current hope is the internet, “– says Robert M. Young. He expresses deep satisfaction that new media opens many new ways to create and propagate culture, making no reliance on existing gatekeepers: he thinks, that e-mail and the web circumvent admirably all kinds of careerists, financiers and professional publishers, opening space for seriously pluralistic marketplace. According to him, the facilities of new media give new opportunities to resist the dumbing down of traditional mass media. He believes that those of us who don’t want to be dumbed down can now make very good use of these potentially ubiquitous spaces in cyberspace in order to create culture and to try to make the world a better place. To his opinion, at each stage new technologies can have an enlightening and a liberating influence. And though, he thinks, some serious philistines are in control of much of the media, including new media, but now we can make and share and choose our own level and taste.\textsuperscript{10}

\textsuperscript{13} Jason O’Connor, 30/08/2006 Article: Why Is Most Music So Bad Today?, p. 3-4.
\textsuperscript{14} http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_media
\textsuperscript{15} Martin Lister,Jon Dovey New Media (A Critical Introduction), 2009 p.192
New media have challenged the distinguishing feature of traditional media by altering the participation habits of the public. The Internet created a space for more diverse political opinions, social and cultural viewpoints and a heightened level of consumer participation.¹⁶

This is how one vision looks like. It believes that new media brings much more diversity and more alternatives to what were promoted through the channels of traditional mass media. Still not everyone agrees with this point of view.

Danny Mullins, Music Industry major at the State University of New York, College at Oneonta, expresses quite opposite seeing. He states, for example, that in the past, music has evolved much slower and more fluently with very little attention given to the particular track, recording, and/or albums bridging the musical gaps and paradigm shifts. To his opinion the viral nature of Internet and other advances in technology have enabled the entertainment conglomerates (record companies, publishers, radio and television broadcasters) to control every aspect of the pipeline. In his view, companies have more vehicles than ever to forcefully deliver their commodities. In other words, media management and other factors have sped up the evolution of music, he thinks, and have positioned the majors to be the ultimate taste makers of music leaving little to no room for free thought.¹⁷

New media is also criticized, because it enables to devaluate really gifted artists, putting them on the same line with any mediocrities having digital technologies at their disposition. According to Jason O’Connor, technology is not the last thing that contributes to the poor music of today. These days, he says, Hollywood actors who can't sing can have singing careers. He tells that the engineers touch up their voices, and use every digital sound technique there is to make an average product sellable, just like the magazines airbrush the models and actresses, trimming years off to complete the illusion. He claims that there are many ways in which the music engineers can do this in the studio and even for artists on tour. He complains that in any other era there was at least enough really fantastic and original music being created to balance things out, but it is not so anymore, according to him.¹³

Interesting point of view is expressed in another online article, written by Paul Meara, a current student at Ohio University, pursuing a degree in Broadcast News. His case study examines the influence new media has made on Hip-hop music development. It’s worth to present it because it nicely illustrates what possibly happens with popular music on the whole.

In his article he tells, that according to Dr. Tony Anderson, PhD in hip-hop and education from the University of Delaware, technology has had the biggest influence on the change of hip-hop music and distribution. It leads to debasement of what has been true hip-hop artistry, giving everyone an easy-way chance to shine. Anderson thinks, that new media has made an impact on our understanding of celebrity. He claims that though people say it’s an even playing field now created by internet, but in reality what makes people enjoy celebrity is the fact that those people have access to things that the general public doesn’t have. He thinks that when everyone has access to the same tool, then you don’t have celebrity and the art devalues. According to him, with the development of YouTube, Twitter and some of today’s other social media outlets, hip-hop, like so many other concepts, has given the art of “the come-up” to just about anyone. What happens, he says, is that music gets decompressed and shrunk down to phrases to try to penetrate into people’s psyche. He claims that many of today’s self-entitled “hip-hop heads” has made a culture they once knew change beyond recognition. Akil Houston, Ohio University Professor of African American Studies also thinks that social media may be to blame for this. He thinks, that when you have the internet,

¹⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Media_influence
¹⁷Danny Mullins, March 15, 2010 Death of Hip hop, birth of electro-pop, and the influence of electronic music into mainstream music,
where anybody can produce an album and put it up on YouTube is quite another situation when it was in the beginning: when hip-hop was beginning to get recognition, it came out of a tradition that, in order to be an MC, you had to go through the battles on the corners and the clubs, it was not enough just to tell everyone how great you are in order to become a great MC, you had to really earn it, he explains. He believes that social mediums have created a ripple effect of bland artistry. This effect is telling artists, already a part of the industry, to follow this model of sell out or get out. “Nowadays you have a lot of copycat artists,” says Anthony. “They found one formula that works and then you have 20 other rappers or rap groups that want to pattern themselves after that particular formula. You have artists now not doing hip-hop for the love and the passion. There’s an oversaturation of people getting into hip-hop for money, shaping today’s “everyone sounds the same” model of artistry."18 Jason O’Connor expresses the latter in these words: „Everything that seems new today is really just new combinations of existing things. Music is no different. I'm hoping that we return to the days when the combinations of beats, rhythms, harmonies and melodies become as creative as they were in the 60's and 70's."13

