

HANNAH ARENDT
Between Past and Future

EIGHT EXERCISES IN
POLITICAL THOUGHT

Introduction by JEROME KOHN

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Perhaps the chief difference between society and mass society is that society wanted culture, evaluated and devaluated cultural things into social commodities, used and abused them for its own selfish purposes, but did not “consume” them. Even in their most worn-out shapes these things remained things and retained a certain objective character; they disintegrated until they looked like a heap of rubble, but they did not disappear. Mass society, on the contrary, wants not culture but entertainment, and the wares offered by the entertainment industry are indeed consumed by society just like any other consumer goods. The products needed for entertainment serve the life process of society, even though they may not be as necessary for this life as bread and meat. They serve, as the phrase is, to while away time, and the vacant time which is whiled away is not leisure time, strictly speaking—time, that is, in which we are free *from* all cares and activities necessitated by the life process and therefore free *for* the world and its culture—it is rather left-over time, which still is biological in nature, left over after labor and sleep have received their due. Vacant time which entertainment is supposed to fill is a hiatus in the biologically conditioned cycle of labor—in the “metabolism of man with nature,” as Marx used to say.

Under modern conditions, this hiatus is constantly growing; there is more and more time freed that must be filled with entertainment, but this enormous increase in vacant time does not change the nature of the time. Entertainment, like labor and sleep, is irrevocably part of the biological life process. And biological life is always, whether laboring or at rest, whether engaged in consumption or in the passive reception of amusement, a metabolism feeding on things by devouring them. The commodities the entertainment industry offers are not “things,” cultural objects, whose excellence is measured by their ability to withstand the life process and 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 consumer goods, destined to be used up, just like any other consumer goods.

Panis et circenses truly belong together; both are necessary for life, for its preservation and recuperation, and both vanish in the course of the life process—that is, both must constantly be produced anew and offered anew, lest this process cease entirely. The standards by which both should be judged are freshness and novelty, and the extent to which we use these standards today to judge cultural and artistic objects as well, things which are supposed to remain in the world even after we have left it, indicates clearly the extent to which the need for entertainment has begun to threaten the cultural world. Yet the trouble does not really stem from mass society or the entertainment industry which caters to its needs. On the contrary, mass society, since it does not want culture but only entertainment, is probably less of a threat to culture than the philistinism of good society; despite the often described malaise of artists and intellectuals—partly perhaps due to their inability to penetrate the noisy futility of mass entertainment—it is precisely the arts and sciences, in contradistinction to all political matters, which continue to flourish. At any event, as long as the entertainment industry produces its own consumer goods, we can no more reproach it for the non-durability of its articles than we can reproach a bakery because it produces goods which, if they are not to spoil, must be consumed as soon as they are made. It has always been the mark of educated philistinism to despise entertainment and amusement, because no “value” could be derived from it. The truth is we all stand in need of entertainment and amusement in some form or other, because we are all subject to life’s great cycle, and it is sheer hypocrisy or social snobbery to deny that we can be amused and entertained by exactly the same things which amuse and entertain the masses of our fellow men. As far as the survival of culture is concerned, it certainly is less threatened by those who fill vacant time with entertainment than by those who fill it with some haphazard educational gadgets in order to improve their social standing. And as far as artistic productivity is concerned, it should not be more difficult to withstand the massive temptations of mass culture, or to keep from being thrown out of gear by the noise and humbug of mass society, than it was to avoid the more sophisticated temptations and the more insidious noises of the cultural snobs in refined society.

Unhappily, the case is not that simple. The entertainment industry is confronted with gargantuan appetites, and since its wares disappear in consumption, it must constantly offer new commodities. In this predicament those who produce for the mass media ransack the entire range of past and present culture in the hope of finding suitable material. This material, moreover,

cannot be offered as it is; it must be altered in order to become entertaining, it must be prepared to be easily consumed.

Mass culture comes into being when mass society seizes upon cultural objects, and its danger is that the life process of society (which like all biological processes insatiably draws everything available into the cycle of its metabolism) will literally consume the cultural objects, eat them up, and destroy them. Of course, I am not referring to mass distribution. When books or pictures in reproduction are thrown on the market cheaply and attain huge sales, this does not affect the nature of the objects in question. But their nature is affected when these objects themselves are changed—rewritten, condensed, digested, reduced to kitsch in reproduction, or in preparation for the movies. This does not mean that culture spreads to the masses, but that culture is being destroyed in order to yield entertainment. 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. There are many great authors of the past who have survived centuries of oblivion and neglect, but it is still an open question whether they will be able to survive an entertaining version of what they have to say.

Culture relates to objects and is a phenomenon of the world; entertainment relates to people and is a phenomenon of life. An object is cultural to the extent that it can endure; its durability is the very opposite of functionality, which is the quality which makes it disappear again from the phenomenal world by being used and used up. The great user and consumer of objects is life itself, the life of the individual and the life of society as a whole. Life is indifferent to the thingness of an object; it insists that every thing must be functional, fulfill some needs. 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. That the arts must be functional, that cathedrals fulfill a religious need of society, that a picture is born from the need for self-expression in the individual painter and that it is looked at because of a desire for self-perfection in the spectator, all these notions are so unconnected with art and historically so new that one is tempted simply to dismiss them as modern prejudices. The cathedrals were built *ad maiorem gloriam Dei*; while they as buildings certainly served the needs of the community, their elaborate beauty can never be explained by these needs, which could have been served quite as well

by any nondescript building. Their beauty transcended all needs and made them last through the centuries; but while beauty, the beauty of a cathedral like the beauty of any secular building, transcends needs and functions, it never transcends the world, even if the content of the work happens to be religious. On the contrary, it is the very beauty of religious art which transforms religious and other-worldly contents and concerns into tangible worldly realities; in this sense all art is secular, and the distinction of religious art is merely that it “secularizes”—reifies and transforms into an “objective,” tangible, worldly presence—what had existed before outside the world, whereby it is irrelevant whether we follow traditional religion and localize this “outside” in the beyond of a hereafter, or follow modern explanations and localize it in the innermost recesses of the human heart.

