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**BJÖRK: THE ROUSSEAU OF
ROCK**

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Abstract:

I introduce my concept of artworlds; they are meaningful artistic wholes. Björk is situated within such “worlds” as the one of progrock, the world of experimental art, the world of literature, and the popworld. Björkworld is on the crossroad of these worlds. Her music is compared to the experimental progrock of Frank Zappa; if he is tough, then she is soft. Then she is being compared to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who celebrated childishness and the beauties of nature, much like Björk. Comparing artworks and ways of thinking is often a fruitful way of determining their identity. Comparing Björk to Rousseau and Zappa helps us understand the Björkworld. And aspects of Western culture, for instance the Christian celebration of childishness.

Keywords:

Björk, Rousseau, Zappa, progrock, nature, Iceland.

In this article, I want to show that it is fruitful to see the Icelandic singer-songwriter Björk in the light of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s thought. I shall begin with introducing my methodological approach to these issues. Then there follows a presentation of Björk and the concept of the variety of worlds of cultural and artistic kind. After that there is introduction to the philosopher, his life, and thought. Thereafter, I shall argue that there is actually interesting connections between the works of Björk and the ideas of Rousseau, as well as their personalities and careers.¹

1 Some Methodological Consideration

One of the main premises for the argumentation in this article is that comparison plays an important role in giving artworks identity and as a consequence, understand them. The Norwegian Wittgensteinian Kjell S. Johannessen maintains that the possibility of comparison is the logical precondition for giving works of art their identity. Only the possibility of comparing a given symphony by Brahms to other symphonies and/or Brahms' other opuses gives that particular symphony its identity.² Johannessen might be going a bit too far but comparisons play at least some role in giving artworks identity and understanding them. To use my own example, comparing the 13th century Icelandic sagas with realistic novels can give the sagas a new identity, the one of being forerunners of the realistic novels. Comparison has not only the role of showing similarities but also dissimilarities, the sagas were almost certainly written as historical documents, the writers did not possess the concept of a novel. That concept was created centuries later.

If this is true, then we cannot fully understand Björk's oeuvre unless we compare it to other artists oeuvre. I shall assume that there is at least a grain of truth in Johannessen's contention, that comparison can often help us confer identities upon artwork and/or help us grasping those identities.

Comparison is an arduous task, there is always the danger of comparison being vacuous because strictly speaking, everything in this universe resembles everything else in some ways. Nevertheless, by being cautious and compare two or more entities in some details and argue in favor of the comparison, one can evade this problem. After all, comparisons can be informative, comparing the structure of the atom with that of the solar system was informative, even though it later was surpassed by different approaches.³ Hopefully, the comparisons made in this article can be informative.

The way of reasoning in this article is largely a directive one. When engaged in directive reasoning, a critic points towards properties of artworks and uses rhetorical means in order to persuade people to understand them in particular ways. In an analogous manner, someone might try to persuade another person to see a face in a cloud. I am trying to direct the gaze of the readers towards a picture that shows Björk, Rousseau and their creative products as being intimately connected.

And as we shall see, Björk's kind of music cannot be understood in isolation from her life and thoughts. Hence, we might be able to learn something about her by

comparing her life and thoughts with a thinker (Rousseau), whose oeuvre cannot be neatly separated from his life (more about this later in the article).

Am I then committing the intentional fallacy, am I conflating the intentions and lives of Björk and Rousseau with their products? However, it is debatable whether there is any such fallacy to be committed or evaded. Some theorists (the intentionalists) maintain that we cannot understand artworks and texts unless we know at least some of the intentions of artists and writers.⁴

The intentionalist Noël Carroll does not exclude the possibility that there are cases where ignoring the intentions of the artist can be a fruitful way of understanding her work.⁵ This can be the case if searching for aesthetic satisfaction is the main goal of the interpreter. But one can approach an artwork in various other ways than the aesthetic. One can have a conversational interest in the artwork. If so, then one tries to establish a sort of conversation with the artist, establish a community with her (I want to call this kind of conversation “virtual conversation”). However, conversing with people requires trying to understand their intentions. Therefore, trying one’s hand at virtual conversation requires trying to understand the artist’s intention. I want to add that understanding intentions must require some understanding of the artist’s life or at least some segments of it, plus his social and historical surroundings. I shall try my hand at a virtual conversation with Björk and Rousseau and can therefore not ignore their intentions. I shall also try to create a virtual conversation between the two. Directive reasoning and comparison shall be means to enhance these virtual conversations.

