

# Popular Culture and Consumerism

Mediocre, (Schein-)Heilig and Pseudo-Therapeutic

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## **Introduction**

Religion and politics - amongst other spheres - no longer shape life and societies as intensively as they used to do, and globalized<sup>1</sup> corporations have an increasing share of shaping lifestyles according to the “future researcher” (Zukunftswissenschaftler) Horst Opaschowski, University Hamburg.<sup>2</sup> Although Opaschowski’s account is generalizing and superficial, there are certain evidences behind this estimated trend. This is evident in the sphere of research and education when professorship and research projects are funded by large corporations.<sup>3</sup> In the history of art, we can observe a similar trend: while a number of artists in the middle ages were commissioned by the Church (Michelangelo and Raphael for instance) or their art works were donated to the Church by patrons, today a number of artists are employed by globalized corporations. These corporations have their share in shaping individual, social, political and cultural life. Sometimes they have their own museums for which they acquire artworks and cultural objects.

While it seems that ‘the political’ as an entity or sector which influences individuals and societies has given more and more way to the economic, it is not so clear if this applies to religious and spiritual spheres as well. Of course there is a trend of re-spiritualization or de-secularization observable in certain parts of the global society.<sup>4</sup> But from consumer-critical perspective also a spiritualization or sacralization of the consumer sphere and popular culture is evident. There are phenomena which appear to be spiritual, religious or even holy, but in fact they are not, they are “scheinheilig” to use a German term which emphasizes the superficiality and

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<sup>1</sup> I understand the notion “globalized” as extensively and intensively spread almost everywhere around the globe where human beings can be found who are in relatively intensive contact with the rest of the planet’s civilization.

<sup>2</sup> Horst W. Opaschowski, *Wir werden es erleben!: Zehn Zukunftstrends für unser Leben von morgen* (Primus Verlag, 2002), 63.

<sup>3</sup> An example is Opaschowski’s own ‘institute for leisure research’ (Institut für Freizeitforschung), which is sponsored by British American Tobacco (BAT). Many other examples could be added here; conferences hosted by NGOs are of course counter examples.

<sup>4</sup> cp. Peter L. Berger et al., *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 2-10.

deceiving appearance (Schein) of the holy (heilig); for example marketing for the ‘Christmas industry’.

But – before going into details - once again back to the political-economic issue. While the fall of the Iron Curtain and the Berlin Wall were interpreted as a failure of applied Marxist or socialist ideology or theory, the current economic downturn might be an indication that the application of simplified utilitarianism and economics textbook liberalism might not be the golden rule to the wealth of nations. Anti-globalization activists feel as uncomfortable with the ‘*politics has to follow economics*’ credo of certain hyper-globalists as certain artists and designers feel uncomfortable with the “*form follows function*” doctrine.

While there are many dimensions of globalization, one of the economic aspects of it is that certain consumer products of particular brands are available almost everywhere around the globe (red labelled, sweet, caffeine containing, brownish fizz drinks for example). Many of those global consumer products are often judged to be of mediocre quality by experts (the sugary fizz drinks are condemned by nutritional specialists, for instance). Usually those products are marketed in a way that on the one hand, they will be acceptable in the particular cultures in which they are sold or going to be offered, but on the other hand, the marketing strategies also transport aspects of the culture in which the consumer product was initially marketed. Many consumer products and/or media are immediately linked to aspects of popular culture and lifestyle.<sup>5</sup> Marketing strategists utilize several strategies to make products widely popular. I want to elucidate further two of such strategies: spiritualization or sacralization and therapeutization. The first one is interesting because it shows how the economic sphere intrudes into or exploits the spiritual and religious realm. The second strategy is important since a psychotherapeutic component - an integral part of holistic religious rituals - is transferred to the marketplace in the form of consumer products. But before elucidating these two marketing strategies, let me first explain the “mediocre” in the title of this article.

