Hit by the Street: Dewey and Popular Culture

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The idea for this paper started with an image that is likely wholly imaginary but interesting nonetheless. It’s the late 1920s in New York City. John Dewey, after a busy day of teaching and working through the notes that will eventually become Individualism Old and New, leaves his office at Columbia University. Instead of turning south toward home, he turns north and east, into Harlem. He strolls for a bit, turns up 7th Ave., and stops in front of the Regent Theatre. He goes inside, takes off his coat, and catches the early showing of The Lights of New York. Fifty-seven minutes later, he leaves the Regent. He heads home, has a bite to eat with his daughter, but still feels restless. After dinner, he puts on his coat and hat and heads out again—this time to 51st and Broadway, where a bandleader named Fletcher Henderson is playing at a club called Roseland. Dewey stands in the back, bespectacled and moustached, and watches the people dance to this new music called jazz. Maybe he even has a drink . . .

I am not sure this ever happened, but it makes a compelling image, at least for someone who is interested in Dewey’s aesthetics. Dewey lived in one of the artistic centers of the world during the emergence of two significant forms of popular art that remain huge influences on our culture—jazz and film. Dewey also did not tackle aesthetics until relatively late in his career. First, there was a chapter on “Experience, Nature, and Art” in Experience and Nature (1925). Later, after criticism from Lewis Mumford and prompting from Albert Barnes, Dewey published his thorough treatment of the philosophy of art in 1934 as Art as Experience. In both works, Dewey advanced a view of aesthetics that is sensitive to the role social class plays in traditional conceptions of aesthetics. He attempts to overcome this tradition by radically refocusing aesthetics from art objects to aesthetic experience. Aesthetic experience is marked by continuity, in which various aspects of our experience that are often separated, such as mind and body, reason and affect, and means and ends, are brought together.
In what follows, I will briefly outline Dewey’s aesthetics with an eye toward the role of social class within his theory of aesthetic experience. Then, I will delve briefly into Dewey’s views on film as an example of the complexities Dewey’s aesthetics provides for a theory of popular art. Dewey was seemingly dismissive of film and other forms of popular art, despite a developing aesthetic theory that would seem to encompass such forms. Such dismissiveness seems to arise from these class concerns. Popular art is produced for economic reasons and consumed for escapist ones. Just because Dewey was sensitive to the role class plays in the division between fine and popular art does not mean he embraced the emerging popular arts of his day. I see this as a tension within Dewey’s own writings—a tension between the social class dynamics of art and the potentiality of aesthetic experience inherent everywhere. This tension seems to be somewhat out of place, if only because Dewey was very concerned with demonstrating the aesthetic potentiality of “merely” utilitarian objects such as buildings or pots. Finally, I will offer some contemporary examples of how Dewey’s aesthetics is used to engage elements of popular culture. Both John McDermott and Richard Shusterman recognize that a Deweyan aesthetic provides valuable conceptual resources for critique and understanding of popular art. Thus, McDermott and Shusterman move Dewey along, overcoming the unresolved tension Dewey left in his own aesthetics. Taking popular art seriously is important, for it is one of the major social forces that has considerable educational influence; we must reckon with popular art if we are serious about human growth and flourishing.

In the preface to the 1929 version of *Experience and Nature*, Dewey is clear that his emerging theory of aesthetic experience seeks to bridge gaps. The primary gap is between, as the title of the work suggests, experience and nature. The gap between how the world is and how we live in it is a significant philosophical one, one Dewey seeks to mitigate throughout the work. Art plays a central role in this mitigation, as certain views of art (“art for art’s sake”) see it as something completely separate from other attempts to engage and utilize nature. Science is seen as objective, rational, apprehending nature in its true form while art is seen as subjective, emotional, and an expressive reflection of and “addition to” nature (LW 1). Science is to be used, while art is to be enjoyed. Science is means, while art is merely an end.

Art, then, is simply an end in itself. It exists for no other purpose save expression and enjoyment. Thus, objects that serve direct purposes—pots, shovels, dwellings—are not art. They serve other purposes—to cook, to move dirt, to keep us warm and dry—and are thus too utilitarian to be art. They are, to put it another way, dirty and normal. They are also tools, used primarily by members of lower social classes to merely make a living.

