

The Less Ordinary Aspect of Culture

唐士哲*

摘要

文化研究中為俗民代言或以俗民的位置發言的政治需求常使其將美學貶抑為主控階級的意識形態。然而，對於處理文化鑑別標準的抗拒卻也使其落入缺乏自省的批評中。本文強調美學論述對於文化研究是不可或缺的，因為由知識份子所構連的俗民文化本身即無法擺脫在論述上予文化以價值評斷的傾向。美學，以一個倫理上自我質疑而非以一個道德上自我提昇的基準來予以辯明，可以幫助點明文化研究中「文化經驗文本化」此一模式的一些技術上的缺失。

* 南華大學傳播管理學系助理教授

The Less Ordinary Aspect of Culture

Abstract

The political demand of cultural studies to speak for and as the popular has made it relegate aesthetics as a ruling class ideology. However, the refusal to deal with criteria of distinction has subjected cultural studies to the criticism of its lack of self reflexivity. The article argues that aesthetic discourse is indispensable to the project of cultural studies because *popular* culture as articulated by the intellectuals is itself not free from discursive evaluation. Aesthetics, when justified on an ethical ground of self problematization rather than on a moral ground of self elevation, serves the purpose of illuminating some technical pitfalls of cultural studies in its formula of "textualizing cultural experience."

Key word : cultural, aesthetics, popular culture, ethics.

The Less Ordinary Aspect of Culture¹

唐士哲

“Culture,” defined by Raymond Williams in brief, “is ordinary.” It concerns how members in every human society identify its own shape, its own purposes, and its own meanings. Culture therefore includes not only arts and learning, but also a whole way of life—the common meanings (Williams, 1958). Williams’s justification for a “common culture,” written in the theoretical conjuncture of the late-1950s, breached the Leavisites’ association of the word *Kultur* with “civilization” by recognizing the ordinary people’s tastes and pleasures as no less valuable than the finest creative individual things. Rejecting cultural elitism and committing to holistic conceptions of culture and methods of analysis, Williams found new meanings in the most ordinary common things and, along with Richard Hoggart and E. P. Thompson, initiated a critical project that would later be termed “cultural studies.”²

¹ An earlier version of this essay has been presented in the title of “Cultural Studies and Aesthetic Judgment: The Case of Classic TV” in National Communication Association, Summer Conference in Iowa City, Iowa, July, 2000. The author wishes to thank Lawrence Grossberg, Dillip Gaonkar, Lenore Langsdorf for their kind suggestions in various parts of the essay. The author also wishes to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their comments on this version regarding the discursive aspect of cultural practices.

² See Raymond Williams, “Culture is ordinary” in *Conviction*, Norman McKenzie (ed.) (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1959), 74-92. reprinted in *Resources of Hope*.

Nearly half a century later, cultural studies has flourished as a loosely-defined academic field that accommodates such diverse disciplines as communication, literature, anthropology, education, philosophy, sociology, and geography. At various stages of its development, cultural studies met with structuralism, psychoanalysis, post-structural / postmodern discourse, feminism, and post-colonial theories which enriched its armory of discursive equipments. Today, Williams's Anglo-centric ideal of building a "common culture" might have sounded too regressive for cultural studies' globalized / globalizing territory, but his sentiment of "empowerment" still prevails and has become one of his major legacies for today's scholars. In a clear rebuttal of what can be termed "white, bourgeois elitist culture," scholars turn to popular cultural objects and practices such as soap opera, film, rock and roll, comic books, and fashion style to realize the ideal of indiscrimination. These objects' upward mobility on the discursive ladder, naturally, has become the inevitable result following the academia's fervor of "speaking for the popular."