## **Mediocre**

One of the ‘obvious secrets’ of power-addicted political leaders is that they closely resemble their dull followers and admirers, cynically says the German

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<sup>5</sup> e.g. TV, PC, CD; music for instance is broadcast on TV channels, available on CDs or as on hardware downloadable files from the internet

philosopher Peter Sloterdijk in his book *The condemnation of the Masses*.<sup>6</sup> The same, says Sloterdijk, is true for media stars. The individuals of the masses admire in their stars and leaders the subjectification and elevation of their own person.<sup>7</sup> The description of this phenomenon – the admiration of a prominent figure that represents an elevated form of oneself – could also be viewed as a form of narcissism, an exaggerated form of self-love. If we love someone because the person seems to be an elevated form of oneself, narcissism and the wish to elevate or improve oneself seems to be involved (*imitatio prominentis*).<sup>8</sup> What is implicitly or metaphorically said in Sloterdijk's text is that the masses are comprised of not only the two absolute social extremes in a society (the elites and those at the absolute other end of the social hierarchy) but also of a kind of 'lower middle' ("*nach unten und zur Mitte*").<sup>9</sup> Sloterdijk is arguing against mediocrity and indifference.<sup>10</sup> A closer look into individuals' lives might reveal more differences than Sloterdijk is suggesting, but from a bird's-eye view his statement carries some weight.

In macroeconomics, such a view is called 'aggregated'. An example of aggregated figures is, for instance, the GDP (gross domestic product) or the *aggregated demand*. Those aggregated figures show trends. Aggregated figures and their averages not only can be collected and calculated from fiscal data, but also from consumer behaviour, lifestyle trends, demographic trends, education and so forth. Ethically such generalizations are tricky due to their tendency to foster generalization and stereotypisation, but from the economic point of view, they are not only unavoidable but essential for determining economic, fiscal, consumer and social trends. Those aggregated figures and their averages calculated in relation to the number of citizens tell us something about average incomes, average education, average number of children in one family and so on. While many real cases do not reflect such averages, many others do.<sup>11</sup> For example the average American spends 30 hours per week in front of a TV;<sup>12</sup> this figure does not apply to those who do not watch TV or those who watch more than 30 hours, but it says something about the general TV watching behaviour in a certain society or milieu which can be compared

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<sup>6</sup> Peter Sloterdijk, *Die Verachtung der Massen* (Suhrkamp, 2000), 25. The political figure he focuses on in this passage is Adolf Hitler, but the list of examples of power-addicted political rulers could be long.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 20-21.

<sup>8</sup> Roman Meinhold, *Der Mode-Mythos: Lifestyle als Lebenskunst: Philosophisch-anthropologische Implikationen der Mode*, 1st ed. (Königshausen & Neumann, 2005), 40-45.

<sup>9</sup> Sloterdijk, *Die Verachtung der Massen*, 12.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 86-87.

<sup>11</sup> A family with real 1.5 children for instance does not exist.

<sup>12</sup> Manfred Steger, *Globalization: A Very Short Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press, USA, 2009), 74.

to a corresponding figure in a different society or milieu.<sup>13</sup> To analyze such behavioural patterns in different segments of society, *milieu studies* can be utilized (for example to determine the average time spent on TV watching between different age groups, different educational backgrounds and so forth).

Now on that generalized level, something about the usage of consumer products can be said as well. Even without consulting statistical figures we can assume which is the most frequently used word processing computer programme worldwide or which is the most consumed cola drink (in the developed and developing world). Those consumer patterns are mass phenomena and I claim that many of the products are of medium quality. Soft- and hardware which I used for typing this article are of mediocre quality since I am a mediocre user, using what the majority use and not what is recommended by an expert elite of whose paradigm I am ignorant.

Here is a more detailed example. In the Betamax-VHS video tape “format-war” in the early 1980s the VHS format won the ‘battle’ against the Betamax system, although all in all the Betamax technology was considered to be superior not in every single aspect but in many aspects. Reasons for VHS’s triumph over the Beta format were that the VHS-system was simpler to handle and manufacture; it allowed longer recording time. Another possible reason for this success might be the fact that pornographic films were first offered on VHS.<sup>14</sup> So the less sophisticated technology won this format war which, of course, had economic implications on manufacturers and consumers who gradually gave up buying Betamax recorders/players and tapes. The VHS-system in the end was also the one which was available almost around the globe.

Another example of a product of mediocre quality which was available worldwide is a bit delicate but quite interesting, still recent and straight-forwardly observable: the Western style toilet. I suspect that the most common toilet style around the world is a kind of pit latrine with one or the other attached wall for shelter with limited flushing option or none at all, I have an impression that in many parts of the world, in hotels, restaurants, shopping complexes, public places, educational buildings and offices the standard – sitting version - flush toilet is very common,

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<sup>13</sup> I am using the term milieu as a sociological technical term which describes different segments of a society with distinct income, education, consumer patterns, family structure and other items.

