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## Art as *Weltanschauung*: An Overview of Theory in the Sociology of Art

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### ABSTRACT

In this work I attempt to offer a foundation for the sociological study of art. In specific I argue that art is *Weltanschauung*, or a window into the world through which we can identify and explore the social contexts of artistic forms. Further, I highlight the traditional theoretical perspectives of the Functional, Conflict, and Interpretivist approaches to ground a framework from which to study art sociologically.

## INTRODUCTION

What is reality? Our historical epoch resonates with a single voice-  
What is reality? For the first time, paintings [and other artful  
productions] have truly become the expression of *Weltanschauung*,  
a “view-of the-world,” in the most literal sense of the term; the  
artist views the world, to explain it for its real context, its truth.  
What is reality? (Jaffe’ 1964: Introduction).

In the above passage Jaffe’ (1964) argues that the artist, through their work, captures an element of social reality. Much like the artist, the sociologist too may view works of art as a form of captured reality and thus explore them for explanations of social existence. However, in order to thoroughly identify and explore the aforementioned social contexts of artistic forms, the social scientist must first implement an investigative framework relative to their discipline. This being said, the goal of this paper is the elucidation of common theoretical approaches to the sociology of art.

First, this work defines art within a number of approaches: aesthetic, personal, and sociological. Second, the role and place of theory in sociological investigations is introduced. Lastly, the theoretical perspectives of the Functional, Conflict, and Interpretivist approaches are highlighted to ground art as a field of sociological study.

### “ART” DEFINED

When I speak of “art,” I am referring primarily to the visual and auditory arts, e.g., painting, sculpture, and music. However art may also be conceptualized to include literature, theater and media generated art forms, e.g., advertisements, movies, television sitcoms, etc. (Zolberg 1990:4). Typically, such artful creations are viewed and studied within three frames of reference. The first organizes art as aesthetic-- the conceptualization of art as an appreciation of beauty and good taste (Hofstadter and Kuhns 1976; Bourdieu 1987; Eco 1988; Alperson 1992). Speaking colloquially, this initial framework views art as a material form that enhances one’s living with pleasures of the ear, mind, and eye. The second framework conceptualizes art as the practice of innate creativity and individual exploration and growth (Wadson, Durkin, and Perach 1980; Gussak and Virshup 1998). In this second form, art is conceptualized as

a personal expression of emotional, cognitive, and/or intellectual concerns.

While art may be discussed within contexts of beauty and personal communication, art is also social. Indeed, no art is produced in a vacuum (Becker 1974, 1982; Mukerjee 1954; Thalasinis 1988). Further, the beauty standards that classify art are bound to historical and political circumstances (Hauser 1958; Wolff 1975, 1983, 1989; Zolberg 1990). Additionally though artists may be gifted individuals driven by their own creative energies, they are also products of their societies. Take for instance the words of Kornblum. He (1994:28) writes:

The art of any of the world's peoples, past or present, can be 'read' for evidence of how people organize their society, for the nature of interpersonal relationships, for what they value as sacred or simply enjoyable, and for what they despise.

Further, as Allen (1954:6-7) elaborates:

Art, sociologically considered, is an assortment of customs that convey meanings and rules of procedure set consciously by [persons] in any society. Art acts as codes of conduct that become internalized within individuals, or externalized in codes and rules... They also become symbolic actions, enforcing or causing a change in the social structure. In this way aesthetic experience is seen in its relevance to the group structure in society; it is visible to the eye of the historian or sociologist.

Following these conceptualizations, we may view art as *Weltanschauung*, as a medium to look onto the world (Mannheim 1922). In this sense, we may also view art as a complex of information, meanings, and guides to action which can then be studied sociologically.

## **FRAMING A SOCIOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDING OF ART: THE ROLE OF THEORY**

Sociology embodies many ways of thinking about society and thus many ways of thinking about art. First, in the attempt to understand society, sociology generally utilizes theory. A theory, simply stated, is an attempt to describe how something works, in this case society. One definition of sociological theory is: an abstract and general set of assumptions of human actions in an attempt to

explain human behavior and social organization.

Second, sociology can be divided into three main theoretical approaches (Colomy 2005). An approach, according to Alexander (2003:7), “is a group of theories that look at social phenomena from the same basic perspective, with a similar set of assumptions.” In general these foundational approaches are known as Functional, Conflict and Interpretivist approaches. These perspectives and their general assumptions will be examined in the following sections.

