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# HIGH ART, FOLK ART, AND OTHER SOCIAL DISTINCTIONS: CANONS, GENEALOGY AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF AESTHETICS

Gary Shapiro

Most discussions of the arts by critics and philosophers could be characterized in terms of a rather studied neglect of folk and popular art. This neglect is hardly absolute, however, for it is important in order to articulate a specific conception of aesthetic taste, beauty, or style to contrast the standard being used or praised with some other, less desirable, even degraded way of producing or appreciating something similar. It is perhaps more than a historical coincidence that the formation of the modern concept of taste and aesthetic judgment, in the eighteenth century, coincides roughly with the discovery and valorization of folk poetry and folk culture by the early romantics. In fact the historical connections are often quite close. Immanuel Kant is generally credited with having articulated the most comprehensive and influential statement of the modern conception of taste and aesthetic judgment, in the *Critique of Judgment* of 1790. There Kant argues that to judge something to be beautiful is to pronounce simply upon its formal values; in particular a genuine judgment of taste is to be distinguished from any reponse to that which gratifies our appetites or interests. At the same time that Kant was developing this significant statement of the aesthetic point of view, his former student J. G. Herder was celebrating the culture of the *Volk* and publishing their ballads and stories. Now it *might* be claimed that there is no inconsistency between these perspec-

tives; it could be said either that productions of folk-art may meet the same aesthetic standards of disinterested pleasure which obtain for taste generally, or one might admit that folk art did not as a rule meet such standards but that it ought to be valued in some different way, for example, as the expression of a culture or way of life rather than as an object of aesthetic appreciation. Yet this is a route not usually taken; friends of folk art and of higher art seem to be at one in recognizing that they involve quite different standards of excellence. Still, one might ask whether these differences might simply co-exist in a peaceful fashion; perhaps they are so different that comparisons are irrelevant or misleading. Nevertheless, the history of discourse about the arts is marked by either explicit or implicit polemics against one or the other of these forms. For the differences in question are, of course, not simply natural differences but social distinctions. It is precisely by affirming one's taste in art (or one's general cultural taste) that one affirms one's own value; the differences spoken of here are *distinctions*, in the sense in which good taste is said to be a sign of a distinguished person, a man or woman of distinction. The object of this exploratory study is to observe some of these differences and their associated forms of distinction at work in the discourse of aesthetics and criticism. The treatment will be partial and episodic; that is, I will

be examining only a few thinkers drawn from an even smaller number of national traditions. The limitation is a consequence of both the limits of my own reading and of the fact that while there is much said about high art, folk art, or popular art, comparatively little has been written about the way in which the formation of an audience or standard for one form involves the making of distinctions between itself and others.

André Malraux, whose *The Voices of Silence* is perhaps the most exhilarating and richest account of the new world of twentieth century art and the metamorphoses that it has produced in our understanding of the art of the past, felt it necessary to begin one of his essays by claiming that folk art no longer exists. In "Art, Popular Art, and the Illusion of the Folk," he pronounces this exclusion:

Folk art no longer exists because the "folk" no longer exists. The modern masses, bound even in rural places to urban civilization, are as different from the craftsmen and the peasants of the great monarchies as from the people of the Middle Ages. The word "people," when Cardinal de Retz applied it to the Parisians, already sounded false; if the Cardinal had not limited himself to Paris, he would have said bourgeoisie or populace. The people that bought religious images and sang popular songs was born of the oldest civilizations of the earth, would have been partly at home in them, and could scarcely read (Malraux 1967:29).

It might seem that even if folk art no longer exists, it could still be a legitimate object of both academic study and artistic appreciation. Why can't we respond to English folk ballads even if there is no longer a living tradition that is continuous with their earliest appearance? Here Malraux would say that the question of such survival and tradition is all important; for he sees our attitude to art as necessarily constituted by the prevailing institutions, attitudes and practices of the twentieth century art-world. On his account this art-world is an "imaginary

museum" in which all art of the past has been stripped of its earlier social, religious and cultural contexts in order to become objects that should be appreciated for their formal interest and for their exhibition of the nobility of the creative human spirit as it triumphs over death by the artistic "annexation" of reality. If our understanding of art is structured and limited by the art-world that we live in, and if the "imaginary museum" is indeed the basic form of that art-world then the death of folk art would bring with it the end of the possibility of assuming an attitude toward even the folk art of the past that could be like that of past folk cultures. If there is no living folk art, so the argument goes, there cannot be any appreciation or understanding of folk art except through the transformative perspective of the "imaginary museum."

This argument is far from being completely opposed to the views of the romantic celebrants of folk art. They too tended to suppose that a genuine contact with folk art was available to them only in so far as there was a living tradition that could transmit that art to the present day. It was important, they thought, that their inquiries were not merely antiquarian but part of a continuous, if historically changing, culture. Certainly the Grimms believed something like this in their attempt to mediate, through their researches, between an *Ursage* or primal saying sedimented in folk tradition and a contemporary middle class public. Malraux simply denies that the mediating elements are there and so draws the appropriate consequences. As far as the folk art of the past is concerned, some of it, like other past art, can be incorporated into the "imaginary museum," and appreciated for its stylistic and formal values. But there is also something that could be thought of as a replacement or substitute for folk art,

namely popular art. Malraux defines popular art as "the art of appeasement," and his definition does in fact echo some of the things traditionally said about folk art. The appeasing arts satisfy our wishes and desires; they are not so much inferior to art proper as simply devoted to other ends:

Let us not confuse the pin up photos with the nudes of Greece and India, whose very different sensuality bound man to the cosmos. There is no art without style, and every style implies that man has a meaning, is oriented by some supreme value—proclaimed or secret—which was called art or painting, as still happens in modern art. The appeasing media, on the contrary, no longer bind man to values, but to sensations; he struggles against nothingness through a succession of moments, whereas every art and every civilization have bound man to duration if not to eternity (Malraux 1967:35).

