

Popular Culture as a Creation of Art in Frank O'Hara Selected Poems

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ABSTRACT:

While the significance of Abstract Expressionism in Frank O'Hara's poetry has been widely discussed in academic research, this paper aims at exploring the role of popular culture in his poetry and the significance of Pop Art in shaping his poetic production. The paper argues that O'Hara's employment of topics, consumer and mundane objects, and images taken from popular culture and mass media was the very means to create an unorthodox art. Such an art challenged and opposed the American elitism of high culture and good taste, the very standards by which the artistic value of a piece of art was measured.

Key Words O'Hara, popular Culture, pop Art, New York Art World, consumerism, painting, Abstract Expressionism

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Although Frank O'Hara (1926 – 1966) is known for his coterie of artists from every medium of art, he was especially fascinated by pop culture, visual art, and the world of painters. He was a close friend to almost every known American painter and artists of Abstract Expressionism in the 1950s and 1960s such as the world-wide acknowledged painters such as Jackson Pollock (1912 –1956), Edwin Denby (1903 –1983), Larry Rivers (1923 –2002), John Cage (1912 –1992), and Grace Hartigan (1922- 2008). What characterized this circle of coterie or Avant-garde artists was that they were "a microcosm of urban life which has itself replaced Nature by the City" as Lytle Shaw states in *Frank O'Hara: The Poetics of Coterie* (4).

After studying at Harvard¹O'Hara moved to New York City to live there from 1951 up to his premature death in 1966. He resided in a small apartment and worked as Assistant Curator of Painting and Sculpture Exhibitions for the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). The culture of city life had a major impact on him, both as an American individual and city poet. *A City Winter and Other Poems* (1951), *Meditations in an Emergency* (1957), *Lunch Poems* (1964), and *Second Avenue* (1960) are amongst his major volumes of poetry. Since he started his poetic output, O'Hara showed a keen interest in the art world of New York City. Visual arts and painting in particular have a great significance in many of his poems in which

¹ At Harvard, he met John Ashbery (1927-1917), who was at the time an editor in the Harvard Advocate, which is one of the oldest continuously published collegiate literary magazines in the United States as it was founded in 1866.

painterly themes and techniques are employed to demonstrate the resemblance between poetry and painting. ‘A poet among painters’² is how O’Hara was known during his lifetime within his circle of artists and poets, finding inspiration and support from the painters he connected with. Abstract Expressionist painters³, pop artists, and young poets at the Cedar Tavern and the Club, two renowned venues for artists at the time, were of great impact on his poetry. But it was the New York School of downtown Manhattan in the 1950s and 1960s that played a leading role in constructing his social relations with the most celebrated poets and artists in New York during the aftermath of World War II. It was a period that formed a new spirit of the sense of liberty, emerging to innovate their artistic and literary compositions with a distinctive aesthetic sensibility and writing style that they shared. The poets of the school were around the same age, had the same artistic orientations, were of mutual inspiration to each other, and linked with varying degrees of friendship. Amongst the foremost poets of the school were John Ashbery (1927–2017), Barbara Guest (1920 –2006), James Schuyler (1923–1991), and Kenneth Koch (1925 –2002). O’Hara’s coterie of friends also included some of the most renowned painters at the time like Willem (1904 –1997) and Elaine de Kooning (1918-1989), Jackson Pollock (1912 –1956), Edwin Demby (1903 –1983), Larry Rivers (1923 –2002), John Cage (1912 –1992), Grace Hartigan (1922 –2008), Jane Freulancer (1924-2014), and Michael Goldberg (1924-2007).

The members of the New York School of poetry adopted formlessness, untraditional verse, a mixture of language impulses expressed in ordinary conversations, evocative misunderstandings, and everyday events. Doing so, they questioned what is normally considered material for art and the relationship between life and art, adopting into their works various aspects of Abstract Expressionism and French Surrealism⁴, employing typically surrealistic juxtapositions which they combined with whimsical observations of daily human behavior and speech. O’Hara, in particular, was well acquainted with the art world of New York City. He was very much influenced by Abstract Expressionist painters, especially Pollock to whom the poet dedicates a number of his poems.

