

## FROM CRITIQUE OF MASS CULTURE TO CULTURE: MODERNITY AND ARENDT'S POLITICAL AESTHETICS

**Dr. Tengiz Tsimnaridze**  
*Ilia State University (Georgia)*

**Abstract.** In this article, I intend to discuss the Arendtian conception of culture. In her influential essay “Crisis in Culture: Its Social and Its Political Significance,” Arendt argues that culture is at risk of disappearing under conditions of modernity. In her view, modernity is the age of mass society that leads to the destruction of culture and the development of mass culture. This is the situation Arendt has in mind when she speaks of a “crisis in culture,” a situation she describes as worldlessness. Culture, according to her, is a phenomenon of the world. Because of this conviction, argues Arendt, culture has a closer relationship to politics. The article is divided into two parts. In the first part, I explore Arendt's critical reflection on the modern attitude to culture. In the second part, I examine her analysis of the relationship between culture and politics. Throughout these parts, I suggest a reading of Arendt that illustrates her understanding of culture based on the authority of Greek and Roman thought and Kant's *Critique of Judgment*.

**Keywords:** Arendt; Kant; modernity; culture; society; mass society; mass culture; politics; works of art; beauty; taste judgment;

For Arendt, modernity is closely connected to the emergence of the “social” understood as “the form in which the fact of mutual dependence for the sake of life and nothing else assumes public significance and where the activities connected with sheer survival are permitted to appear in public.” (Arendt 1958, 46) Or, to put it in other words, Arendt identifies the rise of the social realm with the victory of the *animal laborans*. What it means is that labor has become the most important human activity in the modern age.

“Although labor has always been part of the human condition, in classical civilization, at least, it was subordinated to the more self-differentiating activities of work and action. But the triumph of the social, Arendt claimed, effaced the boundaries among these activities by reducing action and work to modes of laboring.” (Hinchman and Hinchman 1994, 157)

As Maurizio Passerin d'Entrèves, points out, “the world whose chief values are dictated by labor is a world where private activities...have taken over the public realm...” (D'Entrèves 1991, 90) Seen from the viewpoint of the world, the activity of labor is unworldly. Indeed, according to Arendt, in the mass society of laborers man lost contact with the world and the things of the world. For her, in this respect, mass society consists of the worldless laboring beings who are absorbed not by the world but by the needs of life. A consequence of this is that “*Life* ... and not the world,” becomes “the highest good of man.” (Ibid., 90)

### **Mass Society and Mass Culture**

In her 1960 essay, “Society and Culture,” Arendt argues that the crucial distinction between nineteenth-century society and mass society is that “society wanted culture, valuated and devaluated” cultural objects “into social commodities.” (Arendt 1960, 281) In society, according to Arendt, cultural objects became “values,” the objects of use that gave social status to their owner: “cultural objects were transformed into values when the cultural philistine seized upon them as a currency by which he bought a higher position in society – higher, that is, than in his own opinion he deserved either by nature or by birth.” (Ibid, 281) As Arendt tries to show, cultural values were identical to exchange values in a “good society.” This process of transformation what she calls “the devaluation of values,” was especially noticeable in the 1920s and 1930s, when “cultural and moral values were ‘sold out’ together.” Despite Arendt’s criticism of a “good society,” she writes in her “Society and Culture” that in early modern society cultural objects are not consumed and retain their worldly objectivity. Compared with a “good society,” mass society wants not culture but entertainment. Arendt argues that the commodities offered by the entertainment industry are consumed by mass society just like any other consumer goods. Therefore,

“The commodities the entertainment industry offers are not “things” – cultural objects whose excellence is measured by their ability to withstand the life process and to become permanent appurtenances of the world- and they should not be judged according to these standards; nor are they values which exist to be used and exchanged; they are rather consumer goods destined to be used up, as are any other consumer goods.” (Ibid., 282)