This is one of the many dichotomies Dewey is seeking to overcome. He wants to reorient aesthetic theory away from its focus on a certain class of nonuseful objects and toward objects that contribute to aesthetic experience. Aesthetic experiences are characterized by continuity; the objects therein are characterized by continuity between various aspects of experience that are often separated—ends and means,
mind and body, ideal and real. Such aesthetic objects demonstrate the conditions
that allowed the object to be created. They are a stand-in in certain ways for the
historical, social, and environmental forces that define our experience. They also
turn us outward or forward, allowing us to reflect on previous experiences and
have future experiences in a different way. The immediate enjoyment, the future
experience, and the past conditions all come together. This happens in at least some
experience, but art can facilitate and embody this continuity. This continuity be-
comes the primary feature of the aesthetic for Dewey: “The distinguishing feature of
conscious experience . . . is that in it the instrumental and the final, meanings that
are signs and clews [sic] and meanings that are immediately possessed, suffered,
and enjoyed come together in one. And all of these things are preeminently true of
art” (LW 1: 269). Dewey calls these unified experiences “consummatory.” They are
rare, given the divergent and distracting nature of our world. Yet they are vital for
our quality of life (LW 10).

It is not objects of “fine art” alone that facilitate these consummatory
experiences. Paintings in museums or music offered by symphonies are not the
only objects that express this continuity. Dewey is very critical of those who see
objects that are useful as lacking any aesthetic possibility. He also explicitly
connects the separation of art into “fine” and “useful” categories with social class: “Then
there is that which in quantity bulks most largely as fine art . . . a production which
in reality is largely a form of commercialized industry in production of a class of
commodities that find their sale among well-to-do-persons desirous of maintaining
a conventionally approved status” (LW 1: 273). This status maintenance is important,
because the status it represents is at a distance from the means of production and
an ability to appreciate the ends. Later in the same paragraph, Dewey makes this
explicit: “Its products remind their owner of things pleasant in memory though
hard in direct undergoing, and remind others that their owner has achieved an
economic standard which makes possible cultivation and decoration of leisure”
(LW 1: 273). We consume “fine” art in order to wistfully remember days gone by
without having to relive the difficulties of those days. Fine art also serves to let others
know we are of such a status that we never have to engage with dirty, normal world
of useful things any longer.

It may sound like Dewey is engaging in some sort of art class warfare, but he is
not just criticizing a social phenomenon, but a metaphysical one—the separation of
experience into completely separate spheres for instrumentality and consummation.
In one section of Experience and Nature, he begins in social class but ends in
education, at least if we conceive of education as the making of meaning. One, if
not the principle, goal of education is to enable individuals to continually enrich
their own lives through transaction with everyday experience. Dewey says: “The
traditional separation of some things as mere means and others as mere ends is a
reflection of the insulated existence of working and leisure classes, of production
that is not also consummatory and consummation that is not productive. This
division is not a merely social phenomenon.” It reflects, for Dewey, what may be “the problem of experience” which is taking experience that only seems to have causal connections and forging meaning: “When that task is achieved the result is art and in art everything is common between means and ends” (LW 1: 277). The split between fine art and useful objects, just like the split between producers and consumers, arises from a misplaced ascription of meaning to only those things that are seen as consummatory and a neglect of the instrumental. Art and class mirror our ignorance of the necessary continuity between means and ends.

Given these factors, it would seem reasonable that Dewey would engage with popular art. After all, popular art is, by definition, not the domain of the upper class. Yet in Art as Experience his major examples of form and function are all works of art that are typically regarded as “fine,” even if historically they were once used for more utilitarian purposes (as were Grecian urns). He speaks often of the poetry of Keats, but doesn’t mention Whitman. The work has photos of paintings by El Greco, Cezanne, and Matisse, but says nothing about film. There is a symphony, but no jazz (LW 10). If, as Dewey suggests, he is trying to remove art from the museum, then why are his examples all museum pieces? This is the same Dewey who says “the growth of capitalism has been a powerful influence in the development of the museum as the proper home for works of art, and in the promotion of the idea that they are apart from the common life” (LW 10: 14). Yet Dewey goes to the museum time and time again, even if it is to bring those pieces out to the common life. Why does he not consider the living, vibrant art that was literally emerging on his doorstep?