As much as O’Hara was interested in the artistic power of classical paintings and visual art he was equally fascinated by the vigor of Pop Art since it emerged from the heart of city life. Pop Art is an art movement that emerged in the United States in the mid-to-late 1950s as a response to the postwar period that was characterized by its consumerist spirit. It

² The poetry scholar and critic Marjorie Perloff is the one who used this term in his book, *O’Hara Poet Among Painters* to describe Frank O’Hara.

³ Abstract Expressionism is a movement in American painting that began in the late 1940s and became a dominant trend in Western painting during the 1950s. It entails the use of "use degrees of abstraction," depicting "forms unrealistically or, in the end, forms not drawn from the visible world (nonobjective)" (*Britannica*, Abstract Expressionism).

⁴ French Surrealism as a movement in visual art between World Wars I and II "as a means of reuniting conscious and unconscious realms of experience so completely that the world of dream and fantasy would be joined to the everyday rational world in "an absolute reality, a surreality" (*Britannica*, *Surrealism*).

challenged the ethos of traditional fine arts by employing objects or imagery from popular culture, mass production, advertising, comic books, and the life of the mundane. According to Hazel Smith, the movement's rise is largely believed to be "a huge reaction against the Abstract Expressionism of the 1940s and 1950s" (175). By embracing popular culture, pop artists reacted against the elitism of high culture and good taste. One of the major aims of the movement is to use images of popular culture in art, emphasizing the banal or kitschy found in American culture as opposed to the loftier and traditional ideals, mostly through the use of irony.

The movement reached full maturity in the 1960s embodied through the work of pop artists and film directors such as Andy Warhol (1928-1987), Roy Lichtenstein (1923-1997), Tom Wesselmann (1931-2004), and James Rosenquist (1933-2017). Most of their work focused on flat outlines of consumer goods, or images from the mass media. This was a radical move to the opposite direction of the painterly canvases of the Abstract Expressionists which is characterized by the absence of a clear subject matter; a seemingly haphazard dripping of paint; and no differentiation between figure and ground. Furthermore, Pop Art is usually considered as devoid of self-expressivity versus Abstract Expressionism's feature of personal expression.

With that being said, it is quite important to address O'Hara's interest in Pop Art and popular culture of the 1950s and 1960s. Almost all of his work is based on actual life activities connected to mass culture that dominated the United States at the time. O'Hara's increased attention to popular culture is deeply rooted in the quotidian details. No wonder that he was an advocate of his contemporary culture, for he found in the here and now of every day the 'joie de vivre,' the value of exuberant enjoyment of urbanity. Thus, his poetry incorporates celebrity-artists, news, pop singers, popular music, the film industry, and actors. He even used headlines from the newspapers and mass media in some of his poems.

In O'Hara's poetry, the artistic elements of Abstract Expressionism are often integrated with those of Pop Art, creating a dynamic substance that combines the beauty, complexity, and essence of both. The influence of Pop Art and popular culture can mainly be seen in poems in which O'Hara celebrates, honors, or highlights certain pop artists as emblems of American urban culture.

In "The Day Lady Died," to begin with, O'Hara eulogizes the death of the iconic jazz singer, Billie Holiday (1915-1959). A representation of the jazz singer is made emblematic as the poet- flaneur strolls the streets of New York, doing his quotidian errands:

I am sweating a lot by now and thinking of
 leaning on the john door in the 5 SPOT
 while she whispered a song along the keyboard
 to Mal Waldron and everyone and I stopped breathing. (*CP*⁵, 325)

⁵ All quoted lines of O'Hara's poetry are taken from *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara* (1995), abbreviated as *CP*; otherwise, it will be cited.

