

The Cultural Significance of Pop.

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Nevertheless, Stephen perfectly illustrated the fracture which occurred during his lifetime, between the high culture of which he was so vivid an example, and the common culture that made it possible.

Stephen began his academic career in holy orders. Having lost his faith and left the church, he devoted to the cultivation of his own intellect the energies that he might otherwise have bestowed on his flock. In time he became self-consciously godless, severed from the old common culture of his native country, no longer convinced that ordinary people had any need of the religion on which their hopes were founded. Unlike his brother, Sir James Fitzjames Stephen, he did not take an external, anthropologist's view of his own tribe, and therefore had little awareness of the fragility, when severed from its roots in religion, tradition and prejudice, of the intellectual heritage which he enjoyed. The high culture that he passed on to his most famous child, Virginia Woolf, was a culture adrift from its moral foundations, a culture becoming ever more thin and precious and refined, ever more a whisp and a perfume, a volatile after-image of the life that had died. And she captured this moment in prose of inimitable distinction.

We, who have the singular task of teaching the artistic inheritance which those great Victorians took for granted, to young people who know nothing or next to nothing of the religion and traditions from which it grew, can only envy them that brief moment of confidence, when high culture could be transmitted with ease, to people whose emotions had already been tempered by the long-term perspective of religion. The immense difficulty that confronts the university teacher of the humanities in our times is not unconnected to the fact that the gap between the culture acquired spontaneously by the young, and that which we strive to impart in the university, is so cavernously wide that the teacher is apt to look ridiculous, as he perches on his theatrical pinnacle and beckons the youth across to it. Indeed, it is easier to make the passage the other way, to join your young audience in the enchanted field of popular entertainment, and turn your intellectual guns on the stately ruin across the chasm. Hence the vogue for deconstruction, Marxian analysis, feminism, and all the other intellectual and pseudo-intellectual devices whereby the old aesthetic canon can be undermined, and its authority destroyed.

Although I speak from a point outside the academy, I am one of those who believe that the effort to hand on the artistic legacy of our civilisation is not merely justified but obligatory. We live in a time of organised forgetting, and some things, once forgotten, can never be re-discovered. It is perfectly conceivable that we should enter a dark age, in which the precious icons of our civilisation no longer illuminate our lives, in which people wander through a landscape of pleasure, profit and prosperity, but in which nothing makes sense

beyond the moment, since the instruments that humanity once possessed for making sense of things have been once and for all mislaid. I don't think we have reached that stage. But increasingly many of those who understand and value art and literature find it easier to keep the experience to themselves than to interest those deafened and dazzled by modern life. In this lecture I want to explore one of the principal reasons why young people have become so difficult to teach - namely, pop music, and the culture surrounding it.

At once we find ourselves in the intellectual thick of things. What exactly do we mean by culture? In particular, do we mean the same by this word, when we describe the high culture of our civilisation and the popular culture of the modern TV? And if pop music is really the centre of a culture, is that not already a kind of vindication, a sign that pop can be criticized only by threatening a form of life which has as much right to exist as any other?

It is useful here to step back a little, and see how the word 'culture' acquired its modern meanings. Following Herder, Kant distinguished Kultur from Zivilisation, the first referring to the local customs, traditions and practices of a community, the second to the universal ideals of reason, morality and law. Kant meant to praise civilisation; his immediate successors wished to question it. For the German romantics, mere civilisation was an empty form unless joined to a culture, through which a community could give content and meaning to its specific social life. This concept of culture, as the life-blood of a community and its means of distinguishing itself from its competitors, fed the well-springs of German nationalism. It gave rise in due course to the anthropologist's idea of a culture, as the sum of those customs, ceremonies and religious practices through which a tribe rehearses the experience of membership. To share a culture, in this sense, is to belong, and the ceremonies and formalities are 'rites of passage', through which members of a tribe pass from one condition of membership to the next. Through their culture, people are united with their immediate fellows and, in consequence, divided from the rest of mankind. In this sense, to possess a culture you do not need any special skills, or imagination, or intellect - the culture is common to the tribe, and learnable to each of its members.

In opposition to the romantic nationalists, Wilhelm von Humboldt, founding father of the modern university, identified civilisation as the outward conformity to the demands of society, culture as the inner and subjective development of the individual, through art, religion and self-reflection. This was the concept taken up by Matthew Arnold in Culture and Anarchy. Culture, for Arnold, is the precious elevation of the spirit through art and literature. It is acquired only by those who pursue and attain it, and is a matter of degree, since it comes about through education, reflection and criticism. Every modern society, Arnold believed, needs a cultured elite, if it is not to degenerate into anarchic individualism. A culture preserves the images, the words, the ideas and the values which inspire us to sacrifice. Take it away, and society will inevitably decay, since it will have no image of itself to live up to, and no living icons of human excellence.

Arnold's is the concept of culture which we find in many subsequent English-speaking critics - notably in T.S. Eliot and F.R. Leavis. It is clearly not the concept deployed by the social anthropologists. In the anthropologist's sense, all adult members of a community possess its culture; in Arnold's sense only some do, and only to a certain degree. And since culture in Arnold's sense is founded on criticism and taste, it is in the business of making distinctions - of praising and condemning cultural artefacts, and of separating humanity itself into lower and higher forms of mental readiness. Culture in the anthropologist's sense makes only one distinction: between us and them, between the tribe and its rivals. It is perhaps worth pointing out, however, that English anthropology has its roots in the high culture of the Victorians - and in particular in that passionate love of the ancient world which you encounter in Frazer's *Golden Bough*. Hence much of our modern attitude to culture in the anthropologist's sense has been conditioned by the Victorian tendency to read the high aesthetic ideals imparted by a classical education into the belief systems of people whom the Victorians themselves described as 'primitive'.