One historical reason may be the influence of Albert Barnes. Barnes was a chemist and a doctor who developed a type of silver nitrate solution that led to Barnes becoming very, very wealthy. At the age of 45, Barnes enrolled in one of Dewey’s seminars at Columbia in 1917-1918. After this course, Barnes and Dewey became close friends. Barnes’s wealth enabled him to amass a significant collection of art, the bulk of which was the contemporary (for the time) post-impressionist work of Degas, Cezanne, Matisse, and other French painters. Barnes was not merely a private collector, but rather wanted his purchases to be used for education. This led him to Dewey’s seminar and later to appoint Dewey as the educational advisor of the Barnes Foundation. On several occasions, Barnes took Dewey to the art museums of Europe and eventually left a healthy stipend to Dewey after his death in 1951 (Dykhuizen, 1973; Dalton, 2002). Undoubtedly, Barnes had significant influence on Dewey’s aesthetics.

Dewey dedicated Art as Experience to Barnes; it was the Barnes Foundation that first published the work. In the preface, Dewey writes “My greatest indebtedness is to Dr. A. C. Barnes.” He notes that Barnes went over every chapter of the work and that his conversations with Barnes “together with that of his books, has been a chief factor in shaping my own thinking about the philosophy of aesthetics” (LW 10: 4). The photos contained in the work all come from pieces in the Barnes collection. Dewey wrote about what he saw and what he knew; when he looked for examples of works of art to include in his aesthetics, those examples were supplied by Barnes.
Barnes himself was, by all accounts, “a difficult man” (Westbrook, 1991, p. 388). This difficulty emerged in his attitude concerning art and art education. His own aesthetics seemed radically different from Dewey’s, centering on formalism and objectivity. He downplayed the transactionary role of art, nor was there much emphasis on continuity that marked Dewey’s attempts to describe aesthetic experience. Indeed, Barnes seemed to frequently misread Dewey, as when he focused on the criteria for distinguishing good from bad art he claimed to derive from *Experience and Nature* (Dalton, 2002). It wasn’t Dewey’s aesthetic theory that Barnes appropriated, however. Barnes found, at least in Dewey’s writings, the same sense of class and art that marked his own practices with his foundation.

The Barnes Foundation was anti-museum and anti-art establishment. Barnes was notorious for denying admission to the collection to the wealthy or influential and granting it to those not immersed in the art world (Westbrook, 1991). This anti-establishment stance of Barnes may be due in part to his favored artistic subject matter. Barnes focused heavily on the impressionist and post-impressionist artists of Europe; this was the modern art of his day. As such, it (and Barnes, whose long-standing interest in art was only recently coupled with his “new money”) was often derided by the American art establishment. The artists that Barnes favored were ignored or thoroughly criticized by most Americans; Barnes just poured fuel on the fire by being overtly hostile to anyone who was critical of his collection (Dalton, 2002).

While the issues of social class and the museum character of fine art were present in Dewey before Barnes’s influence, one can see how Barnes and his collection made these issues even more complex. Barnes was thoroughly (and, perhaps, paradoxically) democratic in his views about art and art access. He was also adventurous and in some ways prescient with his collector’s eye (Dalton, 2002). Dewey may have absorbed both Barnes’s anti-establishment tendencies and his artistic preferences during their friendship. Although Barnes was acknowledged to be very interested in African and African American art, Barnes did not seem to be interested in the emerging popular art forms of the times (Ryan, 1995). Although in some ways their focus on modern art was a stretch from the established subjects for aesthetics, Matisse was not Frank Capra; the average New Yorker was much more likely to have seen *It Happened One Night* than to have viewed *The Dance*. Nevertheless, Matisse and the other artists patronized by Barnes stretched the boundaries of the aesthetics of the day.

It may be possible that Barnes’s influence kept Dewey from examining the popular art of his day. There are other possibilities as well. Dewey had his own prejudices on the matter, of course. Plus, he was getting old. Dewey turned 71 in 1930; he may have found it hard to jitterbug at Roseland. There are also philosophical and cultural reasons. One of the central dichotomies he attempted to resolve in his aesthetics was between art for art’s sake and created objects that were immediately useful. Key to this resolution was acknowledging the continuity present in art that
led to the consummatory. Popular art, such as film, was neither very fine nor obviously useful. It was not a painting designed to be sublime, nor was it a functional tool like a pot. It was, at some level, supposed to entertain. This end of popular art was also coupled with another end—profit. The entertainment function and profit motive of popular art such as film made Dewey more than a little skeptical of its consummatory potential, especially given that such popular art was merely consumed by the lower class.

