TED COHEN

High and Low Art, and High and Low Audiences

Not long ago I delivered a lecture I call "Hitchcock's *North by Northwest*: The Face of America."[1] The occasion was an excellent colloquium on movies held at the University of Colorado. Those attending the colloquium were an agreeably intelligent and sensitive group, and the discussion following my lecture was fine. At one point, however, a man asked how I could explain the fact that some friend of his had opined that *North by Northwest* is "1950s Hollywood fluff," while I was making the movie out to be an exceptionally profound meditation on the condition of being an American. Because the man asking the question had not seen the movie, I could think of no way to advance my own view, and when he persisted in requiring an explanation of the difference between my reaction and that of his friend, I finally offered the probing analysis, "Your friend is an idiot."

Not a very good answer, I suppose, although it may have been as good as the question, but in any case, it has come to seem to me that there is one very good question in the offing, namely, What are we to make of the fact that some monumental works of art sustain two seemingly very different audiences, and some do not? Although I may be wrong, I think this "double appeal" is found more often with movies than with any other art, and I will begin with an effort to understand it there.

With movies there has been a duality of double appeal. About twenty-five years ago Stanley Cavell observed:

> The movie seems naturally to exist in a state in which its highest and its more ordinary instances attract the same audience (anyway until recently).[2]

If we allow a couple of crude distinctions, we can, first, separate really fine movies from generally mundane ones, and, second, separate sophisticated and refined audiences from generally modest ones. We will then note (1) that fancy audiences often like both high and low movies, and (2) that at least some very high movies appeal to both fancy and plain audiences. What are we to make of these things?

One's first thought about this doubly directed, doubly received appeal of movies may be connected to the often noted fact that movies are, after all, *commercial* (whatever that means), and this reminds one of Panofsky's wonderful, enigmatic observation:

> While it is true that commercial art is always in danger of ending up as a prostitute, it is equally true that noncommercial art is always in danger of ending up as an old maid. Noncommercial art has given us Seurat's "Grande Jatte" and Shakespeare's sonnets, but also much that is esoteric to the point of incommunicability. Conversely, commercial art has given us much that is vulgar or snobbish (two aspects of the same thing) to the point of loathsomeness, but also Dürer's prints and Shakespeare's plays.[3]

A difficult part of this remark is the idea that vulgarity and snobbishness are two aspects of the same thing, and I will have to make a guess about what that thing is (Panofsky does not say). First, however, let me get under way by asking just this: What does it mean to make a movie? In fact I will not ask that question, exactly, for although this topic arose for me in terms of movies, and that is how I have so far introduced it, I would like to be asking a question more about art in general. So let me get to it.

It *seems*, at least, that the complex situation is this: There are high audiences and low audi-

The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 57:2 Spring 1999

ences, and there are works appropriate to each, called, perhaps, works of fine art and works of popular art. But then, these complications: a single person might join both audiences, and thus be an appreciator of both fine and popular art; and a single work might find favor with both high and low audiences. Both possibilities seem to constitute curious bifurcations, and they lead one to wonder (1) whether it is exactly the same auditor who likes Bach's unaccompanied cello music and Leon Redbone's blues, and (2) whether *North by Northwest* is the same work for the fellow who enjoys it as a nice example of Hollywood fluff and for the one who finds it a profound meditation on American identity.

I. THE ARTIST'S AUDIENCE

It may seem to complicate things even more, but I am going to try sifting through these possibilities by beginning with a consideration of the artist, the person who makes these works for these audiences.

Here is the question: When an artist makes his art, for whom does he think of himself as doing this? There are at least four seeming possibilities. He makes his art (1) for himself alone, (2) for everyone, (3) for a "high" audience (perhaps what Panofsky calls a "snobbish" one), (4) for a "low" audience (perhaps what Panofsky calls a "vulgar" one).

The first case, in which the artist creates only for the artist, is perhaps the most important one, but I would like to set it aside, at least when it is described in that way. Some artists quite typically and characteristically reject the idea that they make their art for any so-called audience at all, insisting, instead, that they make art "for its own sake" or only for their own satisfaction. But then we might ask, fairly and innocuously, I think, just how much anyone else would have to resemble the artist in order to be someone this art might reach. That is, what kind of person has a sensibility adequate to *appreciate* this work? With the question put in this way it is possible to put the initial question, again, in terms of audiences: What audience is the artist aiming at?