One might expect a somewhat different perspective from a Marxist art historian like Arnold Hauser, than from Malraux, whose thinking about art guided and was guided by his role as Minister of Culture in the government of Charles de Gaulle. But Hauser, in his judicious study of *The Philosophy of Art History* (1963), makes a preliminary distinction between genuine art and folk or popular art:

Serious, authentic, responsible art, which necessarily involves a wrestling with the problems of life and an effort to capture the meaning of human existence, art which confronts us with a demand to "change our way of living," has little in common either with folk art, which is hardly often more than play and adornment, or with popular art, which is never more than entertainment and a means of passing the time. When one thinks of the creations of Michelangelo or Rembrandt, Bach or Beethoven, Flaubert or Baudelaire, one feels reluctant to reckon as art either the playful and clumsy ornaments and songs of peasants or the literature and music of the modern entertainment industry with its coquetry and flattery of the common man (pp. 281-282).

Hauser's analysis of the relations between folk art, popular art and high art is more detailed and finely articulated

than this passage might suggest, but for the moment it is worth considering his stark statement of the contrast between high and folk art. That contrast is certainly one endemic to the literature of aesthetics, which tends to define genuine art in terms of just those features which differentiate it from folk art and popular art. Perhaps the contrast is one that recommends itself to any person of taste and aesthetic culture; these are matters, one supposes, that should be evident to anyone who has learned to appreciate Michelangelo, Beethoven, or Flaubert. Such a response simply pushes the question back to a further level: what are the values, beliefs and practices that are implicit in aesthetic or artistic cultivation? Might not an appeal to the taste of the most refined and those with the highest degree of knowledge of the arts constitute an evasion of the question whether folk (or popular) art has distinctive aesthetic values of its own?

At this point it may be worthwhile to attend to thinkers who have challenged the usual hierarchy of high and low arts. Leo Tolstoy's *What is Art?* is a radical indictment of traditional aesthetics and high art in the name of an art of universal human emotion and religion. Tolstoy's work is perhaps the most widely known and influential attempt to subvert the standards of artistic valuation associated with culture, taste, refinement, and disinterested judgment (what I am calling, somewhat loosely, the "Kantian" tradition in aesthetics and criticism). *What is Art?* is notoriously cranky and quirky; Tolstoy finds *King Lear* unintelligible, late Beethoven unmusical and denounces even almost all of his own writings with the exception of just a late religious fable or two. Nevertheless, he raises deep questions about the alleged autonomy of the aesthetic sphere and the social construction of the world of art.

The title question of Tolstoy's book suggests a certain modernity in his methodological concerns, even if he is in most respects a determined foe of modernity. For the initial concern of his analysis is with the difficulty involved in defining the concept of art and the bewildering multiplicity of such definitions that have been offered since the beginnings of modern aesthetic thought in the eighteenth century. The modernity of Tolstoy's enterprise appears when we note that starting in the 1950's there is a rather full body of Anglo-American philosophical literature on the question of whether art can be defined. Beginning with Morris Weitz's article, "The Role of Theory in Aesthetics" (1956), one significant trend of thought has been to suggest that the very plurality of theoretical definitions of art—one might think here, for example, of formalist, expressionist, intellectualist, and emotivist accounts—and the fact that this plurality will not go away demonstrates that the search for a definition is wrong-headed from the start. According to Weitz (who appeals to the later Wittgenstein) the search for a final definition is misconceived because art is essentially a family-resemblance concept. Certain kinds of art will have features that are more or less accurately described by one of the conventional theories, but it will always be possible to find works or types of art that are better described by another; the different types may well have something in common, considered a few at a time, but we ought not to expect that there will be any single, significant set of characteristics that will run through all of the types and works. Similarly in a family we may find some members with some common physiognomic features and each member of the family may share some feature or other with at least one other member of the family, but we can't expect that there will be a single

significant feature that all family members will share.

Tolstoy's level of conceptual analysis may lack the sophistication of Wittgenstein's progeny in aesthetics, but it begins with the same perplexity. Tolstoy runs through an encyclopedic variety of eighteenth and nineteenth century theories of art and beauty in order to establish their real diversity and incompatibility. Unlike the Wittgensteinians, however, he is not content to say that customary usage and practice, in all its diversity, must take precedence over attempts to find a definition of art. Not only is he prepared to offer his own analysis, he is also ready to deploy a moral critique of precisely those forms of artistic activity and institutions that generate the many theories and which those theories (on his view) are designed to legitimate. The Wittgensteinians tell us that the price we would have to pay for theoretical rigor in aesthetic matters is the exclusion of works, styles, and genres that "we" all admire and accept from the canon of art. It would indeed, they say, be a kind of philosophical insanity if "we" were to exclude those works, genres, and styles for the sake of a mere desire for consistency and order. (It is tempting to speculate that this attitude may itself be an heir, at some remove, of the British tradition of taste, as embodied in the gentleman and the "virtuoso" who are able to recognize individual excellence untrammelled by any rigid rules of criticism). For Tolstoy, however, the canon is not unquestionable; it, and the institutions and practices that it bolsters, are precisely the problem. According to Tolstoy the very diversity of aesthetic theories results from attempts to accommodate the entire canon. The attempts lead to theoretical incoherence. If such incoherence is unavoidable, on this plan, the plan itself is still capable of analysis:

. . . this science of aesthetics consists in first acknowledging a certain set of productions to be art (because they please us), and then framing such a theory of art that all those productions which please a certain circle of people should fit into it. There exists an art canon according to which certain productions favored by our circle are acknowledged as being art—Phidias, Sophocles, Homer, Titian, Raphael, Bach, Beethoven, Dante, Shakespeare, Goethe, and others—and the aesthetic laws must be such as to embrace all these productions . . . what is considered the definition of art is no definition at all, but only a shuffle to justify existing art (Tolstoy 1960:44, 47).