Despite this great difference between the two meanings of 'culture', there are important grounds for using the same word - and in particular, this word - to express them. Just as the land is cultivated by human labour, in order to bring forth fruits which reflect both the efforts of the farmer and the peculiarities of the climate, so is culture implanted in the soil of human nature, so as to flower in a variety of ways, according to human effort and climatic conditions. And the effort involved is of two kinds - the one devoted to making us the same, the other to making us different. We try to implant in each member of society the moral code, religious belief and traditional allegiance which hold things together; and at the same time we strive to preserve the imaginative reflection which sets us apart from those who are immersed in getting and spending. Neither in the anthropologist's nor in the critic's sense, is culture a form of theoretical or scientific knowledge. It involves an acquaintance with, and an internalisation of, forms of feeling - whether collective or individual. If there is knowledge here, it is not knowledge that, nor even knowledge how, but knowledge what - knowledge what to feel and what to do, in the circumstances of social life. Hence you acquire a culture not by learning facts and theories, but by a process akin to religious conversion - the learning experience is not a course of instruction but a rite of passage.

Let us return from that brief excursion to the topic of popular culture. It is immediately apparent that the term 'culture' is used here with yet another, although again related, meaning. Popular culture is not a system of moral and religious belief, does not find expression in customs and ceremonies, is not induced through rites of passage, and is often enjoyed in solitude and without any essential reference to a community of initiates. It is therefore not a culture in the anthropologist's sense at all, and its very fluidity and openness enable it to flow over all traditional forms of social order and to break down the barriers between them. Pop music is now a globalising force, creating adherents wherever the air-waves can flow: 'one world, one music,' in the slogan adopted by MTV. Moreover, popular culture is not culture in the critic's sense - for it eschews criticism, and is available

to all-comers, regardless of their intellectual and imaginative attainments. If we refer nevertheless to popular culture, it is because we think it has the same effect as the culture of the tribe - the effect of shaping the feelings, the outlook and the social identity of those who absorb it. And it has in common with the critic's culture, the fact that it is absorbed primarily in a condition of leisure, through art, music and the electronic media.

The heart of popular culture is without doubt pop music, and in what follows I wish to identify and examine a particular kind of pop - the kind which seems to have most appeal to the young, and which has colonised every public space where young people are sovereign. I do not say that this music is popular with everyone, nor even with everyone who depends upon a background of overheard music for daily moral support. But it has the greatest claim among the various styles of modern music to be the foundation of a shared way of life.

The music that I wish to discuss is characterised by a peculiar feature, which I can only describe as the 'externalisation' of the musical movement. Like music in our classical tradition, and like jazz, ragtime, blues and folk, pop has melody, rhythm, harmony and tone-colour. But these seem to come not from within the music itself, but from elsewhere. The music is generated from a point outside, assembled from a repertoire of effects, according to procedures which involve little or no invention, but which set the music into a machine-like motion with repetition as the principal device. This is particularly evident in the case of rhythm, generated by percussive sounds which have little or no relation to anything else that is happening. Often the music itself draws attention to this - opening with some mesmeric sound-effect or cheesy crooning, and then bringing in the drum-kit with a barrage of amplified noise, as when a gang which has been waiting quietly on the staircase suddenly breaks down the door.

The device is frequently used by the group Oasis - in 'My Big Mouth', for example, which opens their latest album. The ingress of external rhythms which you hear in the opening measures of that piece can be usefully contrasted with an example from an earlier period - 'Lay Down Sally', by Eric Clapton. Here the guitarist (Clapton himself) generates rhythm from an accompanying figure, sounding in anticipation of the melody. The melodic outline of this figure distributes beat and accent over the bar-line, and does so from its own internal movement. When bass and drum enter, they do not force on to the music any rhythm that is alien to it, but pick up the existing beat.

The external nature of the rhythmical force is matched by the special kind of processing given to melodic phrases. Pop melodies are made up, as a rule, from curt modal or diatonic phrases, with little internal variation or prolongation, and avoiding foreign keys. I say 'as a rule' since things were of course not always so, and are not universally so even now. The melodies of the Beatles, for example, were often highly adventurous, with internal rhyming and ventures into neighbouring keys. But the Beatles belong to another

era, and their once insolent songs sound quaint and innocent beside Oasis, Nirvana or The Verve.

All the same, the desire for a catchy tune remains, at least with a certain section of the pop audience. This is what the Spice Girls provide in the song that made them famous: 'Wannabe'. In the chorus of this song we encounter an age-old device of folk music - a tune composed from the major triad (B major) with the added sixth. It goes nowhere, and wants nothing. But it also invites you to listen. It is a voice from the old world of song, and must therefore be recycled if it is to be fitted to the new conditions. Before entering the virtual world of pop, the tune must be speeded up, distorted, and given a techno-background, so as to lose its singability. Hence 'Wannabe' exists also in another, sound-engineered, version, in which music and performance have been welded together: a 'vocal slam', to use the technical term. In this version, the melody reappears as a force coming from outside and acting through the singer, but not coming from her.

Such examples show, I hope, what I mean when I refer to the 'externalisation' of rhythm and melody. Even when modern pop aims to be lyrical, melody is synthesised from trite and standardised phrases, which could be rearranged in any order without losing the effect. It is not that such music is tuneless: rather that the tune comes from elsewhere, like food from the drive-round pizza merchant. A characteristic example is the recent hit by Mary J. Blige: 'Get to Know You Better'. Here the melody is assembled from a small set of notes, arranged around the flat lyrics, and without internal movement. The effect is emphasized by the yukky thirteenth chords and droopy vamping which open the piece, with a sound that suggests someone trying carefully to puke into a wine glass.

What is true of rhythm and melody is true also of tone colour. The electric guitar owes much of its immense appeal to the obvious fact that it is strapped on and brandished like a livid dildo. But it is equally important that it is a machine, which distorts and amplifies the sound, lifting it out of the realm of human noises. If a machine could sing, it would sound like an electric guitar. Techno-music simply is the voice of the machine, which has finally triumphed over the human utterance and cancelled its lyrical meaning. In such music we encounter the background noise of modern life, but suddenly projected into the foreground, so as to fill all the auditory space. However much you listen to this music, you will never hear it, as you hear the voice that addresses you from soul to soul; not even when it sounds so loudly that you can hear nothing else. You are overhearing the machine, as it discourses in the void. (A telling example is the second mix of 'I Wanne Be a Hippy' by Technohead, in which you hear a little human voice trapped somewhere inside, its unmeaning cry churned over and over by the unstoppable machine.)

