

Forever Young? Age in and Ageing of Cultural Policy in Sweden

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Abstract

This paper sheds light on age as a variable in Swedish cultural policy. By using simple examples, it is shown how age might influence the cost of cultural policy in the longer run. The starting point is otherwise the age – and ageing – of cultural policy as such. Drawing on institutional theory, discourse analysis and theories of modernity and late modernity, it is argued that cultural policy might have lost part of its legitimacy.

Of particular interest is the handling of commercial culture. Once seen as "bad", it has today become an obvious part of the cultural field, attracting not the least a younger audience. Using design and the national Swedish design program as an example, the many paradoxes in cultural policy regarding commercial culture and the different strategies of handling them are shown.

Keywords

Cultural policy, modernity and late modernity, legitimacy, demographic structure, commercial culture, design.

Teaching arts management at a business school, there is always one issue that raises discussion among the students: the question of culture and commercialism. The discussion is usually triggered by one of the Swedish cultural policy goals, formulated as "to promote cultural diversity, artistic renewal and quality, thereby *counteracting the negative effects of commercialism*".

For business school students, as well as for others, this usually raises confusion. What is commercialism? Is it something that is commercial or, in other words, can meet demand from a market and therefore support itself? Or is it something that is commercialized and made in order to make a profit? And what, exactly, are the negative effects of commercialism? Are there any positive and could they, if so, be promoted by cultural policy?

In order to deeper explore the relationship between Swedish cultural policy and commercialism, this paper poses the question of how cultural policy works in practice in a cultural and commercial landscape. Looking at design as a specific case, it becomes obvious that there exists a blurring of boundaries: between high and mass culture, between culture and commercialism. While usually regarded as a threat to cultural policy, the author argues that this also creates opportunities. Cultural policy might actually have an increased and important role in this new cultural and commercial landscape.

A Controversial Goal

The goal of counteracting the negative effects of commercialism has always been one of the more controversial in Swedish cultural policy. Between 1974 and 1996 it was formulated even more sharply and standing alone: "Cultural policy shall counteract the negative effects of commercialism in the field of culture".

This was probably a legitimate goal in the climate of the early 1970's, but soon its legitimacy was questioned and has continued to be so. During the revision of Swedish cultural policy, which took place between 1993 and 1995, it became heavily discussed. In the final report (SOU 1995:84) it is mentioned that there had been a lot of criticism concerning the use of the expression "the negative effects of commercialism". According to the report it was mainly a question of attitude and formulation rather than of actual content and practice. However, in the final report it was suggested it be erased and replaced by: "to promote artistic and cultural renewal and quality".

But, as we know, this was not to become the final formulation. Instead the discussion continued. The government suggested adding the old expression, and even emphasizing it by placing it in the beginning: "to counteract the negative effects of commercialism and promote artistic and cultural renewal and quality". This was however later revised and beginning in 1996 the goal found its present expression: "to promote cultural diversity, artistic renewal and quality, thereby *counteracting the negative effects of commercialism*".

In general this goal has been interpreted as a way of creating a dichotomy between culture and commercialism, between good non-commercial culture and bad commercial one. This is an old figure-of-thought, often said to still be present in Swedish cultural policy. Björn Linnell, an independent writer, tells for example the story of how the cultural policy of 1974 was formulated by a young communist called P O Zennström in the 1940's. According to Linnell, there was no doubt that for Zennström capitalism and commercial forces, à priori, was a threat to art. This was to later become the dominant value in Swedish cultural policy. As Linnell formulates it (my translation):

"A very important foundation for this cultural policy was the absolute conviction about the need for and willingness to counteract the negative effects of commercialism. That has been the most fundamental force behind all cultural policy run by the State, from at least the 1940's and on [...] there is a belief that it is possible to separate a good, non-commercial culture, from a bad, commercial one."

Linnell also questions the legitimacy of this argument today:

"But the condition for this policy is that everyone agrees that the goal for cultural policy is to limit the forces of commercialism and that commercialism has negative effects. Does this mutual agreement exist today? Is it possible to maintain? Is it reasonable?"