<sup>14</sup> Dave Owen, “The Betamax vs VHS Format War,” May 1, 2005, <http://www.mediacollege.com/video/format/compare/betamax-vhs.html>, retrieved: 18.05.2009

followed by the squat toilet, which is more common in many parts of Asia, and few southern European countries. Most standard bathrooms/toilets for example in Bangkok (but also those in cities of the United Arab Emirates) have a water sprayer.<sup>15</sup> This device is unfortunately almost non-existent in Europe. Also not very common worldwide are composting toilets which are not attached to the sewer system but to a collecting, separating or composting unit. Such toilets should not be confused with pit latrines mentioned earlier. The composting toilet can be found not only at campgrounds or in eco-houses, but also in rural areas in developing countries (e.g. Lesotho), installed by NGOs such as the GTZ (Gesellschaft für technische Zusammenarbeit) and in public venues in Europe and North America, for example, in a building of the University of British Columbia in Canada, but they are also available in Thailand.<sup>16</sup>

Now, from an environmental point of view the composting toilet has the most advanced system of water saving and excreta recycling (used for fertilizer and biogas). Due to an increasing (drinking) water shortage around the globe the discussion of water saving has become a crucial issue in the scientific community in the areas of international relations, law, water management, biology, ethics and many other domains. But back to the toilet: From a hygienic point of view, the water sprayer is the cleanest option if it is used correctly. If paper can be avoided this option has also positive environmental and technical implications, since no paper has to be produced and recycled, and on top of that paper cannot be used with septic tanks or it might block fragile sewage systems. Standard Western toilets ‘invite’ sitting and some users tend to sit too long and even read their ‘bathroom’ literature at this quiet place.<sup>17</sup> While there are a number of habits to be avoided for preventing haemorrhoids, the recommendation not to sit too long is one of the more important ones. These facilities are also more difficult to clean and sanitize and thus less hygienic than squat toilets. Thus there seem to be more medical arguments in favour of the squat toilet than of the standard Western toilet. In short, the standard Western style water toilet is not the environmentally, hygienically and medically most advanced option and therefore of mediocre quality. An environmentally, hygienically and medically conscious person

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<sup>15</sup> In slang language this device is called “bum gun”.

<sup>16</sup> One of the positive side effects of globalization is for example that the composting toilet is available in rural areas of one or the other developing country and is partly manufactured there as well.

<sup>17</sup> A poet – whose name and the source I forgot – wrote to one of his critics: *“I am sitting in the smallest room of my house and just brought your critique behind me”*.

or group would opt for the composting squat toilet with water sprayer (the amount of water used for cleaning is still less than the one for flushing).

Many international hotel chains – especially those in the high end category - have Western standard style toilets installed in the bathrooms (which is not the environmental, hygienic and medical most recommendable option). This example suggests that this globalized product is of mediocre quality. What has been coined a democratization or proletarianization of luxury is in fact also a mediocrization.

Having explained the mediocre aspect of globalized mass products, in the following two sections I now want to explain two strategies for advertising mediocre (but sometimes also high end) products which have been borrowed from the religious-ritual sphere: Therapeutization and Sacralization.

### **(Schein-)Heilig**

According to the contemporary German philosopher Stephan Grätzel we are experiencing presently a profanisation of the sacred and a sacralization of the profane.<sup>18</sup> Some religious rituals are partly losing their religious or spiritual meaning, while in the marketing sphere spiritual and religious elements are imprinted in consumer products.<sup>19</sup> Christmas celebrations become increasingly fashionable around the globe – also in Thailand – but in general it seems that the aspect of buying, and exchanging presents has become one of the most important features of this festivity. I am not going deeper into the aspect of the profanization of the sacred but I would like to elucidate the phenomenon of the sacralization of the profane.

In the globalized world of fashion and consumerism, quite often religious language and symbols are employed. Designer-*popes* create aesthetic *miracles*, beauty- and pop-*goddesses* are admired and adored almost as gods and imitated for the sake of having part of their fame.

*“We have attempted to perform a couple of miracles for you. Experience the exhilarating Lifestyle of Society, experience people whose style turns you on – and let yourself be inspired by them!”<sup>20</sup>*

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<sup>18</sup> Stephan Grätzel, *Utopie und Ekstase. Vernunftoffenheit in den Humanwissenschaften* (Gardez! Verlag, 1997), 105.

<sup>19</sup> Matthias Sellmann, *Mode. Die Verzauberung des Körpers* (Kühlen, 2002), 197

<sup>20</sup> Jörg Walberer, “Editorial,” *Life&Style*, October 1999, 3.

