

Towards An Alphabet of Cultural Rivalry

Cultural Division and Rival Onlookers

Theories of cultural division, regardless of political affiliation, customarily formulate the division of culture along the perimeter of art. Simply: that cultural division is the division between art and the rest of culture. Not that the border line of art has been drawn steadily, demarcating the same cultural territory or according to the same criteria. Far from it. There is a world of difference between framing cultural division in terms of the opposition culture/anarchy and stating that modernism and mass culture are “the torn halves of an integral freedom to which, however, they do not add up”. Despite every subtle and not-so-subtle divergence between these two paradigms of cultural division – one from the founding text of modern cultural conservatism, the other summing up the most trenchant cultural radicalism – they manage, nonetheless, to agree on one thing: cultural division is coterminous with art’s horizon.

The widespread misconception that cultural conservatism is identified by exclusion and elitism derives from the assumption that what separates conformist and radical cultural positions is whether the division is regarded as porous or impermeable. This misconception has led to a certain amount of confusion on the left when faced with non-exclusionary neo-conservatism, such as in the aesthetic philosophy of Arthur Danto. And this is not all. Inscribing cultural division along the boundary of art, whether for the purposes of shoring up art’s self-image or establishing traffic between art and its others, obscures divisions internal to art. Consider, for instance, Andreas Huyssen’s treatment of gender in modernist discourses, hitching it up to the antagonism between art and mass culture rather than using feminism to cut across the old hierarchy. True enough, cultural division is gendered, but the theory of cultural division’s gendering must avoid reconfirming the formulation of cultural division that it critiques, or else it will replicate the old hierarchy’s blindness to art’s internal divisions.

If theories of culture reconfirm the horizon of art in the identification of cultural division then debates over what is at stake will fail to question the inherited category of art. This leads to familiar problems for the Left critique of art and aesthetics. It is easy for complaints about art’s role in cultural division to be hijacked by the assertion of art’s value or quality – shifting the debate from social or institutional questions to judgements of objects and experiences – only if (and this is crucial) the theory of cultural division goes with the grain of art’s own self-images. Cutting across art’s own categories would not so easily permit the reassertion of art against the charge of cultural division. To do so would insert the question of cultural division into art itself. There is a strategic value to rethinking cultural division as internal to art, but there is more to it than that. What is fundamentally at stake is whether cultural divisions are taken as the limits of cultural exchange or, to take an extreme example, whether a philistine’s experience of art is to count as internal to art.

Going some way to theorising cultural division as internal to art and as cutting across art’s own categories, Art and Language, in an essay entitled “Painting By Mouth”, examined some of the implications of two distinct modes of attention for art through the analysis of two models of a painting’s (P’s) rival onlookers:

Imagine two ideal onlookers: (A) and (B). (A) goes immediately to P, waits until he gets the proper feelings, etc., and then he just might look up the title of P, seek information and confirmation concerning P, etc. (B) goes immediately to the catalogue (or etc.) seeking to discover how to read the picture. (A) and (B) may correspond to some real or possible onlookers. Indeed, we may suggest that this relative ordering of 'reading' of pictures and titles goes to different fragments of culture, social divisions and so on.

Onlookers (A) and (B) are more than just two contingently related possible onlookers; the distinction between them is articulated by existing cultural and social divisions. Onlooker (A) corresponds, roughly, to the post-romantic model of

aesthetic appreciation taken up by modernist culture (and not fully expunged by postmodernism) in which the viewer is figured as autonomous and his (almost never her) engagement with art is predicated on a kind of face-to-face encounter with the artwork based on the Protestant idea of how the individual worshipper established his or her own private relationship with God without the mediation of clerics. In Bourdieu's terms, onlooker (A) is only able to appear autonomous in this way because the process of acquiring the wherewithal (cultural capital) to engage meaningfully with art has been concealed or denied as a necessary feature of the acquisition. Onlooker (B) has no cultural capital to speak of and so seeks a point of entry from whatever form of mediation is available.