This dichotomy between culture and commerce has a long history, not only in Sweden. According to some thinkers it goes back to at least the 19th century. Paul Di Maggio, for example, talks about how high culture was created as a separate, autonomous entity, in order to gain control. If it was to be separated from the market, it could be controlled and used as a class marker for the higher classes. It was by defining it as "good culture" and

the other as bad, they distinguished themselves from the masses (Di Maggio, 1991).

John Storey argues along similar lines, for example, that opera was once a popular form of entertainment, but that it was made less popular by the creation of separate buildings, dress- and behavior codes for the audience, and use of foreign languages. This way it was turned into high culture, exclusive for those who had the competence and knew the codes (Storey, 2002).

The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, follows the same line, introducing the concept of cultural capital. This form of capital is as he calls it "anti-economical", meaning that in order to gain it, one must act in a non-commercial way. But Bourdieu also talks about the separation between art and commerce as a way for art to survive in a society that comes more and more rationalized. Since art cannot be rationalized in the same manner, it has to define itself as something completely different, something anti-commercial (Bourdieu, 1984).

The interesting thing with this history is that it tells a completely different story than one would expect from a social democratic government. This tends also to be one of the arguments against focusing too much on commercial culture as something bad. Commercial culture does not require the same kind of cultural capital, the knowledge of codes or a cultural competence. While a lot of non-commercial, state-supported culture, tend to attract the same kind of audience year after year – middle-aged, well-educated women, as the stereotype says – commercial culture attract a much more varied and, not the least, younger crowd. Therefore it could not be disregarded, as the business school students never fail to mention.

Now one must of course make a difference between rhetoric and practice. In practice cultural policy does neither disregard nor despise commercial culture, especially not a regional level. As most researchers seem to agree upon, cultural policy has become more and more instrumental and more and more directed by commercial policy in recent years (Duelund, 2003).

However this new turn might not have replaced the old, but rather added to it. Dorte Skot-Hansen (referred to and interpreted by Nilsson, 2003) talks for example about different forms of legitimizing cultural policy. In the beginning the goal for cultural policy was to educate people. It was the humanistic era, soon to be followed by a more sociological approach, where the goal was rather to emancipate people. Recently this has changed into a more instrumental approach, where arts and culture are used as engines in economical development. However, according to Skot-Hansen this is not a development where one model replaces the other. Rather it is a development where one adds to the other, making the arguments more and more complex – and more and more contradictory.

Dealing with contradictions has therefore become a challenge for cultural policy. Arguing on one hand that diversity, renewal, and quality is necessary to counteract the negative effects of commercialization and, on the other, that arts and culture can become an effective engine in economical development is not necessarily easy. But as we shall see in the following, it might be necessary for cultural policy to have a rather chameleonic character in the new cultural and commercial landscape.

The Case of Design

There are of course many examples of how cultural policy in practice supports also

commercial culture. Still, one of the more recent and rather illustrating cases is design. Here the Minister for Culture – together with the Minister for Industry and Commerce - has taken a rather active role in supporting an initiative that definitely is partially commercial. As well as cultural.

To argue that design is a commercial activity is not difficult. One can quite easily imagine – and see – that there are also a lot of negative outcomes of this commercialization. But this has not stopped the Ministry of Culture to formulate the following goals:

- Architecture and design should be given good conditions to develop;
- Quality and beauty should not be subordinated short-sighted economical solutions;
- Cultural history and aesthetical values in already existing environments shall be taken care of and strengthen;
- The interest for high quality within architecture, design, and public environments shall be strengthen and broadened;
- Swedish architecture and design shall develop in international co-operation.

What is interesting to notice is how the old dichotomy between culture and commerce is still there, especially in the second goal. However, it is not a rejection of design as a commercial activity, but rather an emphasizing of the cultural aspects of it. This, I believe, is also a new way for cultural policy to act, as a guard of cultural values in commercial landscape.

