

Craft and industry in cultural production

by Alkis Raftis

You can make wine in your own backyard, but you cannot make coca-cola. Because coca-cola demands mass production: trained personnel, a laboratory, a bottling plant and a special syrup which comes from the United States. It requires thousands of bottles, boxes, trucks, sellers, as well as an accounts department to keep track of all this. Even after such an outlay - a few million dollars - you must pay as much again for advertising to promote the consumption of the large quantities such a plant is obliged to produce.

Wine, however, you can make by yourself. If you don't know how, you just ask someone who does. It may not come out as very good wine but it will be drinkable, and year by year you will do better. You will have enough to drink yourself and also to give to your friends. If after some years you succeed in producing something exceptional, you will sell it for fifteen dollars a bottle. Like a good clarinet player who can make one thousand dollars at a Greek village wedding.

He starts by himself with an instrument made of cane. He does not need an expensive piano, nor a room full of amplifiers, equalizers and speakers. A friend can show him the technique in a couple of days, no need to pay teachers for years at the conservatory. He will play by himself to let off steam and slowly he will improve. At first his friends will make fun of him, later they will plead with him to play for their enjoyment. If he becomes really proficient they will call upon him to play at weddings, festivals, and celebrations. He now gets paid on the spot, cash in hand on the same night. There are no contracts, no agents, no "We have invested in you, we poured all that money into advertising to make a name for you, you will earn big money later!".

Wine is a craft (or artisanal, or traditional, or pre-industrial) product, coca-cola is an industrial (or non-traditional) product. Traditional music is a craft product, modern music is an industrial one. That does not mean that one

is better or inferior to the other; it simply means that they are different; they belong to completely separate categories; they are not comparable because they belong to different worlds, to different societies, each obeying its own laws.

I use examples from dance, music or wine-making, but the principles can equally apply to any form of production. What is important is to make a clear distinction between two radically different worlds. Folklore is not simply what belongs to the past or to the old-time villages. It is what belongs to another mode of production than what we are accustomed to today.

Many think that traditional music can be distinguished from modern music by its structural elements: they search for the crucial difference in its morphological characteristics, e.g. that they are written in different scales. Others use historical-evolutionary criteria; they use such terms as "classical" and "modern", suggesting that there is a course of evolution (and therefore of betterment, of refinement) from traditional to present-day music. There is nothing objectively classical in "classical music" (i.e. Central European 18th century bourgeois music), any more than in traditional music from any country and any time period.

The real difference, however, must be sought in the manner of their production: not in how these types of music are, but in how they are made. Imagine two children: one cuts a piece of cane and makes holes for the fingers, the other persuades his father to buy him an electric guitar. The music each plays is predetermined even before the first sound is heard. It is not necessary for us to hear it before classifying it.

Industrially produced music needs to be produced in large quantities to pay. It is aimed at large markets and for this reason needs to offer standardized products. It requires a series of specialized technicians each of whom functions independently and acts on a small section of the production process: from the composer, the lyricist, the performers, to the sound engineer, the cover designer and the photographer. All of them are more or less artists in their work, so that the lead artist, too, becomes another "more or less artist"

by entering such a process. When at last the product becomes an object - record, cassette, videoclip - it enters into the process of a commercial circuit: storage, distribution, advertisement, sale.

Industrial production is based on market forecasting: it cannot succeed if it hasn't secured buyers whose tastes are predicted and at the same time shaped. Periodicals, arts columns in newspapers, radio, television, festivals, they all function as the vanguard of the music/dance industry. Craft production, on the other hand, is free from the burden of market prediction.

The traditional instrumentalist reduces business risk to the minimum by addressing a small market (his village area) with a limited range of products (his song repertoire) which remains stable for many decades. At the same time he maintains his autonomy by making his own instrument from local materials. The traditional nature of his music is predetermined from the moment he sets off. He starts by himself with a handmade instrument and when his father sees that he means to persevere he sends him as an apprentice to a master. This is how he learns the art of the instrumentalist, as he would learn the art of the blacksmith, the barrel-maker or the saddler.

An industrial product is not necessarily one produced by a factory. The factory in its known form - a large building with a chimney, full of machines and workers - is of course the symbol of industrial society, but it is not its only expression. All production occurring in a modern industrial society and subject to its principles is industrial. It is not the particular type of production equipment that characterizes the industrial mode of production, it is large scale, worker specialization, bureaucratic manner of organization and programming.

