

Mausoleums, Oxymorons, and Carnivals

The welcome energy that has resulted in the contemporary proliferation of magazines and journals concerning themselves with some aspect of culture also creates the compulsion to confront intellectual movements that attempt to redirect our sense of what culture is. This means not only recognizing their existence but also being wary of suffocation by their attempt at whole-scale appropriation. Take, for example, that scholastic and aesthetic fad known as postmodernism which is currently sweeping the conference circuits and seeping through the cracks of academe.

Now, theoretical schools or artistic movements that try to name themselves have been generally apocalyptic in tone and nihilistic in intent. And it is certainly true that most movements that do not so qualify were either named after a concept (positivism), a thinker (Aristotle) a historically convenient figure (Victoria), or a style (Baroque), and always by subsequent generations. The idea of the modern, the post-modern, or the ultra-modern are thus curiosities of those whose sense of time running out overwhelms their ability to offer descriptive or even approximately analytical categorizations, or attempts to grab the present before others define it. The categorical imperative turns to consume its own tail. The literature of the aesthetics of the "postmodern" offers simultaneously an explosion and implosion of images, metaphors, allegories and tropes which suggest that the time of Now may be the time of the Oxymoron, that skirmishes amongst improbable images are better than the repetition of over-used ones. It is curious to witness critical theorists behaving like newspaper columnists; the instant judgement of the moment being, however, translated into sweeping generalizations of an entire epoch.

One of the legacies of Hegelian-Marxist thinking is the attempt to make connections across the whole sweep of culture, society, economics, politics and biology. But if in Marxist thinking the attempt came from analysing and metaphorizing a recognizable socio-economic base, the cultural has been purely constructed out of the flotsam and jetsam of images and productions. The baleful influence of the French misanthropes (notably Baudrillard, Bataille, Lyotard) echoes in their North American clones whose *mitrailleuse* splatters its bullets at random across an entire continent in a fit of intellectual *Beider-Meinhofism*. The hermetic cult of post-modernistic rhetoric is a cynical substitute for examining the present in any critical manner. It is the contemplation of its own detritus.

Of course much of everyday culture is self-seeking (or already self-referential), produced by mountebanks concerned with novelty for its own sake, a culture of narcissism, the glorification of atrocity. This dynamic has continuously appropriated what used to call itself the avant-garde. And in addition,

framed within a different but related institutional apparatus, there is the culture of hegemony, the articulation of control, the culture of the major galleries and Robert Fulford, the sanctification of The Tradition and nationalism-as-fetish. This safe culture will not be put on the bargaining table easily because it is the culture of the self-image. Archival inheritance, threatened by appropriation as the meretricious adornment of a bourgeoisie intent on displaying -- against all the evidence -- that it is cultured, must be rethought, but not in those terms.

The two cultures -- the culture of the mausoleum and the culture of the oxymoron -- represent the polarities of the cultural debate as it is presently circulated in public-institutional discourse. Both cultures are predominantly concerned with instant legitimacy and the political neutralization of art. The mausoleum culture is in haste -- through Governor General's awards and the like -- to co-opt products, from whatever source, which can validate its tenuous claim to power; the culture of the oxymoron refutes this co-optation, and the sense of history that it implies, by arguing for even greater disconnectedness, for absolute relativism, with the claim that what it is doing is not 'mere' culture but philosophy -- in Lyotard's words "working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what will have been done." With such a programme it too can claim any contemporary writer or artist, artefact or process as part of its raw material, a terrorism dedicated to the dismissal of any content of what is said and the context within which it is said. But by claiming to be open both cultures are predicated on closure and the pursuit of system-building.

Borderlines is concerned with opening cultural discourses, of intervening in specific areas so that the potentials for social and political emancipation are eased out of the talk, the paint, the plastic, the silicone chip and the environment. The problem with the culture of the mausoleum is that its metaphor is the Hall of Fame to which we come to remember; the problem with the culture of the oxymoron is that its metaphor is a structured language which it seeks to explode. Neither helps much with exploration or emancipation because the metaphors are themselves continuously decontextualised and hence anti-social. They are not inhabited by people, and are consequently abstract categories which only come alive when used for other political purposes.

The truly emancipatory culture is one which is constantly testing the experience of the present by rereading history, not only, we must hasten to add, the history given to us by the Mausoleum, (which is basically the history of a particular mode of classification), but the history of action and the history of those products which sit in our living rooms or public spaces as

things we are obliged to encounter. The sense of language we are after can be drawn from the image of the carnivalesque where we encounter ourselves in other guises, deliberately relating to moments not necessarily ours by making them part of ourselves. If the culture of the postmodern is a humourless culture of relativism and exclusion, of sealing off the past and the other, then emancipatory culture is the strategically motivated and contextualized exploration of alternatives by juxtaposition. Like the mausoleum culture it recognizes history and other cultures and like the oxymoron it recognizes the importance of linguistic rediscovery. But unlike both it is conscious of the joy of practice, and conscious also that such joy is only possible by admitting desire and politics and movement and place as integral to the conditions of being, and of becoming.

Invention. Our entire environment is constructed, occupied, invented. The "natural" landscape of our parkland is as much a social construction as the "natural" landscape of our sexuality. But we still have to live in them, and therefore our deconstruction of these as ideological texts is part of a strategy for establishing spaces for living, for finding our own principled processes of self-creation and collective re-invention. The politics of our nationalism is not concerned with defending territory but rather with redefining the conditions of the territory we want to inhabit. These are not metaphorical arguments. Well, perhaps in part they are; but ultimately they act as a catalyst to figure out what is going on here.

Borderlines, finding itself forced to maintain all the borders of culture, has never argued for the mausoleum view of culture and it has often seemed close to the oxymoronic (because we are tempted by what is not known as much as by what is known), but it is time, surely, for the carnivalesque to make itself more obvious. Thus, Nature is not reduced simply to the strategies of dominance or the rediscovery of language, but becomes part of our disguises and our problems. And history, that "cry in the street" as Joyce called it, must be taken back to the streets and the playgrounds and the texts and the airwaves and the homes, by ripping it out of the mausoleums that would encase it forever in the framework of an almost dead bourgeois hegemony. Politics has been neutered by the language of those who would say that no politics matters except my language, and no sex except my sex, no horizon except the impossibility of any utopia. *Borderlines* has begun to think about the politics of the specific, of the everyday, of the global, of the knowledge that comes from tangible connections. It will continue to do so.

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