The externalisation of harmony comes about by treating the harmonic dimension of music purely vertically, as a sequence of chords with no voice-leading between the parts. The chords are taken from the shelf and laid out in a sequence. Whether sounded in distorted form on the electric guitar, or churned out of a synthesizer, these chords are lifeless relicts

of harmony, which do not move but merely replace each other, since none of their notes bears any melodic relation to its successor. A good illustration of this is the piece which the current (October 1997) issue of *Guitarist* describes as a modern classic: 'In Bloom' from Nirvana's second album, in which the chords succeed each other in exactly the arrangement that is implied by the shift of the hand along the frets of the guitar, and in which the illogical sequence is led by none of the voices - not even the bass.

It is in the nature of strumming that it annihilates voice leading, and is largely indifferent to the distinction between a chord and its inversion. The same issue of *Guitarist* tells you how to hit a C major seventh: easy - you just stop the A string on C and the D string on E and strum the lot! But the result is a first inversion of the chord with three Es in it and only one C - a monster that topples on to its neighbour as soon as it is sounded. In fact, it is not a C major seventh at all, but the chord of E minor with added minor sixth: acoustically identical but musically as different as can be. It is a significant fact about the pop idiom, that the distinction between these two harmonies is, in such a context, indiscernible.

In this connection it is worth noticing a peculiar fact about modern Opop, which is that it rarely comes to a conclusion. The music bursts out, repeats itself, and then fades away. Lacking any harmonic movement of its own, it cannot move toward anything - certainly not toward anything that requires careful preparation, like a cadence. There is, to put it another way, a lack of musical argument - indeed, a lack of musical thought. (Examples are legion: try the concluding bars of 'If Ever I Lose My Faith in You' by Sting.)

Now I have avoided any discussion of pop lyrics, since I wish to focus on the sound of pop, and to its effect on the ear, attention and movement of those who overhear it. Recent criticism has paid much attention to the words. These often dwell on violence, drugs, sex and rebellion in ways that lyricize the kind of conduct of which fathers and mothers used to disapprove, in the days when disapproval was approved. But these criticisms do not, I think, get to the heart of the matter. Even if every pop song consisted of a setting of Christ's beatitudes (and there are born-again groups in America - '16 Horsepower' is one of them - that specialize in such things), it would make little or no difference to the effect, which is communicated through the sounds, regardless of what is sung to them. The only thing that is really wrong with the usual lyrics is what is really right about them - namely, that they successfully capture what the music means.

In fact the externality of the movement is precisely what suits the music for its place in a society of overheard noise. The kind of music that I am describing might be called 'music from elsewhere' - it is churned out by the music machine, and scattered on the air-waves. And this mechanical approach to the musical material serves a function. When the voice is erased from the accompaniment, and re-processed as noise, the singer becomes the focus of attention. The music becomes the background to a drama, which is the incarnation of the idol.

To that extent, externalisation has an all-important cultural meaning. Its significance can be more clearly appreciated if we turn our attention to the sociological aspect of pop. Three features stand out as worthy of comment.

1. The relation between the performer and the fan. Although this relationship begins in a musical experience, it goes far beyond any exercise in taste. Consider the group Oasis: there is nothing in their music that distinguishes it from countless other derivatives of the Beatles. In fact there is nothing that distinguishes it at all, since it is put together from stock devices that are available to any amateur rock musician, as part of the tools of the trade. The Beatles were known for their tunes. Oasis has no tunes, but only phrases, shuffled together like cards in a pack, and dealt out in standard permutations. Harmony is equally uninventive, and the impetus behind the music is created by power chords, distortion effects and mixing, which pour a continuous stream of iron filings into the ear. The drums are played with minimum syncopation and the notes slide above them like a party of identikit tourists on a conveyer belt, all equally miserable beneath the rain of metallic noise. (A telling example is 'I hope, I think, I know', from the latest album.)

I do not mean those remarks as criticism. The fans of the Gallagher brothers would very probably accept what I say, for they do not require from Oasis any other sounds than those that the group so reliably provides for them. The relationship of the fan to his group is not musical but totemic. Like the football team, the pop group recruits its fans, and the CD often contains instructions as to where to write for further information, with a help line and support service, in the form of posters, diary items, and bulletins, like the circulars and briefings offered to its congregation by an activist church. The group offers membership. It is therefore imperative for the fan - or at least for a certain kind of fan - to choose his group, and to exalt it above any rivals. The choice is, in the end, arbitrary - or at least, not guided by any criterion of musical merit. But it is a choice that must be made. (This aspect of the sociology of popular music has been well documented by Simon Frith, who notes the ease with which the fan receives any insult to his group as an insult to himself.[1])

The phenomenon can be most interestingly witnessed in the cult of Nirvana, the grunge musicians whose lead guitarist, Kurt Cobain, addressed his young audience in songs of a truly supererogatory emptiness. When Kurt Cobain fulfilled the promise contained in his music by committing suicide, millions of young people entered a state of crisis, comparable to the crisis that attends the deaths of monarchs or religious leaders. Many of the fans needed intense and prolonged counselling; not a few committed suicide themselves. A whole tribe entered a state of wandering and mourning, unable to believe that their totem had died. In natural totemic societies, it is normal for the totem to die - but since the totem is not, in these societies, an individual but a species, incarnate in the sacrificial victim but also surviving it, the death of the totem is also a rebirth, in which the life of the community is renewed. The fan is not so lucky, since his emotions focus on a real and vulnerable human being. Death, in these circumstances, is a major social catastrophe.