This article is an attempt to make a contribution to the philosophy of culture and the aesthetics of popular art but not the philosophy of music.

2 Björk and various “Worlds”

Let us now take a look Björk. She is one the most original artists in the world of pop and rock, not only making music but multimedia spectacles where visual effects (including her lavish costumes), strange lyrics, and music blend in a disharmonic harmony. Recently, *Time Magazine* has chosen her as one of the 100 most influential people in the world.⁶ She began her career as a child prodigy in Iceland, making her first album while only twelve years old. As a teenager and young adult, she was a

member of anarchist and surrealist groups, comprising of young poets and musicians. In that period, she joined several underground rock groups in Reykjavik, most notably The Sugarcubes, which became a global cult band. The group disbanded in the early 1990s and she embarked on a solo career, first making an album in Icelandic with a local jazz band. Then in 1993 she made her first solo album in English, *Debut*. That album contains a strange mix of electronic dance music, and world music, with unusual but catchy and somewhat commercial tunes. Later, her albums became increasingly experimental. *Medulla* is almost entirely vocal; musical instruments play only a minor role.⁷ Nicola Dibben describes her musical development in the following fashion:

“Her music underwent seemingly radical changes in style, from punk, jazz covers, and the pranksterish pop of the Sugarcubes, to an innovative blend of electronic dance and indie in her early solo career, and subsequent combinations of electronic and acoustic sound sources and styles.”⁸

Today, Björk is the queen of sophisticated coolness, celebrated by intellectual lovers of rock and music in general. It is not by chance that New York’s Museum of Modern Art (MoMa) has had an exhibition of her work.⁹ It has a distinct creative, visual side, as can be seen in the lavish shows of her concerts and the visuality of her music videos. Her opulent, imaginative costumes are a part of this visuality, for instance her swan costume.¹⁰

Performing on stage or in music videos is acting, Björk has also acted in movies, most notably Lars von Trier’s *Dancer in the Dark*.¹¹ The slice of the artworld that she has created is a Gesamtkunstwerk (a total work of art), to use an expression, that originally was employed by Richard Wagner to denote his own artistic vision where music, poetry, narrative, and acting formed a whole.¹²

I do not use the expression “the artworld” in the same sense as Arthur Danto and George Dickie. Danto maintained that the artworld was the product of certain theories as the one claiming that Duchamp’s ready-mades were artworks.¹³ According to Dickie, the artworld is a social institution which decides which objects shall be called “works of art” and how they should be judged.¹⁴ The problem with these theories is in the first place that they make our relationship with art far too abstract, they forget the role that tacit knowledge plays in many cases in this relationship. We can know a piece of music pretty well but without being able to describe it in words, our knowledge is tacit.¹⁵ However, there are many kinds of relationship with artworks

where tacit knowledge plays little or no role, we can for instance explicate Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* in propositions.

This brings us to the second weakness in Dickie's and Danto's thinking: artworks and ways of judging and understanding them are so varied that it might not be fruitful to generalize much about them. What do for instance the performance of Marina Abramovic have in common with Austen's novels and they in common with symphonies?

The third weakness is ignoring the fact that art does not exist in vacuum, isolated from the rest of society. Artworks and artistic practices are to varying degree connected to non-artistic practices and institutions. Is an orthodox icon be understood purely in aesthetic and artistic terms, must not we know the religious practices and institution it is involved in in order to understand it? It is more fruitful to talk about artworlds in the plural. But I shall drop the prefix "art", both because it has Dantoan/Dickiean connotations and also because I shall be focusing on types of arts that are heavily involved with non-artistic practices.

That which I call "a world" is both an artworld and a cultural world, there is no clear-cut division between the art and the culture side of it. It is a meaningful whole, accessible to persons with a certain training. It is a close relative of the Wittgensteinian concept of language games.¹⁶ Such games are ways of using language, which are woven into modes of practices. Each language game has its own set of rules which only make sense in the practice, an abstract application of them is bound to fail and enumeration of them does not say much. At the same time, the language games and their rules overlap and are intertwined. Mutatis mutandis, the same holds for the various worlds.

The world of rock and roll (the Rockworld) overlaps with other worlds such as those of rap and pop (the Popworld and the Rapworld). The Rockworld also overlaps with the Littworld, the world of serious, imaginative literature, cf. the fact that Bob Dylan got the Nobel prize in literature. It also overlaps with the world of "serious" music, call it the "Classicworld" (it includes avant-garde music of such composers as Karl Heinz Stockhausen). With the exception of the Rapworld all these worlds matter to the understanding of Björk's oeuvre.