When Dewey did speak of film or other forms of popular art, he expressed his worry that such arts were unintelligent, in the sense that they expressed a separation of means and ends (Seng, 2007). Popular art was created to distract and entertain consumers while making money for producers. The consumerist (in both emotional and economic terms) impulse was a concern for Dewey, for it threatened the deliberation and intelligent action necessary for democratic life. Thus, he was skeptical of popular art. In Politics and Culture, he writes, “Adverse opinions as to the possibility of a general democratic culture are also based on the low standards, intellectually and aesthetically, of the radio, the movie, and the popular theatre. Is there not a possibility that the standards of things are low ultimately (I think we all agree that they are much lower than they ought to be) ultimately because of economic causes?” (LW 6: 44).

These economic causes stem from the split between ends and means that threatens democratic life and makes fine art the domain of the upper classes. This separation, mirrored in the social split between producers and consumers, results in two types of art: popular art for the workers and fine art for those of leisure. The fine/popular art split is symptomatic of the deeper metaphysical and cultural split Dewey seeks to overcome in Experience and Nature. The ordinary worker goes to movies because he is disconnected from the aesthetic continuity in his everyday life. This is a problem for Dewey, who remarks, “a civilization, in which the average man spends his day in a factory and his evening at a movie, has still a long way to go” (LW 7: 434). The problem, again, is discontinuity. Popular art displays the discontinuity because it is produced for economic consumption, not aesthetic experience. Popular art arises in a social system that itself is discontinuous, where most of the population is disconnected from the deep democratic life Dewey advocates.

Given this state of affairs, two possibilities emerge. Either popular art can be refined to better display the continuity that marks aesthetic experience or the social situation can be altered so that the experience of most of us has a higher degree of continuity. The fine arts serve as both means and end for the latter possibility, which seems to be the one Dewey prefers. Seng remarks that “Dewey’s aim is not the improvement of movies themselves as an art form, but a more critical, intelligent public. Education is his desire, and as this ideal becomes realized he believes people will gain more interest in the traditionally fine arts” (2007, p. 6). Seng bases his assessment on Dewey’s statements in the Ethics, where Dewey discusses improvement in aesthetic standards and knowing “good” art (LW 7). If more educational and
social options were provided to the public, more people would be able to develop the capacity to integrate the aesthetic into their everyday lives. If such art was better integrated into mainstream social life, instead of being removed to the museum, then this sort of aesthetic education would be easier. Dewey does not follow up on the possibility that the forms of art that were already part of mainstream social life—popular arts such as film—already have aesthetic value.

Despite his aesthetics, Dewey seems dismissive of popular art. He does not seem to even consider the possibility that the emerging forms of popular art, such as film, could be a mechanism for promoting the continuity of experience he seeks. That may be the result of old prejudices about art dying hard. Film, for example, was a relatively new expressive form during Dewey’s time and had not yet proven itself as an art form. One wonders, however, why this matters, given Dewey’s insistence that objects typically seen as instrumental also had aesthetic value. If a pot could express the continuity of experience, why not a film? Dewey was also clearly worried about the economic entanglements involved in film and other forms of popular art. Films were made to make money, not to provoke, inspire, and unify. This seemingly taints them in some way for Dewey. But two issues remain. First, it seems naïve for Dewey to ignore the economic function of the production of anything, given the social intelligence he displayed and promoted. Films were the products of and participants in an economic system. But so are pots, shovels, and Impressionist paintings. Second, if Dewey wants to claim that we should dismiss popular art because of the economic intent behind its production, then that leads us to the very thorny problem of creator intent and the function of art. How much does intent matter in our interpretation of a work? I am not sure Dewey wants to go down that road, especially given his arguments about the importance of seemingly instrumental objects. The intent of the pot is not just to represent the continuity of experience. It’s also to boil water. For Dewey to dismiss films or other elements of popular art because the intent of the products is to make their producers money seems a bit contradictory.