In other hands, onlooker (B) might be regarded as a cultural figure self-evidentially external to art or at least peripheral to its competences – a neophyte perhaps. Consequently, any cultural division identified by the rivalry between (A) and (B) could be grounded and resolved with reference to art's proper horizon. (A)'s hegemony could be perpetually restored in this way. By considering (A) and (B) as rival onlookers for the same painting, Art and Language introduce cultural division into art as an internal tension, not a mark of distinction. Art and Language thus tie rival 'readings' to 'different fragments of culture, social division and so on' in the very act of refusing to map cultural division onto art's own hegemonic ground. Only in this way, or some equivalent of it, can (B)'s (or C's or etc) cultural agency begin to have an impact on (A)'s cultural world.

In the twenty years since Art and Language wrote about onlookers (A) and (B), the normative environment of the museum has (under the pressure of increasing visitor numbers, expanding new audiences and the postmodernist critique of modernism's exclusionary institutions) shifted away from onlooker (A). Onlooker (B) is courted and catered for in contemporary (museum and other) practices in ways that would have been scandalous to the previous generation of curators. Onlooker (A) has not been ousted, though. And onlooker (B) has not been endorsed exactly. Care has been taken to preserve the experience of onlooker (A) alongside the provision of supplementary material for the influx of onlooker (B)'s. What's more, the forms of attention advocated by the vast majority of museum catalogues, wall panels, audio guides and education programmes are those perfected by onlooker (A)'s throughout the history of modernism: visual, aesthetic, emotional, authorial, expressive, and so on. (B) does not challenge (A)'s hegemony of culture in the typical managerial mission of the new museology.

Consider, by contrast, the extent of the shift envisaged by Art and Language in their analysis of the act of painting by mouth [PBM₁]:

PBM₁ shifts the advantage away from (A) towards (B). In Modernist (and etc.) culture the advantage would be supposed to the other way round: the possibility of an authentic reading would tend to be favoured by the tendencies of (A). The sensitive (A's) search for unreflected content is more likely to be doomed to remain a convulsion or series of convulsions of his first-order discourse than is (B's) relatively more sober practice.

If paintings executed by mouth resemble expressive (and other modernist and postmodernist) styles of paintings then it follows that onlooker (A)'s forms of attention (going straight to the work etc) will not equip the onlooker with the ability to distinguish one from the other and may find themselves emoting or aestheticising inappropriately, whereas onlooker (B)'s forms of attention (reading the title first) will know in advance not to bother. This is what Art and Language mean by shifting the advantage away from onlooker (A): painting by mouth is a trap designed with onlooker (A) specifically in mind: "it stalks the onlooker's antecedent competences like a whiff of scandal". Indeed, despite all the hubris about postmodernist critiques of art's institutions and the new museology's transformation of the cultural environment, it remains, twenty years on, something of a scandalous suggestion to describe onlooker (A)'s forms of attention as convulsions and onlooker (B)'s as sober.

Among other things, Art and Language's summoning up of onlooker (B) is a first step in articulating cultural division as the construction of *rival and contestable* publics for art. Onlooker (B) is like a stain on aesthetics: its effects cannot be localised (the whole surface of the fabric is stained, not just this little corner). This is because the introduction of onlooker (B) enacts a qualitative transformation of the cultural field: without (B) or its equivalent, (A) is not *an* onlooker of art, but *the* onlooker of art. (B), for Art and Language, is not included into the community of gallery-goers as a trouble-free addition to that community. (B) transforms the cultural territory by entering it. In a word, (B) negates. Just as the identity of the 'self' is radically and permanently split by the existence of the 'other' (it is only by denying the existence or validity of the 'other' that the 'self' can hold onto a bogus sense of untroubled identity), (B) negates the self-identity (the self-images) of art and art's presumed proper public.