Rock music certainly does not live in a vacuum, isolated from society. The American philosopher Alva Noë thinks that pop and rock music are really about the performers and their style and that the music itself does not matter much.¹⁷ He has a point, a

typical magazine/internet report on a rock act focuses as much on the person(s) as the music (this a part of the cultural side of the Rockworld). This can be seen in an article about the group Lazy Eyes on the webpage of the New Musical Express (NME).¹⁸ But Noë throws the child out with bathwater, we cannot reduce rock and pop to people and styles. Even though they matter quite a lot, the music matters too. Theorists like Andrew Kania go too far in the opposite direction, looking at the rock songs in isolation from people performing them and the interaction between them and their fans. Kania regards rock as being essentially about recorded tracks.¹⁹ Of course he has a point, recorded tracks matter to the Rockworld. But so do live performances. Kania allots some place to live performances he completely ignores the interaction between the musicians on the stage and their audience. The latter cheers the band, sings along with them, dances and so on. Moreover, the musicians dance too and move in various ways, think about the performance of Mick Jagger. Or Björk's extravagant shows, the Rockworld has a visual aspect, which manifests itself in cover art, the clothings of the musicians and visual effects in concerts. Of courses the recorded tracks and the recording process matter too, Björk uses modern recoding technologies for all it is worth. However, they are not all there is to rock and roll.

What differentiates the various worlds discussed here is that each of them a logic of its own, consisting of certain informal rules, modes of their application, and special kinds of life forms (cultures). Part of the life form of the Rockworld can be drug-abuse, fast lifestyle, relations with a lot of sexual partners etc. A rock song is part of a meaningful (or even absurd) whole, more precisely the Rockworld. The hairdo, the gestures, the clothes, the album covers, the music, the lyrics, the Zeitgeist, the persons, and personae of the performers are parts of this whole, the Rockworld. And these elements interact in various ways. In the heyday of the LPs, the cover enhanced the image of the artists which in its turn enhanced the experience of the songs and the lyrics. Which in their turn enhanced the experience of the cover. Thus, the cover of Bob Dylan's *Blonde on Blonde* enhanced the image of him as the coolest cat around. Which enhanced the understanding of the songs and the lyrics, which in its turn enhanced the understanding of the whole dylanesque world. We can call this "the hermeneutic circle of the Rockworld". Understanding the songs of the Rolling Stones requires knowing their stage act, the way they dress (and undress), even the scandals involving members of the group, witness Noë's theory of rock, which has some merit. This can be seen on the webpage of *The Rollings Stones Fanclub of Europe* where

new items concern more the members of the group than the music. Thus, there is a news item about Keith Richards becoming the face of the Louis Vuitton company.²⁰ Understanding the Rolling Stones requires understanding a subworld within the Rockworld, the Stonesworld.

The special rules of the Rockworld can be “Be loud!”, “be energetic!” “Be provocative!”, “Be sexy!” Björk’s original band The Sugarcubes certainly followed the bulk of these rules, besides the group had a classical rock formation with singer, guitarist, bass player and drummer. This makes at least an important part of her music bona fide rock music, part of the Rockworld.

The Popworld has some similar rules as the Rockworld, but loudness is not required, coziness is rather the thing. The lifestyle is not necessarily as wild as the rock style, nevertheless we cannot neatly separate the lives and lifestyles of pop musicians from their music. The nice, clean, image of many pop groups, for instance The Osmonds and the Carpenters, cannot be entirely separated from their music and acts. They would not have succeeded with their music if they had been wild and mad dope fiends.

Some of Björk’s song, especially on her first solo album *Debut* can perhaps be classified as pop music. The influence of electronic dance music on her songs is a Popworld influence.²¹

But most of her music has experimental qualities, besides having colorful, avant-garde shows as a part of the experimental whole. This makes Björk’s artistic work partly an inhabitant of the Expworld, the world of experimental art. In this world the main rules are “be provocative!”, and “be original!” A wild, excentric lifestyle is often a part of the Expworld’s life form. And there is often no clear-cut line between the artists of the Expworld and their art. Thus, British duo Gilbert and George display their life together as an artwork, Björk’s own life is a virtual artwork.