With relation to art, social theories attempt to explain how humans use art to motivate action and structure relationships. Stated in another manner, the role of sociological theory in the realm of art is the examination of how art is used to build, maintain, and/or change social structures.

## **FUNCTIONAL APPROACHES**

Functional approaches generally hold that the core of every society is a network of socially shared meanings, beliefs and values. The beliefs and values that the members of society are able to create structure the basic ways in which they organize social life (Sanderson 1999).

If a society is to persist, functionalists argue, it must engender integration and consensus on the part of its membership (Colomy 2005). But how is this accomplished, and what is the role of art in such matters?

Very generally, functional approaches identify social participation as the common outcome of systems of socialization and communal interaction which stress responsibility to the social system. (Durkheim 1893, 1895, 1912; Parsons 1963). Indeed these systems, commonly defined by functionalists as social institutions, act as carriers of social responsibility and societal maintenance.

### **Art as Social Institution**

Within the framework of the functionalist approach, art may be studied as a social institution or “a principal structure through which human activities are organized to serve basic societal needs (Albrecht 1968:384). If we conceive social participation as a functional requirement in the maintenance social structures, then art can in fact be identified as an institution. Consider the

words of Ames (1986:9):

Art may be used to express and authenticate the established or official values of images of a society in several ways, *directly*, by promoting and affirming the dominant values, and *indirectly*, by subordinating or rejecting alternative values.

Indeed, artistic forms may be used in a number of social contexts: as political ritual, as religious icon, as commemoration. Directly or indirectly, art as social institution may “bolster the moral of a group and help create a sense of unity, of social solidarity...” (Albrecht 1986:390).

In this perspective, numerous scholars have noted the institutional functions of art in the unification of diverse social groups. Following Durkheim’s (1912) interest in the way totems are used to promote social solidarity and a collective conscious in a society, Warner (1959) and Bellah and Hammond (1980) similarly noted how patriotic beliefs, symbols, and rituals form varieties of civil religion—the invoking of particular institutionalized symbols in the worship of society itself. As Collins (1994:217) writes, “Patriotic ceremonies and the historical symbols bound within traditions like the Fourth of July parade, Labor Day, and commemoratives are ceremonies designed to focus the community on itself as a unit” (for additional works in this tradition see also: Shils and Young 1953; Edelman 1964; Gusfield and Michalowicz 1984; Goss 1986; Young 1989; Jacobs 2004).

Broadly considered it may now be appropriate to offer a provisional functional interpretation of the social institution of art: Art helps to *legitimate* existing social structures by representing them or culturally “invalidating” them by their non-representation (Straurowsky 2000; Paul and Birzer, 2004).

## **CONFLICT APPROACHES**

### Art as Hegemony

Like functionalist approaches, the conflict perspective examines the emergence and persistence of long standing practices, institutions and societies (Colomy 2005:39). Unlike functionalist approaches however, the conflict perspective examines the role of hegemony, not shared values, in the structuring of human relations.

In general, hegemony is the dominance of one group over other groups. It is most commonly defined as a form of cultural control (Gramsci 1971). As Alexander (2003:44) notes, “In this view, dominate groups structure relationships and rule through persuasion, not (for the most part) through force or bald power, as these latter engender resistance.”

Stated in another manner, hegemony is the embodiment of the norms, values, and world views imposed on society by dominant groups. It is generally accomplished through the distribution of various cultural artifacts. This is important for the sociology of art in that elites are instrumental in the creation and distribution of cultural products. They are therefore, able to place into art ideas favorable to their own interests. In this way, a society can be ruled or dominated by one group or class, in that everyday practices and shared beliefs provide the foundation for complex systems of domination.

Take for example the words of Brissett and Edgley (1990) and Hall (1979) who write:

Power... does not flow automatically from the pulling of institutional levers, but from the negotiation of images” (Brissett and Edgley 1990:350) ... “which is a relatively easy and cheap form of power that could be used to inform, to inspire, to motivate, but which, as normally practiced, is designed to pacify, deflect, confuse, and seduce (Hall 1979:305).