Tolstoy is arguing that the artistic canon is the unacknowledged source of modern attempts to define art and beauty. Moreover, the canon is always the canon of some relatively specific group rather than the exemplification of a set of absolute or universal aesthetic values. While the Wittgensteinians appeal to this canon in speaking of what “we” all find to be good, Tolstoy questions the “we,” repeatedly using expressions such as “our circle,” or “the upper classes” to indicate that the subject of taste is always socially defined. This is often an ironic rhetoric, for at the same time that he acknowledges his own membership in that group, and confesses that his own taste (not to mention his work as a writer) has been formed by his enculturation in the upper classes, he prophetically denounces the canon and associated practices that help to sustain the group. To make explicit this social construction of the canon is to suggest that it has no *intrinsic justification*, but is subject to change along with social values, practices, and conventions.

In contrast, Tolstoy offers his own definition of art as the infectious communication of feelings from artist to audience. The best art will be that which transmits the most important feelings and these, according to Tolstoy, are those emotions that are, first, common to everyone and, second, those appropriate

to the deepest religious insight of an age (pp. 52-55). Given Tolstoy’s idealized version of Christianity, these two forms of emotion are not exclusive but complementary, for genuine religion, as he sees it, is now concerned above all with the universal brotherhood of man. It should not be surprising then that he finds the best examples of art in folk tales, folk songs, children’s art or in some of the religious art of the past. His descriptions of contemporary high art are aimed at making the members of “our circle” rethink their commitment to the ideological underpinnings of artistic practices that enable them to be both self-indulgent and smugly conscious of their cultural superiority at the same time. *What is Art?* opens, for example, with a defamiliarizing account of opera, surely the paradigmatic social scene of art for the upper classes of the nineteenth century. Tolstoy takes us behind the scenes and asks us to reflect on tyrannical directors and temperamental prima donnas who are constantly at each other’s throats, both being totally unconcerned with the vast amount of productive human labor that supports their enterprise. The audience of the opera is there, he suggests, to see and be seen by the members of their own class, to enjoy lewd and sensual performances, or to use the opera’s cover to arrange their own assignments or other intrigues. As an alternative, a new canon of art is suggested in a number of other set-pieces in which high art is compared with folk art or children’s art. Tolstoy recounts, for example (pp. 134-135), that upon returning home from a walk, at a time when he was depressed, he heard “the loud singing of a large choir of peasant women”:

They were welcoming my daughter, celebrating her return home after her marriage. In this singing, with its cries and clanging of scythes, such a definite feeling of joy, cheer-

fulness, and energy was expressed that, without noticing how it infected me, I continued my way toward the house in a better mood and reached home smiling and quite in good spirits.

That evening a visitor played Beethoven's sonata, Opus 101; Tolstoy assures us that "being very susceptible to music" he understood as much as anyone present of this music and that he had learned to "attune [himself] so as to delight in those shapeless improvisations which form the subject matter of the works of Beethoven's later period." But on comparing the impression of this work with that of simpler pieces and (presumably in virtue of the fresh memory of the choir of peasant women that morning) "with the impressions produced by folk songs—Italian, Norwegian, or Russian—by the Hungarian czardas and other such simple, clear, and powerful music," he found that "the obscure, almost unhealthy excitement from Beethoven's later pieces that I had artificially worked in myself was immediately destroyed." The same contrast is illustrated by juxtaposing a children's tale of a poor mother preparing an Easter cake for her children (despite the fact that the family chickens steal the flour) with the latest literature by "Zola, Bourget, Huysmans, Kipling, and others, handling the most harrowing subjects."

Tolstoy does not limit himself to constructing the outlines of a new canon of art in which the places of folk art and high art would be reversed. Like so many other thinkers of the nineteenth century, he is also concerned to articulate the nature of the art of the future. This art must avoid the pitfalls of elitism while expressing the deep and common emotions of mankind. There is some irony perhaps in the fact that Tolstoy is, in effect, appealing to the notion of a "religion of art," that is, a truly universal

art that would bring together people of all sorts; such theories had been advanced by some of the artists that he most despises (the romantics and Richard Wagner) as a substitute for religion. Tolstoy's vision of the art of the future reads in many ways like some versions of folk art. As folk art is said to express the common spirit of a people (the *Volksgeist*), so the art of the future will be free of individualism and invidious social distinctions, expressing emotions of the most far-ranging universality. To this end, it will be necessary to do away with those contemporary and traditional institutions (art schools, art as a paid profession, state subsidies and private patronage), which give the artist a distinctive station in society. The artist should not have economic security on account of his art; only if he shares the working life of the common people can he communicate the great human feelings (p. 176).

It is not clear that Tolstoy's own text can sustain the burden of universalism that he would place on the art of the future. He must constantly acknowledge the obstacles to such universal feeling and the gaps of understanding that arise among men of different backgrounds, nationalities and occupations. There is constant discussion of artists and audiences who have been "corrupted" or "perverted" by the taste of their society and of "people who lack the capacity to be infected by art" (p. 160). At the same time that Tolstoy would uphold folk art as a model for the art of the future, he denounces "provincialism" in art. Yet surely it seems that folk art derives much of its power from the very regionalism and ethnocentrism that limit its availability as a universal art while reinforcing its appeal to a very specific audience. Whatever truth there is in the idea of folk art as the expression of a homogeneous society with commonly shared values

and perceptions, it is also the case that such societies (or those that we believe approximate to them) maintain their characters through a rigorous insistence on preserving their own ways, language, and art, even when this entails hostility to other human groups, "folk" or otherwise.

Tolstoy's art of the future is tied up with the historical and anthropological picture that he gives of art in peasant societies and in Christian Europe before the Renaissance and Reformation. The purity of such examples is what enables the hope for a revival of artistic (and religious) universalism on a higher level:

The artists of the Middle Ages, vitalized by the same source of feeling—religion—as the mass of the people . . . were true artists . . . their activity, founded on the highest conceptions accessible to their age and common to the entire people, though for our times a mean art, was nevertheless a true one, shared by the whole community.

And this was the state of things until in the upper, rich, more educated classes of European society doubt arose as to the truth of that understanding of life which was expressed by Church Christianity (p. 57).

Such nostalgia for an idealized past seems to be a common element in many programs for the renewal or rediscovery of folk art. But one must ask whether there has ever been such an autonomous and universal strain of folk art and whether artistic programs based on such a view of the past are plausible.

