

## Book Review

### Culture and Art: Selected Writings, Volume 1

John Robert Clammer <sup>1,2\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Jindal Global University, INDIA

<sup>2</sup> Kyoto University, JAPAN

\*Corresponding Author: [jrclammer@jgu.edu.in](mailto:jrclammer@jgu.edu.in)

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Bauman, Z. (2021). *Culture and Art: Selected Writings, Volume 1*. Edited and Introduced by D. Brzezinski, M. Davis, J. Palmer, and T. Campbell. Translations from the Polish by K. Bartoszynska. Cambridge and Medford, MA: Polity Press.

Many of us quite naturally associate the work of Zygmunt Bauman with his work on 'liquid modernity', 'liquid life' and 'liquid love', mortality, in his later work problems of social exclusion, and of course his seminal and controversial book on the Holocaust. Again, although many of us were familiar with his writings on the broad question of culture, I suspect that few of us knew that he had a significant interest in the arts, visual and performative. This valuable volume brings together a range of papers on the arts and culture, some unpublished and others published only in Polish, some fully polished and ready to print, others from the large archive of papers by Bauman and his wife and now deposited at the University of Leeds, the institution where he taught throughout his long sojourn in the United Kingdom.

The papers collected here and ably organized by the editorial collective and translator of those only in Polish, range over subjects as diverse as expositions of Bauman's own theory of culture, Marxism and culture, values, photography, the theatre, the novel, the stories of Jorge Luis Borges, Jewish Polish writers, and the connections between these and sociology as understood and practiced in a remarkable number of books by Bauman himself. The papers range over the period 1966-2015, and while some in effect introduce themes later developed by Bauman into full-length books (the idea of liquid modernity for example), others see their author ranging off into subjects as varied as actors and spectators, for many of us, alas, little known Polish writers and artists here introduced to an English-reading audience, the whimsical imaginary meeting between Einstein and Magritte that gave birth to postmodernism, the limits of interpretation, love and hate, and the novels of Milan Kundera, of which Bauman was clearly a great admirer. This range shows Bauman as an important public intellectual in his native Poland, engaging with the literary and intellectual communities there and provides insights into his life and professional genesis before he became known to many of us as a leading sociologist writing in English, as well as a bridge between sociology in the West and the rich if politically repressed artistic and literary life of Eastern Europe.

On reading these essays one rather regrets that Bauman did not, as did his predecessor Herbert Marcuse, devote a whole book to the arts and aesthetics. Had he done so, it is possible to see what many of the themes of that volume might have been. But beyond signaling Bauman's interest in the arts, the book reveals several other aspects of his work. One of these is stylistic. When he removed himself from the strictures of more academic writing (although one of his many virtues is that he is always eminently readable) - when writing for Polish literary journals for example - another, more relaxed and expansive Bauman appears. Clearly, he was able to write fluently in a

number of registers, as this book so ably reveals. Another is the profound idea that the sociological imagination and the artistic imagination, far from being opposed to one another, inform each other in ways that enriches both. This relationship, as revealed in these essays, is not a simple one of cause and effect, but a kind of constant dialogue. Sociology sheds light on the conditions of artistic and cultural production; the arts point to alternative forms of knowledge and to paraphrase the term of Bauman's contemporary, John Berger, "ways of seeing". It would be very good if this book stimulated further exploration along these lines, since even these brief essays suggest an exploration in progress that can be carried much further. As the editors point out, Bauman frequently drew on literature in particular in elucidating a range of sociological problems, and the book reveals that he was himself an accomplished practitioner of photography and film. I am always more respectful of people who write about the arts when I know that they themselves actually practice at least one.

In relation to the sociology of culture, Bauman has an interesting relationship. He was never an empirical sociologist in the usual sense, but his work illuminates culture through the sociological and theoretical perspective that he brought to bear on it in his prolific writings, and as one reads him, one has the intuitive sense that he has indeed grasped the essence of whatever phenomenon he is discussing. Here, as in most of his other work, one does not read Bauman for the "facts", but precisely for the interpretation of culture which he writes about in these essays. Embedded in this interpretative project, as this book makes abundantly clear, were both a critique of contemporary culture, and in particular its tendency to marginalize and exclude those not fully included in its gaze, and a deeply humanistic view of sociology rooted in what is finally more of an ethical vision than a political one. The issue of the relationship between ethics and aesthetics has been much discussed elsewhere: here Bauman sheds new light on this by triangulating it with sociology, providing an "interpretative sociology" that does not fit into any existing school, and in that sense, Bauman was a genuinely original thinker. These essays both reveal a lesser-known aspect of Bauman's thought and interests, and significantly demonstrate how he wished to link sociology and the arts in ways that open new interpretative horizons that deserve much further exploration, an activity that would carry the impetus of his work into the future.