There is considerable resistance to thinking of artists as catering to prospective audiences, and so I will say a little more about this before going on.

We all know of the romantic artist, the individualist, the self-sustaining, heroic figure whose commitment is to his art alone. He cares not a damn for any audience, actual or possible. He may even find reassurance of his integrity in the fact that he persists in his art in full awareness of its failure to find any audience whatever. Assuming that this character is not simply a dyspeptic fool, or that kind of self-deluded failure who finds a way to believe in his own success by reading the failure into others (like the professor who fails his students, denominating them lazy or stupid, when in fact he has failed to teach them anything—the sort of avoidance of self-blame I may indulge in if you do not like this essay)—assuming, that is, that the artist is indeed committed to his work and believes in it, and truly does not think of its success in terms of any connection between his work and any possible audience, I think it is still possible to raise the questions I wish to raise with relevance even to such an independent, isolated artistic spirit. When this artist works he makes choices and decisions. He decides to do it this way and not that, he decides on this word or this color, etc. How does he make these decisions? The only thing that makes sense is the supposition that he does it the way he does because he thinks the work is better that way, or he likes it better that way, or he thinks it should be that way. Now, without intruding in the least on his splendid isolation we can ask, What is it in him that makes him think the work is better the way he has made it? And we can raise just this question by asking, How would anyone have to resemble this artist in order to respond to the work in the way he does? And this is to ask, conceptually, what is the audience for this work?

This way of thinking of things does not demean the artist, nor does it betray his own conception of what he is up to. Here is a kind of illustration, a personal one. It is a joke I once made, to very limited success. For a number of years I have played billiards with a group of friends at my university. One of my fellow players, who I am sorry to say died about three years ago, was a very elegant, well-mannered, sophisticated Indian mathematician. I have never played games with a kinder, more generous competitor than this man. He was a very distinguished scholar and an absolutely first-class billiard player. His name was Raj Bahadur. One aspect of his personality forced him to abjure the

juvenile and occasionally obscene conversation that goes on during the four-person game. He professed shock at the bad language, and he made a poor attempt to conceal his own amusement at some of the banter. Although he had been in this country for very many years, and had pursued his career in Chicago, he was born in Delhi, I think, and he spoke English with a slight version of that typical Indian accent affected so well by Peter Sellers. I was especially fond of him because he had been patient and kind when I was learning the game (I was a pool player and it took me some time to learn the billiard aspect of this game), while it is an enduring feature of the society of this game that the players mock one another's failures. One day Raj attempted a moderately difficult shot and failed because he hit the ball badly. As he watched his shot go awry he said in a disgusted tone in his soft-spoken manner "Ugh!" No one had ever heard him say this word. I could not resist and I said, "Ugh? Raj has forgotten what kind of Indian he is." I thought (and still think) that this was a marvelous remark. It was apt partly because one player in the game had been using an instruction book by Willie Hoppe, and in that book Hoppe recounts a match he once played against an American Indian chief. Raj had been particularly amused by that story. And so, just in that moment, I managed to get all these Indian matters together in a phrase, a phrase suggesting that this very learned, cosmopolitan man, in the grip of disappointment at his own billiard-playing, had confused his being from Delhi with his being, say, a Sioux Indian. Now I confess two things: (1) Although Raj himself enjoyed the remark, and referred to it in later weeks from time to time, no one else in the game really appreciated it, and (2) I consider it a brilliant stroke of mine. I have such a good opinion of my joke that its failure to move others counts for nothing with me. And yet I do understand the quality of that joke in terms of what it would do for any *adequate* audience, even if I remain unable to locate even one member of that group besides myself, now that Professor Bahadur is gone.[4]

I hope this will do to render innocuous my preference for beginning by speaking of whom the artist makes his art for. In any case, I am going ahead in that way. Proceeding in this way allows for a prior question, which I would like to put in this way: If a is the artist, A is the intended audience, and x is the work, then when a thinks of himself as making x for A, does he take himself to be a member of A? If not, if the artist thinks of himself as making his art for *someone else*, then I will call this kind of case a case of "fraudulence."[5]

