

SOME GENERAL OBSERVATIONS ON THE
PROBLEM OF CULTURAL COLONIALISM.

by

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Traditionally, historians of culture in general and art-critics in particular have tended to base their analyses and their theoretical platforms upon the assumption that art somehow represents the embodiment or the concretization of basic values and fundamental truths that exist somewhere outside of history, beyond social mutation, external to political and economic reality.

The complex of ideas that is clustered around the inter-related notions of the essential spirituality of art, the sublimity of the creative ~~experience~~ and the passion of genius, has served as a central nexus in the vast majority of thinking concerning matters of aesthetics since the inception of that area of inquiry as a specific discipline down to the present point in time. The validity of this position is, however, currently being severely questioned; though from the great majority of published art-criticism in specialist books, in art journals and in catalogue prefaces, it would not seem that our discipline has yet begun to take much note of a major shift in focus that is now occurring in the broad spectrum of world culture.

The present commentator himself is no longer able to accept the idea of the extra-historicity of art and the notion that artistic events take place in some manner in a continuum that is divorced from social and political dynamics. It also appears evident to him that when (in the vast majority of instances) we speak of a world-wide

"high" culture, a significant part of which is formed by the whole spectrum of the Fine Arts, we are actually speaking of a tradition that is largely restricted to the European cultural experience. Even a cursory glance at recent issues of the various "international" art journals, or at museum and major-exhibition catalogues, whether they emanate from Europe, from North America, Latin America, Soviet Russia, India, Japan or wherever, reveals a homogeneity of thought which fails utterly to question the Eurocentricity of most contemporary art-critical assumptions.

The two phenomena, the notion of the extra-historicity of art and the Eurocentric bias of our thinking on culture, are not merely in a clear reciprocal relationship but would seem to be mutually dependant one upon the other. In the present writer's opinion, they would also appear to be central aspects of a total attitude towards art which cannot, in clear honesty, be defined as anything less than Cultural Colonialism.

The stated theme of this present Congress is Modern Art and Negro-African Art, Reciprocal Relations. Such a subject obviously presupposes an examination of the relationship between African culture in terms of its national and regional heritage and its present manifestations on the one hand and the historically-defined edifice of European culture on the other. This inquiry cannot possibly avoid the issue of Cultural Colonialism, and the following observations are offered in the hope that they may be found to be of some value in this debate.

These observations, however, can only serve at this point in time as a sketch outlining the problem in broad strokes and thus attempt to define the general areas in which research and analysis is indicated. This specific inquiry is currently of an extremely pressing nature for obvious moral as well as historical reasons; but the scope of the question is very wide and far-reaching, penetrating, as it does, into every corner and crevice of our cultural superstructure, into every assumption and belief that helps to support our identity and self-esteem, into every facet and aspect of life that we regard as justifying our individual roles and activities.

In the broadest sense, what we regard generally as culture and specifically as art is the continually mutating end-product of a process that is basically mythic in nature, that is to say, a process in which beliefs and assumptions gain substance, become validated. But the dynamics of culture do not only lead in this way towards the fluid identification of a collective identity within a society, they also tend towards the freezing of concepts supportive to the interests of a dominant minority within that society.¹ Ideas which are at first the products of historical necessity are thus transformed into absolutes that are cited in justification of attempts to arrest the historical process, to maintain the status-quo.

The need to examine our present cultural assumptions in the light of the above contention cannot be emphasised strongly enough. It would seem that in the present majority view, there is hardly a single facet of that complex structure which we refer to as "high" culture that is understood to remain conditional upon historic necessity; rather, the whole cultural superstructure appears to be generally regarded as constituting a self-enclosed system obedient only to the exigencies of "art-history" - a different matter altogether. The discipline of art-history has never, until now (excepting in the work of isolated individuals regarded, institutionally, as tangential) been required to submit itself to the historical rigours of social and political fact, but has been nourished in the main on poetic insight and metaphysical speculation.

Art-history has been, since its inception in the late Renaissance, ultimately little more than a scholarly elaboration of myths inescapably engendered by the twin concepts of the essential sublimity of the creative process (which logically defines art as an experience located in the sphere of the ideal rather than the actual) and the centrality of style (which predicates the sequential development of an art whose central subject-matter is restricted to its confrontation with previous art rather than with real experience taking place in history).

The notion of the extra-historicity of art is, however, clearly a false one - not even, but especially - in terms of the class who do not only defend this idea, but

who have also raised it to an ideological imperative. The bourgeois insistence upon the Idealist nature of the whole creative process can be seen to serve, on the one hand, as justifying the view held by that class that its understanding of the individualistic, competitive and acquisitive nature of man is not a class-view but an absolute human condition, and, on the other hand, to obscure the almost total appropriation of "high" culture as both the private property and preserve of a privileged group and as the spiritual vindication of their continuing economic and political domination.