However, in the scholarly fad of popular culture, issues of distinction, judgment, and taste that have long been considered politically incorrect resurface in recent years following some scholars' introspection and interrogation of what this field has become. Simon Frith, for instance, criticizes that in valorizing the popular, aesthetic discrimination essential to cultural consumption and the considered judgments it involves are ignored by cultural studies. Scholars avoid

London: Verso, 1989, 3-18. For an evaluation of Williams's intellectual legacies, see Andrew Milner, "Cultural materialism, culturalism and post-culturalism: The legacy of Raymond Williams." *Theory, Culture & Society* (London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi: Sage) Vol. 11 (1994), 43-73.

passing judgment to popular culture because what makes popular culture "popular" is precisely its free from aesthetic discrimination that seems to be the case of high culture. But Frith points out that scholars' indifferent attitude does not reconcile with the fact that popular culture is evaluated by its producers and users according to a hierarchical order. If there are obvious differences between classical music and country music, Frith argues, "the fact that the objects of judgment are different does not mean that the processes of judgment are."³

This attitude of indifference, according to Ian Hunter, has to do with the long-standing hostility of cultural studies toward the aesthetic discourse. Particularly in its Kantian version, "the aesthetic" is identified as a specific mode of the subject's mental relation to reality; its constitution presupposes the existence of "the artistic" as a distinct autonomous sphere and aesthetic judgment universally viable. "The aesthetic" has been divorced from culture as "the way of life as a whole" and declined into a purely ethical pursuit of a deracinated elite.⁴

But cultural studies and aesthetics do not have to be mutually exclusive. Indeed, I argue that cultural studies as an academic inquiry that articulates the social implication of culture requires aesthetic discourse to bring to light the ethical dimension of turning objects into

³ Simon Frith, "The good, the bad, and the indifferent: Defending popular culture from the populist" *Diacritics* 21(4), 102-15. The quote see, Frith, "The cultural studies of popular music" in *Cultural Studies*, Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson & Paula Treichler (eds.) (New York & London: Routledge, 1992), p. 107..

⁴ Ian Hunter, "Aesthetics and cultural studies" in *Cultural Studies*, Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson & Paula Treichler (eds.) (New York & London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 347-73.

“cultural objects.” In other words, since culture demands that its meaning and value be articulated through things that bear its name, the problem of *culturation* is what aesthetics particularly relevant to cultural studies. The point is, as Hunter suggests, how to bent aesthetic discourse to the practical need of cultural studies for a better interpretation of the technologies of our present existence.⁵

This article is aimed as one such trial. It explores the aesthetic dimension of popular culture by calling attention to the problem of intellectualization—a problem that inevitably follows after popular objects or practices were basked in the light of scholarly attention. I argue that in cultural studies, the textualization model is often taken for granted by intellectuals without attending to their own stakes in name-tagging the popular. This is not only the case with the relationship between scholars and the people they claim to speak for, which has already been discussed in some critiques of cultural populism;⁶ it is also the case with the scholars’ relationship with the “objects” they chose to deposit such populist value—from trendy pop cultural icons to revamped classic TV; from a pair of torn-up jeans to an entire shopping mall; or from tribal totems to a graffiti on the wall.

⁵ Hunter, *ibid.*, p. 349.

⁶ Bourdieu, for instance, has been quite suspicious about the intellectual’s sympathy for the popular. In *Distinctions* (1984), he analyzed at great length strategies whereby intellectuals, with symbolic capital, mark out their positions in society. The intellectual’s interest in popular culture is particularly complicated because of their low status in the dominant sector of the society. Due to this, their stake in popular culture is often mixed with the double-edged function of speaking for the “popular” and self ennoblement. What distinguishes the “positive popular” from its negative counterpart, therefore, lies in whether the product of re-evaluation can produce a “market” in which the service they rendered for popular culture is needed. Also see Bourdieu, “The uses of the ‘people’” in *In Other Words* (Los Angeles: Stanford University Press, 1990), pp.150-5. And Jim McGuigan, *Cultural Populism* (London &

Their appeal to the scholarly mind is for tactical reasons of constructing politics of resistance and, therefore, often entails that they be free from judgment. "Not about the aesthetic" is probably why they remain their purity of breed. But the problem is that there seems to be little discussion on these objects' discursive legitimation. In other words, how do we account for the difference between popular culture in its pristine state of the "unspoken of" and *the* popular culture in its new state as the subject of discourse? Are we ready to acknowledge the elevating tendency of "naming" which inevitably distinguishes one text from the other?