After several initial waves of enthusiasm for new studies of folk poetry, folk-song and other folk art genres, sparked especially by some of the German romantics, critical questions have arisen about the valorization of the folk and their art that seems to ground the enthusiasm and the accompanying scholarship. Arnold Hauser, whose summary judgment of the value of folk art was cited earlier, has also written extensively of folk art in a historical and analytical vein. His study of "Educational Strata

in the History of Art: Folk Art and Popular Art" is, so far as I know, the most sustained attempt to investigate the identity and affiliations of folk art; his inquiry proceeds in response to idealizations such as Herder's and Tolstoy's and in the light of a wide range of scholarship on the particular arts. Hauser's investigation might be called genealogical rather than historical (although he calls his main theoretical work *The Philosophy of Art History*). The contrast, made current by Michel Foucault (who finds it in Nietzsche), is between two ways of constructing or emplotting the past, that is the records of what has happened (Foucault 1977). History is to be understood as the enterprise of tracing a relatively continuous development from an origin to a goal, in which the origin typically has a special meaning or significance that unfolds or manifests itself in the course of the history. Genealogy is suspicious of the purity of origins, the linearity of development, and the view of the end as being the meaningful manifestation of these; instead it sets itself the task of identifying the many different agents and forces that contribute to a sequence, and the gaps, breaks or paradigm shifts that characterize the sequence. The romantic theorists of folk art and those who, like Tolstoy, implicitly or explicitly accepted their perspective, are clearly employing a fairly straightforward historical model with specific philosophical and ideological commitments. The model requires that there was once a folk whose life was undisturbed by conflicts of class and status; that the folk (not individual artists) produced an art expressive of their common life; that certain malign events (e.g. industrialization, increasing social stratification, modern rationalism) have thrown that folk art into temporary eclipse; but that enough of the tradition has been preserved so that the art and, perhaps by means of it, the folk culture



itself can be revitalized. If we add that the folklorist himself may play a special role in this renewal because of his commitment to the folk (often involving a kind of heroic abandonment of his own upperclass life and culture), then we have most of the typical components of romance, that is, a story revolving around the restoration of some original principle of good, in opposition to forces of evil, effected by an agent or hero of special qualifications.<sup>2</sup>

Such a view is romantic in the double sense of being committed to a romantic way of emplotting history and stemming from that literary and intellectual movement that is called romantic (so called, in past, because of its very interest in medieval literary romance). Hauser's genealogical study takes a polemical attitude toward this romantic emplotment of the story of folk art at each stage of the analysis. The most radical challenge to the romantic narrative of the folk and their art is his claim that there can be no undifferentiated folk society that could express itself in a folk art:

One can speak of folk art only where there are already differences of class and education; if there is no social and spiritual elite, there is no sense in introducing the concept of folk art, for it has significance only by contrast with the art of educated strata and with sources of production which are not "folklike." Folk art is not communal art, but the art of a class and of a status, like the art of the upper class. A peasant society that knows no differences of education (even though from the point of view of government it may no longer be quite uniform), like that of the neolithic age or the Germanic tribes of the time of migrations, produces peasant art, but not folk art (Hauser 1963:290-291).

Hauser uses this principle of "significance only by contrast" to suggest that what we call folk art always exists in a complex setting in which it exhibits relations of various sorts (e.g., limitation, derivation, antagonism) to other forms of art and culture. This does not mean that there is no folk art, but that folk art

must be conceived genealogically in terms of its descent and affiliations with its relevant others. It is to be understood as the artistic activities "of those strata of the population which are uneducated and not urbanized or industrialized . . . those who keep it in being . . . do not stand out as individuals or claim any personal authorship." The contrast is not only with high or elite art but with popular art which is to be understood as "artistic or quasi-artistic production for the demands of a half-educated public, generally urban and inclined to mass-behavior." These forms can be further differentiated by the fact that "in folk art, producers and consumers are hardly distinguished, and the boundary between them is always fluid; in the case of popular art, we find on the contrary an artistically uncreative, completely passive public, and professional production.

In deploying these categorical distinctions Hauser produces a rather complex picture of folk art. In many respects he echoes what appear to be the views of an artistic and cultural elite; his comprehensive narrative of *The Social History of Art*, for example, has relatively little to say about folk or popular art, but is essentially concerned with giving a social history of those works that constitute the traditional canon of Western art. In *The Philosophy of Art History* he cites the commonplace that folk art consists of "cultural goods that have drifted downward" which has, for example, among its consequences that "folk-songs for the most part are nothing but plagiarism." When elite art is "popularized and ruralized" it tends to lose both its relation to its own time and place and its artistic quality. "Its themes are treated in a banal fashion, its devices take on a clumsy appearance, and the final result often gives the appearance of being the parody of an ill-understood original" (pp. 294-295). The other side of this picture of folk-art as the

result of a clumsy *reception*, however, is Hauser's acknowledgement of the formative role of folk artists in the *production* of their art:

The reception never takes place mechanically, but manifests certain principles of selection in which the country-folk give effect to their own taste and their own characteristic feeling for form . . . The real task of the art critic then is to acknowledge that fact of transformation, to reveal the principles according to which the material is transformed in becoming folk art (Hauser, p. 298).

A critic who pursued this task would discover that while high art tends to be unique and to exhibit a highly individual view and folk art tends toward the conventional and traditional, neither of these tendencies is absolute; rather, each art form exhibits an interplay of tradition and innovation. Similarly, the influence of the forms upon each other is not limited to high art's "downward drift"; comedy, even in its highest forms derives from the simple mimicry which was a staple of country fairs, carnivals and entertainments. Despite his general reservations about folk art, Hauser is prepared to admit that "a direct line leads from the animal masks of primitive peoples to the stock personages of the mime, and from these to Shakespeare's clowns and Moliere's slyboots" (p. 318).