Actually, the Expworld also has a straighter side, the one that shows itself in “serious” avant-garde music were the Expworld meets the Classicworld. At the same time, the expworld and the rockworld can overlap in progrock. That concept obviously has some content, however experimental, such acts as Zappa, Kraftwerk, and King Crimson are rock acts, using rock instruments, alongside with other instruments. Björk’s music is mainly a kind of progrock or even progpop, witness the pop side of it.

The best way to understand these different worlds and Björk's place in them is to compare them not only with each other but also a very different world, Classicworld, the world of classical music. One of the rules of this world is that music shall be intricate and complex, and that the personality and circumstances of the composer shall not play a *major* role for the understanding of the music. Beethoven symphonies can, to a certain degree, be separated from the composer and the political realities of its society; in contrast a Stones song cannot be neatly separated from the band and the society they worked in.

Even though one of the rules of the Classicworld is to largely ignore personalities, the works of classical music do not exist in a bubble. A sonata is something that partly exists in interpretations and interpretations are made by concrete people in given contexts. And it is a product of intentions that only make sense in given contexts. Moreover, you have to understand Beethoven's symphonies in the context of Vienna classicism and understanding Vienna classicism requires knowing its place in the history of classical music. And we can hardly ignore the social and political context of this history entirely. Furthermore, you have to understand the socially created rules for how to react to classical music and how it functions in society. Thus, one can understand aspects of the Classicworld by seeing it from the outside, not obeying the rule of ignoring personalities.

Nevertheless, we do not have to know that Beethoven originally wanted to dedicate his third symphony to Napoleon in order to understand and analyze the symphony. Classical music works, in contrast to rock songs, usually have a complex and intricate structure, in order to understand them one must be able to focus on these complexities. At the same time, originality is of importance in the Classicworld, just like the Expworld.

Be that as it is, you need only a thin contextualization in the case of classical music and literature, in the case of rock songs you need a thick contextualization. My description of these contexts shows this: I mention many more contextual determinants in the case of the rock song than in the case classical music; the number of such determinants is an important factor in deciding the thickness or thinness of contextualization. The Rockworld is a thick world, the Classicworld a thin world.

To evade misunderstanding, the kind of "serious" music that has influenced Björk is mainly the modern, avant-garde one. She has expressed misgivings about the

focus of the classical music of the past and shown interest in Arnold Schönberg and Stockhausen. She has performed parts of the former's *Pierrot Lunaire* and interviewed the latter. She has also recorded the modern composer John Tavener's *Prayer of the Heart*.²² This activity of hers might as well be called "Expworld activities".

What about the Littworld? Not all her lyrics are memorable, but she has some excellent moments, for instance in the song *Army of Me*. The last-named expression can be understood in at least two ways: as a metaphor for the multiple self or as a metaphor for the way a person can mobilize great strength in a difficult situation. In her song *Hunter* from the album *Homogenic* she has this wonderful jab at Scandinavia:

"I thought I could organise freedom
How Scandinavian of me..."²³

She is much more poetic in *Virus* from the record *Biophilia*:

"Like a mushroom on a tree trunk,
As the protein transmutes,
I knock on your skin and I am in."²⁴

This lyrics is written in cooperation with the noted Icelandic poet and novelist Sigurjón Sigurðsson, whose *nom de plume* is Sjón. He was a leading member of the surrealist group that Björk was connected to in her teens. They still cooperate.

So, there is also some overlap between Björk's work and the Littworld, partly thanks to Sjón. This kind of overlapping is what Björk is all about, her music can be situated in a place where the Rock-, Pop-, Expworld, Littworld, and Classicworld overlap. Even those of her songs, which cannot be called "rocksongs" usually have enough rock drumbeat in order to qualify as rocklike songs. When I say "rock" in the last sentence, I of course mean "progrock."

Talking about progrock, it might be fruitful to compare Björk to Frank Zappa. Just as Björk, he made experimental rock music, while composing serious classical, avant-garde music, and light pop tunes. Just like Björk, Zappa was into making *Gesamtkunstwerk* where music, stage performance, and visual images made a whole²⁵. But his rock/pop music is much rougher than Björk's music, much more rock and roll. His

lyrics are also often very ironic, even nasty, while his sound images can be disturbing, in stark contrast to the positive feel of Björk's lyrics and music, or at least most of it.²⁶ The perhaps most nasty of Zappa's lyrics is the one of *Bobby Brown (goes down)* about the physical emasculation of an unsympathetic young man.²⁷ One of the most ironic is *Who Needs the Peace Corps* where he makes fun of hippies.²⁸ We find nothing comparable in Björk's lyrics while the experimental use of sounds is something she has in common with Zappa.²⁹ Both like(d) to mix music with non-musical sounds (more about Björk's mixing of these two later in this article). But Zappa is Björk's dark uncle, the Zappaworld is a cold place.