An interesting feature of design is that it is usually said to incorporate both cultural and commercial aspects. It is patently obvious that design has a foot in both worlds. It is also possible that both feet have even sunk down to the ankles in the last twenty or thirty years. Design has increasingly come to be used as a competitive tool in commercial contexts, and not just in the traditional design industry. Meanwhile, cross-fertilization with art has also increased tremendously. Or as Torsten Weimarck writes in the preface to his anthologies on design and art:

Design and art? Only a few decades ago, the relationship was expressed as design or art, and the dividing line was perceived as a productive boundary that both categories could lean on. [...] But now the link between the two, the boundary-crossing contact from both directions, appears as self-evident, enlightening and liberating for both parties - design and visual art.

It is not merely the boundary between art and design that is easy to cross. The same applies to the boundary between art and commerce, and here it is design that is often accused of being the villain. Hal Foster warns us in *Design and Crime* that everything from jeans to genes is now regarded as having been designed and we have all become both designers – and designed. He calls it “the narcissistic logic of the consumption spiral - a perfect chain of production and consumption without any latitude for much else”.

In his opinion, the margin for - and resistance from - art and culture are reduced when utilitarian values are confused with artistic values and vice versa. When, in an aesthetic economy, it increasingly becomes a question of aesthetic values, based on desire. When design inflation has come about, when packaging has replaced the product, and the symbol has replaced the goods.

Of course, it is also possible to imagine the exact opposite turn of events. In other words, that design becomes a bridge between different, previously separated spheres, and that art and culture are afforded greater scope in the aesthetic economy. It seems like this is

also one of the underlying goals of cultural policy.

In 2002 the Swedish Industrial Design Foundation and the Swedish Society of Crafts and Design proposed a national program for “design as a force for development in the private and public sectors” to the Swedish government. The program contained many different parts: using design to develop different industries and the public sector, different manifestations and exhibitions, research and development. The basic idea behind it was that design – as a method – could and should be used to develop Sweden in all different respects.

One part of the program was to make the year of 2005 a Swedish Year of Design, an initiative that was also supported by the Ministry of Culture. The Swedish Society of Crafts and Design was to be the organizers. The campaign-office describes the year as follows (www.merdesign.se):

Design includes everything from woodwork, handicrafts and art to architecture, advertising, fashion and industrial design. It's now more important than ever to have an understanding and an awareness of why objects and places are designed in different ways, knowledge of which is the very basis of creativity and aesthetic pleasure for society as a whole.

The 2005 Year of Design will also show how design permeates our everyday lives, our jobs and our leisure time. Everything around us – products, environments, even services – is designed with different objectives in mind. It could be a matter of price and quality, a unique handicraft item, or global mass production. Or of accessibility, user-friendliness and feelings. Design is not only glass, chairs and mobile phones; it's also playgrounds, forms, roads, sewing machines, rock drills, work schedules, and production lines.

Design is not some isolated universal tool. But using design can bring about some radical changes. Irritation can be converted into inquisitiveness, disappointment into satisfaction, isolation into accessibility, alienation into participation and environmental problems into development opportunities. Issues of working life and design will also be raised. Day-care centers, schools, hospitals, industries, public transport, the public sector and many other workplaces are facing immense challenges in a process of change where design can play a pivotal role.

This last part, the role of the public sector, has also been one of those that have been emphasized by the Ministry of Culture. They went out to more than hundred public authorities and asked them to participate in the Design Year together with all municipalities and regions and several other kind of organizations and companies.

The goal was to create an increased awareness of form and design, strengthen the position of design and mark its strong potential in an international context. Several areas were prioritized:

- working life and design
- design as a cultural expression
- public purchasing
- design as tool for growth
- design for everybody
- sustainable design
- research and development

Once again we can see the emphasis put on the cultural aspects. But, naturally, the

program became questioned by many different instances. Some thought it reached too far, others that it forgot the more basic design industries and issues. Some thought it was too commercial, others that it was not enough commercial.

Part of the conflicts turned into discussions about how to define design and part of the confusion probably stemmed from the many different uses of the word. Sometimes covering everything, sometimes not the “right” things. It became, in other words, a fight over who had the right to define the word.

