

A taboo on mainstream serious music; diversity in popular music (23)

This text supplements section 23 in my book: Hans Abbing, *The Changing Social Economy of Art, Are the Arts becoming Less Exclusive?* (Palgrave Macmillan 2019) DOI 10.1007/978-3-030-21668-9.

- The recurring term “period of serious art” refers to a period from circa 1880 to 1980, a period in which the art of the elite was supposed to be serious while popular art was thought to be mere entertainment. In the book I argue that this period is well passed its zenith but has an aftermath which lasts to the present day.
- I use the term “serious art” instead of “high art” with its positive as well as negative connotation. For the last decades I also use the term “established art”.
- Numbers between brackets refer to the numbered sections in the book.
- Anna is the alter ego of the author.

UNLIKE IN POPULAR ART MAINSTREAM IS TABOO IN THE ARTS BECAUSE IT IS POPULAR AND LITTLE-DEMANDING. SOME SERIOUS ART CAN NEVERTHELESS BE CALLED MAINSTREAM. IN POPULAR MUSIC MAINSTREAM IS NOT TABOO. MORE PARALLEL (SUB)GENRES EXIST. For a proper understanding of these theses and of the social economy of art, an adequate interpretation of the term mainstream and a comparison of mainstream in art and popular art is required.

Listening to people, the term mainstream is used in different and confusing ways. Some structuring is required. Mainstream art is an under-researched topic in the social sciences.ⁱ The following “definition” is my own. It is, however, in line with the most common uses of the term and with the, rather vague, descriptions of mainstream in sociological texts on popular music.ⁱⁱ

Mainstream art is art that is *popular* and that is, given people’s preliminary knowledge, *undemanding* (or *easy*). Mainstream art is often also *predictable*. What I call *general mainstream* is mainstream that is undemanding for very large groups (usually also for very different social groups), because preliminary knowledge is widely shared. *Genre-specific mainstream* is undemanding (or easy) and predictable for people who are somewhat familiar with the genre. (It follows that popularity and easiness are relative.)

The qualification “mainstream” can also be used in a more subjective sense. In an avant-garde circle of dubstep lovers, certain works that are far from popular, may well be classified as mainstream. The “easiness” of mainstream art is also relative. Most mainstream genre-specific popular artworks are less easy or simple than general mainstream works. Some familiarity is anyway required. But if they are omnipresent, for instance in the media, they soon stop being difficult.

Popularity of mainstream shows from sales of recordings including streams in music markets. General mainstream works are best-sellers in the overall music market. Genre specific mainstream works are best-sellers in the markets of specific genres. (Certain Reggae tracks hold high positions in the chart of Reggae music but not in the Billboard chart.)

Aside: In certain genres, to distinguish mainstream from non-mainstream, the former sometimes has a different name. For instance, at the moment mainstream Dance is called EDM. Most subgenres are not called EDM but have own titles. (EDM is short for Electronic Dance Music. As abbreviation this is confusing, because non-mainstream Dance music is also electronic.)

Mainstream works are often —but not always— imitations of artworks by others, i.e. it is *imitation art*, or it is art *in-the-style-of* other artworks, and as such *middle of the road*. If this is the case there tends to be much *repetition* and overlap. Part of general mainstream art —but only part— contains elements of works in a (sub)genre in a diluted (simplified) form.

Mainstream art is *meaningful*. The same as in the lyrics of many operas and arias of old, part of the meanings in the lyrics of mainstream popular art is timeless. Another part changes regularly. The latter is in line with contemporaneity [9] in popular art. Every few years there is need for different messages and meanings. In the time of MeToo other meanings come to the foreground than during the financial crisis.

Most mainstream art is not only popular and easy but also sells relatively well; that is, given the overall size of the market in which they are sold, which can be a world-wide market for a specific type of art, but also a market in a small country or region or a market segment. Many works of Jeff Koons, Mozart and Justin Bieber are not only popular and easy; they are also best-sellers. They sell well in the top segment of the overall visual art markets. —Thanks to reproductions certain works of Koons are popular among a very large and worldwide audience and — All mainstream works are relatively popular and easy, but not all sell well, while some are not for sale. Until two decades ago the graffiti (stencils) of Banksy were very popular thanks to reproductions, but they were not for sale.

Even though serious art lovers are not inclined to say so, given the definition of mainstream some serious art is mainstream art. Within the classical/serious art-world certain works of Mozart are very popular and given widely shared preliminary knowledge they are little demanding. They also sell well in concert halls and as recordings. They are, moreover, popular and little demanding and thus mainstream among a much larger group, i.e. also among other social groups, and therefore also mainstream. Other social groups foremost listen (and sometimes buy) recordings. (In terms I use in the chapter *Sharing Art*) the classical evergreens are *much-shared*, or otherwise, *well-shareable*.)

This is not to say that going into details the works of Mozart or the so-called evergreens in classical music cannot be complicated. They may even be complicated for expert consumers. But most works of art are layered and can be enjoyed by learned expert consumers as well as by less learned non-expert consumers. Sometimes artists are aware of this and appreciate it. This applies, for instance, to Mozart as shows from one of his letters.