Is there a way out? Can we put Dewey in the movie theater or jazz hall in good conscience? Dewey certainly went to the movies (Seng, 2007). But his attitudes about art seemed shaped more by Barnes than the street life of New York City. This is understandable, even as it is a bit disappointing. Dewey himself seems a bit stuck in his neglect of popular art, due to a variety of factors such as the influence of Barnes. Dewey’s aesthetics, however, can serve as a rich resource for involvement in and understanding of popular art forms, if someone can take it up and move Dewey along. John J. McDermott does it with architecture and late twentieth-century modern art. Richard Shusterman uses Dewey’s aesthetics to discuss rock and roll and hip-hop (McDermott, 1976; Shusterman, 2000). Both of these authors take Dewey’s aesthetics and apply it to contemporary and popular artistic developments.

McDermott is a notable commenter on Dewey and sees Dewey’s aesthetics as central not only to understanding Dewey’s philosophical project, but also to
fully understanding aesthetic developments in modern culture. According to McDermott, only the pragmatism of Dewey and James contains the tools to reckon with the significant changes wrought during the twentieth century in both the art world and American culture writ large. This project—deploying philosophical tools to understand and enrich our cultural transactions—is one that most of philosophy has abandoned, but one that is necessary if we are concerned with the betterment of lives.

In his essay, “To Be Human is to Humanize: A Radically Empirical Aesthetic,” McDermott claims that only the empiricism provided by James and Dewey give us the conceptual tools to fully understand modern art: “Dewey’s views [in Art as Experience] provide a point of departure for a contemporary aesthetic, rooted in the very fabric of the human condition and capable of transforming our cultural attitudes» (1976, p. 45). This is because both pragmatist empiricism and modern art share a central way of understanding the world. We live in a world where making, not representing, is the central human task. Central to the emergence of modern art is the attitude that people both constitute and construct their own reality. Process is key—not just the process of making art, but the process of making anything and everything, as everything is made. The focus on the process of making—a focus on medium and technique as much as a finished product—that McDermott sees in modern art mirrors the larger philosophical claim that being itself is a process. We (as individuals, as a culture, as entities) are not finished, ever. Flux is the norm, with stability only being temporary.

In the essay, McDermott compares the empiricism of James with the impressionism of Monet. This was the same genre of art that Dewey was exposed to via Barnes. According to McDermott, modern art provides us with two vital philosophical perspectives. First, nature is no longer our primary creative referent, in art or in life. The accurate representation of fixed forms is no longer the goal. In philosophy, pragmatism moves us away from the attempt to accurately mirror nature to a more instrumental concern with how we transact with the various forms within our environment. Second, modern art objects are best seen as events, not as fixed entities. As events, entities become relational. They tie together historical dimensions of experience, such as the artist’s context and the context of the art world, with our present viewing, where we supply our own context and circumstance. Modern art invites participation. The blurred contours of a Monet painting asks us to become involved in the painting itself, just as the street theater or other happenings erupt around us, drawing us into direct participation with the event. We carry that experience of participation forward into the future, where it becomes part of our context for the having of subsequent experience. This, of course, is Dewey’s emphasis on continuity—the unity of past, present and future that art facilitates. But it is continuity that Dewey seeks in all experience, not just the experience of traditional works of art. McDermott speaks to this Deweyan theme, and moves closer to considering a Deweyan perspective on popular art when he considers the Rodia towers in Watts.
The Rodia towers are a prime example of the Deweyan themes in modern art that McDermont wishes to highlight. They are assembled, literally put together, from common household materials that many would consider trash. Rising in a lower class neighborhood and constructed by a working class immigrant, the towers give embodiment to the Deweyan idea that “any material, found or constructed, can be aesthetically meaningful” (McDermott, 1976, p. 48). Aesthetic value does not come from what the towers are made of, it comes from what the towers do in the present. As nonrepresentational art that was under construction over a period of years, the towers avoid the nostalgia that McDermott claims drives so much of high art. The towers don’t attempt to accurately portray some past event, recreating it for present viewers. Instead, they stand as a never-quite-completed invitation. The towers, and by extension all modern art, become less about presenting the past and more about making something in the present. The past, in the form cast-off materials, still emerges in the towers; they have the potential to foster the continuity of experience that Dewey claims must be present in the aesthetic, but they are not captive to a stagnant nostalgia. Given the materials of their construction, the background of the artist, the neighborhood they inhabit, and their form and presence, the Rodia towers are an example of arts movement from museum to the street. According to McDermott, a pragmatist aesthetic is the only aesthetic capable of reckoning with this movement.