In the national program design was defined as:

*Design is a generic term for how we form our culture – our way of living.
Design is not everything, but it touches everything and everybody. There is a degree of design in all things, relations, and environments.*

During the year that followed the presentation of it, the definitions and the content of the program were heavily debated. One commented on one of the many conferences in the following words (my translation):

I think a large part of the criticism towards the program can be placed here: That it has an aura of masculine motorcycle-culture over it, that it drains “design” from its content when it also includes services within psychiatric care and design against drugs and crime, and at the same time, underestimates design as a bearer of culture. Here I also place the tussle between what “design” is and contains: Too much technology. Too little technology. Too little culture. Too little handicraft. Too little history of handicraft. Too little fashion. Too much fashion. Too little science and too much. There existed an obvious schizophrenic attitude between, on one hand, wanting to design things and artifacts, and, on the other, a felt contempt for consumer society. One wants to express oneself, but not participate in vulgar mass consumption. One wants to be famous and bought, but not sold.

The tension between culture and commercialism can therefore be said to be ever present. However, this does not necessarily create problems for the Ministry of Culture. At one of the many occasions when the two ministers, the Minister for Culture and the Minister for Industry and Commerce, presented their views together, the Minister of Culture expressed their co-operation in the following words:

“It is done in co-operation between different departments. The old dividing up between different areas does not work any longer, with all the crossing over boundaries. At the same time it is of course important that there is a ministry and a minister, that show such an engagement in the business-side of design”.

The interesting thing to notice is also the strategies in use, which are of a rather chameleonic character. One is a kind of *separation* between an artistic or cultural part and a commercial one. The Minister of Culture has on several occasions talked about creation as a kind of basic research, where a certain degree of freedom is needed. Designers need to experiment and not always think about the commercial use of their products or the needs of the market, in order to develop products that might or might not later be produced.

In many ways this is almost the complete opposite of how design is described in the national program, where it is said that the main competence of designers is to always take the user's needs as their starting point. This, I would say, is a good illustration of the difference between an artistic/cultural and a commercial point of view, but it has so far

not been very discussed or debated. Where the first by tradition tends to focus on the creator, the second focuses on the market.

The creators, though, typically belong to what Bourdieu calls "the new petite bourgeoisie", those involved in presentation and representation (1984). In many ways they are more similar to artists, not the least by their education, than to any other profession. Julier (2000) remarks that the culture and recruitment to design schools cultivate a working practice that assumes the status of lifestyle. As Julier notices: "it is important to reinforce here that designers draw on this system to differentiate themselves and their skills from other professions and educations, to identify and distinguish themselves and their skills" (Julier, 2000, p 36). But they also need to differentiate among themselves and there they tend to draw on fine art, cultivating a celebrity culture. Here they are also helped by Swedish cultural policy.

The writing of design history has also giving primacy to the individual designer, while the reception, use and consumption of design has not been given much attention – despite the fact that design practice is said to be a or even the key to understanding audiences and markets. In other words, the same paradox as in the practice of cultural policy within the Swedish design field.

Because there, paradoxically, the focus is later switched, and the second strategy in use is *everybody's right – regardless of resources – to live in a beautiful environment*. The difference between this and a commercial perspective is not obvious at first. Both focus on the users rather than on the creators, but of course with the difference that a cultural policy perspective puts the focus on citizens, while a commercial perspective focuses on consumers.

In sum, and being positive, one could therefore say that there are three focuses in the design program: creators, consumers, and citizens. While cultural policy focuses on the first and last, commercial policy takes care of the middle category, the consumers.

The Blurring of Boundaries

But who are the consumers and what differs them from the citizens? While design was once something for the elite, a sort of high culture, it has today reached the masses through tv-shows, journals, books, and stores (Collins, 2002). Some argue that the transformation of design into mass culture, will contribute to make it increasingly the same. Others, among them Jim Collins, questions this, since it presupposes that individuals are incapable of make sense of their own cultural existence.