I take these questions as aesthetic questions, although their solution does not lie in justifying why these objects come to have aesthetic value. The aesthetic elements in studying popular culture, I submit, lies in constantly contradictory, always self-undoing modes of subjectification, by which I mean the problematization of how the intellectuals come to associate themselves with cultural objects, artifacts, or practices in specific ways. Aesthetics, in this sense, should become contingent and practical, which concerns the practice of the self in the world of multiple values and intersecting political and economic interests.

To demonstrate my point, I will first discuss what constitutes the ethical problem of studying popular culture. Then I will explain why the aesthetic discourse is rejected by cultural studies, regardless of its possible contributions to redress some of the technical problems of this field of study. Toward the end, I will propose an aesthetic inquiry

into the study of popular culture from an ethical point of view, emphasizing the significance of problematizing the intellectual discourse in the construction of the value of popular culture.

Writing culture

In defining cultural analysis, Mieke Bal characterizes:

Cultural analysis as a critical practice is different from what is commonly understood as “history.” It is based on a keen awareness of the critic’s situatedness in the present, the social and cultural present from which we look, and look back, at the objects that are always already of the past, objects that we take to define our present culture. Thus, it can be summarized by the phrase “cultural memory in the present.” As such, it is immediately obvious that cultural analysis contains an ambivalent relation to history as it is or has been traditionally practiced in our faculties.⁷
(italicized words are emphasized by the author)

Bal therefore suggests that cultural analysis is the “silent assumption of history” that presents history in different ways.⁸

What is significant about Bal’s definition is the role objects play

⁷ Mieke Bal, “Introduction” in Bal (ed.) *The Practice of Cultural Analysis: Exposing Interdisciplinary Interpretation*. (Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 1.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

in giving culture its specific contour. We can infer from Bal's point that the discursive value of objects in cultural analysis always lies somewhere else, because their appearance as historical objects renders meaning more than their humble physical existence is able to. The inscription of academic value in popular culture therefore involves processes of transculturation, in which objects are re-evaluated for their interdiscursive complexity.

Bal convinces us that objects come to have *cultural* value only when they are conceived by the known mind in specific ways—which is all right. But if popular culture can render intellectual service which, in return, glorifies itself, can we say that objects that become the subject of discourse are free from the effect of distinction? Scholars who see anti-patriarchal value in a female pop icon, or praise a rock lyric for subverting the repressive social order, also relegate some other dimensions of its signification as irrelevant to what they wish to see in them. The tried formula, the massive duplication, and the attempt at creating a sales pitch do not seem to affect the scholarly "way of seeing." Insofar as there is a thin line between mass and popular cultures, it is evident that most chosen objects belong to the latter category. The commodity aspect of popular culture is often deliberately concealed. This can be seen in John Fiske's distinction between the financial and the cultural aspects of commercial television. "Popular culture is made by the people, not produced by the cultural industry." Fiske defends, "All the culture industries can do is produce a repertoire of texts or cultural resources for the various formations of the people to use or reject in the ongoing process of

producing their popular culture.”⁹ With “financial economy” at the end of production and “cultural economy” at the end of consumption, what is to be dealt with is the meanings and pleasures that are the product of the latter.

This value transformation is why cultural studies is often criticized for its lack of value discourse.¹⁰ The politics of tearing down the wall between high culture and low culture has made cultural studies hyper conscious about making *any* distinction. But the question is whether or not a proclaimed value-free discourse on culture can completely free itself from evaluation. If “the popular” is appreciated for its indiscriminate and polysemous content, should “the popular” remain so naïvely popular despite what might be imposed upon it? In other words, if scholars or intellectuals report or interpret what they “discovered” in these objects or practices, could it be that their discovery itself becomes an imposed form of judgment even though such a judgment violates the fundamental ethos of cultural studies that vows to fight against such imposition?

That “the popular” is not completely free from elitist judgment is poignantly pointed out by Andrew Ross. On the cultural sentiment of “Camp,” Ross points out that even though Pop arose out of problematizing the question of taste itself, the Pop camp which grew

⁹ John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture* (London & New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 24.