Therefore, the manipulation of images serves to create the symbolic mobilization of support for the dominate class. Scholars such as Mayo (1978), Hall (1979), and Welsh (1985) have examined the role of political rallies and the creation of “false negativities” (constructed rituals of ideological but insignificant content) to “redirect” the public’s attention away from issues that may challenge the dominant group’s interests. Other scholars such as Davies (1993) and Sage (1996) have examined the role of patriotic symbols in mobilizing public support for war and other forms of conquest, e.g., the use of foreign and exploited labor.

In the end, this perspective may be best summarized by the words of Collins (1994:217) who argues:

Patriotic ceremonies are ritual weapons of class domination; they suppress feelings of class conflict and dissension by emphasizing

group unity, while implicitly conferring legitimacy on the class that leads the rituals and exemplifies the culture expressed in them.

## Art as Emancipation: Critical Theory and the Role of Protest Art

In the previous section I introduced the basic tenant of hegemony. This tenant holds that institutions may be used as tools of the elite to disseminate and legitimize the necessity of domination. Art then, under hegemonic traditions, is best described as a weapon used to institute conformity and force elite interests into the consciousness of the masses.

In a similar but opposing vein, art, under the guidance of the dominated, may also be used to expose the ruling class' true intentions. Agger's (1992:5) definition of art as critical theory: "the use of images to decode the hegemonic messages of the cultural industry that permeates every nook and cranny of lived experience" is well suited to define this theoretical perspective.

Stated in another manner, critical theory at its core holds emphasis on repression, domination, and the overthrow of such entities. In order for this to occur however, persons must become aware of their subjugated status and rise up against it. As proffered by Agger (1992), this may be best accomplished through the role of protest art. Protest art refers to artful productions which seek to combat or expose domination. "It is a revolutionary and critical force, which awakens, liberates and motivates individuals to work for social change" (Held 1980:97). Thus, critical theory and its critical implementations, i.e., protest art, seek to make people aware of the elites' "true" interests.

The most prolific writers in the critical application of art are the members of the Frankfurt school (Adorno 1945, 1972; Horkheimer 1972; Marcuse 1964, 1972, 1978; Jay 1973; Kiralyfalvi 1975; Held 1980; Bottomore 1984; Habermas 1984; Wiggershaus 1994). The Frankfurt school, in its strictest sense, is an interdisciplinary project guided by aspirations of a civil society. It is a school of thought who's "combined methods of scientific research with a critical theory of society seek a social life bound by freedom of coercive political powers" (Payne, 1980: 250).

To reiterate the philosophy of the Frankfurt school, art is viewed as an emancipating force urged to "jar and shock the masses out of their complacency" (Thalasinis 1988:47). A recent work of this form includes Eyerman and Jamison (1998) *Music and Social Movements*. Eyerman and

Jamison's work examines how music embodies a "mobilization of tradition" by awakening in actors "a river of embodied ideas and images to connect the generations" (Eyerman and Jamison 1998:2). Stated differently, the authors hold that songs are more than music; they are an expression of a life rooted in structural experience which can then be used to mobilize persons against perceived injustices.

The song "We Shall Overcome" for instance, expresses a collective memory between past and present and between individuals across generations which engenders a framework of meaning, emotion, and passion necessary for the revitalization of social protest (Eyerman and Jamison 1998:47).

Ultimately, the words of the philosopher John Dewey may be used to summarize the liberating force of art. He states, "Art is more moral than moralities. For the latter either are, or tend to become, consecrations of the status quo... The moral prophets of humanity have always been artists in that they keep alive the sense of purposes that outrun the indurated habit of the established order" (Dewey as cited in Jasper 1997:1).

## **INTERPRETIVIST APPROACHES**

Interpretive sociology is primarily concerned with two points of investigation: (1) the various interactive networks between individuals and groups that structure social systems, i.e., families, communities and societies, and (2) the meanings created and actions derived from those interactions (Collins, 1994).

### **Networks of Interaction: The Creation of Art Worlds**

In one tradition of the interpretivist vision of art, the interactive networks that "enable" art may themselves be investigated. Indeed, the making of art is a social product and scholars such as Duncan (1953), Becker (1974, 1982), and Fine (2004) examine the "art worlds" or communal actions necessary for art to become art. In specific, they identify the interactive networks that link the dealer of raw art materials, the artist, the critic, the gallery owner, the client, and the public in a chain of artistic creation. Fine (2004:5) writes:

The art world is a social system because it consists of an interconnected group of actors who perceive common interests and who are embedded in a network of social relations... artists,



suppliers, collectors, dealers, critics, academics, and curators...  
are all necessary in the creation of an 'art world.'