Design is usually said to typify what Collins call "high pop" - highbrow culture and popular culture at one and the same time. On the one hand, it is a frequently used tool for expressing social and economic status, on the other hand, something that is increasingly available to everyone, regardless of social and economic status. In effect, a final showdown with the old categories: mass culture and high culture.

If it once were two different and distinct circulations: one for high culture and one for mass culture, the boundaries between them have become less defined today. What is good, what is bad, what is high, what is mass, is not so easily defined. And perhaps the two circulations cannot even be distinguished anymore.

John Seabrook, among others, argues for example that high culture has only become one sub-culture among many others and the new scene has become a Nobrow, where

identity rather than taste is the most important thing (Seabrook, 1999).

In a recently published doctoral thesis, Magnus Persson summarizes some of the discussion about the distinctions between high and mass culture. He argues that there is a long tradition in cultural criticism to regard mass culture as something that manipulates and makes the citizens passive, distorts reality and constitutes a threat to art and "real" culture (Persson, 2002). This is a tradition that has left its trademark in the Swedish cultural policy, according to many.

Part of this tradition can be traced back to the Frankfurt School, where Theodor W. Adorno's criticism of the culture industry, the homogeneity of its products and the audience's passive reception, forms the basis. Although cultural studies research has done its best to reevaluate mass culture as an academic subject, it has, according to Persson, partly and in its more popular form just turned the hierarchy around, by pointing out high culture as being elitist, per se.

It is therefore not really until more postmodern theories enter the stage, the distinction as such becomes questioned. The postmodern aesthetic is a mixture between high and low culture and several theorists have traced the moving and borrowing between different forms of culture and the disintegration of boundaries, which can be seen in the field of design, for example.

Of course, there is nothing such a complete crossing over. Rather the distinctions are still in use, but the borders are more floating. High culture borrows from popular culture and popular culture borrows from high culture. Each one also has its own hierarchies and the power is negotiated not only about place in the room of culture, but also about other hierarchies such as gender, ethnicity, and class. Therefore there are a variety of hierarchies which are spread and opens up for social and aesthetical heterogeneity, according to Persson.

Referring to John Frow, Persson points out four reasons for why it is impossible to draw a definite boundary between high and low (p 48-49):

- 1) High culture has become a good as well, produced in the same standardized forms as the products from culture industry. Therefore it is impossible to keep up the distinction between autonomous art and commercial culture. High culture has become only one of many niches in the general cultural market. Design is a very good example.
- 2) Since media has become the mediator of cultural values, it is impossible to describe high culture as the culture of the dominant class.
- 3) There are no longer any differences between what kind of culture different classes participate in, mass culture can as such be an important denominator of class or lifestyle. Again, design is a good example.
- 4) A mixture of high and low characterizes several contemporary aesthetical practices. Here looking into a Swedish home, with its mix of cheap Ikea and expensive Alessi, can be a good example.

All this can therefore certainly be regarded in practice, especially in the field of design. The same goes for the authors Magnus Persson studied in his thesis and he therefore concludes (2002, p 347):

"It might be true that postmodern media and consumer culture is becoming synonymous with culture itself, as for example Fredric Jameson maintains. To try to and place oneself outside this common, increasingly expansive and wide-range culture of our time seems difficult, not to say impossible. We are all, whether we want it or not, surrounded by it and a part of it. The distanced

position from above and outside is in any case not the strategy chosen by the authors I have studied. Unlike the "heroes" of cultural criticism and theory they instead choose to place themselves right in the middle of it – equipped with an honest curiosity which does not exclude criticism, delight or dislike for that matter – in order to aesthetically explore a new cultural situation, and if possible make our age both more complex and more comprehensible."

So the borders between high culture and mass culture are less defined and more easily crossed over today. While mass culture has become a kind of high culture in itself, having its own hierarchies and academies, high culture has become popular. Referring once again to the example of opera, it became once again more popular, by the use of more commercial methods, recordings, superstars, festivals, and the abandonment of foreign languages (Storey, 2002).