Enough has been written elsewhere upon the question of a dominant class' appropriation of cultural institutions to dispense with arguing this point in the present context: it is hoped that it will be here accepted that the possession of a broad culture and of a liberal-humanist education is not merely the privilege of the bourgeoisie but that it also comprises the structure of the code signals by which individual members of the class recognise each other and consolidate their own private identities. The institutions in which the transference and acquisition of cultural property take place are set up in such a manner as to perpetuate existing class privileges and to restrict the entree of extra-class individuals to those whose status is considered in terms of necessary recruitment, that is to say, as candidates for indoctrination into the bourgeois value system.

It might be stated that it is not our purpose here to consider the still-existing, though possibly eroding, bourgeois class-dominance other than where class hegemony relates to colonialist assumptions. But, this finally would be a meaningless statement since it is not possible to separate either, historically, the development of bourgeois consciousness from the development of colonialism, or, socially, the bourgeois value-system from racist and imperialist assumptions of superiority. Very little that is fruitful can be achieved in attempting to think of imperialism as a phenomenon divorced from the class assumptions of capitalism; this is an error frequently made in the past by many writers concerning the internally-colonialist status of the Blacks in North America and elsewhere, and, more recently, in regard to the Amerindians and

internally-colonized aboriginal peoples. The "whites", as a collective and politically undifferentiated mass, rather than the capitalist system which produces the alienation requisite for racist attitudes, are seen as the oppressors.

In our present context it is absolutely crucial to recognise that the two questions of cultural colonialism and class appropriation are interrelated and interdependent; and, although space clearly precludes that this paper should attempt an analysis on these lines, it must be emphasised that the dimension of class contradiction be borne in mind throughout the remainder of this exposition.

We have intimated that culturally colonialist attitudes and assumptions permeate the whole domain of "high" culture, and that this is no where more evident than across the spectrum of the Fine Arts. The reason for this may well be related to the reason for the apparent preeminence in our present culture of the visual mode in the arts over both the musical and the verbal. Up until the end of the 19th Century it would appear that musical and verbal culture were more highly regarded than was plastic culture, which, with few significant exceptions, essentially was considered as being the province of mere artisans. Indeed, in Anglo-Saxon countries, such an attitude has persisted until very recently, whereby literature might, under certain circumstances, be considered a fit occupation for a gentleman, while, at the same time, there was something suspect, indeed disreputable, in the idea of making a career as a painter.

It is interesting to observe, over a period of time, the changing social attitudes of the European and North American middle-class towards the Fine Arts; This process is perhaps due less to the fact that financial profit was possible in both production and speculation than to the supposition that painting (and sculpture to a lesser extent) was the art-form that best objectified bourgeois ideals, since the individual picture could become property in the absolute sense, since it could uniquely embody both the status and the aspirations of its owner in a manner that was obviously denied to the poem, the novel, the play or the opera.

That direct financial potential was not a factor to be taken into serious account becomes clear if one is to remember that only twice in the history of art during modern times was there a brief situation of boom and speculation in which art production and marketing could be said to approach a sufficiently high temperature of speculative potential to interest the serious investor or financier. One of these booms was in late-Victorian genre painting, but this cannot in any way be considered a phenomenon of visual culture since it was, in essence, the sentimental and moralistic subject-matter exemplified by the work of such painters as Landseer and the late Millais that was at issue.

It is not possible, in this instance, to regard the art-work as a cultural product designed for the consumption of a visually literate public, nor is it possible to see the individual painting operating as a special objet de luxe. The whole phenomenon was more in the nature of an early construct of mass-media soporific, one designed as a placebo for a restless lower middle-class and upper-proletariat. The vast prices that were paid for individual works, the aura of gossip and fame, the celebrity status awarded such artists as Watts, Alma-Tadema, Leighton and Poynter, as well as to such support-system mandarins as Ruskin, would seem to make it obvious that, if parallels were to be drawn with more recent times, then this extraordinary period should be related to the baroque extravagance of Hollywood at its zenith, at a point when a later and only slightly more sophisticated generation of the articulate deprived were clearly persuaded to submerge their claims in a vicarious participation in constructed glamour.