Standardization of the product, increased productivity, depersonalised relations etc. are some of the consequences of the industrial mode of production. In this sense, then, "industry" can be a university, a hospital, a Ministry, a television network, as is the Opera, and the National Theatre. The fact that they do not produce what are normally regarded as "industrial products" is irrelevant; the essential thing is that they function according to

the industrial mode of production which is imposed by their very existence in a modern society.

Wine is tied up with the vineyard in which it is produced. The soil, the climate and the manner of cultivation cannot be the same from place to place. Even if you plant the same variety of vine in two fields, a different taste will emerge. No one would think of mixing all the wines of a country in order to produce a "national" wine. For sure, the result would not be drinkable. This is why there are no "national" dances, either. The traditional cultural element has meaning only in relation to its own place or context. The "Kalamatianos dance of Greece" does not exist except for the teachers who seek an easy way out, just as the same wine is not produced across the whole of Greece. In folk dance lessons and performances, they should say: "Now we will dance as in such and such a village", as is written on wine bottles: "Appellation d'origine contrôlée".

Even within the same village area there are differences from field to field (and from dance to dance). Every neighbourhood has its own characteristics, something in any case quite natural since the corresponding peer-groups celebrated separately. The music/dance preferences are often fashioned according to family ties. In many places this is still very clear. Each person leading a dance has his own particular song of preference, which the instrumentalist knows and plays without it even being requested. Often it is the same song that his father, his grandfather, or some uncle used to request. On the island of Skyros they still have family melodies, in Florina they have family dances.

Everyone will agree that wines generally "travel" badly. The same is true of traditional dances. When you have seen someone dancing in great spirits in his village square or among his friends, and then you see the same dance performed on the stage of a distant festival or under the lights of television, then you realize that it has not quite the same taste. When television discovered that it could fill program hours at low cost by showing folk-dance groups, many people thought that this neglected dance idiom would receive a new impetus. The exact opposite occurred: few adults want to join a folk

dance ensemble any more, while the more elderly, after seeing the modernized version of their dances on TV, are now ashamed to dance publicly anywhere. Outside his own region or in front of the camera the popular dancer loses the freshness of the amateur without acquiring the expertise of the trained dancer.

On the other hand, coca-cola "travels" very well: it is the same wherever you drink it, in the same way that a videoclip can be viewed equally well in Europe, America or Asia. It is the same in classical repertoire: the New York Opera can stage a ballet which was originally composed in Russia, using European and Asian star-dancers. The more the product is industrialized, the smaller are the obstacles of cultural boundaries. On the other hand, if a traditional product is to pass through boundaries, it must reject its local peculiarity, which constitutes its most valuable quality. The tango danced in the European salons has little relation to that of the Buenos Aires suburbs.

When a dance leaves the context of the village or neighbourhood, it cannot remain the same. If it does, we won't like it, we will not understand it since we do not possess the code of the original social group. Traditional dance is born out of a small community whose members have passed a large part of their lives together so that at every occasion they have a common point of reference. If someone dances in a particular way, they will say "He dances like so and so". When learning to dance, a person tries to approach a common model and only to the degree that he can't manage it will he dance "like himself". He "dances like so and so" when the relations are primarily personal, otherwise he dances more or less "beautifully", that is, evaluation criteria intervene.

When a particular dance is removed from the context of its original social group, it has to abandon its personal references and acquire aesthetic references in order to become pleasing and finally acceptable. That is, it has to be regarded as "beautiful" on the basis of the collective criteria of the wider group, since the personal criteria of the smaller group (village, neighbourhood) can no longer prevail. If the dance is to be adopted by a still broader group (until it finally reaches worldwide propagation) there are two alternatives : either the criteria of a large group of people are homogenized

through an educational process - as for classical dance - or the content of the dance is simplified to the extreme so that it becomes acceptable to large masses of untrained people - as for disco dance.

We can of course find similar examples for song and music. We want to show that what primarily characterizes the music/dance product is not its structure but the way in which it is produced. We should classify a product as industrial or craft according to the way it was made, not according to its morphological characteristics. For example, an industry can copy exactly a craft product (e.g. a piece of furniture) and produce it in thousands. If a copy were so exact that even a specialist could not tell the difference, would we call it an industrial or a craft product? Even though in its form it does not differ from the craft one, it will be called industrial because the manner of production is dominant.