We need illustrations here, and I would like them to be authentic. I cannot give the kind of illustrations some could, for I am not a visual artist. What little art I attempt is writing, and I have no ready examples of that. I do have an abiding interest in jokes, however, and that enterprise affords good, crystal clear examples. In fact we do not even need concrete examples in order to begin. General descriptions will do. Suppose I plan to tell a joke (J), with good hopes of success. I may have created J (that is, I may have made it up), or I may simply have heard it and be planning to retell it. For this illustration it does not matter. There are a number of possibilities. To begin, either I, myself, find J funny, or I do not. In either case, there is this question—Why do I expect to succeed with my chosen audience A?

If I do find J funny, then, we might say, I expect members of A to find it funny because I think they are like me. If I do not find J funny, but nonetheless think that someone might find it funny, why do I think that I do not find it funny? Well, perhaps it is that J is too simple for me, or too vulgar, or something like that. Or, quite differently, perhaps it is because I do not understand J.[6]

Now in many cases it is straightforwardly understandable why I expect J to succeed with A. It is because I have good reason to expect members of A not to find J too simple or vulgar, or whatever, or I have good reasons to think that members of A will understand J. Examples are easy to come by, and I will leave them for your invention and contemplation. If you require a hint to get started, let me suggest that you consider jokes that are racist or sexist or for children. Then think of jokes for mathematicians or musicians, jokes that incorporate the jargon of those trades.

When an artist aims for less than a universal audience, just what difference does it make what fraction of humanity he aims for? In particular, what is wrong with aiming for a large chunk with what will be called "popular art"? When people speak ill of the creation of popular art, it

is not clear just what is their objection, and it is especially unclear when the objection carries what sounds like a moral tone. In one case it is just that the art in question seems slight, and so both its creator and its appreciators seem slight. There seems to me no moral wrong in this, and perhaps it is only that those who do not care for such art are expressing contempt for the art and its audience. The more troublesome case—and the one that seems deeper and more like a moral failing—is the case in which the artist himself has no particular commitment to the art he makes, nor indeed any liking for it, but makes it nevertheless, knowing that it will find an audience. And he knows it will find an audience because he knows what that audience cares for *despite the fact that he himself is not a member of that audience*. This sounds like a kind of pandering, perhaps even a form of prostitution, and it may be what Panofsky is thinking of when he describes vulgar art in terms of some kind of promiscuity. I suspect it is something like this that critics have in mind when they speak ill of popular art: they suppose that it is made formulaically, calculated to appeal to a certain group, and that it is invested with no personal conviction by the artist, if indeed such a manipulator deserves to be called an *artist*. Maybe these critics have a point. Maybe, but it cannot be formulated as an indictment only of popular art, or even of vulgar art. It is possible to pander to the elite, to the snobs, and I am not sure it is all that much more difficult. Do you want to reach the snobs? Try things like these: Find a striking curve in some Cézanne and put a close approximation of it in your painting. Take the mystic chord from Scriabin's *Poem of Ecstasy*, transpose it into a different key, and then sound it in your next sonata. In your next short story (or novel), name two of your characters, one after one of the more obscure characters in Joyce's *Ulysses*, and one after someone from a novel by Virginia Woolf. When the snobs find these things—and they will: they come looking for them—they will be delighted in self-congratulation. The literary ones will realize that your story or novel is a literary realization of the great struggle in modernism between the extravagance of Joyce and the control of Woolf. Of course you will not always succeed in these endeavors, but neither is it *that* easy to succeed in making popular art. The question is, is there a significant difference, moral or aesthetic, between pandering to the snobs and pandering to the vulgar? What do *you* think of this enterprise in general—making something you do not yourself care for because you think someone else will like it?