The external movement of modern pop connects with an important fact of modern life. The modern adolescent finds himself in a world that has been set in motion; he is beset by noise, by external pressures, and by forces that he cannot control. The pop star is displayed in the same condition, high up on electric wires, the currents of modern life zinging through him, but miraculously unharmed. He is the guarantee of safety, the living symbol that you can live like this forever. His death or decay are simply inconceivable, like the death of Elvis.[2]

2. The fusion of the idol and his works. Popular songs grew from a tradition of ballad and folk music, in which an expanding repertoire of favourite tunes and devices formed the foundation of music-making. Until recently the song has been detachable from the performer - a musical entity which makes sense in itself, and which can be internalised and repeated by the listener, should he have the skill. Of course, there is a whole branch of popular music which is improvisatory. But modern pop songs are not improvised as jazz is improvised, and do not owe their appeal to the kind of spectacular musicianship that we witness in Art Tatum, Charlie Parker or Thelonius Monk. Modern pop songs are meticulously put together, often by artificial means, so as to be indelibly marked with the trade mark of the group. Everything is done to make them inseparable from the group. The lead singer projects himself and not the melody, emphasizing his particular tone, sentiment and gesture. The melodic paucity is partly explained by this. By subtracting the melody, or reducing it to stock phrases that can be reapplied in any context, the singer draws attention to the song's one distinguishing feature, namely himself. The croaks and the groans with which he delivers it become the central features of the melodic line. The singer stands revealed exactly where the music should be. (Contrast here the tradition of classical performance, in which the singer is the servant of the music, hiding behind the notes that he produces.) Again, examples are legion - but in the present moment (and pop is an art of the present moment) Michael Hutchence deserves special mention, he having followed Kurt Cobain's example only two days ago. The harmony is surrendered to a process of distortion, involving much mixing and editing. It is therefore impossible to reproduce it by any means normally available. Sometimes, as with the Spice Girls, serious doubts arise as to whether the performers made more than a minimal contribution to the recording, which owes its trade mark to subsequent sound engineering, designed precisely to make it unrepeatable. The music is simultaneously ephemeralised and eternally transfixed. It is an unrepeatable moment in the life of the great machine, which, by means of the machine, can be repeated forever.

Hence pop addicts find themselves deprived of one of the most important gifts of folk music - the gift of song. It is almost impossible to sing for yourself the tunes and words of the typical pop-song. The best you can do is to impersonate the idol during Karaoke night at the local, when you have the benefit of full instrumental backing, amplification and audience, and can briefly fit yourself into the empty groove where the sacred presence lay.

This intense and cathartic experience once over, the fan must step down from the stage and reassume the burden of silence.

In effect, we witness a reversal of the old order of performance. Instead of the performer being the means to present the music, which exists independently in the tradition of song, the music has become the means to present the performer. The music is part of the process whereby a human individual or group is idolised. In consequence it has a tendency to lose all musical character. For music, properly constructed, has a life of its own, and is always more interesting than the person who performs it. Much as we may love Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald or Cole Porter, we love them for their music - not their music for them. And this is music we can perform for ourselves.

3. The iconisation of the idol. Singers, groups or lead performers are not constrained by musical standards. But they are constrained by their totemic role. They must be young, sexually attractive, and with the plaintive voice of youthful desire - like the girly group called All Saints.

Often they refuse to answer to a normal human name, since to do so would compromise their totemic status. The name must be an icon of the tribe. Sting, R.E.M., Nirvana, Hanson, Madonna, U2 are like the species names assumed by tribal groups, in order to clarify their social identity, with the difference that it is not biological species that are invoked by the titles, but abstract ideas of defiance or (in the case of All Saints and Madonna) of blasphemy.

The transformation of the pop star into an icon is assisted by the music video. This is perhaps the most important innovation in the sphere of pop since the electric guitar. The video sublimates the star, re-cycles him as image, more effectively than any painted icon of a saint. It is expressly designed for home consumption, and brings the sacred presence into the living room. And it completes the demotion of music, which now becomes background, with the pop-star, transfigured into the divine status of the TV advert, occupying the foreground. The idol has entered the condition familiar from the other forms of youth art. Like Damien Hirst and YBA, he has become the advert which advertises itself.

In describing those features of the pop scene I have borrowed concepts from anthropology. For it seems to me that we can make sense of the phenomenon in no other way. Before developing the thought, however, I should like briefly to revisit the nineteenth century.

The societies studied by the Victorian anthropologists were organic communities, bound by kinship, which sustained themselves through myths and rituals devoted to the idea of the tribe. In such communities, the dead and the unborn were present among the living. Rituals, ceremonies, gods and stories were the private property of the tribe, designed to enhance and fortify the experience of membership. Birth, marriage and death were collective and not merely individual experiences, while the crucial process of acculturation - the transition from raw human material to a responsible adult member of the community -

was marked by rites of passage, trials and ordeals, through which the adolescent cast off his childish wilfulness and took on the task of social reproduction.

In the society of the Victorians themselves, there existed a common store of myths, rituals and ceremonies which created a comparable sense of the divine origin of society, and its absolute right to sacrifice. Adolescents were instructed in the ancestral religion, and made to respect its rites. Crucial human experiences like birth, marriage and death were still collective experiences, in which individuals passed from one state of membership to another. Erotic feelings were regarded as the preparations for marriage. They were duly sublimated - which means, not idealized only, but also ordealized, hemmed in by interdictions. Marriage was (as it has always been) the principal instrument of social reproduction. But all the institutions of society played their part, and all contained their ceremonies of initiation. The transition from adolescent to adult was marked by complex forms of induction, which reinforced the view that all stages of existence prior to the adult state were but preparations for it. In exploring primitive societies, the Victorians were delighted to discover simpler and more transparent versions of an experience which lay at the heart of their own civilisation - the experience of membership, enhanced by a common religion, and by the rites of passage which lead to the full adult state, the state in which the burden of social reproduction is assumed.