Aside: Mozart wrote: “There are still two concertos to be written for my subscription concerts. These concertos are a happy medium between being too easy and too difficult; they are very brilliant, pleasant to the ear, and natural, without being vapid. There are particular passages from which connoisseurs alone can derive satisfaction, but still the less learned cannot, I believe, fail to be pleased....”ⁱⁱⁱ

The phenomenon that art can be enjoyed at various levels is not limited to difficult or, so-called, alternative art. It is also possible in the case of mainstream art, like the music of Justin Bieber. *Anna, who is (or believes she is) an expert-consumer in the case of general mainstream popular music, can point to certain aspects in much mainstream music, which she notices and most of her friends do not notice. Because Anna has sufficient art luxury consumption space [8] and is intrigued, she “schooled” herself in this kind of art, and unlike most of her friends she enjoys the complex details which she notices. For her several works are complicated and demanding, and therefore extra enjoyable. (She especially appreciates the, often, complex production of works which are created by producers and not the singer.)*

Aside: If people are not aware of such details —whether in Mozart’s music or in the well-produced music of some pop-singers— the details may still have an impact on their artistic experience. This certainly applies to the subtle differences in the voice of singers, whether in opera or popular music. In the serious arts the association of mainstream with popular art —which is thought to be easy and inferior— contributes to a taboo on the creation of mainstream art. Newly created serious art must be noticeable layered and complex; with the consequence that it can be shared among informed art lovers, but not with others and certainly not with common people.

An implicit assumption is that serious art lovers are expert-consumers, or otherwise, before too long, become expert consumers. But, the same as Anna’s friends, most serious art consumers have only limited time for art and learning art. Or, also common, they are expert consumer in one area of

serious art, while also consuming serious art in areas, which they are not familiar with. This is possible given that in the case of longer existing serious art the minimum required preliminary knowledge is often widely shared.

Also in the worlds of popular art there can be disdain for mainstream and very successful popular art. This also applies to mainstream popular art that contains diluted elements of works that are not or less mainstream. The disdain for mainstream of groups of artists and art lovers can be intense. Music critics, expert consumers and many musicians, judge the artistic quality of mainstream and best-selling works to be low, like at the moment (2018) the works of Ed Sheeran and earlier that of Justin Bieber. Most consumers agree. They point at less successful music whose quality they judge to be higher. They, nevertheless, may well listen most often to mainstream popular music. In their view, the same as in serious art, quality and success do not have to correspond. But an art meritocracy of works and artists [17] does not exist in popular music and hardly anybody cares much about this. This is very different in the serious arts. Success *must* follow quality, and if it does not, this is experienced as painful.

Both in the serious arts and the popular arts, even though they may not admit it, many consumers enjoy mainstream art. One does not have to become an expert-consumer and spend much time on “learning” complex art. [See also the additional text: *Learning Art*.] And not importantly, talking about favorite mainstream works one can communicate with many others; with the neighbors or with people at the other end of the world [77]. Whether one likes them or not, Hirst, Bieber and Ronaldo are all good for talk —while for those educated, their “works” can still be quite complex.)

At present (2018) much middle of the road mainstream popular music contains elements of the Dance and Hip-hop genres in simplified forms. An example of much-imitated or copied visual popular art is that of Picasso. (If in popular music imitation is too literal, as in the case of the use of the same melody, there can be copy-right infringement and a lawsuit may follow —a lawsuit which usually results in a settlement.)

In the book I refer to the existence of more parallel (sub)genres in popular music than in serious music. In popular music a large number of parallel avant-garde circles coexist. In several, musicians are lower-middle class and in some, low class. They create many parallel but interrelated genres, subgenres and sub-subgenres. These have different names. (The collection of avant-garde popular art is often called *underground* or *alternative* art.) The sociologists Jennifer Lena and Richard Peterson researched 60 popular music genres in the 20th century in the United States. (They use a sample of 60 genres. They evidently judge there to be more than 60.) Within each genre several subgenres and sub-subgenres exist with different names. Inventors distinguish themselves by advertising a new name and for-profit labels sometimes stimulate this. Along with developments in electronic sound equipment, since 1960 in electronic popular music —i.e. the Dance genre in a broad sense — more than 200 innovative subgenres have been developed.^{iv}

The difference with serious music is large. Much depends on the definition of genre and subgenre, but given the elaborate and convincing definition of Lena and Peterson, in the early 20th century there are far fewer parallel genres in contemporary classical-serious music, let alone sub-genres. Moreover, for a long time after their initial development their existence is only known among small audiences. The same applies to contemporary-art in other art forms, be it in a lesser degree.

The much larger number of popular music genres and the phenomenon that one relatively fast replaces another testify of more contemporaneity in popular music [9]. It also explains that the innovation inherent in new genres in popular art tend to be less fundamental than in the serious arts. They, however, add up and in added form the overall innovation can be just as fundamental.[23] (An example is EDM.)

Over the last decades new serious art is widely shared and popular among various groups, also groups that do not participate in art-worlds. A possible difference with the period of serious art is, that in that period most artists did not intend their work to be accessible to very varied groups, while now in the more user-oriented domain in the arts some artists create art while having popularity of their

work among a much larger and more varied group in mind. In this respect old times are returning: before the period of serious art many artists wanted their work to be popular among a very large group.

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i (Keunen, 2015)'s analysis of, what he calls, alternative mainstream in popular music is, however, interesting.

ii Among others (Lena & Peterson, 2008), (Dowd, 2004), (Lena, 2014) and (Keunen, 2015).

iii (Mozart, 1866) 116

iv See for instance: <https://music.ishkur.com/> and https://electronicmusic.fandom.com/wiki/List_of_Genres