Does the comparison with Zappa bestow a new identity on Björk's oeuvre? Perhaps not, but it helps us understand her work as having the identity of being soft, gentle, spontaneously experimental. Zappa's rough, calculated experimentalism makes this identity conspicuous.

We can conclude this chapter by saying that there is a Björkworld, which exist where the Rockworld, the Popworld, the Expworld, Classicworld, and the Littworld intersect.

3 Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Now it is time to turn to the other main character of this article, Franco-Swiss philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1713-1778). He was one of the first Western thinkers to extoll the virtues of pristine nature. In his book, *The Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, he talked about the feeling of oneness with nature while taking solitary walks in the forest. He writes: "I strolled along feeling that pleasure and interest which beautiful landscapes have always given me."³⁰ He extolls the beauty of the shores of the Swiss Bienne, which is interesting to those "...who love to drink deep of the charms of nature..."³¹ Living in that place, Rousseau would engage in botanic studies, writing: "Instead of all that sad trash of paper and books, I filled my room with flowers and plants..."³² Nature is to be preferred to the dry wisdom of books.

He would row into the middle of the lake, stretch himself in the boat, looking at the sky, letting the boat drift, while he himself was "...lost in a thousand vague but delicious reveries..."³³

Still further, he writes that trees, shrubs, and plants are "...the dress and adornment of the earth".³⁴ And a few sentences later he writes:

"But endured with life by nature and clothed in its wedding garment in the midst of running water and the song of birds, the earth offers man, in the harmony of the three kingdoms, a spectacle full of life, interest, and charm, the only spectacle in the world of which his eyes and his heart never grow weary."³⁵

I gather that the trees, shrubs, and plants are the wedding garment of nature and that they are also the three kingdoms mentioned in this quotation. Be that as it may, for Rousseau nature prompts sweet reveries in which he forgets himself and identifies himself with nature as a whole. It is also a means to forget all the wrongs he thinks other people have done to him, even forgetting human society while walking alone in the forests.

The *Reveries* were written in his old age where he had become somewhat misanthropic. In his younger days he claimed that man is good by nature, but civilization corrupts him. Rousseau famously said that we should return to nature. This does not mean that Rousseau wanted to destroy civilization but only that he wanted to create a culture that was more natural than the contemporary one. He was an advocate of the wholesome, authentic, simple life while condemning the excesses, pomposity, and artificiality of the reigning aristocracy. Further, he was critical of cold, calculating reason while celebrating emotions, not very arguably the first Western thinker to do so.³⁶ This side of his thinking is evident in *Emile, or the Education*, a sort of romance about the upbringing of children. Children should be brought up in a free manner and in close contact with nature. Learning from books is not important; nature is the best teacher available. Childhood has an intrinsic worth, and children are not just tiny adults. He gives the following advice to the caretakers of children:

"Watch nature follow the path she traces out for you. She gives children continual exercise, she strengthens their constitution by ordeals of every kind; she teaches them early what pain and trouble mean".³⁷

Rousseau was also staunch opponent of aristocratic rule and the power of moneyed interests. His book *The Social Contract* commences with a thunderous claim: "Man is born free, yet everywhere he is in chains".³⁸ He advocates a society where the natural rights of men (males only?) are respected and where the laws and institutions are in accordance with democratic procedures, more precisely that which he calls "the

general will”, that is, the combined will of every (male?) citizen, a will purified of individual and factional interest.

Some of his critics maintain that he neglected the freedom of the individual and rights of minorities, maintaining that men should be forced to be free, and that the minority should be subordinated to the general will.³⁹ Bertrand Russell wrote: “...Hitler is an outcome of Rousseau; Roosevelt and Churchill of Locke“.⁴⁰ But John W. Chapman maintains that there is no totalitarian moment in the idea of the general will. The consensus, which is the main moment of the general will, can only be realized if the individuals have the right to take part in discussions and take part in the formation of the general will. These individuals must be autonomous and the formation of the general will must be democratic. However, even though Chapman regards Rousseau as mainly a liberal thinker, he maintains that there is a totalitarian moment in his thinking, not least in his idea of one, civilian religion that all citizens of the republic must adhere to.⁴¹

In his *Confessions*, Rousseau undertakes something entirely new: writing a completely candid description of the story of his own life, including his innermost thoughts and feelings, as well as his most shameful deeds. Reading the book is like witnessing the birth of the first full-fledged individual, an emotional and lustful being but also a thinking one.