Hauser also claims that almost all of folk art as we know it is relatively recent; it does not reflect an unbroken tradition that can put us in touch with a primordial wisdom, but has developed as a function of the class and social stratifications characteristic of modern society:

Not until the eighteenth century do we find what is ordinarily called "folk art." From that century derive not merely most of the folk-songs known to us and still sung, but also almost the whole repertoire of decorative forms of modern folk art. In that century originate most of the patterns in weaving, embroidery, and lace-making, the ornamentation of plates and jugs, the types of furniture and domestic utensils which we associate with the concept of folk art (p. 329).

Hauser does not mean to suggest that folk art must be of little value simply because it is two centuries old rather than coeval with the human race. But he does intend to deflate the pretensions of the romantic school which held that folk art (or at least some of it) could be traced to pure and spontaneous origins in the collective creative powers of a people unspoiled by social hierarchy or the influences of other cultures. And he is implicitly raising the question whether folk art can be said to be of great value once its roots in an ancient past have been questioned; that is, if we are tempted to lower our valuation, could it be that we had been valuing it for extra-aesthetic reasons? There is, generally speaking, no folk art until the eighteenth century because only in the modern era does the kind of intense social stratification arise that leads to the formation of a "country-folk"; in modern times

the number of [social] ranks was increasing and the ordinary "country-folk" was getting farther removed from the spiritual elite, i.e. separated from them by a larger number of steps or degrees than ever before. The Renaissance produced a bourgeois art, and even a kind of petty bourgeois art as well; but it also gave rise to highly specific tastes and requirements in art, and to a far more refined type of connoisseur than existed in medieval or ancient times (p. 328).

One could speculate that much folk art and culture derives from people who found themselves newly expropriated, colonized or economically exploited by the political and economic developments of early modern capitalism; this seems to be the case, as William Carswell (in this volume) informs us, in Irish clachan culture. To some extent, then, we might think of folk culture as an adversary culture that consciously differentiates itself from that of the upper, generally urbanized classes. This should not be surprising, because its "other," high art or culture, also seems to require that it

be understood not only as the realization of certain cultural values but as that which is different from, more refined than, and superior to the allegedly crude culture of the folk.

The apparent intent of Hauser's genealogical analysis is to question the purity, spontaneity and immemorial antiquity so often claimed for folk art; but his work can also be deployed to show that the claims made for the aesthetic superiority of high art are themselves often somewhat thinly disguised assertions of social superiority. Such an interdependence of artistic standards and aesthetic criteria would be quite distinct from the interdependence of artistic forms that Hauser documents. The latter consists not only of the tendency of folk-art to adapt the works of high art. It is also apparent in the many cases in which high art adopts folk forms or motifs or in which whole genres develop from folk-like forms; the most significant examples would be the Western comic tradition and the religious drama of the middle ages. I am suggesting that Hauser's work allows us to discover more than influences flowing in either direction between folk art and high art on the level of motifs, genres, styles, and individual works; it also points to the fact that the very practices, attitudes, and institutions that constitute the art-world of the educated classes cannot be understood simply as the realization of universal aesthetic values but must be seen as part of a complex gesture by which the superiority of those with taste is asserted. High art would make a kind of essential reference to folk art (or, in some circumstances, popular art) in a way analogous to that in which the belief that some groups appear to have in the intrinsic value of their own culture, actually makes an essential reference to those groups whom they see as their own inferiors or "others." To speak with

Hegel, then, folk art and higher art would each be the "other" of its "other." This is an interpretation of their relations which is not likely to be congenial to the partisans of either high art or folk art; Tolstoy and Malraux, for example, might each be gratified to know that the "other" of his favored art form was indeed indebted to that form, but each would be appalled by the suggestion that the favored form was not truly autonomous.

Questions concerning the relations of high art and folk art arise whenever the attempt is made to define an aesthetics and delineate a canon of works appropriate to one or the other of these forms. A case in point is Mikhail Bakhtin's study of *Rabelais and His World* (1968). Bakhtin believes that the customary view of Rabelais suffers from a reading that has been constituted by the formation of elite canons and the aesthetics of disinterestedness typical of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. His goal is to demonstrate that Rabelais must be understood against the background of the rich folk culture of the late middle ages and renaissance, including the world of the marketplace, the celebration of the body and a satiric opposition to the official culture of the time. Bakhtin is not merely aiming at a new interpretation of Rabelais's texts by contextualizing them in this way. He is also attempting to challenge the prevailing aesthetic and critical standard of high art which excludes folk humor, the grotesque and the carnivalesque from the privileged sphere of what is to count as art. In restoring these dimensions of Rabelais's work, Bakhtin is hoping to articulate a critical and aesthetic point of view that will be able to recognize these and similar developments as genuinely artistic. The focus on Rabelais is appropriate because *Gargantua and Pantagruel* and its critical reception can be seen as constituting a

collision of some notable traditions of folk art and elite or higher art. Rabelais is part of the literary canon, despite some prudish misgivings and repeated attempts at bowdlerization. Yet Rabelais's language of the marketplace, his carnivalesque inversions of social and religious hierarchies and his grotesque realism which celebrates what Bakhtin calls "the material bodily lower stratum" are intelligible only within the traditions of popular life and folk humor.

Despite the comprehensive aims of his study, Bakhtin does not directly address the question of how folk culture or its art is to be defined, nor does he relate his usage of such concepts to those of the German romantics or more contemporary folklorists. He builds up a picture of a particular world that is in many ways the antithesis of the official religious and political institutions of the middle ages. The picture is both plausible and appealing; it centers around the practices of the carnival and other festivities in which the world was turned upside down, people felt the liberating effects of a generalized laughter at the conventional, and were able to rejoice in the earthy body of eating, drinking, sexuality, birth, and death. Yet there is a certain unthematized conceptual tension in Bakhtin's attempt to articulate the aesthetic stance appropriate to this world, which has to do with the question of the degree of autonomy to be attributed to folk art and culture. One strand of Bakhtin's presentation emphasizes the ancient, autochthonous character of folk culture and folk humor. He is fond of demonstrating that many themes and motifs having to do with excrement, sex or abusive language can be traced back to the earliest cultural records and can be plausibly supposed to antedate them. In this respect he is at one methodologically with the German romantics and early folklorists who see the folk as the repository of an ancient

wisdom that we too civilized latecomers may yet, at this late date, be able to tap into. However, Bakhtin's vision of the *content* of this ancient wisdom or lore of the folk is radically different from that of these other students of tradition. In the place of the more somber world of the (often Germanic) *Volk*, we encounter a world of laughter, celebration and satiric freedom more commonly associated with the culture of southern Europe. Leaving this complication aside for a moment, we should note another dimension of Bakhtin's analysis, which is historical or, to speak more precisely, genealogical. It consists in his understanding of folk humor and associated institutions like the carnival as fully adversarial and polemical responses to a repressive official culture of the social elite and the hierarchy of the church. In this perspective the carnivalesque is an answer to a challenge rather than the manifestation of a continuous tradition:

It was precisely the one-sided character of official seriousness which led to the necessity of creating a vent for the second nature of man, for laughter. "The feast of fools" at least once a year became a vent for laughter; the material bodily principle linked with it then enjoyed complete freedom (Bakhtin, p. 75).

Bakhtin's adversarial conception of folk culture is stated very clearly in his discussion of the various forms of reversal and parody associated with carnival. The carnival replaces the Christian mass with an ass-festival, substitutes a fool for the king, allows the socially low to rule temporarily at the expense of the high, and celebrates those dimensions of life frowned on by political and religious authority. Specific elements of the official culture such as religious prophecy are subverted by the production of parodic prophecies. Parody is a relatively sophisticated activity; it requires both an awareness of some original text or activity which is to be parodied, as well as the

constructive process that goes into the making of the parody. To conceive of folk culture (or some part of it) as parody is to think of it as something other than a spontaneous source of a self-contained tradition.

Bakhtin's work seems to involve a certain social idealization of the carnival as well as the attempt to make it central in an aesthetics of grotesque realism. That is, he sees the practices of the carnival as inherently emancipatory, manifesting a relaxed fraternity and a sense of being at home in the material world. Yet this understanding of the carnival (and of the carnivalesque) omits the dark side of the same phenomenon. Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, in his historical narrative *Carnival in Romans* (1979), documents in detail the way in which the aristocratic party in one sixteenth century French city turned the carnival into a device for reasserting their own domination through violence. To read Le Roy Ladurie's account of the way in which a popular festival can be turned against itself is to realize how much of Tolstoy's faith in the infectious power of the culture of the people is still present in Bakhtin's much more sophisticated and scholarly analysis. One might be tempted to say that a political use or abuse of the carnival does not touch its status as an aesthetic or cultural activity. However part of the aim of theories like Bakhtin's is precisely to break down the distinction between the aesthetic, artistic or cultural and the moral or political; so to the extent that the carnival lends itself to events such as those described by Le Roy Ladurie, questions are necessarily raised for such approaches. In order to see the force of these questions it is not necessary to think of such spectacular (and perhaps atypical) events as the political massacre in Romans in 1580. One might think of the stabilizing role played by carnival as

a periodic release of tensions that allows the social order to continue despite the potential conflicts that it harbors.

Bakhtin, despite his clashes with the Soviet authorities, was a Marxist; and the shift in his thought between a romantic-historical and a genealogical conception of the folk and their culture may be typical of the situation of Marxist aesthetics. One important current in Marxism preserves a certain nostalgia for the life of the people before the rapid industrialization and rationalization of the capitalist era; this current can lead to the idealization of primitive communism or rural, village life. But another side of Marxism emphasizes the specifically historical character of human action and culture and is particularly responsive to signs of class conflict and class consciousness. These tendencies can be combined, as Bakhtin seems sometimes to combine them, by seeing them as unified in such themes as the celebration of the material, bodily, and earthly and the manifestation of generalized laughter as a vision of freedom.

While Bakhtin may be somewhat ambiguous on the question of whether the folk art that he admires is to be conceived primarily as a manifestation of an original tendency or as an agonistic response to the higher culture, he makes two important contributions to the understanding of the relation between folk art (specifically folk humor and its affiliates) and relatively formal thinking in aesthetics and criticism. The first of these is his attempt to delineate an aesthetics of the grotesque, the carnivalesque, the satirical, the festive, generalized laughter and the celebration of human beings as embodied and earthy. It should be clear that the articulation of such an aesthetic would involve a transvaluation of elite, academic standards of taste. Bakhtin's studies of the high art of Dostoyevsky, the Western novelistic tra-

dition and other subjects have attracted attention because they attempt to re-interpret and revalue some of the works of the higher canon precisely in the light of their carnivalizing or dialogical tendencies. It should be obvious that a work might figure in the canons of the critical perspectives represented by Bakhtin and (for example) T. S. Eliot, but be read quite differently depending on the standard of evaluation employed.

Bakhtin's second contribution is his rather detailed narrative of the repression of folk humor and the carnivalesque in the formation of the European tradition of aesthetics in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It could be said without much exaggeration that there is no area of thought that could properly be called aesthetics before this time; the term is first used in something like its contemporary manner by Alexander Baumgarten around 1750 and becomes entrenched through Kant's discussion of aesthetic judgment and in the work of the German idealists so strongly indebted to him. It is also in the eighteenth century that the Abbé Batteaux first articulates the conception that the various "fine arts" form a natural group which can be understood in the light of a common principle. What Bakhtin adds to studies of the formation of aesthetics such as Paul O. Kristeller's famous essay on "The Modern System of the Arts" (1965) is an awareness of the socially exclusionary dimension of early aesthetic and critical thought. During the eighteenth century there is a heated critical debate around the figure of Harlequin, the *commedia della arte*, and the grotesque which involved Lessing, Gottsched, and Justus Moser. The result of the controversy and of the larger developments in the formation of aesthetics which are echoed in it was this:

During the domination of the classical canon in all the areas of art and literature of

the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the grotesque related to the culture of folk humor was excluded from great literature; it descended to the low comic level or was subject to the epithet "gross naturalism" . . . During this period (actually starting in the seventeenth century) we observe a process of gradual narrowing down of the ritual, spectacle, and carnival forms of folk culture, which became small and trivial. On the one hand the state encroached upon festive life and turned it into a parade; on the other hand these festivities were brought into the home and became part of the family's private life. The privileges which were formerly allowed by the marketplace were more and more restricted. The carnival spirit with its freedom, its utopian character oriented toward the future, was gradually transformed into a mere holiday mood (Bakhtin, p. 33).