As Arendt explains in her 1961 essay “The Crisis in Culture,” products produced by the entertainment industry serve the life process of society. She wants us to see that entertainment is “a part of the ‘biological life process,’ immersed in ‘a metabolism feeding on things by devouring.’” (Sjoholm 2015, 39) In some sense, Arendt, like Adorno and Horkheimer before her, pursues the idea of connectedness between labor and entertainment.<sup>1)</sup> “Entertainment,” for Adorno and Horkheimer, “is the prolongation of work under late capitalism,” as they write in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: “It is sought by those who want to escape the mechanized labor

process so that they can cope with it again.” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 52) Arendt concurs with this view and argues that entertainment and labor are inseparable from each other; both are equally necessary for the maintenance and renewal of life. For Arendt, then, entertainment is inextricably linked to the “gargantuan appetites” of mass society. Precisely for this reason, its products “must constantly be produced anew and offered anew” in order to sustain the cyclical life process. In this case, she does not imply the phenomenon of mass distribution because this does not affect the nature of consumer goods. Their nature, as Arendt points out, is affected only “when these objects themselves are changed – rewritten, condensed, digested, reduced to kitsch in reproduction, or in preparation for the movies.” (Arendt 1961, 207) And she immediately adds the following, “this does not mean that culture spreads to the masses, but that culture is being destroyed in order to yield entertainment.” (Ibid., 207) As Arendt writes:

The result of this is not disintegration but decay, and those who actively promote it are not the *Tin Pan Alley* composers but a special kind of intellectuals, often well read and well informed, whose sole function is to organize, disseminate, and change cultural objects in order to persuade the masses that *Hamlet* can be as entertaining as *My Fair Lady*, and perhaps educational as well. (Ibid., 207)

According to Arendt, mass culture arises when the mass society begins to seize upon cultural objects. By this, she means that the life process of society consumes worldly things and destroys them. As Arendt put it in one of the early essays devoted to this topic:

If life is no longer content with the pleasure which is always coexistent with the toil and labor inherent in the metabolism of man with nature, if vital energy is no longer fully used up in this cycle, then life may reach out for the things of the world, may violate and consume them. It will prepare these things of the world until they are fit for consumption; it will treat them as if they were articles of nature, articles which must also be prepared before they can enter into man's metabolism. (Arendt 1960, 285)

In fact, for Arendt, life is indifferent to the thingness of worldly objects. This is so because life insists that every worldly object must be functional and fulfill bodily needs. Thus, in “The Crisis in Culture,” Arendt writes:

“Culture is being threatened when all worldly objects and things, produced by the present or the past, are treated as mere functions for the life process of society, as though they are there only to fulfill some need, and for this functionalization it is almost irrelevant whether the needs in question are of a high or a low order.” (Arendt 1961, 208)

In a similar context, Arendt adds the idea that when life consumes objects of culture, they rapidly disappear from the world. Arendt is deeply convinced that this disappearance – “which first begins in mass culture, that is, the ‘culture’ of a society poised between the alternatives of laboring and of consuming” (Arendt 1960, 285)

– is something different from the defacement of cultural objects; namely, when they were made into exchange values and spread in a “good society” until their “original stamp and meaning” were hardly recognizable. From Arendt's point of view, the disappearance of culture in a mass society occurs when we have a consumer society “which, in so far as it produces only for consumption, does not need a public worldly space whose existence is independent of and outside of the life process of society.” (Ibid., 286) It is for this reason that she claims that as members of consumer society “we would no longer live in the world at all but simply be driven by a process in whose ever-recurring cycles things appear and disappear, manifest themselves and vanish, never to last long enough to surround the life process in their midst.” (Arendt 1958, 134) Arendt, therefore, understands the worldlessness of consumer society as the subjection of worldly things to the biological process of consumption. As she states in “Society and Culture,” this anticultural process happens when all the worldly things have become “social” and are seen in their merely functional aspect. Arendt insists in this regard that the functionalization of the world, which takes place in the consumer society, “deprives the world of culture as well as beauty.” (Arendt 1960, 287) However, it is important to see that she combats the modern “functionalization of the world” by asserting that “Culture can be safe only with those who love the world for its own sake, who know that without the beauty of... works of art [...] all human life would be futile and no greatness could endure.” (Ibid., 287)