Rousseau had a tale to tell. He led a dramatic life, being a creative, brilliant, but emotionally unstable person, childish and paranoid, he said in no uncertain words “...I was long a child and am so yet in many particulars”.⁴² His life was full of paradoxes. In his *Emile* he celebrated childhood, yet he put his own children in a foundling’s hospital.⁴³ He was born in a lower middle-class family in Geneva, which was then an independent republic. Having drifted around for some years, Rousseau went to Paris where he made quite a career as a composer, thinker, and novelist.⁴⁴ His operas were popular and his books bestsellers; he became the darling of the Parisian literati for a while. He had unorthodox ideas of music, stressing melody and spontaneity, in contrast the classicist ideas of Rameau who maintained that harmony was the essence music.

Rousseau was offered a position that was connected to the king’s court but refused it on the ground that he would lose his independence if he had accepted the offer. And when his radical books, *The Social Contract* and *Emile*, were published, he got into deep trouble. These books were banned and even burned. Rousseau himself had to

flee the country to escape arrest, living in England for more than one year. It was during his time in England that he started to write his confessions. He returned to France in 1767 and spent his remaining years working on his autobiographical books while becoming increasingly paranoid. After his death, he became the hero of the French Revolution, and the revolutionaries moved his remains to the Panthéon in Paris.⁴⁵

Rousseau philosophized largely in the first person singularis, his own life and thoughts can hardly be separated. In contrast, while Bertrand Russell's autobiographical books are very entertaining, it is hard to see how knowing anything about his life helps the pundits determine whether his attempt to reduce mathematics to logic was successful.⁴⁶ They might not even help us understand much about his theorizing about these issues.

We need only thin contextualization to understand Russell's philosophy but thick contextualization when it comes Rousseau's thinking. Hence, understanding the French thinker's intentions matters more to the understanding of his views than the one of Russell concerning his logical atomism. Likewise, the thick contextualization required to understand Björk's work makes understanding her intentions more important than in the case of works that only need thin contextualizations, for instance Beethoven's sonatas.

The nature of the contextualizations concerning Björk and Rousseau further supports the view that there is nothing against understanding their works partly through their intentions.

4 Björk as Rousseau, Rousseau as Björk

Just like the philosopher, Björk is a very creative person, with an elusive and mysterious personality. And like him, she has unorthodox ideas of music, blending all kinds of style and singing in peculiar way. They also have in common the fact that both are jacks of many trades. Besides, it holds for both that it is hard to separate their lives and their works. In addition, both are/were a bit childish and celebrate childhood. Dibben writes:

“Björk’s critical reception as a child-woman can be attributed partly to her occasionally child-like vocal timbre, her lyrics sung in the first person often from the perspective of a child...”⁴⁷

Dibben also points out that Björk sometimes makes sounds in between singing and speaking which can have childlike qualities.⁴⁸

Further, Björk has an aura of authenticity, spontaneity, and intimacy, just like Rousseau. She has not bothered to change her name to suit a global audience; she uses only her first name and thereby signals intimacy and authenticity, Rousseau’s trademarks. Her singing often sounds like a sonorous picture of the stream of consciousness, the way feelings and thoughts rapidly change and successively dominate the consciousness. It is like she is showing an honest, authentic, sonorous picture of her inner life.

Her next to last album, *Vulnicura*, is confessional. She expresses her feelings concerning the break with her long-time boyfriend, the artist Matthew Barney, in the same candid fashion as Rousseau’s descriptions of his complex relations with women in his *Confessions*. The expression of sorrow and heartbreak in the songs is accentuated with the aid of ominous drumbeat. The beat of a broken heart.

The French thinker certainly was a utopian, making plans for the perfect republic. And Björk shows her utopian side in her last album, *Utopia*. Judging from the video of the song Utopia from the album, her utopia is an ecological one, a utopia of beautiful, balanced, diverse nature.⁴⁹ Notice the variety of plants in the video and think of it in connection to Rousseau’s fascination with plants.