None of that is true of modern adolescents, who have neither the tribal nor the modern urban experience of membership. They exist in a world protected from external and internal threat, and are therefore rescued from the elementary experiences - in particular the experience of war - which renew the bond of social membership. They have little or no religious belief, and what religion they have is detached from the customs and rituals that form a congregation. Erotic feelings are no longer regarded as the preliminary to marriage, which has itself been downgraded into a condition of partial servitude, to be avoided as an unacceptable cost. In the absence of any perceivable social penalty, sexual release becomes readily available, and courtship disappears as a time-wasting impediment to pleasure. Hence sex has broken free from the process of social reproduction, to become readily available in all its forms, as an intrinsically adolescent experience. The rite of passage from the virgin to the married state has disappeared, and with it the 'lyrical' experience of sex, as a yearning for another and higher state of membership, to which the hard-won consent of society is a necessary precondition. All other rites of passage have similarly withered away, since no social institution demands them - or if it does demand them, it will be avoided as judgemental, hierarchical or in some way oppressive. The result is an adolescent community which suffers from an accumulating deficit in the experience of membership, while resolutely turning its back on the adult world - the world in which the burden of social reproduction must be finally assumed.

At the same time, modern adolescents are abundantly provided with leisure and resources. They have money to spend, and if they cannot or will not earn it the state will provide it. Typically they spend this money on entertaining themselves, so as to enjoy the condition of

adolescence and to make it into something glamorous and redemptive, with a justified claim to permanence. From this arises the new forms of entertainment through which youth isolates itself from the world of adults, and by means of which the refusal of youth to assume the ancestral burden is recast as a kind of virtue.

Now all human beings, whatever their condition, are social animals, and can live with themselves only if they also live with others. There is implanted in us the need to join things, to be a part of some larger and justifying enterprise, which will ennoble our small endeavours and protect us from the sense that we are ultimately alone. The deficit of membership must therefore be made good, but in another way - without the rite of passage to a higher or more responsible condition. Hence new forms of 'joining in' arise. Unlike armies, schools, scout troupes, churches and charities, these new forms of joining in need not involve participation - unless of a rough and undemanding kind that imposes no discipline on those who opt for them. They centre on spectacles rather than activities.

The paradigm instance is the fan club. The modern adolescent will follow the actions of his favoured team or group or idol, and adopt those actions as his own. Hence the emergence of professional sport as a central drama in popular culture. Football, for example, has lost its original character as a form of recreation and become instead a spectacle, through which the fans rehearse their social identity, and achieve a kind of substitute form of membership, not as active participants in a real community, but as passive respondents to the virtual community of fans. The fan is, in some sense, a part of the group, in just the way that the football supporter is a part of his team, bound to it by a mystical bond of membership. Nick Hornby has expressed the point in words that deserve to be quoted:

One thing I know for sure about being a fan is this: it is not a vicarious pleasure, despite all appearances to the contrary, and those who say they would rather do than watch are missing the point. Football is a context where watching becomes doing....when there is some kind of triumph, the pleasure does not radiate from the players outwards until it reaches the likes of us at the back of the terraces in a pale and diminished form; our fun is not a watery version of the team's fun, even though they are the ones that get to score the goals and climb the steps at Wembley to meet Princess Diana. The joy we feel on occasions like this is not a celebration of others' good fortune, but a celebration of our own; and when there is a disastrous defeat the sorrow that engulfs us is, in effect, self-pity, and anyone who wishes to understand how football is consumed must realise this above all things. The players are merely our representatives, chosen by the manager rather than elected by us, but our representatives nonetheless, and sometimes if you look hard enough you can see the little poles that join them together, and the handles at the side that enable us to move them. I am a part of the club, just as the club is a part of me... (Fever Pitch)

Of course, the old tribal feelings are there just below the surface, waiting to be activated, and erupting every now and then with their usual tributes to the god of war. Football

hooligans are not the peculiar and perverse criminals painted by the press. They are simply the most fully human of football fans - the ones who wish to translate the only experience of membership that has ever been offered to them, into the natural expression of a tribal right. In a sense, the membership offered to the fan - in which a mesmerised passivity neutralizes the desire for action - is the greatest safeguard we have, that modern societies will not fragment into tribal sub-groups, contending for scarce resources in the concrete jungle. And we should therefore be grateful for professional football, and for all the other ways in which an icon of membership is offered to those who might otherwise chase after some adolescent version of the real thing. For when tribal groups emerge in modern conditions, they take the form of teenage gangs, whose initiation ceremonies forbid the transition to the adult world, and are designed to arrest their members in a stage of rebellion. The first concern of such a gang is to establish a right to territory, by violently erasing all rival claims.

The teenage gang is a natural (if destructive) response to a world in which the rites of passage into adulthood are no longer offered or respected. I do not say that such a world is a healthy one. But it is our world, and we have to make the best of it. Pop culture is an attempt to make the best of it - to make oneself at home in a world that is not, in any real sense, a home, since it has ceased to dedicate itself, as a home must dedicate itself, to the task of social reproduction. Home, after all, is the place where parents are. The world displayed in the culture of youth is a world from which the parent have absconded - as these days they generally do. This culture aims to present youth as the goal and fulfilment of human life, rather than a transitional phase which must be cast off as an impediment once the business of social reproduction calls. It promotes experiences which can be obtained without undertaking the burdens of responsibility, work, child-rearing and marriage. Hence sex, and especially sex divorced from any long-term commitment, becomes of paramount importance; so do experiences which involve no cost in terms of education, moral discipline, hardship or love - the paradigm being drug-taking, which has the added advantage that it shuts out the adult world completely, and replaces it with a cloud of wishful dreams. When the adult world is mentioned, it is in order to pour scorn on it as a delusive fiction or a source of tyrannical constraints.

Youth culture is therefore inherently transgressive. It announces itself always as radical, disconcerting, infuriating, disorienting and lawless. The group Prodigy, currently top of the charts with 'Slap My Bitch Up', makes the point explicitly in its techno-slam entitled 'Their Law': i.e., the law of adults, which is there to be trampled on. But the explicit incitement contained in such a number should not blind us to the fact that transgression is also institutionalised by pop, so as to become a new conformism. Future Bitch, for example, announcing its debut at the Ministry of Sound, declares its aim 'to disorientate its audience, pushing the current cultural scene to its limits and towards the millenium. Future Bitch,' it goes on, 'is challenging, radical, disconcerting, stimulating, unpredictable, subliminal and unprecedented'. And what could be more predictable than that?