Within a mundane activity of the "I do this, I do that" poem, O'Hara expresses with a spontaneous reaction a sense of deep loss by the end of the poem, embodied through "everyone and I stopped breathing." The combination of "everyone" and "I" underlines the personal and collective voice of the poet, echoing the jazz element of self-expression as well as Pop Art's attention to popular culture. Holiday's iconic image is also emphasized through the unpunctuated sentence "she whispered a song along the keyboard." Michael Magee remarks that normally a singer sings in a key rather than "whisper along the key;" in doing so "she gestures outside the Western musical notation" (717). It is worth noting that O'Hara once said of Holiday, as quoted by Magee: "I guess she is better than Picasso" (710). Thus, O'Hara employs an icon of popular culture in poetry the same way Pop Artists do in their paintings.

Likewise, in O'Hara's "Poem (Lana Turner has collapsed)," another popular culture icon is made the topic of a poem. He depicts the landscape of New York and the speaker's state of mind when surprisingly reading in the newspaper that the American film actress, Lana Turner (1937–1985)⁶ has collapsed. The first interesting fact about this poem is that O'Hara wrote the first and final draft of the poem spontaneously while he was on a ferry, heading to a poetry reading gathering at Wagner College. Joe LeSueur (1924-2001), a poet and a close friend of O'Hara's, asserts that O'Hara informed the audience that he had written the poem on the ferry that transported him from Manhattan (48). The poet, Robert Lowell (1944-1977) with whom O'Hara shared the stage that day, responded with a humorous comment, saying "Well, I'm sorry I didn't write a poem on the way over here" (Perloff, 13). The newspaper headline becomes the occasion for the poet's account of his stressful morning, and then of his surprise that Lana has collapsed. The poem, in other words, is written directly in response to a celebrity tabloid headline, which illustrates the extent to which O'Hara valued popular culture.

It is worth saying that there are three characters in "Poem (Lana Turner has collapsed)," the speaker, supposedly O'Hara, the flâneur,⁷ an addressee (an indefinite You), and Lana Turner, the famous actress and American sweetheart. The poem is written with a presentative method as O'Hara presents to the reader the picture of the moment without subjectively commenting on it. The poem starts with a dramatic line "Lana

⁶ "Poem (Lana Turner has collapsed)" was inspired by a real story that was reported in many newspapers at the time. According to Gooch, O'Hara wrote the whole poem inspired by a story in the tabloids in the New York Post that very day (744). Lana Turner, the heroine of many black and white movies did faint during a public event and was transported to the hospital.

⁷ The figure of the 'flâneur' comes from a French noun referring to the 'saunterer' or 'stroller,' the symbolic model of 19th century urban affluence and modernity in Paris. The flâneur that O'Hara renders throughout his poems is a New Yorker poet whose spontaneous, rhythmic, and constant strolling does not only reveal his observation of city life or the consumerist and capitalistic American culture but also his peculiar poetic creativity of reading and penetrating the urban identity of New York City and its dwellers.

Turner has collapsed!" with an exclamation mark; the only punctuation to be found in the poem. The speaker commences in a casual tone speaking of the weather's situation as he was running under the rain the moment, he read the headline:

I was trotting along and suddenly
it started raining and snowing
and you said it was hailing
but hailing hits you on the head
hard so it was really snowing and
I was in such a hurry
to meet you but the traffic
was acting exactly like the sky
and suddenly I see a headline
LANA TURNER HAS COLLAPSED!

.....

I have been to lots of parties
and acted perfectly disgraceful
but I never actually collapsed
oh Lana Turner we love you get up (*CP*, 449)

Within the sense of immediacy, the reader is drawn into the dialogical tone of the poem and its dramatic twist as the speaker confronts the bad weather and is suddenly taken by the shocking headline: "LANA TURNER HAS COLLAPSED!" The emotional reaction of the speaker as he unexpectedly breaks upon reading the headline emerges by the choice of words, or verbs in particular, which correlates with the impact of the shocking news of Turner's death. Within lines of enjambment, the verbs naturally evolve, starting with "trotting," "raining," to "snowing," and then to "hailing" until the shocking news pops up. It is assumed that the repetition of verbs with 'ing' that are placed in a series of flowing lines with enjambments is a mode of incorporating the experience of the poem with the swing rhythm of jazz music. In this respect, Elizabeth Wingate Grice states:

The energetic transitions in O'Hara's poetry, in the form of "ing" verbs and enjambments, add a cadence to his poems that mirror the nature of swing rhythms, a principle in jazz directly tied to performance and improvisation. (24)

But as O'Hara concludes the poem with such a dramatic line, he is back to use the simple present tense with the collective 'we,' imploring Turner: "oh Lana Turner we love you get up," communicating this time a communal sense of pain, respect, and love for the actress.