¹⁰ John Frow, for instance, is quite displeased by such a wholesale validation of popular culture. Frow argues that despite constructing politics of the popular, it remains important to define the systemic constraints within which textual choice is possible. He therefore argues that the analysis of cultural texts must be set in relation to the “institutionalized regime of value” that sustains them and organize them in relations of difference and distinction. See *Cultural Studies & Cultural Value*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 84-8.

out of it still contradicts it by recognizing the “in-taste” of a minority elite. “Camp” salvages the power of tastemaking intellectuals to influence the canon of taste which is being threatened in an age of mass culture. If intellectuals have the power to “discover” from everyday life what was supposed to be vulgar but organic, the ethos of discovery, Ross suggests, “inevitably brought with it the tropes of appropriation, one-upmanship, and collector chic which had little to do with the immediate, hedonistic use of a reliable, processed environment that Pop had sought to valorize.”¹¹ The question thus becomes: how do we interrogate into the incongruity between culture in its unspecified, anonymous state and “the cultural” invested with a certain elitist discursive legitimacy?

Ironically, problematizing the standard of appreciation has always been the task of aesthetic discourse. In its original formulation by the German philosopher Alexander Baumgarten, aesthetics refers to the whole region of human perception and sensation, in contrast to the more rarefied domain of conceptual thought. The distinction enforced by the term “aesthetic” in the mid-eighteenth century, according to Terry Eagleton, is not between “art” and “life,” but between the material and the immaterial: between things and thoughts, sensations and ideas, that is bound up with the creaturely life.¹² Cultural studies distances itself from aesthetic discourse for reasons that “the aesthetic” is partial to its project of inquiry, which concerns the social and economic aspects of culture. But the stigma attached to

¹¹ Andrew Ross, *No Respect: Intellectuals & Popular Culture* (New York & London: Routledge), p. 150.

¹² Terry Eagleton, *Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford & Cambridge: Blackwell,

aesthetics springs from its being equated with “the artistic,” which is largely the result of aesthetic’s philosophical turn since the late-nineteenth century. It overlooks the prospects that aesthetics is, in the words of Terry Eagleton, born as a discourse of the body.¹³ It problematizes the whole region of human perception and sensation and, therefore, can serve as a useful tool to monitor the changing relationship between objects of culture and intellectuals who, besides all other reasons, discursively “appropriate” the objects. In the following section, I shall discuss the discontent of cultural studies with aesthetics and suggest ways that aesthetic discourse can be redressed to meet the ethical requirement of the contemporary social life.

The Discontent

The discontent with aesthetics can be summed up in two main points: one is to speak against it as a camouflaged bourgeois ideology; the other is to problematize the general social experience given to the subjection of aesthetics to commodity production.

In terms of the former, the charge that “the aesthetic” is ideological has to do with Kant’s mystification of aesthetic judgment. In the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant argues that our knowledge is aesthetically moulded in an elementary and constitutive sense. The aesthetic state is “transcendental” insofar as it exposes the “conditions of the possibility of experience” as well as “the conditions of the

1990), p. 13.

¹³ Ibid. p. 1.

possibility of the objects of experience." Yet neither objective knowledge nor subjective emotive reaction can quite explain how the subject can attain such a lucid state of cognition. It is rather the synthesis of the two in which the aesthetic constitutes a distinctive mode of the subject's appropriation of reality. Therefore, it appears that the aesthetic judgment is at the same time universal and subjective, disinterested and personal.¹⁴

Pointing to this apparently oxymoronic configuration, Terry Eagleton suggests that it is better to cast the Kantian aesthetics in light of ideology. Like aesthetics, ideology as a performative discourse does not rest upon conceptual categories of truth and falsehood. Its utterances "conceal an essentially emotive content within a referential form, characterizing the lived relation of a speaker to the world in the act of appearing to characterize the world."¹⁵ The aesthetic, therefore, appears as the experience of pure contentless consensus: it unites subjects in an abstract and universal solidarity without necessarily informing them what they are agreeing over.

Eagleton attributes the emergence of transcendental aesthetics in the late eighteenth-century Europe to its social condition, in which the rising middle class struggle for hegemony through exerting a cultural and spiritual leadership. The transcendental aesthetic contains the seeds of self contradiction, because, while promoting the universality of artistic value, it is blind to the fact that such universality is a moral dictate only partial to the social experience of the bourgeois class.¹⁶

¹⁴ See Wolfgang Iser, *Undoing Aesthetics* (London: Sage, 1997), pp. 38-9.