As Rousseau, she is a lover of nature. The title of her album, *Biophilia*, means “love of living beings”. She does not directly advocate this love in the lyrics but stresses the way we are connected with nature and the material world in general. However, she shows her feeling of oneness with nature in such videos as the one of Utopia. The oneness that Rousseau expressed in words in his *Reveries*.

According to Björk, many of her songs have been composed while she is walking in nature.⁵⁰ She also tries to mime nature in her music by for instance making her beat in *Homogenic* sound like volcanos or make liquid like sounds in songs like Nature is Ancient.⁵¹ Dibben points out that this stress of nature as the wellspring of her music is being expressed in various videos and documentaries, which show her singing and composing in nature. Her voice is not polished as those of “civilized” classical singers, she sometimes shrieks and howls, that is, makes natural sounds.⁵² It might be added

that the way she often chants rather than sings is somewhat reminiscent of the way the Icelandic genre of epic poetry, *rímur*, were performed.

Her love of nature also shows itself in the way she is. She is an elfin-like creature and elves are the guardians of unspoilt nature in Icelandic folklore. In Icelandic contexts, Björk is a leading spokeswoman for environmental causes, as can be seen in her song in Icelandic *Náttúra* (Nature).⁵³ She addressed the global audience and asking support to preserve the Icelandic highland.⁵⁴

Further, she has expressed her environmental concerns to global audiences, for instance in a TV program, made by Sir David Attenborough.⁵⁵ This does not make her an enemy of technology, she speaks enthusiastically about computer technology in an interview.⁵⁶ And she certainly uses technological devices in her music, while sort of humanizing technology. This can be seen in the video of *All is full of Love*, we see robots that express genuine human feelings.⁵⁷ As Dibben points out, she naturalizes technology by fusing it with wild, untamed nature.⁵⁸ Dibben has a point when she says that Björk wants to unify apparent opposites “...the natural and the technological, traditional and modern, rural and urban, myth and science, folk and art, music and sound”.⁵⁹ In this connection, some pundits have maintained that her work has an oceanic character, that it invites to the experience of boundlessness, of being immersed in it and reality in general.⁶⁰ Somewhat like the way Rousseau experienced immersion in nature, which, as we have seen, he described in his *Reveries*.

She wants to create an Icelandic musical identity which shall draw heavily on the distinct landscape and nature of Iceland, including the country’s volcanos.⁶¹ She does not hide her Icelandic nationalism.⁶² She does not mention the *rímur* but they are a part of Iceland’s literary heritage. So, maybe chanting in the aforementioned *rímur*-style is a part of her endeavor to create an Icelandic musical style.

She is also a champion of the independence of small countries like Kosovo, Tibet and the Faeroe islands as can be seen from footage of her concert in China in 2008.⁶³ In her song “Declare Independence” on her 2007 album *Volta*, she seems to be encouraging small nations to become independent. In the video, she has the flag of Greenland on her upper arm.⁶⁴

Likewise, Rousseau supported the independence of Poland and Corsica and was generally in favour of small states and critical of big states.⁶⁵ His writings on Poland and Corsica inspired later nationalists, Björk’s nationalism is therefore hardly tainted by his thought, however indirectly.

Björk could have sold even more albums if she had continued to make the kind of techno-dance music she made for her first album. Instead, she has chosen to make difficult, experimental music. On albums like *Medulla* she sings some songs in Icelandic – definitely not a good commercial move in a global market where almost nobody understands that language. Björk just is not in it for the money, she even refused the Icelandic governments offer to give her a little island.⁶⁶ In a similar manner, Rousseau could have had an easy life as a fashionable composer after one of his operas was celebrated by the king. But it has been said that something in his Calvinist blood made him not want to attain worldly glory.⁶⁷ He just was not in it for the money. If he had been alive today, he might have composed and performed progressive rock songs, even rock operas.

However, there are also notable differences between the two. There is absolutely nothing authoritarian about Björk’s ecological utopia, but as earlier said, Rousseau’s writings have been accused of having a hidden authoritarian streak.

Now, what about the purported relationship between comparison and the identity of artworks? Comparing Rousseau’s *Confessions* and Björk’s confessional *Vulnicura* certainly is fruitful. Both are seemingly sincere but Björk never whines the way Rousseau sometimes does. Nevertheless, the comparison can give the record a new identity, the one of being a work in the tradition of Rousseauan confessionality.