The art boom, now substantially deflated, of the immediate past was a different matter altogether. It was the product of two forces; first, a direct and very lucrative dimension of speculation whereby industrial and corporate marketing techniques allied to sophisticated promotional methods were applied to the merchandising of art, and, secondarily, the recently initiated and still-ongoing "canonisation" of culture whereby the arts have, to a certain extent, been required to fill a role of secular spiritualization in the vacuum left by the demise of religion within an increasingly alienated consumer society.

It is, however, not in respect of, but rather despite, these two art "booms", both resulting from forces extraneous to art itself, that we note the progressive ascension of the Fine Arts from a somewhat lowly status to a position of preeminence among other cultural pursuits to a point whereby the word "art" became synonymous with the visual experience and connotes a dimension of sublimity only previously associated with mystical and divine visitation. The hypothesis that this process represents the development of the cultural symbol-system most appropriate to a society increasingly geared to profit and consumption would seem to be supported by a historical juxtaposition of the events in art during the last 150 years or so and the parallel emergence to social confidence, to political and to economic power, of the bourgeoisie.

If there is any virtue in the above line of thought, then one would expect to discover a more clearly impacted and more deeply ingrained structure of colonialist assumptions in the domain of the Fine Arts than in other parallel disciplines. Literature, certainly, in the past maintained a clear allegiance to a tradition whereby it sought to locate itself in an "academic" stream of liberal-humanism which restricted the definition of verbal culture to the European experience; however, on the threshold of the modern period, as we shall see, it abandoned this specific structure of collective civil value for a general structure of subjective and regional value.

The notion that culture comprises a humanizing body of values and concepts through which the educated both recognise each other and communicate with each other (through the common possession of a vocabulary of metaphors and historical or classical references) was an invention of the High Renaissance. There is an incontestible logic in the fact that, during the first years of evolving imperialism and condensing European identity, the emerging mercantile society should have regarded itself as both a historical and cultural nexus, and, in order to justify itself by initiating a claim upon predecessors and exemplars, should have projected value and virtù onto a mixed tradition that was part historical fact and part legendary construct.

The appropriation, in this manner, of a past that was an amalgam of myth and actual event was in essence the cultural dimension of a European expansionism that had its

mental dimension in the developing scientific approach towards the natural world and its political and geographical dimensions in the mercantile and maritime explosion which took place at the crumbling of the Aristotilean universe. The birth of Europe was not only achieved in relationship to the twin forces of emergent science and emergent capitalism, but it was also fixated with a profound conviction of the fundamental centrality and manifest preeminence of the new political and social structures, and this event was accompanied from the very first by a deeply ingrained process of appropriation.

Colonialism did not appear in the modern world with the forays of Cortez into Yucatan, or with the destruction of Tenochtitlán, but with the claim of historical cozenage extended by Renaissance mercantile republicanism towards the exemplars of a dimly-remembered Roman polis observed through the roseate lenses of political ambition and swiftly-consolidating class interest.

It is from this point that we can note the development of a body of cultural property that was later to be defined as the tradition of liberal-humanism. At the beginning this represented simply the collective self-identification of a small, but enormously self-confident, mercantile class in Florence and elsewhere; but as time went on, the idea of "Humanism" was to be identified with civilized value itself, it was to become the prerequisite base of culture and education. In this way, the special interests of a specific class and the broad sweep of absolute cultural value were seen as synonymous. This claim upon history initiated the process of cultural mystification from which we are still suffering, and, as we may now perceive, it relied for its continued expansion upon a process of cultural appropriation.

Culture, in the new post-Renaissance understanding, was henceforth to serve the interests of a class rather than those of the collective; as the new economic imperatives penetrated the feudal world they inexorably mutated the relationships that existed in that world, transforming the co-operative Gemeinschaft of the collective of Christianity into the competitive Gesellschaft of economic, and later, of industrial, man. Furthermore, the new concept of culture, as in the very nature of capitalism itself, demanded both a continually-expanding lode of resources and a continually-expanding "market".

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In opposition to the static and genuinely "absolute" value of feudal culture, it was in essence dynamic and relative (though, of course, it pretended claims to the absolute) and, thus, could only function in a condition of permanent expansion. Since its subject-matter was not realist in the feudal sense, that is to say, one not reflecting the existent and, internally to that society, self-evidently timeless and eternal values subscribed to by that society, but, rather, was idealist (in that its motive was to project the poetic and the conditional, to project metaphorical allusions to a universe that did not yet exist but which might possibly be brought into being through the powers of the imagination) then, clearly, it was constrained to look outside of the general body of symbols and concepts that made up the common heritage of the society.