II. PAROCHIAL AUDIENCES

When the art is intentionally less than universal, some things happen whether the audience is high or not so high, and these fraction-audiences typically have something in common. What the snobs and the vulgarians have in common—at least when they are self-consciously snobbish and vulgar—is that they are exclusive. The snobs know they are not joined by the vulgar, the vulgar know they are without the snobs, and both are excluding that middle which is neither snobbish nor vulgar. Art created specifically for either (for either the snobs or the vulgarians) is thus essentially parochial—expressly not universal. It is not that it fails contingently to be universal, but that it *intends* not to be universal, it intends to exclude many from its audience, and it even glories in this parochialism. It seems to me an exceedingly important fact about appreciation that those who appreciate sometimes derive an additional satisfaction from knowing that not everyone is able to appreciate the work at hand. This seems to me undeniably a fact about the appreciation of highly particularized, virtually hermetic jokes; and I think it is also a feature of the appreciation of some art.

This art, and these jokes—the parochial ones—have their special audiences.[7] The complement of such an audience is all those who cannot appreciate the art or get the joke. One might ask whether this complement is essentially outside the audience of appreciators, or only contingently outside. I think this is a misleading question. Imagine saying of someone who does not understand a joke, "Well, he doesn't get it because he doesn't understand the Hebrew and French words; but he *could* learn those languages and then he would get the joke." Or, of someone who does not get "What's round and purple and commutes to work?—An Abelian grape," "He *might* become acquainted with grape jokes and also learn enough simple mathematics to know some trivial things about group theory." Or, of someone who does not apprehend the significance of "Call me Ishmael," "It's cer-

tainly within his power to read the book of Genesis, or in some other way find out about Abraham's older son and what happened to him." Thus one thinks that the appreciators and the nonappreciators are only "contingently" what they are, and any of them "might" belong to the other group. I suppose there are ways of investigating this matter, perhaps with one of those stunningly informative propositions like "There is a possible world in which Arthur knows Hebrew and French, has read and remembers the entire Hebrew Bible, and understands that Abelian groups are commutative, although it is not this world." But this seems to me irrelevant. The fact is that the dynamics of the appreciation of many jokes and much art incorporate an awareness that there are many people unable to respond.

Although this is a powerful affective component in *elitism*, and is often objectionable there, it is not in itself objectionable, as I see it. What do you think of the kind of enjoyment we take partly because we know it is not available to everyone else?

III. BILATERAL WORKS AND BILATERAL AUDIENCES

There are many significant works of art that are "bilateral." Such a work appeals to two audiences, audiences that may have few if any members in common. After my experience with *North by Northwest* in Colorado, I have come to think that many Hitchcock movies are bilateral.

In such cases it is as if, since there are two discrete audiences, there is something in the work for each audience. Then there are two questions: How are the high audience and the low audience connected to one another? How is that part of the work that appeals to the high audience connected to the part that appeals to the low audience?

The two-audience situation is a special problem for me. It has been a favorite idea of mine (and, I confess, an obsessive one) that works of art (and some other kinds of things, including jokes) are sometimes foci for intimate communities. Such a community is constituted by its shared response to something (a work of art, a joke, a sports event), and the sense of *community* derives from its members' awareness that they *share*, that they are linked in their common response. So the community for some work is its audience. Now how am I to understand how to place both its high members and its low members within that audience? I have understood that the common bond uniting members of any audience is their mutual acknowledgment of a sameness of feeling about a work, and here there is no specific "sameness."

Suppose you and I are both fond of someone, say Bertha. You like Bertha because she is very intelligent and a high-class artist, and she is someone wonderful to talk with about art. I like Bertha because she is a good-natured and cheerful softball player. So we are both in the community of fans of Bertha, of those who like Bertha. Are we really connected to one another, you and I, in our fondness for Bertha, or is this just a kind of accident because it is an accident in Bertha that she is very bright about art and also a very good companion playing softball? What do you think?

This is a serious question, I think, because a great deal of the finest art we know appeals to various audiences in many different ways. The different constituencies within such an audience are not always divisible into high and low appreciators: sometimes the divisions are along quite different lines. The discrete audiences for the Hebrew Bible are good examples. My late father and I both greatly enjoyed a number of John Wayne movies, especially those directed by John Ford and Howard Hawks. But as I grew older it began to seem to me that my father and I responded to different things in those movies, and indeed we sometimes barely recognized one another's descriptions of the same movies. When you love a work of art, you are likely to want others to care for it as well. Does it matter to you whether they like it for the same reasons as you?