¹⁵ Eagleton, *ibid.*, p. 93.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4.

The fictional universality of the Kantian aesthetic subject predates its realization in the age of modernity, in which the universality of appreciation is realized, albeit ironically, in the fetish of commodities. In the tradition of critiquing modernity, aestheticization appears to be the culprit of a fragmentary social life in modern capitalism. The spectacles created by commercial culture appear as a husk that concealed the emptiness of the human spirit. Georg Simmel, observing the innumerable commodities that fascinated the eyes of an urban dweller, lamented that in modern society, excessive culturation of commodities has caused neuroaesthetic exhaustion of a modern subject. "Everything claims with a certain right to be of cultural value," Simmel argues, that the subjective spirit does not know how it can completely protect its unity of form from the touch and the temptation of all these "things."¹⁷

The fake quality of the arts in the industrial age was also the subject of criticism by Frankfurt scholars, who criticized that the truth and autonomy in art has fallen prey to industrialization, and art has become an instrument of collective control.¹⁸ The surplus production of signs by advertisement and television, according to Baudrillard and Jameson, has involved culture in an endless game of signification and symbolizes the disappearance of a tangible reality.¹⁹

¹⁷ Georg Simmel, "On the concept of tragedy of culture" in *The Conflict in Modern Culture and Other Essays*. K. Peter Etkorn (ed.) (New York: Teacher's College Press, 1968) p. 46.

¹⁸ See Max Horkheimer & Theodore W. Adorno. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Continuum, 1993).

¹⁹ Frederic Jameson. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. (London & New York: Routledge, 1991); Jean Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of Silent Majorities or, The End of the Social and Other Essays* (Semiotext(e) Foreign Agents Series, 1981).

This excess of the aesthetic, together with an idealized, fictive bourgeois ideology of "authentic subject" that serves as its antithesis, therefore designates aesthetic discourse as the ultimate Other of organic culture. Aesthetics becomes a problem to be get rid of, a hindrance in the way toward the realization of cultural diversity and heterogeneity.

Tony Bennett, in an article that provocatively sentenced aesthetics to useless knowledge, suggests that aesthetics left a great burden of proof for Marxist critical theories to reconcile the contradiction between the historical-materialistic impetus of identifying artistic practices as socially determined and the idealist pull that art transcends social determinations, or, in other words, artistic practices that are socially determined and authentic Art that is not. According to Bennett, critical aesthetics, which argues that authentic art is "self-validating" and "transcendental" and, therefore, is inherently critical of the existing social order, is troubled by its founding upon a set of distinction criteria already accomplished in the bourgeois social order. If the sorting out of "authentic" from "inauthentic" art is trans-historical, Bennett argues, then there is no need to account for what constitutes revolutionary art since all the elements of distinction are readily available. As he criticizes,

A Marxist aesthetic springs ready-made from bourgeois aesthetics, like Athene from the head of Zeus, without its feet ever touching the ground and without ever completing the passage from its bourgeois origins to its would-be Marxist destination. For where is there

a Marxist aesthetic which does not derive its distinctive characteristics from a set of operative concepts culled from some pre-Marxist body of aesthetic theory? In aesthetics, as in philosophy, Marxism's rhetorical claims to have transcended its forebearers have been denied by its practical subordination to the dominant influence of one or another version of bourgeois aesthetics.²⁰

Given the configuration of today's political struggle, Bennett argues, it is highly unlikely that an ideal personality can be forged out of multiple, intersecting, and non-coincidental foci of struggle constituted by various identity politics. Bennett therefore suggests abandoning aesthetic discourse *tout court* to maintain political acuteness of cultural studies.²¹

However, the major drawback with such an articulation is that aesthetics is historicized as the product of the bourgeois society. It denies the prospect that aesthetic ideal can be articulated other than being transcendental and authentic. As Wolfgang Iser argues, we are living in a world of multiple aestheticization that the concept of the aesthetic should reflect the changing social context. Aestheticization processes in the contemporary society exist in many different levels—as embellishment, as economic strategies, and as constructed realities. Rather than embracing a totalizing aesthetic discourse which