The culture of the feudal world, in terms of the understanding of that world, was far from a metaphysical one, for, despite the totally Christian nature of its symbolism, the basic concept of the universe was of a hierarchical continuum rising vertically upward from the lowest peasant through the ranks of the nobility, the ranks of the Church, through the Pope to the empyrean, to Christ and, finally, to the Godhead. The structure of medieval thought, just like the content of medieval religious painting, was essentially one which was concerned with things that were actually real and tangible, things as physically present in both time and space as was man and his daily mundane activities and aspirations. Paradoxically, it is with the development of pictorial realism in the purely technical sense that we first note the shift towards the depiction of a metaphysical and Idealist universe.

It would not seem to be co-incidental that the Medici and their successors should have chosen and reinforced the medium of the visual arts to express and confirm the justification for their vision of a new, fragmented, and competitive structure of human social relations, since this medium could perhaps best embody the dimension of subjective idealism with the notion of individual "genius", and, thus, help to salve and obscure the paradox engendered by the necessary opposition between usury and charity, between competition and co-operation, between the possession of economic power and privilege by a minority and the requisite resignation to poverty and to subservience demanded of a majority.

The new idea of the creative power of the imagination as the prime assumption within the domain of culture was, in so raising isolated and personal actions to a fundamental principle, without doubt engendered by the need to vindicate the moral ambiguity of individual economic and entrepreneurial aggression. Similarly, the claim upon precedent raised by the delineation of parallels between the 15th Century mercantile reality and an idealized view of Roman republican virtue was conditional upon the need to legitimize a social stance that was based upon fiscal manipulation in a society that had for centuries regarded usury as a cardinal sin.

A concept of appropriation that is soon to declare itself as colonialist in nature can thus be seen to have initiated its central role in European culture from the very point of the emergence of a continental "European" consciousness. Though the first phase of this phenomenon can be seen to have operated almost exclusively in the domain of "history", we must be clear at this point that the force that was working in this context was far from what we understand by the concept today.

An understanding of history as a continuum of events whereby the occurrences of the past to a great extent logically preclude the patterns of the future is dependant upon the possession of accurate records or plausible speculation together with an objective analysis of this evidence. History, until the end of the 18th Century at least, was as much, if not more, a matter of projection as it was of research and analysis; the separation between legend and fact was not accomplished until the comparatively recent past. Bishop Ussher's widely-accepted chronology, for example, whereby the world was understood to have been created in scriptural totality upon a specific day in February 4,004 B.C., or the fact that Issac Newton was himself ultimately more interested in his theological and his historiographical speculations than in his scientific observations, demonstrates a profound ambiguity in regard to the past existing as late as the Enlightenment. At that time it was still imperative to somehow equate the literal and revealed truth of Biblical text with the virtual and observed truth of archeological and palaeontological evidence.

Even on the threshold of **Romanticism** we may observe William Blake alternately swinging between, on the one hand, his "modernist" response to the injustices of industrial society and to the revolutionary aspirations of an awakening political consciousness and, on the other, his residual, but deeply intuitive, conviction of scriptural truth and his intellectual debt to Swedenborg and Jacob Bryant; indeed, it is from the very tensions of this paradox that his poetic inspiration depended.

The Romantic period, however, was not simply the major cultural response to the developing technological dimension of the industrial revolution and to the emerging social dimension of class-consciousness, it also marked the shift of central emphasis in the ongoing process of appropriation from the historical domain directly to the geographical, and, ultimately, to the colonial domain.

The conflict between Classicism and Romanticism that marked the closing decades of the 18th Century as well as the opening ones of the 19th Century, was not the result of simple stylistic or scholastic rivalry, it was not even primarily the expression of antagonism between the waning, closed society of post-Restoration aristocracy and the social forces unleashed by the French Revolution. Rather, it was much more the expression of the fact that a developing body of scientific knowledge had begun to render history opaque to the penetrations of capitalist appropriation. History had become, itself, a science, and, as a result, the possibility of a reinterpretation of the past in favour of an elite began to recede in the face of the increasing availability to a wider public of clear and unambiguous information.

In the light of the archeological discoveries of Winckelmann and others, the ancient world took on the clearly defined lineaments of real life. The Classical antique, revealed at last to the the scrutiny of daylight, thus lost the ambiguous and problemantical dimensions which alone made it malleable to the idealism of appropriation. The Classical mutated into the Neo-Classical; and, as the distinction between legend and fact was clarified, so images in art became more archeologically "truthful" and progressively less and less able to support the process of mystification.

In a final and spectacular burst of historical appropriation, the French Revolution itself claimed justification from the ancient world; but the brief paganism of the divinity of Reason was soon to fade, and by the time of Napoleon we note the sudden shift of focus, first to a non-Classical past, then, directly, to the double perspective of a geographical and colonial dimension balanced by the obverse invasion of purely mental territories.