Rival Rivals of Culture's Cultures

Much of what is gained by inserting cultural division into the fabric of art might be lost if it was assumed that the resultant cultural rivalry amounts to a straight competition for art itself. Such a formulation of cultural rivalry revives the notion of art as a singular cultural formation. If (A) and (B) are rivals in art, however, then it would seem to be impossible to settle the question of which model of art that they represent should be regarded as the legitimate one. Art would, therefore, correspond somewhat to Laclau's concept of the 'empty signifier' – "whose temporary signifieds are the result of political competition". As such, rather than talking about art or aesthetics as having certain essential qualities, art would be opened up as the contingent result of hegemonic struggles over culture by rival fragments of the divided social whole. It would no longer make any sense to talk about what art is, what artists are or what art's onlookers do without identifying from which fragment of culture these claims derive.

Now, at the same time as opening up art to the contingencies of contestation through the play of hegemonic struggle, multiplying art in the process, the rivals within cultural division would also tend to multiply. (A) and (B) would seem to open up the field of cultural contestation for a ragbag of cultural rivals. Onlookers C to Z seem to be worth considering. Unless, that is, the very staging of the rivalry between onlookers (A) and (B) is too narrow to open up cultural hegemony for rival rivals. Certainly there is potential for variations on (A) and (B) within the framework of (A) and (B)'s rivalry, but the question is whether the formulation of their rivalry is sufficient for a number of rival rivals that are key to art's internal cultural divisions. There is a whole alphabet of cultural rivals that needs to be articulated.

Art and Language couch the distinction between onlooker (A) and onlooker (B) in terms of certain technical features of their respective rival forms of attention. These techniques derive from conceptualism's complaints about the intellectual heritage of modernist painting: onlooker (A)'s forms of attention follow from the modernist understanding of the primacy of the visual; onlooker (B)'s forms of attention are Conceptualist insofar as, for instance, they correspond to Siegelau's formula of inverting primary (visual) and secondary (supporting, contextual, discursive) information. In this sense, of course, the institutions of the new museology are graphically *not* populated by millions of onlooker (B)'s in the strict sense. (A) critique of the new museology could be developed from the disparity between its conception of art's supplementary onlookers and Art and Language's conception of onlooker (B). At the same time, however, we need to extend our conception of art's rival publics beyond the Art and Language's technical, Conceptualist horizon.

To conceive of the rift in art's modes of attention in terms of rival *onlookers* is already to construct cultural division according to sectional interests. Our first objection to the formulation of the rivalry between (A) and (B) is their shared status as onlookers. An onlooker is an individual who looks on but has no agency in an affair, and this automatically skews the question of art's potential rivals in three aspects – the primacy of vision, the framing of the encounter with art in terms of individuality rather than collective action, and the implication of passivity, rather than, say, participation, collaboration or co-

production. In order to extend art's rivals beyond the rivalry between onlookers (A) and (B) we need to extend our conception of the encounter with art beyond that of the onlooker. What are the alternatives?

The onlooker is not identical in all respects to the viewer, for instance. And the same can be said for a range of cultural figures, including the spectator, the audience and the passer-by. Consider briefly the distinctions between these cultural figures. One of the most commonly used terms to describe individuals in art galleries, the viewer, was originally intended to refer to the person watching television. (A) spectator is an individual who looks at a show, game or incident (a spectacle), while an audience, strictly speaking, is a group of listeners. A passer-by is an individual who casually happens upon a thing or event whereas a visitor actively makes a trip to somewhere or something. Notice not only the fine distinctions between these various cultural figures, but also that none of them were coined specifically in reference to the modes of attention of art. In the absence of an acceptable term that refers to art's subject specifically, seemingly neutral terms, such as visitor and gallery-goer, have come to replace objectionable terms such as connoisseur, art lover, gentleman, aesthete and man of taste.

