

Art – Entertainment Continuum in Modern Complex Society

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In the traditional human society of bands and tribes [230,000 years] art is an integral part of life, and it is most often combined with ritual. Within the realm of traditional expressive behavior, there is a good deal of play but not much of what we commonly refer to as entertainment. With the rise of complex culture [in the last 3,500 years for most humans], the domains of sacred and secular activity tend to separate, and as this occurs, art gets distinguished from ritual, entertainment separates from art, and ceremony arises and becomes independent of ritual.

Entertainment Extreme

In modern complex society, the more of and the more strongly the following characteristics are associated with an expressive culture work, the more likely it is to qualify as extreme entertainment: use of media – especially electronic media [print publication, film, photo, video, record, tape, CD, DVD, etc.]; corporate financial investment; corporate production; mass media distribution; mass marketing/advertising; “star” or “celebrity” artists/actors/performers; secular content often involving gender, race, ethnicity, religious, political, equity, or national conflict; intensely sensational visual and/or auditory presentation; violent action; explicitly erotic display and/or action; coarse, mundane, ephemeral language and imagery; escape from reality orientation; evocative of superficial laughter, surprise, fright, and/or fear; support for individual physical action leading to personal success and acclaim; ethical “cover” in an otherwise uncertain overall message.

Art Extreme

In modern complex society, the more of and the more strongly the following characteristics are associated with an expressive culture work, the more likely it is to qualify demonstrably as art: singular or very limited production; personal or small group creation; little, if any, corporate financial, distribution or promotion involvement; individual artists or small groups of artists – some recognized in a special social sphere; inspirational/spiritual/magical/cosmic content promoting inclusiveness and the resolution of divisiveness; beautiful/stimulating/innovative visual and/or auditory presentation; evocative, timeless action; nominal sexual display and/or action; significant metaphoric language and symbolic use of imagery; penetrating reality orientation; evocative of deep emotions from sorrow to delight/joy/love; support for honor and responsibility leading to social benefit; enlightening/elevating/unifying/moral overall message.

The Art – Entertainment Continuum

Typically, few individual expressive culture works in complex society qualify as either “extreme” entertainment or “extreme” art. Most are located on the continuum between these extremes – exhibiting to greater or lesser degrees some characteristics of art and some features of entertainment. For instance, some expressive culture works are strictly secular in content and generated with full corporate involvement, but in many other respects they trend toward art. And in the modern age of the internet and social media, more art is adopting electronic mediums.

Conclusion

It is my view that making the broad distinction between art and entertainment is valid and useful for the purpose of assessing expressive culture and its function in modern society. And, in spite of recognizing the existence of the art – entertainment continuum, my personal concern is that in our modern complex society – which is dominated by an objective-secular-material worldview – two of the signs that our highest order perspectives on self, society, and reality are severely out of balance are first, that entertainment is overwhelming art, and second, that ceremony is supplanting ritual.