What was new in this development was not the concern with marking off legitimate and acceptable art from the activities of the lower classes. Plato's discussions of beauty and ugliness are consistently framed in social terms. Aristotle already felt the need to respond to the charge that tragedy was a vulgar art and to distinguish those forms of music appropriate to free born citizens who are being educated for a life of virtue from those suitable to a vulgar crowd composed of mechanics, laborers and the like. Such judgments and distinctions, prior to the rise of aesthetics, occur typically within texts such as Plato's *Republic* or Aristotle's *Politics* that are explicitly political in their concerns. What seems to be characteristic of the "epistemological break" that introduces aesthetics as a separate discipline is the combination of such social exclusions and distinctions with a discourse that views itself as establishing universal standards of art and beauty. Within this modern tradition, as Bakhtin (p. 37) notes, the grotesque (for example) was accommodated only in a subjectivized, internalized form that excluded the public, festive and celebratory dimensions: "Unlike the medieval and Renaissance

grotesque, which was directly related to folk culture and thus belonged to all the people, the Romantic genre acquired a private 'chamber' character. It became, as it were, an individual carnival, marked by a vivid sense of isolation."

Readers of Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* (1984) will recognize that that book can be read as an allegory of the repression of the popular-comic, although the time is displaced from the modern period to the fourteenth century. The villain, Jorge de Burgos has committed a string of murders and finally burns down the greatest monastic library in the world in order to make sure that the single surviving copy of Aristotle's treatise on comedy (the lost half of the *Poetics*) cannot exert the baleful influence that he fears:

"from this book there could be born the new destructive aim to destroy death through redemption from fear. And what would we be, we sinful creatures, without fear, perhaps the most foresighted, the most loving, of the divine gifts? . . . if one day—and no longer as *plebeian exception*, but as *asceticism of the learned*, devoted to the indestructible testimony of Scripture—the art of mockery were to be made acceptable and to seem *noble and liberal and no longer mechanical*; if one day someone could say (and be heard), 'I laugh at the Incarnation,' then we would have no weapons to combat the blasphemy, because it would summon the dark powers of corporal matter, those that are affirmed in the fart and the belch, and the fart and the belch would claim the right that is only of the spirit, to breathe where they list" (pp. 578, 580. My emphasis).

We may perhaps be permitted a certain scepticism as to whether the survival of Aristotle's analysis of comedy could have had such momentous effects simply by itself. Yet Eco's story does dramatize the repressive tendencies that have been directed against some of the main forms of folk culture, and the historical importance of the formation of the modern study of aesthetics for the legitimation of social and political hierarchy. Tolstoy may still have something to teach us

about the connection between canon, aesthetic theory and social structure, even if we question his solemnity and piety.

I would like to conclude this episodic survey by taking a brief look at a recent, and rather exhaustive study of the social determinants and production of taste which is itself written from the standpoint of a polemical engagement with the Kantian tradition in aesthetics. Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (1984) aims at a fully contextual understanding of taste in the widest sense: not only in regard to works of art and high culture, but also with respect to taste in recreation, home furnishings, clothing, and, of course, food. That we should, in the modern European languages, use "taste" to designate both the sense that is stimulated by food and drink as well as the faculty of discriminating among paintings or musical performances has long been noted. It is something of an embarrassment to the founders of aesthetics (Kant, for example), who are at pains to point out the differences between the "pleasure in the agreeable" which satisfies an interest, and the "pleasure in the beautiful" which lies beyond all interest. Bourdieu's study rests on the very simple idea that such distinctions are systematically exaggerated and the exaggeration suppressed; he invites us to transgress "the sacred frontier which makes legitimate culture a separate universe" and so discover the mainly unconscious social function of art and culture (p. 6). Two qualifications must be mentioned. First, Bourdieu is not explicitly concerned with what we have been calling folk art; no doubt he would share something of Hauser's genealogical skepticism concerning the possibility of identifying a pure vein of folk art or culture within the complex of cultural activities, whether taken on a large historical scale or as a

synchronic cross section of a particular society or tradition. But he does attempt to provide a carefully differentiated study of the competing forms of taste from the "high" to the "low" (terms which we may now recognize as having a social as well as an allegedly pure aesthetic meaning). Second, Bourdieu's material, although extensive, is limited to France, and his empirical surveys are all products of the last twenty years. But this is also something of an advantage, for the profusion of material within these limitations provides a model of what a careful study of such phenomena ought to be. It might be said that France is atypical, since it is precisely the land in which fashion or, to put it invidiously, snobbery, in taste is most deeply entrenched. Yet even this caveat might be balanced by the consideration that the land of fashion may be the best laboratory for analyzing conscious and unconscious structures of taste that are operative elsewhere with their own regional modifications.

It is perhaps not surprising that Bourdieu's respondents should sort themselves out rather neatly by economic class and educational attainment in regard to their taste in photography. The question whether a photograph of a specific subject is likely to be "beautiful, interesting, meaningless, or ugly" invites the respondents not only to display their own taste (by imagining the photograph and their response) but to distinguish themselves as persons with a certain kind of taste, belonging (with an uncertain degree of explicit consciousness) to a particular group with similar taste. Taste becomes increasingly "Kantian" as one goes up the ladder of "cultural capital" (Bourdieu's term for a combination of the factors of class and educational achievement). Those at the lower end of the ladder tend to approve of photographs on the basis of the conven-

tional meaning of their subject matter (e.g. first communion); while those at the higher end seem to be relatively contemptuous of such "simple" meanings and instead show a willingness not present at the other end to enjoy images of cabbages or the bark of a tree, subjects with no conventional meaning but presumably capable of being given an interesting formal or "aesthetic" treatment. These and similar data could be used to construct an "anti-Kantian" aesthetic that could be attributed to those at the lower end of the scale. What the table does not show are the comments made by the respondents in explanation or defense of their taste, and these typically involve a negative reference (by those at the high end) to the crude taste for facile pleasures in those who would prefer photos of first communion or to skepticism (from those at the lower end) of what anyone could really find appealing, other than the exhibition of a certain snobbery, in pictures of cabbages. Moreover, the same preferences are demonstrated with great regularity in regard to everything else that comprises what we have come to call life-style. It is such regularities which leads Bourdieu to conclude that

Hidden behind the statistical relationships between educational capital or social origin and this or that type of knowledge or way of applying it, there are relationships between groups maintaining different, and even antagonistic relations to culture, depending on the conditions in which they acquired their cultural capital and the markets in which they can derive most profit from it (p. 12).