²⁰ Tony Bennett, "Really Useless 'Knowledge': A Political Critique of Aesthetics." *Thesis Eleven*, 12(1985), pp. 30-1.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

attends to every of its social outputs, the term "aesthetic" should be understood in terms of its partiality and contingency.²² In light of Wittgenstein's notion of semantic ambiguity, Welsch argues that with plural aesthetic phenomena, aesthetic perceptions and cognitions should be recognized accordingly. Since no one element enables one to decree what the aesthetic *is*, the term should be approached in terms of the overlap of its many different usage. Analyzing "family resemblances" among different aesthetic phenomena, rather than synthesizing them into one grand narrative, thus enables nowadays aestheticians to manage the full range of the expression "aesthetic" which seems to be taking form in more and more dimensions of social life.²³

Michel Maffesoli argues on the same ground that aesthetics today should be interpreted in terms of its polyvalence and the possibility of networking among diverse aesthetic elements. He argues that despite fragmentation and dispersion, there is a specific "unicity" in the spirit of our time which encourages social synergy, "allowing actions and desires to converge toward a more or less solid, even if conflictual, equilibrium."²⁴ Although massification seems to be the case, "processes of condensation are constantly occurring through which more or less ephemeral tribal groupings are organized which cohere on the basis of their own minor values, and which attract and collide with each other in an endless dance, forming themselves into a

²² Wolfgang Welsch, *Undoing Aesthetics*. London: Sage, p. 9.

²³ *Ibid.* p. 89-91.

²⁴ Michel Maffesoli, "The ethic of aesthetics" *Theory, Culture & Society*, (London, Newbury Park & New Dehli: Sage), 8(1991), p. 12.

constellation whose vague boundaries are perfectly fluid.”²⁵ Aestheticization, in a dialectic twist, becomes what bridges and negotiates differences in a world where unity of value and commonality is no longer tenable. The new form of cultural tribes, based upon differences and ambiguities and a recognition that they do not preclude communication and mutual understanding, therefore characterizes the ethic of aesthetics.

Welsch's and Maffesoli's propositions for a new ethic of aesthetic both emphasize polyvalence and family resemblances as ways out of the dilemma of traditional aesthetics, which also dissociates aesthetics from a mere expression of ruling class ideology. The major contribution of this new “look” of aesthetics to cultural studies is that it suggests new ways to deal with issues of “cultivated appreciation” in popular culture. Since appreciation is not exclusively linked with the so-called high culture, the ethical inquiry into what constitutes the standard of appreciation can be applied to *any* cultural object or practice that has become the subject of intellectual discourse. The more encompassing concern with perceptive and cognitive differences among things and their values opens up aesthetics to diverse types of act, ways of living, and artistic expressions, yet all these are linked with the ethical practice of the self in a world of multiple aesthetic feats. This functions to illuminate some technical pitfalls of cultural studies in its current formula of textualizing cultural experiences. Jim McGuigan argues well that cultural populism in cultural studies, in its excessively audience-oriented and

²⁵ Ibid., p. 12.

one-dimensional consumptionist perspectives, have led to a lamentable foreclosure on questions concerning "quality" and the sense of "progressiveness" in its critical project. "Production and textual determinations were too readily dissolved into uncritical construction of 'popular reading.'"²⁶ The problem is not only that cultural studies ignores production, but also that cultural studies refuses to identify itself as a link in the production of popular reading. There is some discernible difference between politicizing and intellectualizing popular culture that is somehow left out in the critical project of cultural studies. Inquiring into the ethical dimension of studying the popular therefore serves the purpose of bringing such a difference to light.

The aesthetic problematization is precisely the clarification of "why we speak." Culture, after all, involves making judgment on things we considered meaningful and valuable. Our task is not to dismiss it as irrelevant, but to turn its problematic nature into an occasion for further political interrogation. The "nomadic" tendency of cultural studies, in which scholars explore different objects or practices to locate and lend credit to the voice of "the popular," has produced several paradigmatic texts that enjoy a respectful afterlife. Aesthetic value probably has nothing to do with why these popular cultural objects or practices were chosen and how they were credited, but it has everything to do with how the discursive value is formed after they were chosen. Kant's universalist maxims might be awkward in a world of growing sensitivity to multiple cultural values, but its failure does not have to be equated with that of the aesthetic's own.