Every thing, whether it is a use object, a consumer good, or a work of art, possesses a shape through which it appears, and only to the extent that something has a shape can we say that it is a thing at all. Among the things which do not occur in nature but only in the man-made world, we distinguish between use objects and art works, both of which possess a certain permanence ranging from ordinary durability to potential immortality in the case of works of art. As such, 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, from the products of action, such as events, 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. From the viewpoint of sheer durability, art works clearly are superior to all other things; since they stay longer in the world than anything else, they are the worldliest of all things. Moreover, they are the only things without any function in the life process of society; strictly speaking, they are fabricated not for men, but for the world which is meant to outlast the life-span of mortals, the coming and going of the generations. Not only are they not consumed like consumer goods and not used up like use objects; they are deliberately removed from the processes of consumption and usage and isolated against the sphere of human life necessities. This removal can be achieved in a great variety of ways; and only where it is done does culture, in the specific sense, come into being.

The question here is not whether worldliness, the capacity to fabricate and create a world, is part and parcel of human “nature.” We know of the existence of worldless people as we know unworldly men; human life as such requires a world only insofar as it needs a home on earth for the duration of its stay here.

Certainly every arrangement men make to provide shelter and put a roof over their heads—even the tents of nomadic tribes—can serve as a home on earth for those who happen to be alive at the time; but this by no means implies that such arrangements beget a world, let alone a culture. This earthly home becomes a world in the proper sense of the word only when the totality of fabricated things is so organized that it can resist the consuming life process of the people dwelling in it, and thus outlast them. Only where such survival is assured do we speak of culture, and only where we are confronted with things which exist independently of all utilitarian and functional references, and whose quality remains always the same, do we speak of works of art.

For these reasons any discussion of culture must somehow take as its starting point the phenomenon of art. While the thingness of all things by which we surround ourselves lies in their having a shape through which they appear, only works of art are made for the sole purpose of appearance. The proper criterion by which to judge appearances is beauty; if we wanted to judge objects, even ordinary use-objects, by their use-value alone and not also by their appearance—that is, by whether they are beautiful or ugly or something in between—we would have to pluck out our eyes. But in order to become aware of appearances we first must be free to establish a certain distance between ourselves and the object, and the more important the sheer appearance of a thing is, the more distance it requires for its proper appreciation. This distance cannot arise unless we are in a position to forget ourselves, the cares and interests and urges of our lives, so that we will not seize what we admire but let it be as it is, in its appearance. This attitude of disinterested joy (to use the Kantian term, *uninteressiertes Wohlgefallen*) can be experienced only after the needs of the living organism have been provided for, so that, released from life's necessity, men may be free for the world.

The trouble with society in its earlier stages was that its members, even when they had acquired release from life's necessity, could not free themselves from concerns which had much to do with themselves, their status and position in society and the reflection of this upon their individual selves, but bore no relation whatsoever to the world of objects and objectivity they moved in. The relatively new trouble with mass society is perhaps even more serious, but not because of the masses themselves, but because this society is essentially a consumers' society where leisure time is used no longer for self-perfection or acquisition of more social status, but for more and more consumption and more and more entertainment. And since there are not enough consumer goods around to satisfy the growing appetites of a life process whose vital energy, no longer spent in the toil and trouble of a laboring body, must be used up by consumption,

it is as though life itself reached out and helped itself to things which were never meant for it. The result is, of course, not mass culture which, strictly speaking, does not exist, but mass entertainment, feeding on the cultural objects of the world. To believe that such a society will become more “cultured” as time goes on and education has done its work, is, I think, a fatal mistake. The point is that a consumers’ society cannot possibly know how to take care of a world and the things which belong exclusively to the space of worldly appearances, because its central attitude toward all objects, the attitude of consumption, spells ruin to everything it touches.

II

I said before that a discussion of culture is bound to take the phenomenon of art as its starting point because art works are cultural objects par excellence. Yet while culture and art are closely interrelated, they are by no means the same. The distinction between them is of no great importance for the question of what happens to culture under the conditions of society and mass society; it is relevant, however, for the problem of what culture is and in what relationship it stands to the political realm.

Culture, word and concept, is Roman in origin. The word “culture” derives from *colere*—to cultivate, to dwell, to take care, to tend and preserve—and it relates primarily to the intercourse of man with nature in the sense of cultivating and tending nature until it becomes fit for human habitation. As such, it indicates an attitude of loving care and stands in sharp contrast to all efforts to subject nature to the domination of man.⁴ Hence it does not only apply to tilling the soil but can also designate the “cult” of the gods, the taking care of what properly belongs to them. It seems it was Cicero who first used the word for matters of spirit and mind. He speaks of *excolere animum*, of cultivating the mind, and of *cultura animi* in the same sense in which we speak even today of a cultured mind, only that we are no longer aware of the full metaphorical content of this usage.⁵ For as far as Roman usage is concerned, the chief point always was the connection of culture with nature; culture originally meant agriculture, which was held in very high regard in Rome in opposition to the poetic and fabricating arts. Even Cicero’s *cultura animi*, the result of training in philosophy and therefore perhaps coined, as has been suggested, to translate the Greek *παιδεία*,⁶ meant the very opposite of being a fabricator or creator of art works. It was in the midst of a primarily agricultural people that the concept of culture first