Monumental shopping malls are often called consumer-*temples* and famous singers and musicians are often not only termed queens or kings of pop, jazz, rock'n'roll or whichever genre but often also Gods and Goddesses.<sup>21</sup> Many pop and rock acts used religious symbolism to shape their identity, often brought together with sexual themes for the sake of provocation as, for instance, in the cases of the pop-rock stars *Madonna* and *Billy Idol*. Spiritual and religious names are also often used for products, for example, *Angel* for a perfume, *Nirvana* for an organic chocolate bar and *believe*, *amazing grace* and *purity* for products of a cosmetic brand called *Philosophy*.



Cosmetics brand *philosophy* advert, distributed by Mall Bangkapi Bangkok, Thailand 2009

From an economic point of view, the issue of profanisation of the sacred and the sacralization of the profane could either be seen from the demand or from the supply perspective: either the marketing and consumer industry is (over)supplying the market with spiritual and sacred contents, which will be attached to products or services as *meta-goods*.<sup>22</sup> As a result - due to this oversaturation of sacred and religious contents - the demand for the religious or the spiritual might decline in real religious or spiritual life. Or to meet the demand for contemporary life appropriate spiritual and religious contents in life is not answered by a corresponding supply by some religious

<sup>21</sup> cp. Sellmann, *Mode. Die Verzauberung des Körpers*, 7.

<sup>22</sup> Meta-goods are *existential, intellectual, psychological, emotional, social and spiritual values or symbols*. They are immaterial "by products" of products or services. When bought, meta-goods are, apparently transferred (in)to the consumer (Meinhold 2007, 7).

entities. Thus corporations are trying to fill this gap in the market with consumer items which have been linked with sacralized or spiritualized meta-goods. Those meta-goods are not *genuinely* holy (heilig) but seem to be charged with deceptive attributes of the holy or the religious. Therefore such products are not holy (heilig) but *schein-heilig* (seemingly holy).

Mircea Eliade may be right when he states that human being is always a religious being and thus cannot really be without religious rituals and elements in life:

*“Whether he wants to or not, the non-religious person of modern times continues the ways of behaviour, religious ideas and language of the homo religiosus even when he profanes them and divests them of their original meaning.”<sup>23</sup>*

A religious person experiences a kind of purgation in religious rituals, which refer to the Holy, the Sacred, or the Ultimate. In such rituals an *imitatio dei* - an imitation of God or of the Divine, the Sacred, the Holy or otherwise important religious figures - takes place. The purgation results from the moment of experiencing the Holy, the Divine or the source of creation or power. A similar phenomenon *imitatio prominentis*<sup>24</sup> seems to be experienced in the realm of consumerism where consumers believe that they have part in the lifestyle of prominent idols and thus experience or believe to experience a kind of therapeutic effect, which in fact is a pseudo-therapy. I want to concentrate on this pseudo-cathartic or pseudo-therapeutic phenomenon now.

### **Pseudo-Therapeutic**

The analytical distinction between art, healing and religious rituals is viewed from a modern perspective. Today usually specific professions are dedicated to certain professional tasks in restricted and well defined areas. Indigenous cultural rituals usually not only cater for religious needs, but also for therapeutic, social and artistic needs. The division of labour leads to a specialization the side effect of which is a narrowing of the scope in the particular professions and cultural spheres. Medicine, Art and Religion are no exceptions. While in developed countries there are different professions within the spheres of Religion, Art and Medicine, in Basotho

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<sup>23</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Das Mysterium der Wiedergeburt. Versuch über einige Initiationstypen.*, 1st ed. (Insel, Frankfurt, 1997), 229.

<sup>24</sup> cp. Meinhold, *Der Mode-Mythos*, 40-44.



culture, for example, the *Sangoma* or *Mathuela* is a kind of shaman who performs healing rituals with the help of artistic and religious rituals. We find similar phenomena in Srilankan exorcism rituals and in many other cultures.<sup>25</sup> The ritualistic tattooing performed by Buddhist monks as well involves elements which can be situated at the same time in the realms of art, religion and therapy or preventive health care.

In the mainstream healing culture, one distinctive aspect can be detected which could be traced back to ancient Greek philosophy: that is the distinction between body and soul, most eminent in the psycho-ontology of Plato, and the distinction between body, soul and spirit in Aristotle's *Peri Psyches*. Accordingly traditional 'Western' textbook medicine treats human being along those divisions or spheres. The body will be treated by various specialized physicians. There are very clearly defined fields if it comes to the treatment of the body and other human entities in the globalized mainstream healing culture. Asian, African and Southern American traditional medicine systems appear to be more holistic, not only in their approach using religious-ritual, artistic, performative and medical components, but also in their target, namely in treating human beings and sometimes the community and even the environment as a whole entity.