Napoleon's colonial adventure into Egypt was the first one since the imperialism of the ancient world to return in triumph bearing cultural spoils as proof of conquest and territorial sovereignty. During earlier phases of colonialism, during the Spanish domination of Central and South America, for example, or during the British and French expansion into North America, artefacts, usually of a religious or totemic nature, were sometimes brought back to the colonizing metropolis. But it was not cultural property that was transported in this way as much as evidence of the spiritual and religious domination and subsequent conversion of the barbaric heathen. Conquistadors, gentlemen-adventurers and merchants had no interest whatsoever in artefacts as cultural property, only in their possible value as precious metal. Neither did priests have any interests in such objects beyond exhibiting them as proof of their missionary zeal and as examples demonstrated before their ecclesiastical superiors of the thousands of pagan idols they have burnt and smashed in the name of the propagation of the faith.

The Napoleonic campaigns were innovative in that cultural property was accounted among the spoils of war; and not merely physical objects and artefacts either, but also the intangible and abstract property of artistic style. Together with the obelisks and statuary looted from the Nile valley, the victorious returning army brought back an artistic style that was to be rapidly adopted as the formal and official visible hallmark of the moral and political authority of Empire.

At the very point when the mother lode, as it were, of the Classical antique dried up as a resource for historical appropriation, a new pre-Classical civilization was offered as substitute. Yet, just as a transition was being made in the matter of resources, so

parallel transition was also effected in terms of needs. The Egyptian civilization, dying as it did during the Classical period, turns out to be one-dimensional; there are, apparently, no decipherable records, no historic personages save a few vague shadows, no heroes, no exemplary legends. merely the single dimension of visual style.

Style alone, it quickly becomes apparent, cannot long fill the role now being proffered it - a radical departure, incidentally, to any previous response in regard to visual culture, and one crucially in need of proper analysis. This new aesthetic relationship clearly places style under the constraint of consumption; without subject-matter, without a moral or exemplary dimension, there must now be initiated a process of mutation, of change, novelty, surprise.

In this way, a specific element attached to the new imperial Egyptian style becomes first isolated, then made central; it is an element that seems at first to be capable of near-infinite variety, of almost continuous mutation, the element of strangeness itself, the element of exoticism.

The Romantic Movement now has its leit-motiv, its theme; it is, however, to expand the search into the exotic into two essential and different directions. One, which is our direct concern here, is to result in the conscious attempt to appropriate and to incorporate into the body of European culture the diverse cultures, not only of the whole world, but also of the whole of history. It is here that the tacit historical appropriation that we have attempted to define becomes a clear and overt programme of colonial appropriation throughout the whole of world culture. There would seem little doubt that the expanding European military and economic imperialism of the early 19th Century onwards is paralleled and echoed with a developing structure of cultural colonialism.

The other direction taken by the Romantic Movement in general constituted a similar expansion, but one that operated inwards, towards a "colonization", as it were, of subjective mental territory. As the first force can be observed as co-opting

the cultures not only of the non-European peoples but also of the vanished peoples of the past, so the second force may be seen to launch an attempt to appropriate the whole twilight territory of the mind, the landscapes of dreams and fantasies, the preserves of psychology and psychopathology, the primitivism of childhood, the bizarre territories of superstition, magic, folklore and the absurd.

It is not within our scope here to enter into an inquiry concerning the subjectivist space that the arts have invaded and which has become so firmly a characteristic of artistic modernism; suffice, at this point, to briefly remark on two points. Firstly, during the early years of the Romantic Movement, the visual arts entered the subjectivist area with considerable vigour. In a spectrum that might include Fuseli, John Martin, and Caspar-David Friedrich at one pole and Gericault's fascination with abnormality at another, we could stretch out the whole bandwidth of the sublime and the picaresque, particularly in terms of landscape, and even include the gentler Wordsworthian echoes to be found in such celebrators of the spiritual in nature as Constable.

However, despite the dramatic intensity of the period, the theme of mental space in painting is, after a short time, to be almost completely abandoned until it is picked up once more, at a later date, in a minor key by the Surrealists and by various introspective individualists such as Paul Klee. Secondly, in considering subjectivist appropriation, we may here return to a point that was earlier intimated concerning the relationship between the visual arts and other creative areas of activity. A simple glance at the events of the Romantic Movement and after will reveal that it is verbal culture in general and literature in particular which has most consistently explored the subjectivist arena. During the Renaissance and the Baroque, literature naturally expressed the Classical structure that we have defined (witness Spencer or Racine) but, for some reason, perhaps partly because pre-Renaissance writing (Chaucer, Dante, Petrarch, Villon, Rabelais) retained more direct links with the antique world, it never objectified Renaissance and Baroque society as eloquently as did the plastic arts.