Shusterman follows McDermott in claiming that a pragmatist aesthetic is the best tool for understanding modern art, though Shusterman goes further. McDermott’s examples are, for the most part, still fine art in the broad sense of the term. They are paintings and sculptures, much like Dewey’s examples in Art as Experience. With the exception of jazz, which still maintains a slightly rarefied air, McDermott does not consider popular art. The Rodia towers, even as they are made with found materials by a working class artist, are still a sculpture. Shusterman helps us apply Dewey’s aesthetic to popular art forms—film and, most directly, popular music.

Shusterman stands as one of the primary defenders of both a pragmatist aesthetic and of the artistic merits of popular art. For Shusterman, these two are inextricably linked, for a pragmatist aesthetic provides us with both the means and motivation to take popular forms of artistic expression seriously. In many ways, Shusterman takes Dewey farther than Dewey himself. While I cannot fully summarize and critique Shusterman’s aesthetics and views on popular art here, I will point out several lines of continuity between Shusterman and Dewey regarding popular culture in order to demonstrate that, while he may have fallen a bit short of taking popular culture seriously, Dewey’s aesthetics provides Shusterman (and us) with the conceptual and educational resources to reckon with these vital and omnipresent cultural products.

Shusterman’s articulation of a pragmatist aesthetic of popular art comes in several forms, but the most significant is his defense of popular art against traditional aesthetics. Consider, for example, Dewey’s own claim that “adverse opinions as to
the possibility of a general democratic culture are also based on the low standards, intellectually and aesthetically, of the radio, the movie, and the popular theatre. Is there not a possibility that the standards of things are low ultimately (I think we all agree that they are much lower than they ought to be) ultimately because of economic causes?” (LW 6: 44). Dewey’s own claim that popular art has low standards mirrors the common complaints that popular art is simple and uncreative. Shusterman deals with both of these complaints against popular art in a very Deweyan manner.

A common complaint about popular art is that it cannot deal with the messy complexities of life, as such art must be simplified for mass consumption. Real family problems do not get neatly resolved in twenty-two minutes. Nor can the roller-coaster ride that is falling in love be summed up in a hundred-and-eight-minute film. Pretty in Pink deals with social class, love, and growing up all fairly succinctly and superficially. This may all be true of some popular films and other forms of popular art. Shusterman notes, however, that the claim of simplicity does not hold for all popular art. Popular art can be complex; just because some of it is banal does not mean all of it is. Consider, for example, two recent summer blockbuster films, The Dark Knight and Watchmen. Both are films based on comic books. Both were hugely popular, making significant money at the box office. Yet both contain layers of complexity. Each tries to grapple with the price individuals and society are willing to pay for security and the burdens we place on those we choose to protect us. Fear is a common theme in both films. In addition to these thematic elements, they are replete with symbolism, both the broad symbolic play of art in general and a more specific symbolic language designed to appeal to individuals versed in their source material. Watchmen, in particular, is a film based on a comic book that is largely about the specific tropes of comic books. Readers of the books notice things others do not. These films, then, operate on multiple levels. They are summer entertainment, but they are also explorations of social themes using a particular set of signs and symbols. These films are complex while being popular.

Are they as complex as other forms of fine art? Even if they are, does the average viewer notice these complexities? Shusterman says that these questions, ultimately, express a deep-seated class bias. Here, he sounds very Deweyan. Shusterman’s answer to both questions is “maybe.” But such an answer isn’t meant to be evasive or ambivalent. His “maybe” stems from two observations. First, he notes that both fine and popular art contain complexities that are missed by the viewer. I may have liked The Dark Knight for the explosions and action; I may have the print of Rothko’s No. 13 in my living room because it matches my curtains. In either case, my level of appreciation or understanding of a piece of art doesn’t mean that there isn’t more going on with that piece. Shusterman’s second observation is that such dismissal often rests on a conflation of the new and the difficult—what is perceived as complex—with what is relevant or significant. High art is often given that status because it is seen as more significant. Its complexity supposedly allows it to represent and critique elements of our human experience. But our fundamental experiences are often our most familiar experiences. The conflation of the difficult
with the complex and thus significant “is refuted by the abiding significance that our more familiar experiences and traditional forms (e.g., falling in love, kissing our children good-night, holiday prayers and meals) often have in our lives” (2000, p. 187). For most people, the relevant and significant are the things we deal with everyday.