Finally, let me turn from cases in which different kinds of people like the same thing to the case in which a single person likes different kinds of things. Think again of Cavell's remark about the audience for high and low movies. Let me quote it again.

> The movie seems naturally to exist in a state in which its highest and its more ordinary instances attract the same audience (anyway until recently).

Note that Cavell does indeed invoke a distinc-

tion between the high ones and the others. He does not say there is no difference. What he does say, and what I think he is right about, is that it has been a characteristic of movie audiences that its members who appreciate the high instances also tend to like the other movies as well. The reason this is so (or, perhaps, as Cavell says, was so until recently) is that the appreciation of very, very good movies is in many people connected with a liking for movies in general. This is not the case with all kinds of things, not even with all kinds of art. I invite you to consider questions like these. I append my own, personal answers.

Do you like movies? *Yes.*
Do you like music? *Yes.*
Do you like painting? *Well, I like some painting.*
Do you like television? *Some.*

How would you answer these questions? Of course I do not mean that I like *all* movies, or all music, but I do mean something like this: I am the kind of person who likes movies and music. There are people of intelligence and sensitivity, people capable of artistic appreciation who, as a matter of fact, do not much like music.[8] Or movies. When they do respond, it seems to be because they find this a special case, an especially worthy and perhaps uncommon instance. We might put the matter this way, although this is a gross overstatement and not quite right: Some people who like a really good movie like it because it is good art. Some people who like the same movie like it because it is a (good) movie. People who paint are often people who like painting. They like it as such. And this is partly why at least some painters are great supporters of the efforts of other painters.

There is, on the other hand, and especially in the case of movies, a group of people eager to confine their interest and appreciation to the fine cases, the really, really good ones. The members of one conspicuous group typically avoid the word "movie" and say "film" (they might say "cinema" if it did not sound so silly), and they attend art films while avoiding regular movies. Members of the academic contingent of this group are usually eager to make clear that they certainly do not study film as anything having to do with popular culture. They are studying art—very fine art, indeed—and they happen to have concentrated on those examples that are movies. These are some of the people who are constructing American film studies along models taken from standard departments of art history.

As you can tell, I have little sympathy for the orientation of these scholars. It is not so much that I do not like these people, nor is it that I am revolted by the intellectual posture they represent (although I am). It is that their position is undefended at best, and probably indefensible. If you ask one of these people why he spends no time watching ordinary movies, he likely will tell you that he finds it a waste of time, and of course the implication is that anyone watching such movies is wasting his time. I need not remind you that among American intellectuals, and especially academic intellectuals, it is a very common opinion that time spent watching television (except, perhaps, for the occasional soporific time spent watching some costume drama from the BBC) is time wasted. But it is entirely possible to regard art itself as a waste of time. Gallery-hopping and museum-visiting and concert-going can seem idle activities, mainly self-indulgent and distracting. Perhaps that is a philistine opinion, and those quick to detect philistinism will find it both in those who do not spend time with high art and in those who do spend time with popular art. Have you discovered where you stand in this matter?

IV. CONCLUSION

I conclude by asking questions. It was the ambition of this essay only to open questions, anyway, and to persuade you that they are worth thinking about.

Suppose that, across the board and with admitted crudeness, we say that there is high art (some of it snobbish), and low art (much of it popular, some of it vulgar). And there are high, refined audiences (sometimes snobs, no doubt), and there are lower audiences, who claim no special refinement (and who are sometimes downright vulgarians). What makes the high art high? Is it that its appeal is mostly to high audiences? Then what makes the audience high? That its taste is for high art? Well, of course, that makes a *circle*. Is something wrong with that?

When a work reaches both high and low audiences, is it both a high and a low work? When someone—say me, if you insist on a genuine example—cares for both high and low works, is

that person (me) both refined and pedestrian? How many works can a single work be? How many people can one person be? What makes these bilateral works and dichotomous appreciators single things?—one work, one person?

I do not apologize for not answering these questions. I did not mean to. I meant to interest you in them. If you remain uninterested, then maybe I should apologize, but I may just group you with the people who did not like my joke about the Indian pool player.