### **Culture and Politics: Art, Beauty and Aesthetic Judgment**

The concept of Culture, in the words of Arendt, is Roman in origin. In the Roman understanding, culture “relates to the intercourse of man with nature in the sense of cultivating and tending nature until it becomes fit for human habitation.” (Arendt 1961, 211 – 212) So, for Arendt, “culture originally meant agriculture, which was held in very high regard in Rome in opposition to the poetic and fabricating arts.” (Ibid., 212) During this discussion, she notes that there was no Greek equivalent to the Roman concept of culture because of the predominance of the fabricating arts in Greek civilization. “While the Romans,” Arendt writes, “tended to regard even art as a kind of agriculture, of cultivating nature, the Greeks tended to consider even agriculture as part and parcel of fabrication...” (Ibid., 212 – 213) But, as she ironically adds, the Greeks had a deep distrust of fabrication. The reason for this was that “the fabrication of things, including the production of art,” was generally considered to be the opposite of political activities. As Jacques Taminiaux notes, “the pre-philosophical records of Greek political life testify to a sharp differentiation between the activity of the worker and the activity of the citizen.” (Taminiaux 1986, 215)

The main problem with fabrication is that it is utilitarian in nature. To be sure, Arendt argues, fabricators regard all things as means to their ends and judge all

things by their specific utility. She also stresses the fact that in order to fabricate new things for "the already existing world," they must isolate themselves from the public realm. In contrast, political activities cannot be performed without the presence of others and therefore without the public realm where individuals can speak and act. This expresses Arendt's point that the activity of fabrication "is subject to conditions very different from those surrounding political activities..." (Arendt 1961, 217)<sup>2</sup> In the *Human Condition*, she presents what Taminiaux terms the meditation on "the fundamental role of distinction between *praxis* and *poiesis*" in Greek polis: "Whereas *poiesis*, or productive activity, is characterized by the univocity of its models, of its means and of its goals, the activity of *praxis* is thoroughly ambiguous because it connects one or several individuals to the others." (Taminiaux 1991, 113) Arendt uses this distinction to ground her view that fabrication was unpolitical for the Greeks and associated with utility. On the basis of her conceptual development of these, Arendt argues that the conflict between fabrication and politics cannot be solved.

In spite of this, she maintains that the conflict, dividing the fabricator and the statesman, no longer applies when we turn our attention from the fabrication to its products which give "permanence and significance to human existence" because they outlast "individual life." (Canovan 1994, 181) In this respect, she notes

"They are distinguished from consumer goods on the one hand, whose duration in the world scarcely exceeds the time necessary to prepare them, and, on the other hand, the products of action such as ...deeds, and words, all of which are in themselves so transitory that they would hardly survive the hour or day they appeared in the world, if they were not preserved first by man's memory, which weaves them into stories, and then through his fabricating abilities." (Arendt 1961, 209)

So, when Arendt explains further that works of art are superior to all other fabricated things because "they are the worldliest of all things." (Ibid., 209) She argues that works of art are only things without any function in the life process of society. We may capture her position this way: they are fabricated not for the needs of men, but for the world. This is also to say that they are not consumed like consumer goods and not used up like objects of use. Arendt goes on to argue that works of art must be isolated against the processes of consumption and usage to attain their proper place in the world. This isolation can be achieved in different ways and "only where it is done does culture... come into being." (Ibid., 209)

In Arendt's view, works of art find their proper place only in the space of the public realm. It is because only in the public space, works of art may appear as what they are. For Arendt, therefore, works of art share with political activities, "the quality that they are in need of some public space where they can appear and be seen." (Ibid., 218) That is, the commonality between works of art and political activities is based on the fact that, for her, both are phenomena of the world of

appearance. In “The Crisis in Culture,” and elsewhere, Arendt argues that among the fabricated things, only works of art are made for the sole purpose of appearance, the proper criterion of which is beauty. Unlike political activities, Arendt writes, “which come and go without leaving any trace in the world, beauty is the very manifestation of imperishability.” (Ibid., 218) She adds: “The fleeting greatness” of political activities “can endure in the world” only on the condition that “beauty is bestowed upon” them. On the one hand, in many places, Arendt explains that without the beauty of works of art, political activities can not last. But on the other hand, she clearly recognizes that without the space of the public realm, the works of art remain lifeless. Hence, Arendt concludes, art and politics are interrelated and mutually dependent.