Now there is an academic industry devoted to representing youth culture in general, and pop in particular, as genuinely subversive, a response to oppression, a voice through which freedom, life, and revolutionary fervour cry from the catacombs of bourgeois culture. [3] If the adepts of 'media studies' and 'cultural studies' are to be believed, youth finds itself hemmed in at every point by an 'official culture' dedicated to denying the validity of its experience. On this view the profane and anarchic messages of pop are a sign of uncontaminated virtue - gestures of protest against a life-denying social order.

Only years in a second-rate university could convince someone of that. For the fact is that the culture of youth is the official culture of our country. Any criticism of it is greeted, as this lecture will be greeted, by cries of outrage. Every public space in our country is filled by pop, politicians of all persuasions seek endorsement from those who produce and market it, and people with ears, who seek the few pockets of silence where they can be alone with their grief, are an endangered species, though one that will never be protected by the conservationists. It is no accident that the owner and director of the Ministry of Sound, James Palumbo, is son of one of the pillars of the former modernist establishment, Lord Palumbo; no accident that he is a friend and advisor to Peter Mandelson; no accident that the first role-call of guests at no. 10 after the last election included Noel Gallagher of Oasis. The culture of youth seeks and finds legitimacy with the very transgressive gestures which deny that there is any such thing.

It is important to set youth culture in the context of our democratic beliefs and expectations. The youth culture is a natural by-product of democratic habits. It prides itself on its inclusiveness. That is to say, it removes all barriers to membership - all obstacles in the form of learning, expertise, allusion, doctrine, or moral discipline. For these would be rites of passage, constituting a tacit admission that to be young is not enough, that the world expects something, and that there is a higher stage of existence to which we all must eventually proceed. This very inclusiveness, however, deprives the youth culture of human purpose. It remains locked in a kind of moral void, looking for good causes, spiritual icons, ways of representing itself as legitimate, but without crossing the fatal barrier into responsible adulthood. How lucky it was, for those who found themselves trapped in this frame of mind, that Princess Diana should have achieved the perfect post-modern death, and been beatified by Elton John as the holy single-parent family.

In effect, we find in pop culture a kind of institutionalised transgression. Gestures of defiance are now passports to wealth, power and fame, and a kind of ossified rudeness defines the manners of a new state-sponsored elite. A telling illustration of this is to be found in the recent exhibition of British art from the collection of Charles Saatchi, shown at the Royal Academy. To anyone familiar with the tradition of Western art, this collection might seem to reflect nothing so much as the poor education provided by the art schools, which have yet to inform their students that second-hand jokes done to death by Marcel Duchamp are a poor substitute for inspiration. But that reaction misses the point. Duchamp's jokes have set the agenda for youth art in our time. They are the raw material

of desecration. The gesture first made by Duchamp must be constantly repeated, in order to neutralize the resurgent feeling that there is another world to which art might also be pointing - a world in which the labour of human reproduction is sanctified and redeemed by the image of its beauty. Those works in the exhibition which have aroused the greatest indignation are precisely devoted to mocking or dirtying the idea of such a 'higher' world.

Courtship, love and marriage were made secure and durable only because human beings approached each other in a special way - with the kind of reverence that gave sense to their hesitations and meaning to their vows. This reverence was an artefact. It required the collusive effort of art, manners and religion to ensure its reproduction. And if we value the art of portraiture it is because it records and validates this spiritual effort. We see this effort clearly in those old, creased and canny people whom Rembrandt painted in his later years. For an artist like Rembrandt, the human face was the outward radiance of an inner mystery; it was the focus of feelings that were higher and more lasting than animal lusts and appetites, and which made the gaze into a sign of moral valency. It is therefore an authentic gesture of the youth culture to embellish the face with our hidden and forbidden parts, to show ugly genitalia dangling from the place where eyes and nose and lips should be. Thus our interest is redirected, away from the face and its mystical meaning, towards the immediate and expendable pleasures of the organism. It is not the face which is reproduced, but only the organs of reproduction themselves: reproduction is therefore senseless.

Likewise, there is no more effective way of cancelling the call of future generations for our care and sacrifice, than through the icon of Myra Hindley, crudely executed by Marcus Harvey, using the palm-prints of children, reminding us that if children enter this new world, it is only as fodder for our sexual fantasies.

And since religion was the corner stone of the adult world, it too must be subject to desecration. The Virgin Mary is portrayed by Chris Ofili amidst a halo of female genitalia, the purpose of which is to cancel the old feelings of awe and reverence, so that nothing of holiness remains save a vague sexual frisson. Of course, blasphemy executed so crudely and with so little sense of the ineffectiveness of overkill, is unlikely to impress even the most atheistic connoisseur of art. But art as we knew it is of only marginal significance in the culture of youth. Art as we knew it required knowledge, competence, discipline and study, all of which were effective reminders of the adult world. The culture of youth, by contrast, makes use of ready-made images and cut-and-paste techniques. It eschews subtlety, allusion and implication. It is indistinguishable in the end from advertising - with the sole qualification that it has no product to sell except itself. In this connection it is worth quoting from an interview given by Damien Hirst, in the September 1997 issue of *Dazed and Confused*.

'When I think about it,' Hirst says, 'my whole understanding of art has been based on images. I spent more time in the art library and watching TV than ever I did in galleries. I

used to go into the art library and say to myself: "I wish I could be like these guys; these are the guys, these are the dons." Sitting there, looking at 5x4 images of paintings, that was the world that I grew up in. At the same time, though, I spent a hell of a lot of time talking about commercials when I was at art school, conversations like, "My God, did you see the Coalite advert where the dog kisses the cat and then the cat kisses the mouse? Fantastic!" That's the one that Tony Kaye did a few years back where the theme tune plays [singing] "Will you still love me tomorrow?" Just a brilliant advert. I didn't realise at the time, but that was where the real art was coming from - the rest of it was in the art library going: "Shit, I wish I could understand all this stuff".'

That is the authentic voice of the youth culture, as it was a few years ago - not quite discarding the high culture of our civilisation, but reluctant to make the effort to embrace it. Things have moved on since then, partly under the influence of Hirst himself, and the advert, the comic and the photographic image have now de-throned the painted image and all that it stood for. And it is a law of human nature, confirmed by social revolutions throughout modern history, that old authorities, when they fall from their eminence, are instantly trampled on before being kicked aside.