Shusterman’s point is that to equate good art with that which is new and difficult betrays a deeper political disdain for the reality of the common person: “This is surely a convenient strategy for the privilged and conservative to ignore and suppress the realities of those they dominate by denying the artistic legitimacy of their expression” (2000, p. 187). Fine art ignores the concerns and lives of ordinary citizens, as those concerns and those citizens aren’t particularly worth much. While I certainly think it’s incorrect to say Dewey was dismissive of the concerns of the common person, Dewey seems to be skeptical that the popular art consumed by the common person has much to offer. When such art reflects the concerns of the common person, however, Shusterman says it must be considered, lest we ignore the everyday reality most of us face. Many popular artists, such as Bruce Springsteen, would agree: “Poverty and violence, sex and drugs, ‘spare parts and broken hearts’ (to quote Bruce Springsteen) ‘keep this world turnin’ around’; and they have a way of reasserting their repressed reality with a brutal vengeance, as one departs the theater and is hit by the street” (Shusterman, 2000, p. 187).

Dewey may have ignored the street, but he was clearly concerned with the class bias he saw as inherent within aesthetics and the art world. The legitimation of certain objects as fine art was primarily due to the maintenance of class status. Objects that had use were not seen as legitimate candidates for designation as art, as they drifted too close to the means of production. Class separation mirrored an ethical and metaphysical separation—the intellectual and aesthetic concerns of the upper class, concerns that the majority of people simply did not have, are more valuable and real that the concerns of the average or marginalized person. The gallery and museum (but not, perhaps, the movie house), “reflect and establish superior cultural status, while their segregation from the common life reflects the fact that they are not part of a native and spontaneous culture. They are a kind of counterpart to a holier-than-thou attitude, exhibited not toward persons as such but toward the interests and occupations that absorb most of the communities time and energy” (LW 10: 14-15). Shusterman, however, goes further, explicitly connecting the aesthetic disregard for popular art with an attempt to at best ignore and at worst, further repress, the concerns of those who lack much social power.

Shusterman’s defense of popular art against the claim that it lacks creativity also rests on Dewey’s aesthetic insights. Popular art supposedly lacks any aesthetic value because it’s produced by groups for groups; it is mass produced so it can be mass consumed. A committee of Hollywood executives, armed with reams of focus group and test screening data, put together a film designed to appeal to the broadest audience possible in order to make the most money possible. Thus, popular art lacks the creative spark of individuality and expression that marks fine art.
Shusterman’s defense, while multifaceted, rests on the Deweyan notion that all communication is fundamentally communal. In order to communicate anything, an audience must be anticipated. This is as true for the lone artist as it is for the Hollywood committee. The devil, of course, is in the details. What is to be communicated, to whom, and for what purpose? But these are pragmatic, situational concerns. They are not grounds for dismissing the entirety of popular art. Movies do get made by committee and some of those movies are boring, uninspired, simplistic, commercial pap. But fine art gets made by individuals and some of that art is boring, uninspired, overly dense, impenetrable pap. We cannot exclude communally produced works (there goes all film, theater, and architecture!) or works that anticipate an audience (there goes everything, at least if we take Dewey seriously) from aesthetic consideration. Nor can we exclude works that are produced to be sold. Even Dewey notes that “works of art are now produced, like other articles, for sale in the market” (LW 10: 15). Dewey is critical of this sort of production and its inorganic nature. Art ought to arise from the life of the community. Popular art has just as much opportunity to be organic in this way as does fine art.