Due to the emphasis on the body of the medical treatment in the globalized mainstream medicine, it could be argued that there is a gap, a need or a desideratum for treatment in the other spheres of our humanity. Although there are all kinds of spa, counselling, psychotherapeutic, spiritual and esoteric facilities, it appears that the consumer industry discovered their share in filling this market gap which has been filled with products and their (pseudo-)therapeutic meta-goods. Therapy, purgation and catharsis can be discovered in all segments of the consumer industry no matter if the product is closely related to the body such as cosmetics or, something ontologically remote, for example, a car or a holiday trip. The implicit therapeutic and cathartic capacity in consumer products is found almost everywhere.

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<sup>25</sup> Nürnberger, "Trance, Besessenheit und Hypnose in den Tanzriten Sri Lankas," *Ethnopsychologische Mitteilungen* 8, no. 1 (1999): 19-20.



Pack of snacks purchased in Athens, Greece 1998

Catharsis in this context is to be defined as a therapeutic effect which, as a result of a *dis-charge* or *purgation* of strong emotions, follows states of arousal, e.g. emotionally registered actions, and which expresses itself in a joylike, lasting feeling of ‘wellness’. In strongly religious societies, myth supplies examples for human actions. In modern societies, marketers of consumer items plug the now vacant ‘meaning gaps’ with meta-goods. Consumer-related, compensatory surrogate actions, though, only provide a *seemingly* catharsis, because they do not offer lasting purgation from effects but overlies them. The pseudo-catharsis of consumption combats symptoms but offers no therapy. A person with a weak self-awareness at best can be only temporarily strengthened by exclusive market products. A catharsis – a lasting purgation or dis-charge, e.g. from the fear of inferiority – must pervade the mental depths of an individual, since one cannot “*cure the soul by means of the senses*”<sup>26</sup>, as Lord Henry in Oscar Wilde’s *Dorian Gray* asserts.

The apparent catharsis or pseudo-catharsis manifests itself in short periods of ‘wellness’, e.g. in a feeling of joy or pleasure because one has ‘better’ imitated, ‘more successful, rich, beautiful or younger’ people (*imitatio prominentis*), as the result of lacking the style of life one has drawn up oneself. Consumers make do with ‘lifestyle’, instead of developing a personal style of life. Figuratively speaking, he fills the empty husk of a schematic, nebulous model-life concept with consumer items that

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<sup>26</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2006), 155.

make him believe that he has thereby instantaneously acquired meta-goods that import the *'lifestyle of the society'* into his own style of life. The pseudo-catharsis is a feeling of 'wellness', of pleasure or of joy resulting from a 'lifestyle' via imitative staging with the aid of consumer products that promise meta-goods. The advertising strategists make consumers believe that they can acquire a style of life or even an art of living via consumption or lifestyle. However, a real and lasting feeling of 'wellness' cannot be gained from a lifestyle, since no real therapy is brought about. This is why such marketing strategies can be termed pseudo-therapeutic.

Advertising with religious or therapeutic meta-goods is a myth, since it 'narrates' via a lifestyle as being an art of living which is nothing more than a simulation. The actual serious intention of advertising is maximising the profit of sellers and marketers; the content of the actual advertising is, however, simulation and, not infrequently, deception. Hardly anybody 'believes' advertising statements; nevertheless, they presumably make a subconscious impact. The correlation between advertising intensity/quality and product sales cannot be empirically documented without further ado. Immense sums are involved in the marketing of supposedly therapeutic consumer goods; so one can at least assume that hopes are extremely high that advertising must have an enhancing effect on sales. In a wider sense the therapeutical meta-goods plugged in by advertisers is the claim of the improvement (amelioration) of the whole person via consumer items and their meta-goods. But the claimed therapy is a false one, a pseudo-therapy.<sup>27</sup> These meta-goods in fact are simply drugs rather than medicine because the consumer has to buy this or that product again and again to maintain the psychological or spiritual 'health'.

### **Conclusion: Asceticism in Consumerism**

Thailand and most other Asian countries, if not all, are affected by globalization in many ways. If we observe Asian cultures and lifestyles we must admit that culture and the consumers sphere are heavily influenced by the globalization of mainstream 'Western' culture, especially popular culture and consumer goods - from sweet brown fizz drinks to toilets, and from popular software programmes to Hollywood movies. Not all aspects of globalized consumer goods and popular culture are of superior quality and many of such products and cultural goods

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<sup>27</sup> The last three paragraphs have been adopted and adapted from Meinhold (2005, 63-65). The passage has been translated by John Irons (transfertext.com).

are promoted with subliminal marketing strategies some of which claim to have therapeutic effects or involve seemingly spiritual or religious domain.