²⁶ Jim McGuigan, *ibid.*, p. 14.

Towards an aesthetic ethic of popular culture

But how do we talk about popular cultural aesthetics without falling into the Kantian trope of transcendental judgment? Following Foucault, the point is to distinguish aesthetics as a set of moral codes from aesthetics as modes of subjectification. As the latter, aesthetics holds out the prospects of understanding how a subject comes to identify him/herself as the moral subject. It enables the individual to establish his/her relation to the rule and recognizes himself/herself as obliged to put it into practice.²⁷ Nonetheless, such is not to say that the individual only passively meets the disciplinary requirement of the moral code. Aesthetic ethics also enable the individual to interrogate such a requirement by reflecting on it as a problematic. The problematization of the moral mandate is laid out by Foucault as he emphasizes the reflexive role of thought in action. In an interview conducted in 1984, Foucault argues that thought is not what inhabits a certain conduct and gives it its meaning; rather, it is what allows one to step back from this way of acting or reacting, to present it to oneself as an object of thought and question it as to its meaning, its conditions, and its goals. As he further elaborates,

To say that the study of thought is the analysis of a freedom does not mean one is dealing with a formal system that has reference only to itself. Actually,

²⁷ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol II: The Use of Pleasure* (New York: Vintage Books, 1986), pp. 26-30.

for a domain of action, a behavior, to enter the field of thought, it is necessary for a certain number of factors to have made it uncertain, to have made it lose its familiarity, or to have provided a certain number of difficulties around it. These elements result from social, economic, or political processes. But here their only role is that of instigation.²⁸

The tension between thought and action is why aesthetic discourse can be redressed to meet the moral goal of cultural studies. As Ian Hunter suggests, there is a difference between aesthetic doctrines or ideas and the means by which individuals have formed themselves as subjects of such doctrine. The former are composed of a set of prescriptive moral codes that determine certain ideas of good and bad, godly and ugly, thought and behavior. The latter, on the other hand, represent "ethics" of aesthetics that "consist of all techniques and practices that individuals apply to themselves into the kind of person capable of retaining these ideas and put them into action." Actions of aesthetic judgment, understood in this manner, are not universally viable but practical and contingent. The aesthetic is in no sense more complete than the various domains of social ethics, as Hunter points out, "It is simply the domain opened up when these other spheres are transformed into occasions for the practice of aesthetic self-problematization."²⁹ Therefore, its fulfillment is

²⁸ Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*. Paul Rabinow (ed.) (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), p. 388.

²⁹ Ian Hunter, *ibid.*, p. 349.

perpetually deferred in the future. Due to its intrinsic partiality, aesthetics can be “politicized” as a technology for the perpetual pursuit of ethical heightening of subjectivity rather than a science of transcendental subject. It breaks away from its nineteenth-century grand narrative and becomes one of the “contingencies that make us what we are,” and “it holds out the prospect of delivering into our hands one of the technologies of our present existence.”³⁰

I think the benefit of problematizing the aesthetic ethic in studying popular culture is that it escapes the moralizing dogmatism of art for art’s sake while still preserving the element of “self reflexivity” as its rule of practice. Subsuming it within culture as “the whole way of life,” aesthetic ethics function as a tool to problematize the way culture is experienced and conceived by the social subjects, including the intellectuals themselves. Popular objects or practices that enter the discursive realm is, therefore, recognized not only for their face value as the objects of public consumption, but also for their structural implication of linking various social institutions, intellectuals being one of them, in the constant recreation of the value properties that makes them what they *have* become. Problematizing the intent of doing cultural studies and remaining conscious about the effect of intellectualization are indispensable ethics if cultural studies is to maintain its critical edge.