Shusterman’s articulation of the aesthetic potential of popular art ranges far beyond what is covered here. He defends popular art against charges that it places content over form, by noting examples of popular art that are self-conscious about their status as representation. He points out that many works of fine art are as temporary or transient as much of popular art is supposed to be. Popular art can also be physically enjoyed—we can dance! Those dismissive of popular art as intellectually empty not only neglect the intellectual content that is present in popular art, they also neglect the fact that art can be enjoyed in ways that are not intellectual. They privilege the mind over the body, betraying (again) a class bias and a Cartesean dualism that Shusterman and Dewey work to overcome (Shusterman, 2000). Dewey works to overcome it with his emphasis on the unity of art and aesthetic experience. Shusterman goes further, however, directly addressing the meaning that is potentially present within popular art.

Why does all this matter? Why is Dewey’s stance (or lack thereof) on popular art important? First, we swim in popular art. If, as Dewey, McDermott, and Shusterman argue, philosophy ought to be employed to examine elements of our contemporary situation, then the aesthetic measure of popular art has to be taken, and taken seriously. McDermott notes that the influence of modern art is pervasive—in our furniture, our home design, even our kitchen appliances (McDermott, 1976). Popular art is even more embedded in our experience; it is the majority of our cultural context. McDermott’s defense of pragmatism as the best way to reckon with modern art can easily be applied to popular art, particularly his assertion that pragmatism allows us to see that art has moved beyond representation and is primarily concerned with construction. This construction, done by individuals who are often on the social margins, allows a more democratic participation in what constitutes art and demonstrates the sort of continuity that Dewey places at the center of aesthetic experience. Like Dewey, McDermott does not directly address
popular art, but by placing pragmatism at the center of an aesthetic understanding of our contemporary situation, he serves as a transitional figure to Shusterman.

McDermott moves Dewey along, getting him closer to the movie theater and nightclub, even as Dewey is reluctant to go. Dewey’s reluctance to enter into a direct dialog with popular art stems from worries about the emptiness of commercially produced and consumed popular art that, I have argued, are slightly out of place, especially given the place social class occupies in his aesthetic concerns. It is Shusterman who buys Dewey his ticket and takes him inside. Whereas Dewey argued that it was largely a class bias that led to the dismissal of useful objects from the aesthetic realm, Shusterman argues that is the same sort of bias that leads to a dismissal of popular art from the aesthetic realm.

Like McDermott, Shusterman sees Dewey’s pragmatism as the best means for addressing our contemporary aesthetic situation, only in Shusterman’s case this situation is often of popular art. Shusterman’s basic reason for addressing such art is simple: popular art gives us pleasure. We listen, we dance, we have a good time. While even I find it difficult, in my initial fictional Dewey outing, to picture him dancing, the fact that we seek out elements of our experience because they are enjoyable did not escape Dewey. Such a vital part of our experience cannot be constantly derided or condemned without dividing ourselves between that part which guiltily enjoys the latest Roots album and the part which says we need to get busy reading more philosophy. For Shusterman, the dismissal of popular art is the dismissal of the everyday reality most of us inhabit. Such as dismissal amounts to an attempt to control that reality by those in power (Shusterman, 2000). If nothing else, Dewey’s work is an attempt to overcome the philosophical dichotomies that result in harmful social divisions. The split between fine and popular art is one of those harmful divisions, resulting in a kind of disdain to certain parts of ourselves and to certain classes of people. Finally, there are significant educational reasons to deploy aesthetic resources in analyses and defenses of popular art. Most of the attacks on popular art that Shusterman notes from Bloom, Adorno, Bordieu, and others are, at root, educational attacks—popular art is bad because it has pernicious effects on human growth. Shusterman and McDermott say this is not necessarily true; popular art has the potential to contribute to human growth and flourishing. Dewey, whose aesthetics and educational philosophy are drawn from the same core of continuity, provides us with the means to honestly reckon with the challenges and potentialities that popular art poses to us. Dewey’s aesthetic legacy is that art is not some predefined category, but can be found in any area of our experience where the continuity of ends and means, past and future, production and enjoyment is expressed. That is certainly true of film and other popular art forms. Dewey, I think, helps get us to that realization.
References

Citations of the works of Dewey are to the critical edition published by Southern Illinois University Press in Carbondale, IL and edited by Jo Ann Boydston. Volume and page numbers follow the initials of the series. Abbreviations for the volumes used are:

EW The Early Works (1882-1898)
MW The Middle Works (1899-1924)
LW The Later Works (1925-1953)


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