This is not mere semantics. A genealogy of cultural figures and their respective forms of attention would go some way to mapping culture's divisions and thereby the routes through which culture is encountered and contested. To some degree disputes over culture are disputes over who or what we are meant to be when we attend to it. Or who or what we become by attending to it. Modes of attention are modes of being and modes of becoming. Likewise, the forms of address that are deployed in objects and processes within art and culture are invitations to act one way or another, consensual forms of regimentation. It does not minimise the impact of forms of address by equating them with the contexts in which they are found; aesthetic forms of address are no less regimes of action simply because they might seem, under certain descriptions, to be appropriate to art. If cultural figures are, or stand for, these regimes of cultural encounter, then paying attention to how we pay attention to culture will contribute to understanding who or what we can be through culture and this includes how we pay attention to others through how they pay attention to culture.

There is a cultural figure that can not be left out of such attention to cultural forms of attention despite the fact – or because of the very fact – that it was coined to refer specifically to individuals outside proper culture. This is the philistine. Historically, the framing of the philistine as a cultural figure has conformed to cultural hierarchy: the division between the aesthete (etc) and the philistine is drawn along the same line as the division between the aesthetic and the non-aesthetic, between art and non-art. This is why the concept of the philistine is so handy for exclusionary conceptions of culture: the philistine, under this description, is not a cultural rival so much as a rival to culture. Significantly, then, the philistine is a cultural figure unlike any other. The critical potential of the philistine has been almost entirely neglected, however, because, as an example of hate-speech, critical thinkers have been more inclined to avoid its use. However, recognising that the philistine is a figure within cultural discourse by virtue of being a figure without culture does not mean discounting the philistine from the field of culture. Nor does it mean that the philistine is necessarily an uncritical category. On the contrary, the philistine is a vital – if largely overlooked – cultural figure by virtue of existing at the very horizon of culture. In fact, the philistine, as a cultural category, is peculiarly well placed to mount a critique of the field of culture and its symbolic economies.

The Philistine Hope

Does the philistine's opposition to the aesthete (etc) mark the horizon of culture or is the philistine a marker of cultural division, of rivalry internal to culture? The foregoing suggests that we rearticulate this question in a way that doesn't privilege the forms of attention and modes of address of art and aesthetics. The reformulation might be more like this: it is not a question of whether the philistine is internal or external to culture in general or the system of art in particular, the

question is *what kind of conception of art and culture puts the philistine outside art and culture, and what kind of conception of culture treats the philistine as an internal rival?*

Preference for the latter formulation derives from understanding that art and culture are formed and reformed through cultural activities, particularly through the hegemonic struggle over what art and culture might be. An example that we have looked at illustrates what is at stake. Without onlooker (B) or its equivalent, there is no resistance to onlooker (A)'s claims to universality. In other words, the very authority and legitimacy of (A)'s modes of attention within culture is dependent upon its unrivalled hegemony which can only pass itself off as universal or necessary so long as its rivals are convincingly portrayed as illicit, off the map, naïve, inept or violent. The philistine is a cultural figure that still bears the scars of exactly this treatment. Once we begin to question the cultural hegemony, though, the trick of ruling out cultural rivals by describing them as external to culture becomes too transparent to be taken seriously. The aesthetic hegemony of art and culture is smuggled into the field of cultural production by a symbolic violence that those who profit from it cannot see. Because of this, the philistine is a valuable cultural figure: the philistine knows better than anyone about the mutilation that is concealed by those who exert cultural hegemony in matters of culture.

Just as onlooker (B) challenges the hegemony of onlooker (A), so the presence of the philistine in the cultural field transforms the cultural field itself. If the philistine is not reducible to the taunts of the aesthete then cultural division cannot correspond to the horizon of art. Cultural division is a broader struggle than that between art and the rest of culture, and, at the same time, cultural division is internal to art. One result of paying attention to cultural division in this way is to undo the idea that art is culture's universal. What permits the equation of art and universality is the exclusion of the sort of internal rivalries which would demonstrate that competing versions of art are, in fact, particular. Onlooker (B) spoils (A)'s illusion of universality, but the philistine needs to shake off the accusation of self-interest and particularity before the aesthete's claims to universality can be properly undermined. That is to say, the philistine could, in principle, be included as an internal rival of art but be marginalised, nonetheless, as a rogue voice. Laclau's argument that universal values are always particular ones that have gained hegemony doesn't help here because its levelling of competing terms does nothing to overcome centuries of accumulated bias. As equals under the present cultural hegemony, aesthetics will always win against the philistine. The task is to present the philistine's grievances as universal.

