What is the Function of Art?

In Aristotle’s characterization of the structure of a Tragedy there are six parts, in order of importance: Plot; Character; Thought; Diction; Song; and Spectacle. Tragedy, for Aristotle is an imitation of life. The main interest in life is people’s stories, which consist in a sequence of actions and events. Since the Plot is the “structure of the incidents,” what is central in a Tragedy is the Plot. The second in importance is Character. The choices made by the characters reflect their moral quality. This is important, but secondary to the actions resulting from the choices (or avoidances) the characters make. In cases where speeches do not reveal choices or avoidances but, rather, they serve to establish something or to enunciate some general maxim, Thought is involved.

Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, whole, and of a certain magnitude. (564, 566)

What does Aristotle mean by this?

A key aspect of the action or events imitated is that they inspire fear or pity, events which are the natural consequences of the actions or choices of the characters. These tragic emotions “should spring out of the plot itself,” (569) but the events that inspire these emotions should be the necessary or probable consequences of the actions and choices of the characters involved. Thus, the Plot and Character elements are entangled in the production of the tragic effect. The pleasure experienced by the audience, then, results from the purgation of the emotions of pity and fear.
What do you think is the relationship between the Plot and Character elements and the production of tragic emotions in the audience?

Why do you think that people enjoy Tragedy? How do you think that this is connected to Plot and Character?

With this understanding of the structure of a Tragedy, what do you think the function, or purpose, of Tragedy is?

Does whatever transformation that Tragedy causes in one who appreciates it affect their lives in anything more than an ephemeral way? Is the function merely to amuse or please, or do well constructed Tragedies enlighten and inspire? Following this a little further, what effect does a Tragedy have on individuals in their roles in society?

This naturally expands to the question: what effect do different forms of art have on individuals in their roles in society? And if some form of art functions merely to amuse, what role is it playing in society?


What is the role of painting? What of sculpture? What of photography? What of conceptual art?

Collingwood distinguishes between amusement art and “art proper” in terms of how they treat the emotions that they evoke. In the case of art that amuses emotions are generated and discharged within the amusement itself, and the emotion is treated as an end in itself. Art proper, however, evokes emotions that have a practical function in every day life; art proper uses emotions “as forces whose operation achieves certain ends beyond them.” (572)
What does Collingwood mean when he says that “while [art proper] is utilitarian, amusement is not utilitarian but hedonistic”? (574)

Amusement art functions to please, but art proper functions to excite people to action.

Collingwood points out that amusement art can become a danger to society. People’s resources of energy are finite. The proper function for amusement art would be to provide fun or recreation that releases stress and makes one better able to function better in their “real” lives. In this way the debt, in terms of energy, imposed by the amusement, is paid off in practical life. If the debt imposed is not paid off in practical life, the amusement becomes more than a positively beneficial diversion; it starts to take away from one’s practical life. “When this reaches a point of crisis, practical life, or “real” life, becomes emotionally bankrupt; a state of things which we describe by speaking of its intolerable dullness or calling it a drudgery.” (582)

The kind of addiction to amusement art and inability to find pleasure in ordinary living Collingwood describes as a moral, or psychological, disease. This finding of ordinary life to be intolerable can lead people to destructive kinds of behaviour or to a resigned acceptance of a dull life. This has a destructive effect on a society. Collingwood argues that it can even be fatal to a society, even if it is not fatal to any of its members.

What role do you think that a working life that becomes more and more demanding on one’s time and energy might play in the evolution of the entertainment industry?