Similarly, at the point of the Romantic Movement, literature, and to a similar extent, music, was to concentrate almost exclusively on the subjectivist view of society, of the world, and of nature. This may also partly explain why present-day literature, though obviously by no means totally free of colonialist assumptions, stands in a less crucial position in this regard than do the plastic arts.²

As we have remarked, the subjectivist position exhibited in early 19th Century painting was not to hold centre stage for more than a brief period. Such subjectivism demands content in painting, even if it be no more than that found in Turner, for example: the flux of the individual artist's emotions in the face of nature. It was not Gericault, with his deeply humanistic response to man, who was to survive and to condition the future, but Delacroix, the flamboyant and brilliant master of style, the inaugurator of pure painting, the dynamic colourist, the anticipator of expressionist abstractionism, and the artist who, above all, defined the ideal subject matter of painting as the exotic.

It was Delacroix who travelled North Africa in the wake of a colonizing Embassy and, in observing the picaresque bedouin, the harem odalisque, reified them into exotic and glamorous objects. He painted people as if they were guitars, and, personally, inaugurated the long process through which European art was to attempt to appropriate the visual culture of the whole planet into its own self-conceived "mainstream".

Can we here isolate an imperative within the general structure of capitalist social relations? A subjectivist artist, even if his overt motivation is that of an egoic sensibility who desires his personality to expand to the dimensions of the universe, still observes and recognises his fellow creatures. But, if the necessities of capitalist society require art to maintain its appropriative role in the real-time world, having lost its hegemony over the "historical" world, then it could hardly be expected to observe and recognise real fellow human beings; too many contradictions could result and inhibit the process.

If the visual arts were to be about modern life, if painters were to anticipate Baudelaire (or at a slightly later date, to follow him) they would find themselves in a different position from the poet and outsider who was comparatively more free of social claims. It seems plausible to envisage a situation of pretending a more profound bohemianism than is accepted as commitment, and, subsequently, avoiding conflicts by reifying the subject matter. The logic of the situation demanded that people had to be treated as still-lives (or, more eloquently, as nature-mortes), the logic of the situation also revealed that the imperative towards abstractionism was inevitable.

We can note with the Barbizon painters a swing not only against the commitment of content in painting but also the first intimations of the idea of a pure painting of style. The landscape, in their hands, began to become the starting point for an essay into pure visual sensibility, and was thus the initiation of a process later to be explored by some of the Impressionists into the point of negation. For the individual artist, this represented the threshold of an exciting and passionate voyage into the potential of the eye, and, despite their conscious intentions (even, paradoxically, in opposition to a stated allegiance to content, to a search for rural innocence) the hegemony of style over content was inaugurated.

The later landscape painters of the pre-Impressionist period were already committed to the pure visual adventure. In their conscious understanding, as well as in their visual intuition, the separation between narrative painting and pure painting was achieved. Both the creative experience and the artistic product were thrust firmly into the sphere of the absolute, and, from that point onwards, we began to become used to thinking of "high" culture in general and the Fine Arts in particular as operating in some sort of mental and moral space totally divorced from any but the most abstract and tenuous relationship with social realities.

The present world climate of thought, however, now obliges us to begin to reassess the relationships that obtain, historically, in regard to the arts; there is a current

tendency to query whether it is possible for any event to take place in isolation from the social domain. If this is so, then the initial commitment to pure painting represents not merely the cultural echoes of an attempt to reify the world, but also a significant factor operating towards this end. It could be said that the plein-airistes, developing commitment to style, reversed the image celebrated by such of their predecessors as Constable who envisaged a coherent and humanized landscape, and, in this way, projected an image of an absolute, fragmented and dehumanized landscape.

Immersed in their narrow stylistic concerns, the individual artists, many professing liberal, humane, and even "socialist" affiliations, nevertheless acquiesced in a restructuring of man's relationship with his environment which, ultimately, was profitable to restricted political interests. The capitalist social relations that were consolidating at the peak of the industrial revolution demanded a divorce between man and his natural environment in order that the masses might better accept the artificial environment of the industrial milieu.