In the final part of “The Crisis in Culture,” Arendt refers to Kant's *Critique of Judgment* which gives her a starting point for “reflecting on the political implications of Kant’s reflections on taste and the beautiful.” (Plot 2014, 71) Arendt shows that it is here, in the Third *Critique*, that Kant analysis the phenomenon of taste, understood as an active relationship to what is beautiful. In the lectures published posthumously as *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, she cites Kant: “[T]he beautiful interests [us] only [when we are] in society ... A man abandoned by himself on a desert island would adorn neither his hut nor his person ... [Man] is not contented with an object if he cannot feel satisfaction in it in common with others.” (Arendt 1992, 67) Kant, according to Arendt, was highly conscious of the public quality of beauty and the public relevance of beautiful things.<sup>3)</sup> Ronald Beiner argues that because of all this she maintains that Kant insisted that taste judgments “are open to discussion and subject to dispute.” (Beiner 1992, 105) This lead her to describe such judgments as not entirely subjective but rather based on a common sense shared by all. In her “The Crisis in Culture,” Arendt writes that “in aesthetics no less than in political judgments, a decision is made, and although this decision is always determined by a certain subjectivity, by the simple fact that each person occupies a place of his own from which he looks upon and judges the world, it also derives from the fact that the world itself is an objective datum, something common to all its inhabitants.” (Arendt 1961, 222)

Immediately after this passage, Arendt says that taste judgment “decides how this world, independent of its utility and our vital interests in it, is to look and sound, what men will see and what they will hear in it.” (Ibid., 222) This point underscores the fact that taste judgment deals with the world, and its interest in the world is completely disinterested. This attitude of disinterested joy – Kantian *uninteressiertes Wohlgefallen* – can be experienced only after the needs of the body have been provided for, so that, men may enter the public world.

What is even more important, though, is that in “The Crisis in Culture” Arendt also points out that taste judgment “decides not only how the world is to look, but also who belongs together in the world.” (Ibid., 223) This suggests that taste



judgment also discloses a unique personal identity in the public space where man's "who" fully reveals himself. In this regard, taste judgment is "disclosive in the same sense as political action." (Josefson 2019, 236) Additionally, this situation demonstrates that the political realm is opposed to the realm of fabrication where the quality of the produced object is the determining factor. Taste judgment, as Arendt notes toward the end of her essay, "discriminates and decides among qualities." (Arendt 1961, 224) In other words, "taste," for her, "and its ever-alert judgment of things of the world sets its own limits to an indiscriminate, immoderate love of the merely beautiful." (Ibid., 224) This means that taste judgment humanizes the world of the beautiful and thus creates a culture.

## NOTES

1. For analysis that points to the similarities between Arendt and Frankfurt School, see S. Benhabib and C. Picker, 2019. Arendt and the Frankfurt School. In: P. E. Gordon, E. Hammer, A. Honneth, (Eds.). *The Routledge Companion to the Frankfurt School*. New York and London: Routledge, 295 – 311.
2. Cf., H. Arendt 1958. *The Human Condition*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 188.
3. See, M. Szilágyi-Gál's 2017. *Hannah Arendt and Friedrich Schiller on Kant's Aesthetics: The Public Character of the Beautiful*, New York: Peter Lang. And K. Curtis 1999. *Our Sense of Real: Aesthetic Experience and Arendtian Politics*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 93 – 125. See also R. P. Hummel 2016. Arendt, Kant and the Beauty of Politics: A Phenomenological View. In H. Y. Jung and L. Embree (Eds.). *Political Phenomenology: Essays in Memory of Petee Jung* (Contributions to Phenomenology, Volume 84). Berlin: Springer, 93 – 123. Also see P. Markell, 2014. Arendt, aesthetics, and 'The Crisis in Culture.' In N. Kompridis. (Ed.). *The Aesthetic Turn in Political Thought*. New York and London: Bloomsbury, 61 – 88.

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✉ **Dr. Tengiz Tsimnaridze**

Web of Science Researcher iD: ECV-0397-2022

Ilia State University

Tbilisi, Georgia

E-mail: tengotsimnaridze@yahoo.com