The key to understanding how the philistine could be represented as the universal in culture might lie in Laclau's exaggeration of the role of hegemony in Marx's identification of the working class with universal emancipation. For Laclau there can be no objective factors which would determine the hegemony of one group over another – the only thing that can determine that, for Laclau, is the contingent result of political competition. For Marx, however, the working class suggests itself for reasons that are far from contingent. Marx argues that the working class, as the producers of surplus value, has a special place within the capitalist mode of production which singles it out as the agent of universal emancipation. Marx would have been foolish to base his hopes in the working class on, say, the belief that they were especially virtuous, brilliantly educated, wise, kind, tolerant, full of good instincts or supernaturally well equipped to govern. No, Marx put his hopes in the working class *despite everything*. There was nothing positive about the working class that justified Marx's championing of them. Quite the contrary, it was the negative position of the working class in the structure of the capitalist economy that gave that class its universal status, and it was the potential negative force of the working class that suggested it for the emancipation of humanity in general by its ability, if organised and determined, to abolish capitalism. The position of the working class in Marx's analysis of capitalism can be instructive about the position of the philistine in cultural hegemony.

The philistine is not another way of talking about the proletariat: the philistine is not proletariat and the proletariat is not philistine. Nevertheless, philistinism is culture's hope *despite everything*. The philistine is not culturally superior to the

aesthete (or etc). In fact, there is nothing positive about the philistine that would justify any hope placed in it. Like the proletariat in the economy, though, the philistine holds a unique place within the totality cultural relations which means that it is the key to understanding culture and, potentially, a powerful agent in transforming it. By marginalising or excluding the philistine, aesthetic philosophy, art history, art criticism, semiotics, art theory and cultural sociology fail to grasp culture in its totality; they are all, therefore, subject to the kind of critique that can only derive from an understanding of culture from the point of view of the philistine. Culture is best understood and explained fully only by rearticulating the philistine not as culture's 'other' but as the negation of art's (and aesthetic's) 'false universal' (the contingent presentation of art and aesthetics as the cultural universal). The crucial difference between art (and aesthetics) and philistinism, in this regard – and this is decisive in the philistine's claim to universality – is that the false universal requires as the condition of its own possibility a detotalising split from that which is not universal, whereas the philistine, which can gain its universality only through hegemonic battle with art, must understand its own place as operating within a totality of relations including its relation to the false universal. Philistinism retotalises.

The Philistine Alphabet

Cultural division, especially for those incarcerated on that side of cultural division that pretends it is the only culture that matters, produces detotalising splits as a symptom of division itself. It takes an extra effort to overcome those symptoms of cultural division because they are felt as privileges and luxuries. Cultural capital brings real gains, not just symbolic ones. And they are hard to impugn when you benefit from them. What's more, taking sides with the philistine carries real dangers in a culture hegemonically dominated by art and aesthetics. More than once I've regretted writing about the philistine in the way that I do. But cultural division doesn't go away, and, in fact, so long as the philistine carries with it certain disadvantages, then the effects of cultural division need to be challenged. If we are to contest culture then we need to contest the very categories in which culture reproduces itself. We cannot take it for granted that the category of art is the one that is familiar with us. It is not just the job of artists to challenge the nature of art by doing novel things as art; it is also up to art's onlookers, viewers, spectators, publics and a whole alphabet of others to transform their relationship to art. As part of this we might need to ask ourselves whether the given alphabet of art's cultural rivals is broad enough for what we can do with art. Maybe we need a philistine alphabet? Certainly we need to construct new relations to art and, in contesting art's customary forms of attention and modes of address, it would make sense to devise a whole new alphabet of possible cultural figures. The philistine is only the beginning.

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