It is possible that an earlier stage of this process was initiated during the period of the Gothic Revival, for, with the idea of the picaresque, we can observe the first intimations of the transformation of the natural environment (the basic arena for man's presence, identity and social interaction, the archetypal space in which man labours and humanizes the world and himself) to a product, a commodity designed to be consumed. It is capitalism, rather than the technological exigencies of the modern world that required our present almost total alienation from natural phenomenon, and it would simply not seem plausible to regard a major cultural event, such as the process of developing abstraction in 19th Century landscape painting, as being socially unrelated to capitalism's achievement of this aim.

In this context, we are obliged to observe the developing hegemony of "style" and pure painting as not merely a series of events taking place in the domain of "art-history", but as events taking place in real history, events taking place in respect of the

continually mutating structure of social relations. In substituting style for content, the visual arts were suddenly launched, as we have seen, upon a process of reliance on external resources. The speed with which art, as it were, consumed landscape, eroded its stylistic potential (the rapidity of the voyage between Barbizon and, for instance, Monet's Haystacks) was remarkable.

Most of us are culturally and historically conditioned to regard the intense burst of activity that took place largely in Paris between the 1860s and the 1920s, to consider that period of roughly half-a-century which begins with the mature work of Manet and which climaxes with Surrealism, Constructivism and the Bauhaus, as a peak in terms of human dignity and freedom. We usually think of this as a point where the human race compares favourably with its more common idiocies and barbarities. The only cloud that occasionally shadows this myth is a Pompidou-like French chauvinism that would claim national credit for this wonder which, in reality, belongs to the world; but that does not seem serious, since we are all, apparently, proud to claim passports to the moral citizenship of the Parisian avant-garde.

There would seem to be no question that we would have to regard this period in art as a unique and positive moment in human history if the version proposed by art-history be correct; if it really is true that a group of the most talented people that the world has ever seen congregated almost by accident and created, in vacuo, as it were, a dazzling perspective of images so multitudinous and so fruitful that, for half-a-century style succeeded style, concept displaced concept, in a variety and complexity that historians and curators have hardly been able yet to begin adequately to comprehend and classify the wealth of cultural material thus placed to our common heritage.

However, it is questionable that this is what happened. It is questionable that a great and fruitful stratum of creativity was suddenly brought to light in this manner. A doubt would appear to be raised if we are to regard the whole phenomenon of modern art in the context which we have here attempted to define; for thus we would note the centrality of appropriation rather than that of creation. An art structure that is

rapidly expanding, both in terms of its audience and in terms of its practitioners, develops a pressing need for nourishment. And, an art restricted to style, as we have seen, cannot feed from its own social and historical reality, but demands a constant supply of raw forms for its survival.

When the potential of landscape was "consumed" some time in the 1880s, a brief foray into the twilight territory of the Parisian demi-monde was undertaken, but this alone did not appear to provide substantial fare. A more solid source of material was required; and this was provided just at the point of most pressing need. At various levels throughout ~~late 19th~~ 19th Century society, from the academic ethnologists and anthropologists, guardians of brand-new sciences, to the frivolity of salons and dinner tables, an awareness of extra-European culture was penetrating. Peoples in distant countries and in "primitive" societies began to take on a substance more solid than that of the undifferentiated native. Suddenly, with the possibility of an almost apparently limitless material ripe for stylistic adaption, the vertical take-off of modern art was assured.

The process of co-option and appropriation was extraordinarily rapid and complete, Beginning jointly, and perhaps hesitantly, with Degas and Whistler staking out claims in the Japanese, and with Gauguin grasping, first, the "primitive" of Breton folk-art, then that of Melanesia, the pattern was set. Every artist, from the most significant members of the cénacle at La Lapin Agile to the most obscure dauber in the Place du Tertre, attempted to secure for himself some sort of cultural territory to exploit. Within thirty to forty years years not one corner of non-European culture remained untouched as a source of imagery either, geographically, to the most obscure tribal totem, or, temporally, to the most shadowy celtic dolmen and paleolithic cave.

Despite the ransacking of time and space, the individual artist by himself, the painter in his studio, did not, of course, personally appropriate the complete cultures of non-European space and extra-modern time. However, both by his adoption of aspects of these cultures to contemporary idioms and by his elevation of style to an absolute principle, he was responsible for permitting the European and Eurocentric institutions of culture to consummate the appropriation totally.

For, in this way, was laid the justification for the process first described by Walter Benjamin in The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction and ultimately formalized by Malraux in his invidious conceit of The Museum Without Walls, wherein the whole of known culture is placed on terms of neutral and negative institutional equality, divorced from function, divorced from meaning, divorced from human use, divorced from any social dimension whatsoever.