With the spread of television and cinemas, modern individuals, and especially Americans came to be more and more fascinated with celebrities. Thus, the newspapers are often filled with gossipy news on the lives of movie stars and Pop Art icons. In other words, "Poem (Lana Turner has collapsed)" reveals just how influential celebrity figures are on ordinary people. Being an active individual in his urban environment,

O'Hara's flâneur is an integral part of the culture, sharing the same emotions and interests.

“Personal Poem” is another poem that demonstrates O’Hara’s celebration of pop icons as a crucial part of cultivating the interest in popular American culture. The poem, like all other “I do this, I do that” poems, might seem at first reading as an ordinary diary entry of a casual hour in a typical day in the poet’s life. Beneath its apparent ordinariness, lie serious references to the poet’s contemporary social matters. The poem begins with the speaker rambling about “two charms” he carries in his pocket as he is heading to meet the second character of the poem, LeRoi Jones (1934-2014), an African-American actor and playwright who was a close friend of O’Hara’s.

The conversation carried between the speaker, O'Hara himself, and LeRoi is the main inspiration of the poem, a conversation that includes intellectual discussions on social, political, and artistic topics. It starts with LeRoi telling the speaker the news of police violence against the African-American jazz musician and trumpeter, Miles Davis (1926-1991):

I walk through the luminous humidity
 passing the House of Seagram with its wet
 and its loungers and the construction to
 the left that closed the sidewalk

 and get to Moriarty's where I wait for
 LeRoi and hear who wants to be a mover and
 shaker the last five years my batting average
 is .016 that's that, and LeRoi comes in
 and tells me Miles Davis was clubbed 12
 times last night outside BIRDLAND by a cop (*CP*, 335)

The names O’Hara drops through the poem are highly suggestive. Davis was and still is an icon in American culture even after his death. Apart from being an excellent trumpeter and influential composer of the 20th century he was among many black artists who were abused by the authorities. By stating the name of LeRoi and referring to the assault on Davis, O'Hara draws an insightful picture about the racial segregation in 1960s America, a decade that was known for the activism of the Civil Rights Movement of the blacks and the rise of the Black Arts Movement. Based on the poem, Davis was assaulted by a policeman, indicating the social turmoil in the United States that dominated the era. In the words of LeSueur, O'Hara was "a liberal who supported civil rights early on, and he had a special interest in anything involving blacks-their culture, their music, their history" (qtd. in Magee, 699).

O’Hara’s interest encompassed various aspects and figures of American popular culture, including James Dean (1931-1955), both a symbol and a victim of popular culture. In “To An Actor Who Died” (1955), the poet elegizes the tragic death of Dean in a car accident at a very young age, capturing in a cinematic way, strangely a rural atmosphere away from the city, to express a sense of deep emotional pain:

As the days go, and they go fast on this island
 where the firs grow blue and the golden seaweed
 clambers up the rocks, I think of you, and death
 comes not, except a sea urchin's dropped and cracked
 on the rocks and the falling bird eats him to rise
 more strongly into fog or luminous purple wind. So
 to be used and rest, the spiny thing is empty, still
 increasing decoration on the craggy slopes above. (*CP*, 226-27)

The description of the place seems to be of an imaginary and cinematic-like scene, similar to a Surrealistic painting integrated with images from nature that are scattered between the land, sea, and sky. The various colors are also connected to the pervading presence of death and melancholy. The cinematic technique he employs gives the poem a city-like spirit since the scenes of the poem move in a way that captures the attention of the reader of the speaker's melancholic situation:

[...] Lightly falls the grieving light
 over the heel of Great Spruce Head Island, like cool
 words turning their back on the bayness of the bay
 and open water where the swell says heavy things
 and smoothly to the nonreflective caves. (*CP*, 227)

The eloquent language used in this poem is quite in contrast to the majority of O'Hara's poems about the metropolis, especially the ones that share the ambiguity of being both critique and celebration of the urban-consumer environment. O'Hara was not exactly a cheerleader of American capitalism at the height of its postwar triumph and expansion, but at the same time, he was not an anti-consumerist. In many of his poems, consuming material goods is turned into elements of the creative act, reflecting a sense of ambivalence about the issue of consumerism. Yet, the way they mirror the pro-consumerist ideas that were popular amongst cultural theorists in the 1990s seems to stand in opposition to the Marxist critique of commodity fetishism, suggesting that consumerism is not necessarily a wasteful activity, but can be creative, active, and generative.

This notion can be seen in various parts of O'Hara's poetic work, where everyday shopping for consumer goods generates the inescapable fact that these goods are an indispensable part of everyday life. Joon Hwang asserts that O'Hara's flâneur: "utilizes consumption as a limited means of appreciating his personal life in conflict with the ephemerality of life" (218). Consequently, when O'Hara's poetry refers to a certain consumer good or a mass-produced product, the poet does not exactly celebrate the American consumerist culture but presents to his readers a picture of popular culture with which they can identify.

Coca-Cola, or Coke as Americans like to call it, is one of O'Hara's favorite consumer goods to mention in his work. The famous American brand appears in many of his poems and is always associated with his lover, Vincent Warren, to whom the poet would address several poems. O'Hara wrote a series of Coca Cola poems during the time he spent with Warren, approximately between August 1959 and May 1961. For instance, in a

poem titled "Song," the speaker fantasizes his lover's face in a magazine while drinking a Coke: "having a Coke in the heat it was your face / I saw on the movie magazine, no it was Fabian's / I was thinking of you" (*CP*, 367). "Early on Sunday" is another example that was written only weeks before O'Hara broke up with Warren; as the speaker is miserable and alone and too fatigued to go out or do anything during the day, he is seen "washing the world down with rye and Coca-Cola" (*CP*, 405).

"Having A Coke With You" is one of his most widely read love poems which was written in 1960 and also addressed to Warren. It is all about the experience of sharing a "Coke" with a lover, proclaiming it to be more fun than almost every other sensual experience, including art and traveling:

is even more fun than going to San Sebastian, Irún, Hendaye,
Biarritz, Bayonne

or being sick to my stomach on the Travessera de Gracia in
Barcelona

partly because in your orange shirt you look like a better happier St.
Sebastian

partly because of my love for you, partly because of your love for
yogurt (*CP*, 360)

In the above lines, O'Hara uses Coca Cola, a popular culture icon, to demonstrate his affection for his lover. The activity of consuming classic soda is turned into a meaningful act of sharing a more pleasant moment than visiting a variety of destinations like "San Sebastian, Irún, Hendaye, Biarritz, Bayonne." Here, the flâneur figure appears as a consumerist individual, not only of Coca-Cola but also of love and culture. While the poem's main theme is arguably the poet's affection for his lover, one can see how Coca Cola, a very popular consumer good, has replaced Italian or French red wine that is widely used in poetry as the romantic drink of choice, and how consumption is turned into a creative activity, employed as means of communicating deep emotions. One may say that O'Hara's queer expression of love to place a Coca-Cola can in the same level of art is a source of destroying both. But his readers are always supposed to remember that poetry for him is simply to get on one's nerves.

Moreover, Coffee is another icon in American popular culture that O'Hara likes to consume everywhere he goes as he expresses in "Joe's Jacket": "I am rising...I have coffee / I prepare calmly to face almost everything" (*CP*, 330). Similarly, in "Steps," the speaker equates his affection to his lover to the way he consumes coffee and cigarettes, in the sense that both are extremely delightful:

oh god, it's wonderful
to get out of bed
and drink too much coffee
and smoke too many cigarettes
and love you so much (*CP*, 371).