Jim Collins (2002) uses the concept of "high-pop" to describe the movement. It started in the 1990's as a way of legitimizing popular culture and was accepted because of the late phase of consumer society, where needs are satisfied and only desire rest. In this era culture and commerce merge, becomes hybrid-culture, where can neither disregard culture nor commerce.

In this new cultural landscape everything also circles. Nicholas Bourriard uses the metaphor of the discjockey to describe the postproduction of art, the sampling of expressions already circulating in the cultural landscape (Bourriard, 2003). Today everyone even becomes his or her own dj, carrying an iPod and creating his or her own playlists. Interior design can also be interpreted as a way to be one's own dj. Creating a home, from a large number of cultural expressions, can of course be said to be a way to express oneself.

In that sense it can no longer be argued that popular culture, or commercial culture, creates an audience that is passive. Rather the opposite. The old society of spectators, as Guy Debord once talked about, has become a society of activity, using different expressions in a waste and mixed cultural landscape.

In sum it seems like it has become more and more difficult to draw a boundary between high culture and mass culture and it is no more evident than in the field of design.

The Cultural Turn of Commerce

But if it is not only difficult to draw a boundary between culture and culture, it seems also to have become increasingly difficult to draw a boundary between culture and commerce. Is commerce not culture? What about consumption?

A cultural perspective is of course nothing new in business administration. Still, it seems to have taken on an even wider meaning in recent years and some even talk about the cultural or aesthetical turn of business.

It is sometimes said that the world has become more aesthetized. Symbols, signs and representations are becoming more and more important, artists are taking the place of scientists, and the business world is looking towards the world of art for inspiration.

Consumption, as such, is also be called a cultural activity. Jim Collins argues: "what distinguishes taste wars in postmodern contexts is not a diminished interest in cultural value but an almost maniacal obsession with it" (Collins, 2002, p 188). Slater, referred to

in Julier, describes of consumer culture as a intrinsically cultural process and a leading device through which individuals construct their identities (Julier, 2000, p 48-49).

Ann Birmingham brings the argument even one step further by saying that in order to understand consumerism it is necessary to reject the old modernist narrative of culture, namely that consumerism and genuine culture are diametrically opposed and that the former jeopardizes the purity of the latter (Collins, 2002, p 194).

When the focus is on consumption rather than production, aesthetics has become more important (Adkins and Lury, 2000). Aesthetics influence in many ways, including the looks of the employees, who are regarded as actors on stage and the casting directors pay attention not only to formal merits, but also to the looks and the image of their employees (Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Hancock and Tyler, 2000).

Naomi Klein has, for example, pointed out that companies in the Western part of the world to an increasing extent are engaged in cultural production, in the production of brands, life-styles, symbols, etc, instead of in actual physical production (Klein, 2002). A good example is the Swedish telecom company Ericsson. While much of the physical production has been outsourced to low-wage countries, research, design, and marketing – the production of symbols – has rested in Sweden.

Way earlier than Klein, philosophers and sociologists such as Guy Débord, William Haug, Jean Baudrillard, Scott Lash and John Urry and many others, pointed towards the same kind of symbolization of the economy. Lash and Urry (1994) said, for example, "what is increasingly produced are not material objects, but *signs*".

But also the production processes have become aesthetized. An example is Volkswagen's transparent factory, where work is conducted in an almost museum-like setting. Or as Peter Pelzer says: "Volkswagen does not only produce a luxury car in the transparent factory; more than that it intends to produce an image. Volkswagen does not sponsor art, Volkswagen is art, that is the message" (Pelzer, 2002).

So if all businesses engage in cultural production and produce art, then cultural policy might have an even larger role to fulfill in the future. The old figure-of-thought, that there exists a good, non-commercial culture and a bad commercial one, might be difficult to maintain. Still, the old goal of counteracting the negative effects of commercialization might not be so bad. There could still be positive effects and there are definitely cultural aspects of commerce, more than ever. Actually that might in itself be one of the positive effects of the development commercialization. Understanding and supporting those cultural aspects might be therefore regarded as an opportunity for cultural policy in the future.

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