This discursive problematization of the “popular” means that cultural studies, as a way of cultural critique, should always be conscious about the blindspots accompanying each attempt of

³⁰ Ibid., p. 349.

critiquing, including the probability of formal judgment that tends to be excluded from its discursive property. Politics of consumption, which marks the saving grace of commodity culture, tends to be the reason why cultural studies succeeds in extracting the “popular” from the “commercial.” But in addition to transforming objects or practices into “occasions” for attending to diverse politics, critical activities should not exclude themselves from the multiple aestheticization processes in which popular culture serves purposes of embellishment, entertainment, economic strategies, or modes of cultivation, some of which inevitably influence, or are influenced by, the way intellectuals construct the value of popular culture. While these do not determine the modes of consumption, their mediation by several institutional forces—mass media, business corporation, governmental policy, or public education—does have effects on how the “occasions” take their forms. If popular culture deserves an aesthetic discourse, the social or economic processes through which the content of the popular is transformed into forms of aestheticization, I submit, should mark the starting point. Problematizing this aesthetic effect and remains critical with such an effect, therefore, is why cultural studies demands an ethic of aesthetics.

Bibliography

- Bal, Mieke (1999). "Introduction." In Mieke Bal (ed.) *The Practice of Cultural Analysis: Exposing Interdisciplinary Interpretation*. Pela Alto, Cal: Stanford University Press.
- Baudrillard, Jean (1981). *In the Shadow of Silent Majorities or, The End of the Social and Other Essays*. Semiotext(e) Foreign Agents Series
- Bennett, Tony. (1985). "Really Useless 'Knowledge': A Political Critique of Aesthetics." *Thesis Eleven*, 12, 28-51.
- Bourdieu, Pierre (1990). *In Other Words: Essays towards a Reflexive Sociology*. Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press.
- — . (1984). *Distinction*. Cambridge, MS: Harvard University Press.
- Eagleton, Terry (1990). *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Featherstone, Mike (1991). *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*. London: Sage Publications.
- Fiske, John (1988). *Understanding Popular Culture*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Frow, John (1995). *Cultural Studies and Cultural Value*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Foucault, Michel (1985). *The History of Sexuality, Vol. II: The Use of Pleasure*. New York: Vintage Books.
- — (1984). *The Foucault Reader*. (Paul Rabinow Editor). New York: Pantheon Books.

- Frith, Simon (1992). "The cultural study of popular music." In Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler (eds.) *Cultural Studies*. New York & London: Routledge.
- — . (1991). "The good, the bad, and the indifferent: Defending popular culture from the populists." *Diacritics*, 21(4), 102-15.
- Frow, John (1995). *Cultural Studies & Cultural Value*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Hall, Stuart (1981) "Notes on deconstructing 'the popular.'" In R. Samuel (ed.), *People's History and Socialist Theory* (pp. 227-239). London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Hunter, Ian (1992). "Aesthetics and cultural studies." In Grossberg, Lawrence, Nelson, Cary, and Treichler Paula (eds.) *Cultural Studies* (pp. 347-372). London and New York: Routledge.
- Jameson, Frederic (1991). *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. London & New York: Verso.
- Maffesoli, Michel (1991). "The Ethic of Aesthetics." *Theory, Culture & Society*, 8, 7-20.
- McGuigan, Jim (1996). *Culture and the Public Sphere*. London & New York: Routledge.
- — . (1992). *Cultural Populism*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Milner, Andrew (1994). "Cultural materialism, culturalism and post-culturalism: The legacy of Raymond Williams." *Theory, Culture & Society*, 11, 43-73.
- Ross, Andrew (1989). *No Respect: Intellectuals & Popular Culture*. New York & London: Routledge.
- Rabinow, Paul (ed.). (1984). *The Foucault Reader*. New York: Pantheon Books.

- Simmel, Georg. (1986). "On the Concept and Tragedy of Culture." In *The Conflict in Modern Culture and Other Essays*. New York: The Teachers' College Press.
- Smith, Barbara H. (1988). *Contingencies of Value*. Cambridge, MS: Harvard University Press.
- Welsch, Wolfgang (1997). *Undoing Aesthetics*. London: Sage.
- Williams, Raymond (1989). "Culture is ordinary." In Norman Mackenzie (ed.) *Resources of Hope* (pp. 3-18). London: Verso.