Critics reveal yet another outcome of new media's influence on popular music: the loss of true creativity. New media, enabling people with almost unlimited access of anything, what was already created, empowering them to produce new things out of various combinations of already existing products, seduces writers of popular music not to use their full inner creative potential, eliminates or at least reduces aspirations to create and bring something really new to the world. As the writer Patton Oswalt sarcastically asks in his article: „Why create anything new when there’s a mountain of freshly excavated pop culture to recut, repurpose, and manipulate on your digital device? None of that’s necessary anymore. When everyone has easy access to their favourite diversions and every diversion comes with extra features ..., then we’re all just adding to an ever-swelling, soon-to-erupt volcano of trivia, re-contextualized and forever rebooted. We’re on the brink of Etewaf: Everything That Ever Was—Available Forever. Here’s the danger: Etewaf doesn’t produce a new generation of artists—just an army of sated consumers. Under the influence of new media „the old inner longing for more or better that made our present pop culture so amazing is dwindling."

He reveals how some of seemingly obvious advantages of new media can become disadvantages, taking away creative powers from culture, fostering detachment of individual from the depth of his personal experience, facilitating his immaturity. Internet provides instant access to almost every kind of information needed. Though it’s very practical, still we lose here something of a great value to human soul. Namely, we lose favourable preconditions to fully digest our experiences, boiling them down to the essence, being permeated with the music we’ve heard and relating to it on a deep level of the soul. That is why Patton Oswalt yearns for the years, when people had to wait month to month, for the new album to come out, for the years, when there was no possibility to digitally download an entire decade’s albums of some band. The advantage of having to wait for the next issue, movie, or album is, he tells, that it gave you time to reread, rewatch, reabsorb whatever you loved, so you „brought your own idiosyncratic love of that thing to your thought-palace. Everyone had time to create in their mind unanswered questions. “19

These thoughts fit nicely with the words of the famous poet W.H. Auden:”“If, in order to hear some music, a man has to wait for six months and then walk twenty miles, it is easy to tell whether the words, "I should like to hear some music," mean what they appear to mean, or merely, "At this moment I should like to forget myself."”3

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18 Paul Meara, , 2011.03.18 „New Media replaces the „Hop“ with „Pop“ in Hip-hop“
19 Patton Oswalt, Article: „Wake Up, Geek Culture. Time to Die”, December 27, 2010
According to Norman Jacobs, one of Britain's most prolific history writers, it should not bewilder us, that something, used to liberate man has also been used to enslave him. Thus the very ability of human being, creator of culture, to maintain his integrity, is being challenged by the new media.

Dutch-American sociologist, social critic Ernest van den Haag claims, that all mass media, and new media in particular, in the end alienate people from personal experience, intensify their moral isolation from each other, from reality and from themselves. The Internet creates perfect conditions for almost everyone to become involved into a virtual world: it’s ultimately manifold, interactive and always up-to-date, it has a quality of instant access. In Japan, they have a word „otaku“, which refers to people who have obsessive, minute interests, people, who live in their own, enclosed worlds, often related with virtual reality, captured by virtual sounds and imagery. The problem with the Internet, however, is that it lets anyone become „otaku“ about anything instantly. According to Ernest van den Haag, one may turn to it when lonely or bored, but once it becomes a habit, impair the capacity for meaningful experience. The habit feeds on itself, establishing a vicious circle as addictions do. And even the most profound of experiences, articulated too often on the same level (by the media), is reduced to a cliché and lessen people's capacity to experience life itself.

Conclusions

„Spells always seem to fascinate popular culture. The image of the Witch standing in a floor-painted pentacle stirring something in a pot and whispering ancient words of power seems imbedded in our culture. Eternal happiness is yours if you can just find the right words to recite and the right deity to invoke. “

Doesn’t it resemble the relation of human soul to new technologies today? It seems that there are actually real forces that are able to cast spells over our cultural life. It is obvious that popular culture and music can hardly retain it’s identity under powerful pressure from the side of business and charming abundance of modern technologies. Human individuality, exposed to the influence of new technologies also is struggling to maintain it’s integrity, which sometimes is lost in an inner state of isolation and alienation from life. It can only be overcome by much more awakened consciousness. If one finds the still focus of peace within oneself, then while the world's wheel spins around that calm hub, one cannot be seduced by illusory dreams, or enslaved by cold systems. There’s not much left in the outside world that one can lean upon, except this quiet island within, which is the only reliable place, where one can set the turning point back to true creativity and resist intrusive, distracting noise from the outside. This could be a sound basis from which purely artistic impulses could spring forth bringing new life into the popular culture. As Leonard Cohen sings in his song:

“Every heart to love will come but like a refugee. “

SUMMARY

The paper presents compiled reviews and reflections of contemporary writers, social critics, scientists and students on the processes, taking place in popular culture, music and human consciousness under influence of market, advertising, mass media, new technologies (new media).

SANTRAUKA

Straipsnyje pateikiami šiuolaikinių rašytojų, visuomenės kritikų mokslininkų ir studentų atsiliepimai ir pamąstymai apie reklamos, žiniasklaidos ir naujų technologijų daromą poveikį populiariajai kultūrai, muzikai ir žmogaus sąmonei.