A total rejection of popular culture and consumer products – as in the case of some extremist Islamist circles - is not advisable since in some ways we still depend on some of those products. But on the other hand, a careful reflection of what one really wants to consume and a careful selection is advisable because of ecological, economical and psychological reasons. In general if it comes to selecting such products the following idea of ascetics might be considered as a rough guideline.

By asceticism one generally means austerity, or a spartan way of life. But I would like to understand ascetics under the triad of *selection*, *concentration* and *practice*, the concrete content of which has to be attuned, repeated and re-defined in the practical conduct of life. “*For Anthropology [...] [ascetics] must count as belonging to the really high categories. It is even possible [...] to conceive it as being a continuation of the process of becoming a human being*”.<sup>28</sup>

Especially in globalized societies the *selection* of options – because of *multioptionality* (the almost inexhaustible possibilities of conduct of life) and because of an ‘information overflow’ – the inundation of information whether useful or useless to the individual – plays a very important role in the forming, stylising or aestheticising of life. For the selection of options a person must, on the one hand, ‘invest’ time – an investment that can later bear fruit as with economic goods– and acquire a corresponding know-how in order to liberate oneself from ‘information’ given by marketers. For this reason enlightened reflection upon these options and their scope becomes necessary. As with the production of a work of art, it is a matter of selection concerning the aestheticisation or melioration of life’s materials and motives. The selection of options is followed by a *concentration* on selected materials, intentions and models. Here too the influences from ‘inside’ (e.g. intentions) and ‘outside’ (models) as well as that which contains both aspects manifest themselves – influences that can be attuned in a mediation. In day-to-day living, this concentration is the convergence on a centre that is never completely reached, since the person concentrating and the object concentrated on are always in transition. Metaphorically speaking, this concentration in life is similar to pouring water from a

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<sup>28</sup> Arnold Gehlen, *Anthropologische und sozialpsychologische Untersuchungen.*, Neuausg. (Rowohlt Tb., 1993), 66.

large bucket into a bottle with a narrow neck on board a ship on high seas.<sup>29</sup> When dealing with life as a work of art, concentration is thus a matter of mediating between the selected materials and including them in the work. What emerges in the approximation towards an ever-fresh re-determinable centre then has to be *practised*. This *practising* involves an expenditure of time and work, effort and struggle – especially with oneself.<sup>30</sup> In the processing of a work of art, this practice expresses itself in a constantly renewed attempt to bring the work to relative completion and perhaps inimitability as well.

Constantly renewed selection will be necessary in order to lay aside the previously used materials and motives and to add new ones, to concentrate on these and their connections with what has been used up to this point and to practise their use. The central point of ascetics is practising and exercising, for by so doing the work of art or life as a work of art can be brought to (relative) completion. A problem of globalized societies is their profusion of options and the lack of competence when it comes to selection. If bliss – as Edgar Allen Poe postulates – corresponds to the intensity of spiritualisation in an object or the dedication to a task, the discomfort of many people in globalized societies stems from the concentration on too many objects (e.g. consumer products). When selection competence is weak - retaining too many objects from the options - concentration and practising become less intensive. Multi-optionality and the pressure of an economy that only recognises growth (especially monetary), but not stationary status (and thus produces an ever-increasing number of options) would result in a shift of priorities in the direction of a use of the multiplicity of diverse options at the expense of selection competence that has been unable to keep pace with the increase in options. This occurs when there is a simultaneous deployment of individual resources on the concentration and practising of an increased number of objects. One should not at this point speak of a further division of labour, when reference is made to a concentration on a lesser number of objects, but rather to call upon the individual to make use of selection competence in order to cope with the information overflow and oversupply in globalized popular culture and consumer goods.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> The process of *Education* can also be clarified by the use of this ‘pouring out’ example; as age increases, the opening of the neck of the bottle admittedly becomes narrower, but the proficiency of the mind doing the pouring becomes greater.

<sup>30</sup> This also by the way corresponds to the basic meaning of *Djihad* (*Dschihad*: Arabic = ‘effort’).

<sup>31</sup> The last three paragraphs have been adopted and adapted from Meinhold (2005, 136-8). The passage has been translated by John Irons (transfertext.com).

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