The procedure of tracing these relationships is capable of great refinement. Bourdieu demonstrates, for example, a telling difference between the "dominant" and "dominated" fractions of the "predominant" class; the dominated fraction (e.g. teachers, intellectuals) has a special preference for the spare and ascetic in paintings and home furnish-



ings, while the dominant fraction (e.g. successful executives) enjoys things with more flourish and pizzaz. Yet taste is precisely the area in which, on the surface, it seems that the relevance of the social is denied; explicit theories of art tend to view taste as a universal faculty and, if asked directly, most people might say that their taste is a highly individual matter, one which expresses their truer or deeper selves rather than a response to a social situation. But Bourdieu suggests that the regularity of the relations that he uncovers and the responses that people make when asked to comment on particular choices, whether in pictures or in food, require a different definition of taste:

Taste is an acquired disposition to “differentiate” and “appreciate” . . . The schemes of the habitus, the primary forms of classification, owe their specific efficacy to the fact that they function below the level of consciousness and language, beyond the reach of introspective scrutiny or control by the will . . . Taste is a practical mastery of distributions which makes it possible to sense or intuit what is likely (or unlikely) to befall—and therefore befit—an individual occupying a given position in social space. It functions as a sort of social orientation, a “sense of one’s place,” guiding the occupants of a given place in social space towards the social positions adjusted to their properties, and towards the practices or goods which befit the occupants of that position . . . the social agents whom the sociologist classifies are producers not only of classifiable acts but also of acts of classification which are themselves classified (p. 466).

On the basis of such a conception of taste, it would be possible to formulate a number of research projects having to do with the relations between what may now seem to be the overly crude categories of high art, folk art and popular art. Such notions would no doubt have to be further refined in order to yield concepts appropriate to specific social formations within particular societies. Yet as Bourdieu indicates in his “Postscript: Towards a ‘Vulgar’ Critique of Pure

Critiques,” such conceptions may also be useful in developing a better hermeneutical understanding of the dominant traditions of modern aesthetics and criticism. In the “Postscript” Bourdieu suggests that “the whole of legitimate aesthetics” has been constructed as an immense repression of the social truth of taste. It is now possible, perhaps, to reread the founding texts of aesthetics so as to clarify the nature of that repression. Bourdieu begins to develop this genealogical project by looking closely at those texts of Kant—*The Critique of Judgment*, but also the *Anthropology* and the writings on history—in order to bring to light the way in which “the whole language of aesthetics is contained in a fundamental refusal of the facile” (p. 486).

Against the background of his own researches on taste, Bourdieu presents Kant’s analysis of aesthetic judgment as being more complex than is usually supposed. For Kant is concerned not only with aesthetic judgment as a way of judging an object, but also with the way in which those who properly exercise this judgment differentiate themselves from those who abuse it or fail to exercise it. The parallelism that Kant presupposes between social status and taste comes to appear more significant and less peripheral than it does to the traditional readings of this founding text of aesthetics. Consider, for example, texts like the following:

we regard as coarse and low the habits of thought of those who have no *feeling* for beautiful nature (for this is the word we use for susceptibility to an interest in the contemplation of beautiful nature) and who devote themselves to the mere enjoyments of sense found in eating and drinking (1978: 162).

*Common human understanding* . . . has therefore the doubtful honor of having the name of common sense (*sensus communis*) bestowed upon it; and bestowed, too, in an acceptation of the word *common* (not merely in our own language, where it actually has a double

meaning, but also in many others) which makes it amount to what is *vulgar*—what is everywhere to be met with—a quality which by no means confers credit or distinction upon its possessor (1978:151).

Taste that requires an added element of *charm* and *emotion* for its delight, not to speak of adopting this as the measure of its approval, has not yet emerged from barbarism (1978:65).

Kant is operating here with rather crude and general social distinctions; he does not have our specifically romantic or post-romantic conceptions of folk art or popular art. Kant's conception of taste excludes the possibility of any of those interests which a Bakhtin or a Bourdieu discern in the counter-aesthetics of a non-elite art; the highest expression of this ascetic tendency in Kantian aesthetics would no doubt be the experience of the sublime, in which aesthetic pleasure occurs despite the fact that pleasures of the senses are not only absent but are replaced by pains, real or virtual. But it should also be noted that Kant systematically excludes the possibility of attributing the authorship of fine art to the *Volk*; beautiful art is for him, and so many later thinkers, the product of genius, conceived as located only in individuals. Despite the fact that he reviewed the books on the philosophy of history in which Herder introduces a richer concept of the folk, there is no indication that Kant ever took seriously the possibility of some form of artistic production other than that of the genius through whom "nature gives the rule to art." Recent decades have seen a number of challenges to the long supremacy of the Kantian aesthetic with its interlinked concepts of reflective judgment, disinterested taste, formalism and genius;<sup>3</sup> one more such challenge could be formulated in terms of the need both to understand the various social levels of taste, of which the Kantian approach valorizes only a narrow range, and at the

same time to articulate the genealogy of that conception of taste with its many exclusionary gestures.

## Notes

1. For a few of the responses and a bibliography see Dickie and Sclafani, eds. (1977).
2. On romance, see, for example, Frye (1957: 186-206).
3. For hermeneutic and deconstructive attempts to rethink the context and philosophical economy of Kant's text, see Hans-Georg Gadamer (1975:39ff) and Derrida (1978).

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