The speaker is obviously eager for consumption, describing it as a "wonderful" experience. Whereas in a differently-toned poem of 1956, the

normal daily activity of drinking a cup of coffee revives in the speaker a memory of the death of his first love: “Instant coffee with slightly sour cream / in it, and a phone call to the beyond / which doesn't seem to be coming any nearer” (*CP*, 244).

O'Hara's use of consumerist symbols is not confined to drinks. In a short poem entitled "An Airplane Whistle (After Heine)," he personalizes another mass-produced object, an airplane whistle that was, according to Gooch "given him by Vincent Warren from a Cracker Jack box" (353). The whole poem is inspired by a cheap plastic object, which seems to replace traditional symbols of high verse such as "The rose, the lily, and the dove." The poem starts with paying homage to classical images of lyrical poetry, then reverses direction by indicating that these romantic icons do not fit in the “soot” of New York:

The rose, the lily, and the dove got withered
in your sunlight or in the soot, maybe, of New York
and ceased to be lovable as odd sounds are lovable
say blowing on a little airplane's slot
which is the color of the back of your knee
a particular sound, fine, light, and slightly hoarse (*CP*, 361)

The Romantic symbols are not well suited for modern life in the city whose dirt “withers” the beauty of nature, or they may lose their beauty as they encounter the sunlight of the beloved. The mass-produced plastic whistle, on the other hand, can survive the dirt of the city because it is made by the city. In other words, O'Hara transforms a plastic trinket into a personal object of value and interest, serving a love poem. In other words, O'Hara poetry comes to have a “queer role in society as a consumer of glittery objects, books, foreign cigarettes, and books of Russian or French poetry” (Boyer,75), as he reaps meaning out of those objects because for him they are valid representatives of American culture in the 1950s and 1960s. O'Hara is willing to embrace consumerism mainly for elevating trivial objects to be not merely aesthetic elements of his poetry but to be communal factors that may unite city dwellers into one reality.

Accordingly, Pop Culture in O'Hara's poetry does not stand as a mere cultural or physical setting or to reflect the reality of the American city life of the 1950s and 1960s. No doubt that the references to tabloid news in daily journalism, celebrity gossip, and even consumer goods formulate a crucial part of the ‘new realism’ of modern American culture. However, as O'Hara employs flat outlines of consumer objects, mundane conversations, mass media, random newspaper headlines, pop artists, pop music, or popular figures who dwell in the heart of urbanity, he turns these quotidian and secular matters into artistic material of his poetry. O'Hara uses the very mundane aspects of the American modern times that were considered a threat to elite society and good taste to be the tools of his poetic and artistic creation. Popular culture and Pop Art become the poetics of his resistance to any orthodox molds, cultural, social, or literary that tended to encapsulate the American individual at the time within a less creative and liberal spirit to craft an artistic collage out of the mundane.

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الثقافة الشعبية كإبداع فني في قصائد مختارة لفرانك أوهارا

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المستخلص

بينما كانت التعبيرية التجريدية في شعر فرانك أوهارا إحدى المحاور الرئيسية في الكثير من الأبحاث الأكاديمية، تركز هذه المقالة على استكشاف أثر الثقافة الشعبية في شعره وأهمية فن البوب في تشكيل إنتاجه الأدبي. ويؤكد هذا البحث أن توظيف أوهارا للموضوعات أو الامور المأخوذة من الثقافة الشعبية ووسائل الإعلام، وحتى المواد العادية والاستهلاكية هو الوسيلة التي يتخذها الشاعر لخلق وتأليف فن شعري غير تقليدي يتحدى من خلاله النخبوية الأمريكية المتمثلة في الثقافة العالية والذوق الرفيع، وهي المعايير نفسها التي كانت تستخدم لتقييم أي عمل أدبي أو فني من حيث كونه فن أصيل.

الكلمات المفتاحية: أوهارا، الثقافة الشعبية، فن البوب، الاستهلاكية، الرسم، التعبيرية التجريدية،

عالم نيويورك للفن