I said earlier that this article is supposed to be a contribution to cultural philosophy. My comparison might help us understand that there is a strong Rousseauan undercurrent in Western culture, exemplified by Björk. Moreover, there might be an undercurrent of veneration of childlike innocence in Western culture, witness William Wordsworth’s poetic words “The Child is father of the Man”.⁶⁸ This veneration of the childlike might be stemming from Jesus Christ’s celebration of children and childhood: “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these”.⁶⁹ Furthermore, he said: “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children you will never enter the kingdom of heaven”.⁷⁰ It might be fruitful to interpret Rousseau’s and Björk’s works in light of Jesus’s sayings and the quote from Wordsworth.

5 Conclusion/Last Words

I started this article with methodological introduction, stressing that my approach was intentionalist and conversationalist in the understanding of at least certain kinds of artworks. Moreover, that of comparing artworks with each other, and even with theoretical ideas, is a way to grasp their identities. My method is that of directive reasoning, while trying to establish virtual conversations with the artists and thinkers, discussed here.

After the methodological introduction, there was a presentation of Björk's music and career. Then I introduced my conception of the plurality of artworlds, each artworld being a meaningful, artistic entity. Among these worlds are the Rockworld, the Popworld, the Expworld, the Littworld, and the Classicworld. I tried to show that the Björkworld can be placed in the intersection of these worlds, nevertheless most of Björk's music is either (prog)rock music or music with (prog)rock traits. I made a short comparison between her work and that of Frank Zappa. The softness of her music stands in clear contrast to the roughness of Zappa's music, her celebration of life in contrast to Zappa's nihilism.

Then I turned to Rousseau and introduced his thinking with emphasis on his confessional work, his defence of the rights of small nations, his celebration of childhood and nature. Also, on his versatility, that he not only wrote texts but also composed music.

After that, I compared Björk and Rousseau, like him, Björk celebrates childishness, is a great lover of nature, and defends the rights of small nations. And just like Rousseau's writings, some of Björk's work is confessional. Comparing Björk's work with that of Zappa and Rousseau can aid us in bestowing identity on it. In that connection, the comparison can help us get a better grip on the Björkworld.

Contemplating the spontaneous, authentic, childlike aspect of Björk's and Rousseau's work might increase our understanding of some aspect of Western cultural tradition (including its Christian heritage) and help us to come to grips with our inner child. Listen to the music of Björk, watch her performances, think of her life, read some Rousseau, and contemplate his life. If you still do not see Björk as Rousseau, and Rousseau as Björk, then I cannot help you.

Björk is a soundmistress and an artmaster.

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- 33 Rousseau, *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, loc 878, fifth walk.
- 34 Rousseau, *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, loc 1198, seventh walk.
- 35 Rousseau, *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, loc 1198, seventh walk.
- 36 In the *Reveries* he wrote that he preferred reveries to thinking. Rousseau, *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, loc 1185.
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- ⁴² Rousseau, *The Confessions of Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (tr. unknown) <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/3913/3913-h/3913-h.htm>, 2006, loc 3183, Kindle version.
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- ⁴⁴ The score of some of his compositions can be found in Rousseau without year.
- ⁴⁵ For an overview over his thinking and life, see O’Hagan, *Rousseau* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999); Bertram, Jean Jacques Rousseau. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2010); Duignon and Cranston, “Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Swiss-born French Philosopher“, *Encyclopedia Britannica* (2021).
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- ⁵⁰ Dibben, *Björk*, 2009, 53.
- ⁵¹ According to Dibben, *Björk*, 2009, 116.
- ⁵² Dibben, *Björk*, 2009, 54
- ⁵³ Björk, Náttúra, 2009, see also Dibben, “Nature and Nation: National Identity and Environmentalism in Icelandic Popular Music Video and Music Documentary,“ *Ethnomusciological Forum*, June, Volume 18, No1 (2009): 147. See also her “green”, pro-environmentalist concert, Björk, Live at We Love Green, Paris (2018).
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- ⁵⁸ Dibben, *Björk*, 2009, p. 98, on Björk and technology, see Dibben, *Björk*, 72–99.
- ⁵⁹ Dibben, *Björk*, 2009, 130.
- ⁶⁰ According to Dibben, *Björk*, 150.
- ⁶¹ According to Dibben, *Björk*, 116.
- ⁶² On her nationalism, see Dibben, *Björk*, 33–41
- ⁶³ Björk, From a concert in China, 2008.
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- ⁶⁵ See for instance Rousseau, *Constitutional Project for Corsica* 1765.
- ⁶⁶ See for instance Dibben, *Björk*, 2009, 50.
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