Such a question is rarely posed, for two reasons. First, because industry does not want its products to be identical to the pre-industrial ones; on the contrary, it stresses that they are modern or new. Second, because the manner of production unavoidably shapes the structure of the product so that the industrial product is morphologically apparent. However, in the music/dance industry, the words "traditional", "popular" or "roots" are quite frequently used in the quest for legitimization and validity.

The term "traditional" refers to a particular type of society, where knowledge is handed down from parents to children or from masters to apprentices. In the non-traditional (literate, industrial, capitalist, modern) society, knowledge is transmitted by specialized institutions: school, television, press, organizations. Between these two worlds one finds the "popular" artist, who is a hybrid possessing the merits of neither. Every "popular artist" is inevitably under the control of the commercial streams because he possesses neither the specialized training of the music graduate, nor the practised skill of the traditional master. The term "popular", because it is particularly vague, is especially conducive to populist exploitation.

The above clarification of meanings is particularly useful in recognizing some recent cultural practices which create ambiguity and confusion. We will mention one example each for dance, song and music.

When someone dances a dance of his own region, his grandfather's dance, which he learned by observing as a child without a formal teacher, then he is dancing a traditional dance. When the same dance with the same steps is danced by dancers who acquired it from a teacher and not through "heritage", then this dance is called folkloristic. When, that is, there is an imitation of the traditional dance within non-traditional conditions, a representation in a foreign place but with an attempt at truthfulness, then we are talking about folklore in the "revivalistic" sense.

We now have the phenomenon of new "folk" song. The words are replaced by "soapy" lyrics, the traditional instruments are replaced by harmoniums, electric guitars and drums. They shorten the free-rhythm introductory improvisations, the tempo is accelerated, volume is increased, antiphony is removed, scales are enlarged. Old traditional songs entered this phase in Europe one hundred years ago. Recently, in what record companies have labeled "world music", musicians feel free to borrow themes, techniques and instruments from other exotic ethnic groups. This, of course, is not traditional; it could be folkloristic, to the degree that there is an attempt at fidelity towards the traditional. Let us classify it as rustic. Thanks to the encouragement of festival organizers, folk dance is rapidly entering the corresponding phase, and we must prepare to witness "world folk dance".

In instrumental music the situation is different. Here, there is a larger public with musical education. Globally, there are many more people with some musical training than people with dance training. Thus, in music the modern currents which border on the traditional are more refined. Take for example the ensembles that play traditional pieces with traditional instruments at concerts and on records. How should this music be classified? Is it or is it not traditional? Our attempt to clarify the above terms will help: Does their music fit the industrial or the craft production mode?

Its structural elements assign it to traditional music; they are proof of an attempt to imitate and to revive historical style. But the manner of production betrays its industrial character. Firstly, their instruments may be traditional but they originate from different regions and/or countries. Then there is the jump into a repertoire of varied traditional music, instead of persistence on a particular geographical or cultural region. Yet, regionality is a basic element of traditional production.

Another element that is evidence of the industrial nature of this music is its presentation mainly at concerts and on records, whereas the traditional instrumentalist appeals primarily to "his own" public: he plays at its weddings and village celebrations. Fortunately there are still enough instrumentalists who tread firmly in their own region so that the distinction is not difficult. These musicians learned well and probed deeply into the music of their own region, played innumerable times at village festivals for their compatriots and obtained their appreciation: they became indispensable. Some became known further afield but continued to play for their own people, since in the outside world it is difficult for their special style of playing to be fully appreciated.

The so-called folk musicians set out from everywhere and nowhere in particular. They have formed a band of mixed background, a repertoire with a bit of everything, and they "hit" the subsidized festivals, the radio-television favouritism and the commercial record companies. With some contacts, much advertisement and a lot of running around to "the right people", some succeeded. They have learned the pieces from records without straining their lips and fingers from all-night playing in family celebrations and village weddings, without entering deeply into the character of a region.

Their playing smacks of studio recording, like those who execute a dance in the style learnt at the high-school gym lesson. Being themselves a product of industry, they will be displaced as soon as new models appear. In the meantime, some true traditional musicians will be marrying off everyone in their region. The younger ones who choose the easy road will be quickly left

behind. They play a historical musical genre but they learn no lessons from history.

This is because they do not respect the field they set out to cultivate, because they are in a rush to climb by grabbing here and there. Economic laws, however, prevail in cultural production also. These musicians chose - probably without knowing it - industrial production and this cannot be hidden from those in city or village who understand. Like coca-cola, their music, and the dancing that goes with it, refreshes but does not intoxicate.

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