In a related fashion, one may also examine arts organizations, i.e., museums, community non-profits, etc., for their network strategies and community relations in their "dealing of daily organizational environments" (Blau 1988:275). Arts organizations like other organizations have to cope with securing funds and dealing with characteristics such as hierarchies, administration, routinized rules, accountability and internal and external community relations (Dimaggio 1986, 1987, Blau 1988).

### Art as Semiology

Beyond the examination of various art worlds, the interpretivist sociology of art may also investigate semiology, that is, the use of signs and symbols to construct meaning and communicate messages to people (Sage 1996). As Bergsen (1984:187) notes, "Art is a language. Art objects are therefore decipherable into...codes that carry and communicate social information." Further, "Symbols and images tend to be more collective and general, rather than personal and particular..." (Bergsen 1984:189). Thus, the meanings behind most images are perceptible to the broader public.

In this sense then, symbols may be studied as to their public recognition of social relationships and collective meanings. Sociological studies of this form include: (1) the examination of speech patterns (vocabulary, accent, pronunciation, annunciation, tone) as markers of social class (Mills 1939; Goffman 1959; Bourdieu 1977, 1991); (2) the display of consumption patterns (leisure activities, home and fashion decoration, choice of food, drink, art) as symbols of distinction and interactive power (Warner 1959; Veblen 1973; Bourdieu 1984); and (3) the role of symbols in creating and enforcing interactive boundaries (Goffman, 1976; Sniderman and Tetlock, 1986; McIntosh 1988; Staurowsky 2000; Paul and Birzer 2004).

Such symbolic displays are what Bourdieu (1989:19) terms the marking of "one's place" in the social order and the naming of a "sense of place for others." Here, the symbolic display of power identifies signs (verbal or otherwise) that "impose upon others a vision... of social division... [and] social authority" (1989:23). To state in another manner, symbolic articulations mark one's rank in the social hierarchy and draw differences between persons based on conceptions of value and worth.

## Art as Identity

In yet another form of interpretivist strategies, art and other objects may be examined as to the role they play in “people’s definition of who they are, of who they have been, and who they wish to become (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981:x). As Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981:1) continue:

The things with which people interact are not simply tools of survival, or for making survival easier and more comfortable. Things embody goals, make skills manifest and shape the identities of their users.

Examples of sociological studies of this form include the work of Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, (1981) who examine household items as symbols of self; the studies of Vail (1999) Copes and Forsyth (1993) and Atkinson (2004) who examine of tattoo art and body modification as identity maintenance and/or identity transformation; Heern’s (1980) study of individual group affiliation through graffiti and modern fashion; and the creation of ethnicity through story, song, dance, and food (Paul 2003).

Through such works it becomes possible to see how interactions with objects result in identity formation. “To interact with an object in a culturally appropriate way means to experience that object directly – becoming a medium of signs that constitutes [an identity or self of self]” (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981:50-51).

## CONCLUSION

In this work I have attempted to offer a foundation for the sociological study of art. Specifically, I argued that art is *Weltanschauung*, or a window into the world through which we can identify and explore the social contexts of artistic forms. Further, I highlighted the traditional theoretical perspectives of the Functional, Conflict, and Interpretivist approaches to ground a framework from which to study art sociologically.

From these approaches, art may be studied as a social institution, a force of power, and a marker of social identity. First, art is a social institution in that it passes on cultural information, values and normative standards of behavior. Art, broadly speaking, may be examined as a socializing agent and a motivating force by which one learns responsibility to the social system. Second, from

conflict perspective art may be conceptualized as an ideology of domination and/or a cultural mechanism of social change. Third, under interperativist strategies, art is meaning used to shape and pattern various social exchanges and relationships.

In the end, I wish to note that this is not all there is to say of the sociology of art. The literature cited and the perspectives proffered are not exhaustive in any way. They are merely an attempt, on my part, to introduce and stress the viability of a sociology of art.

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