Hence there is a direct connection between the art exemplified in Mr Saatchi's priceless collection, and the graffiti that decorate modern cities. Most graffiti are executed in lettering taken from a deliberately pre-literary source - the comic strip. Moreover, the vast majority of them do not form coherent words, nor even genuine letters. They are a kind of revenge taken against the written word, in a gesture which lays subversive claim to the very public space where the written word has for so long been sovereign, but where, thanks to TV and advertising, it is sovereign no more. The artlessness of graffiti is an act of defiance, a declaration that the knowledge enshrined in the written language is now superfluous. Remember that the written word is the most vivid symbol we possess of adult competence: it is the first obstacle set before the growing child, the original source of adult power and of the mystery of power, which in the hands of adults is propagated and exploited without force or commotion, but through signs alone. The graffiti are spells cast against the written word, designed to neutralize its power and liberate the spaces which once it occupied. Hence graffiti become badges and symbols of the new form of membership. They are the heraldic emblems of the gang. Every place disfigured by the gang's insignia is a place reclaimed from the public world of social reproduction. It has been privatised by youth, to become a site for the new kind of membership - membership with no rites of passage, and for the time being only.

We should take note at this juncture of the fate of high culture, as it has been softened and eroded by the electronic media. The high culture of our civilisation aimed to capture the attention of its adepts: it was addressed to the most intense of human interests, and required a reverential silence if its message were to be absorbed. This is true of the picture gallery and the concert hall; it is also true of the written and the spoken word. When broadcasting first was invented, it was conceived as a way of extending the high culture of

the elite to a wider audience, making available aesthetic and educational experiences that would otherwise require effort and expenditure beyond the reach of ordinary people. A radio talk took the form of a lecture addressed to the listeners, from whom it demanded their undivided attention. The speaker would prepare his talk meticulously, with attention to points of style and diction, in order to make the greatest impact and to drive his thesis home. Radio entered people's lives as a new and riveting authority, a voice from the adult world of knowledge, inviting its listeners to improve themselves, and to rise to the level of the things they heard.

Essential to the effect was the invisibility of the speaker. He was a disembodied voice, slipping down the air-waves like an angel from heaven, straight into the ears and hearts of the public. Once the speaker became visible, his appearance undermined his angelic authority. If he were a brilliant improviser, he might still be able to stare from the screen and utter an unbroken flow of elevated prose, as Bertrand Russell once did. More likely, however, he would offer only hesitant words, and require the constant prompting of an interviewer if he were to sound coherent. Very soon after the invention of television, it was the presenter, the interviewer, the person who 'fronts' the show who had secured the initiative. Distinguished people appeared before him only to risk their hard-won authority. Presenters became debunkers, and one by one the heroes of the national culture were exposed to adversarial demolition for the benefit of a public at first incredulous, then amused, and finally indifferent. If a cultured elite still existed, it had fallen out of communication with the viewers of TV, since it could not make itself listened to in such a medium, but at best only heard.

The standard format of TV spread in time to radio, so that radio talks and readings became increasingly rare. Even on Radio 3, the listener is now seldom addressed directly, with well-rehearsed words designed to elicit his complete attention. Informal dialogue replaces the authoritative utterance; and discussions are conceived in adversarial terms, with every opinion balanced against its opposite and thereby neutralised. Whatever is transmitted over the air-waves arrives in the ears of the public stripped of its authority, reduced to the private exhalation of a passing speaker. And this speaker has no more weight than the indefinitely many contenders for attention who might have been, but as it happens were not, called into the studio.

Another way of putting the point is that, through broadcasting, speech becomes a background murmur, with no special claim to our attention, and addressed to no-one present. The effect is to create a new conception of the public world. The social, cultural and political elite parade across the stage of broadcasting, chattering inconsequentially, appearing and disappearing like figures in a crowd, endlessly and fruitlessly experimenting with opinions the significance of which is exhausted by the moment of their utterance. The educated class steadily loses whatever authority it might have had, to find itself dissolved at last in the universal chatter. The public sphere is not the forum of high culture, discipline or virtue, but merely a special kind of noise: the noise of people who are paid for making it.

In these circumstances, it is hardly possible to persuade young people that the adult world is in some way higher, more fulfilling, or more richly mysterious than the world which they create through their own resources. All that exists out there is noise, and even if some noises pay more than others, no noise is privileged. Besides, the noise that pays the most is the noise which hits the charts - and this noise is usually made by young people, whose success arrives with all the suddenness and arbitrariness of a win on the Lottery. There can be no compulsion to move to the adult sphere, and no rite of passage which will land you there, since all that you can ever do is to replace one type of noise with another. In such circumstances the noises made by youth are protected from criticism, and given the go-ahead to drown out the unconfident murmurs of the fathers as they trudge away towards extinction.

There is another factor that must be considered if we are to understand the role of pop music in articulating the culture of youth, and this is the radical change in dancing. It is evident that dancing is a human universal, and also a practice that distinguishes us from all other species. Although many animals make ritualised displays, especially when attracting sexual partners, and although some, like dolphins, rejoice in the symmetrical motion of groups, none exactly dances. To dance is to move in time to a rhythm, and to translate a movement heard in sounds, into a movement exemplified in steps. In almost all tribal communities dancing has had an important role in rites of passage, and in particular in marriage ceremonies. It represents a supreme act of surrender to the tribe and its ruling deities. In dancing we set all purpose aside and are governed by the spirit of the dance. At the same time, dancing has a peculiar social intentionality - in the normal case dancing is a 'dancing with', a fitting of one's steps and gestures to the steps and gestures of others.

In the old culture of Europe dancing was a part of courtship - a kind of stylised intimacy in which the sexual allure of the body could be displayed and enjoyed without social catastrophe. For young lovers, dancing was a way of going 'part-hog', as Harold Pinter would put it, while behaving with proper decorum and with an excited consciousness of their embodiment. But it was not only young lovers who danced. Our traditional dances were formation dances, like the minuet, the jig and the saraband, in which you changed partners, to find yourself dancing with someone (your grandmother perhaps) in whom you had no sexual interest whatsoever. In the Mediterranean, it was even unheard of for the sexes to dance together: the men performed in a troupe, and then the girls, each sex with an eye for the other but decorously removed from physical contact.