TED COHEN
Department of Philosophy
University of Chicago
1050 E. 59th Street
Chicago, Illinois 60637

INTERNET: TEDCOHEN@MIDWAY.UCHICAGO.EDU

1. After being asked to contribute to this issue of the *Journal*, I was invited to lecture to an audience of students and teachers at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. I decided to turn that lecture into this essay, and thus the essay retains some features that are peculiar here. I do not mind that. It is valuable and chastening (perhaps it is valuable because it is chastening) for a philosopher to speak to artists about art.

2. Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed* (New York: Viking, 1971), p. 5. The remark is also on p. 5 of the enlarged edition of the book, published in Cambridge, Massachusetts, by Harvard University Press, in 1979.

3. The publishing history of this essay is confusing. I had thought it first appeared in *Transition* 26 (1937), and then later in *Critique* 1:3 (1947). Siegfried Kracauer (in *Theory of Film* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1960]) says that the *Critique* version is a "revised and enlarged edition" of the *Transition* essay. Daniel Talbot (in *Film: An Anthology* [New York: Simon and Schuster, 1959]) says that the essay was first published in 1934. I have been unable to locate any 1934 appearance, and I have never found the relevant copy of *Critique*. In its various versions the essay has been called "Style and Medium in the Moving Pictures," "Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures," and "Style and Medium in the Motion Picture." When Morris Weitz reprinted the essay in his *Problems in Aesthetics* (New York: Macmillan, 1959), he noted that he was changing the phrase "screen acting" to "movie acting" at Panofsky's request—which has nothing to do with the passage quoted here, but which I note because of the agreeable choice of the word "movie." The passage quoted here can be found in Erwin Panofsky, *Three Essays on Style*, ed. Irving Lavin (MIT Press, 1995), p. 120. The editor of that volume notes that the essay was first published as "On Movies" in *Princeton University Department of Art and Archaeology Bulletin* (June, 1936). The editors of Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen, *Film Theory and Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), an anthology containing the Panofsky essay, however, say that the essay's first appearance was in the *Bulletin of the Department of Art and Archaeology*, 1934. Ah, scholarship.

4. It may be that some are offended by the idea of a Native American saying "Ugh," but it is just as likely—and a morally neutral matter—that some people do not know or remember the cartoons, comic books, movies, etc., of a generation ago in which Native Americans often were portrayed as saying "Ugh" and "How." Thus some of my failures with this joke may be with those who do not understand it, while others are with those who understand but do not approve of it. It is certainly possible to find a joke funny even when one disapproves of it, but there may be a level of disapproval that renders a joke no longer even possibly funny. I do not know about this. I have made an effort, with slight results, to begin to understand these matters in my "Jokes," in *Pleasure, Preference and Value: Studies in Philosophical Aesthetics*, edited by Eva Schaper (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

5. "Fraudulence" is not a very good term for this because there is nothing obviously *wrong* with such an undertaking, and it is not by any means always an easy thing to do. I have been unable to think of a better term since introducing it in "Jokes," as a name for the general practice of purveying items with which one does not oneself have the relevant, "natural" connection—for instance, saying prayers in a language whose words one does not understand, or telling jokes one does not find funny.

6. The enterprise of telling jokes one does not understand is not a frequent occurrence, but it is more common than you may think. Children often re-tell jokes they do not understand, sometimes at the bidding of moronic parents, but sometimes on their own. And adults sometimes do so.

7. I made a slight beginning at understanding these multivalent audiences in "High and Low Thinking about High and Low Art," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 51 (1993): 151–156, and again, more specifically about the Bible, in "Metaphor, Feeling, and Narrative," *Philosophy and Literature* 21 (1997): 223–244.

8. The most conspicuous example I know of the "modularity" of appreciation is the appreciation of opera. Many of my music-loving friends, perhaps most of them, also love (at least some) opera. But I know keen, sensitive, knowledgeable appreciators of music who detest opera. And I know very discriminating appreciators of opera, listeners who can identify singers and conductors immediately upon hearing performances, who travel long distances just to attend performances at the Met, at the Lyric, and in Europe, who have very little interest in any other music. And then, finally, there are those curious aficionados of opera who display little interest in actually *attending* performances, finding the staging distracting at best, and who prefer listening to the radio and to recordings.