Any lingering doubt concerning the now almost total acceptance of this view of art, of the world-wide bourgeoisification of culture, may be ~~laid to rest~~ by visiting at random any fair-sized Fine Art Museum in any city in the world³. Inevitably, one will there observe cultural artefacts from diverse societies and from diverse historical epochs torn out of social context and presented in a manner where the only standard of comparison or relationship is similarity or divergence of style. Further, one will see these cultural artefacts displayed peripherally to a central collection of European or Eurocentric painting (usually covering the period from the International Gothic to the latest in Conceptual Art).

We are so conditioned to this relationship, we are so ingrained to the central imperative of style, that the implications of the display usually escapes. Only a certain type of analytical approach (such as has been attempted ~~here~~) whereby art is regarded primarily from the point of view of its social role, is capable of revealing an assumption so arrogant as to stagger the mind: the assumption that the whole existing body of world culture from the very dawn of human time must be conventionally understood and appreciated in the light of the European visual experience of the last 500 years!

It has been the intention of this paper to propose that it is a plausible idea to regard the assumptions of modern art and the traditions that have led up to these assumptions as being neither international in scope nor absolute in nature. On the contrary, it is suggested that the assumptions of modern art are fundamentally of a Eurocentric character, and are ultimately limited to a specific world-view that is defined by the nature of the dominant class in the capitalist world.

It would seem that there is evidence to demonstrate the possibility that the Fine Arts have, historically, long been(though, no doubt, unwittingly) in a position of service to social interests that are inimical, both economically and politically, to its own well-being. It would also seem that the Fine Arts have, historically, fallen victim to a myth concerning the absolute and metaphysical nature of its activity, as a result of which its actions and its products have been used to justify not merely a criminal structure of social relations but also the world-wide edifice of imperialism upon which this structure still depends.

Should this line of thought be found in any way to be a viable one, then the ramifications to the artistic community in general, and to the art-critical community in specific, are enormous. We may currently observe significant factions of the academic disciplines of Anthropology and Sociology questioning whom they serve in terms of the conventional and accepted methodology of these sciences. Art-criticism deserves to do no less than to examine the nature of its own role in this regard.

The whole question of cultural colonialism needs desperately, for obvious reasons, to be placed under scrutiny. To the best knowledge of this present commentator, this task has yet to be initiated; and this current paper may well be the first tentative attempt in this direction. The moral obligation of the European critical community to clarify their position is uncontestable. The pressing need for the Third-World countries, presently struggling for economic, political and cultural independence, to dispell the myths obscuring the true social nature of culture goes without saying.

The scope of the question is vast, and the implications penetrate into most levels of local, regional, national and international political relations wherever cultural differences are either a significant factor or where cultural autonomy is being threatened by more forceful neighbours. The problem does not only reside primarily in the emergent Third-World countries, but everywhere. One crucial area, for

instance, is located in the clear policy of cultural genocide through assimilation that is currently being practiced in North America and elsewhere in regard to the indigenous peoples. A sub-section of this area is the ambiguous cultural activity residing in the artificial "airport-art" constructs of Navajho jewellery and Eskimo stone-carvings, whereby bureaucratic political institutions are inventing an art-form on behalf of a subservient and internally-colonised peoples.

It is not within the scope of this paper to chart, at this point, the enormous task of analysis ahead of us. However, should some debate which might lead to the commencement of this analysis result from this thesis, then the author will feel that its primary purpose has been achieved.

Footnotes:

1. Roland Barthes speaks of myth as being "depoliticised speech", Mythologies Paladin, London 1972, p.142. I am using the word "mythic" here in an analogous manner. See also (Ibid) "...myth is a type of speech...a mode of signification (p.109)...(it)is an inflexion...it transforms history into nature." (p.129)
2. Naturally, the very subjectivist bias that celebrates the existential predicament of the individual in the mainstream of the literature of the last 100 years or so (e.g. since Rimbaud's Lettre de Voyant of 1871) seems to justify the bourgeois contention that extreme individualism and competitiveness are the "natural human condition", thus, in turn, appearing to vindicate a political and economic system that accords priority to competition over co-operation.
3. We should clearly remark here that this would be at the present time with the obvious exception of China. It remains to be seen what forms the art institutions of that country will take in the future. In this context, it is perhaps as well to emphasise here that this does not except Soviet Russia and other Eastern European socialist countries who remain European chauvinists in this regard.

The phrase "Fine Art Museum" has been used in this paragraph. It is possible to remark here upon a tendency that is occasionally observable in certain so-called Ethnographic or Anthropological Museums where cultural artefacts are displayed as if they were "art", defining them minimally in a social context. The bourgeois assumptions concerning culture are very insidious indeed.

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