Love, sex and the body are perceived differently by young people today; courtesy and courtship have disappeared from their dancing, since they have disappeared from their lives. The idea of dancing as a form of order and self-control - the idea embodied in the Greek chorus and preserved in the formation dances of our ancestors - is dead. Dancing has become a social and sexual release, among people who expressly represent themselves, in the dance, as sexual objects, even when, and especially when, they dance without a partner. Indeed the concept of the partner - of the one with whom you are

dancing, and who agrees to dance after an exchange of courtesies - hardly engages with the new reality. You all dance together, and every step or shake or gesture is right just so long as it feels right. Nor is this new kind of dancing of marginal significance. On the contrary, 'clubbing' and 'partying' - with or without drug-taking - are the central episodes in the youth culture, the times when the individual renews his attachment to the group and is raised to a heightened level of excitement and a sense of the rightness of being what he is and doing what he does.

Modern pop music has been shaped by the new kind of dancing, which it also shapes. It is an eruption into the public sphere of a noise that will drown out the noise of adult life, and replace it with the collective persona of youth. Now in any age, the exuberance of youth finds expression in loud noise and violent dancing: Plato's celebrated attack on the corybants, and his desire to include only the stately and dignified modes in his ideal republic, testify to the suspicion with which the music of youth has always been regarded. But there has gradually emerged in our time a wholly new kind of music, serving a wholly new kind of purpose, which serves to isolate youth in a world of its own, and to neutralize the need for a genuine culture.

The style and sound of modern pop, I suggest, reflect the fact that it is not there to be listened to, but to rehearse and endorse the solidarity of youth, in a world of external and uncontrollable forces, without rites of passage into any permanent and peaceful home. Its presence in the background is like a veil drawn across the old illusions, and a warning that there is no longer any refuge from the present moment and the present desire.

What are the musical consequences of this, and should we worry about them? There is no doubt in my mind that the constant exposure to pop is eroding the art of hearing. I don't mean merely that people are no longer listening. I mean that, however hard they listen, they hear less and less. And as you hear less in music, so do you hear less in the human voice, which is its archetype. However far your ears strain into the soup of electric guitar music, nothing of harmony is perceivable besides the chord. However closely you attend to the melodic line, the valency of note for note eludes you, since the melody is driven entirely from outside. In the end little or nothing remains, save the spangled cascade of percussion, which repeats itself until faded out at the point of fatigue.

It is often said that we should always compare like with like, and that any attempt to denounce REM because it is not Mozart would be like a condemnation of earwigs because they cannot win the Derby. But while there is a point in such a protest, we should not be entirely silenced by it. For it is only recently that pop music grew away from the tradition of European and American song. Folk-music, rhythm and blues, ragtime and even jazz feed into and from the fertile current of classical music. So let me illustrate with a famous piece of classical music: the quartet from Beethoven's *Fidelio*. I take this piece because it is constructed like pop, from a repeated chord-sequence, which it begins by playing straight. The sequence starts from the tonic chord of G and modulates on to the dominant, D, and

straight away from there to the subdominant, C. This transition is achieved by voice-leading: the alto voice slips from the F-sharp of a D-major chord to the F-natural of a G seventh chord - a simple device around which, however, the whole drama of the piece is made to turn. If you listen for this, you will hear immediately what the distinction is, between a harmonic sequence which arises from the musical movement, and one that is imposed from outside.

When the sequence has been played once, the first soprano enters - and we discover that, simply by arpeggiating the chords, in an inimitable Beethovenian way, we have a melody - and a melody that moves under its own inner force to a conclusion. Each repetition thereafter brings in another voice, with counter-melodies that point up that chromatic shift from F-sharp to F-natural and fill it with doubt and wonder and amazement. The first voice is that of Marcellina, the goaler's daughter, singing of Fidelio, the youth whom she suddenly believes to be in love with her, to her great delight. The second voice is that of Fidelio, who is not a youth at all but Leonora, wife of the prisoner whom she is determined to rescue, who is appalled to discover that Marcellina might be falling in love with her, having mistaken her sex. The third is Marcellina's father, also rejoicing in the prospect of an elegant marriage for his daughter, while the fourth is that of Marcellina's suitor, stunned to discover his beloved's infidelity. Five statements of the sequence, and then a simple dominant-tonic coda, to bring the whole conundrum to an uncertain end, as these conflicting emotions finally exhaust their musical potential. Listen to how it is done, and you will see what I mean, when I say that there is all the difference in the world between a musical movement that is generated internally, and one that is imposed from outside.

The Fidelio quartet is music which cannot sink into the background. Just let it sound for a bar, and immediately it strides into the foreground, compelling a keen awareness of the life that evolves through the notes. The music is addressed to you, and your ears are led by it into an inner world, where melody is a movement of the soul, and harmony a confluence of voices.

But it requires effort to hear such things correctly - a pleasant effort, it is true, but an effort of the whole attentive being and not just of the ear. And I cannot help thinking that those who are brought up on music such as this, in which a continuous musical argument makes of every repetition a variation, and of every ending a conclusion, are living at another and higher level than those who know nothing but pop, and who find nothing painful in the endless repetitive background which is rapidly driving both music and silence from our world. To prove this would be the undertaking of a lifetime, and not of a lecture. But I believe that those who teach in the humanities ought at least to make the attempt, not so as to convert their students, but so as to give a sporting chance to those who are not yet morons.

[1] 'S. Frith, 'Towards an Aesthetic of Popular Music', in Richard Leppert and Susan McClary, eds., *Music and Society: The Politics of Composition, Performance and*

Reception, Cambridge 1987.

[2] See Grail Marcus, *Dead Elvis*, New York, 1991

[3] See especially George Lipsitz, *Dangerous Crossroads: Popular Music, Postmodernism and the Poetics of Place*, Verso 1994.