

ABOUT THE COVER

The cover features a detail from Liza Lou's monumental work *Kitchen*, a room-size sculpture measuring 8 × 11 × 14 feet and covered with an estimated 10 million beads. *Kitchen* took Lou five years (1991–5) to create, and it made its public debut in 1996 at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York as part of the "Labor of Love" show curated by Marcia Tucker. *Kitchen* has since traveled to museums around the world.

In 2002, Liza Lou was awarded a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship for her work.

Many thanks to Marcia Tucker for introducing me to Liza Lou's work, and to Liza herself for her kind permission to reproduce this detail from *Kitchen* as an emblem of the dazzling and ingenious aesthetics of cultural studies.

Thanks also to Janet Lyon for pulling Marcia Tucker's *Labor of Love* off the shelf, opening it to the photo of *Kitchen*, and saying, "this would make a great cover."

THE AESTHETICS OF CULTURAL STUDIES

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by Michael Bérubé

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Notes on Contributors

Michael Bérubé is the Paterno Family Professor in Literature at Pennsylvania State University.

Barry Faulk is Assistant Professor of Victorian Literature and Cultural Studies at Florida State University. He is the author of *Music Hall and Modernity: The Late Victorian Discovery of Popular Culture* (2004).

Rita Felski is Professor of English at the University of Virginia. Her most recent book is *Literature after Feminism* (2003).

John Frow is Professor of English at the University of Melbourne, and the author of *Marxism and Literary History* (1986), *Cultural Studies and Cultural Value* (1995), *Time and Commodity Culture* (1997) and – with Tony Bennett and Mike Emmison – *Accounting for Tastes: Australian Everyday Cultures* (1999). A book on Genre is forthcoming in the Critical Idiom series in 2004/5, and a Handbook of Cultural Analysis, co-edited with Tony Bennett, in 2006/7.

Jane Juffer is an assistant professor of English and Women's Studies at Pennsylvania State University, where she specializes in Latina/o and feminist cultural studies. She is the author of *At Home with Pornography: Women, Sex, and Everyday Life* (1998) and other work on pornography and domesticity. She has also published on lingerie, single mothering, Sammy Sosa, Latina/o studies at the corporate university, and various aspects of the US–Mexican border.

Irene Kacandes is Associate Professor of German Studies and Comparative Literature at Dartmouth College. She is author of *Talk Fiction: Literature and the Talk Explosion* (2001) and co-editor of *A User's Guide to German Cultural*

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Studies (1997) and *Teaching the Representation of the Holocaust* (forthcoming in the MLA Options for Teaching Series). Author of articles on German and Italian cultural studies, narrative theory, feminist linguistic theory, trauma studies and Holocaust studies, her current research focuses on violence in the Weimar Republic.

Laura Kipnis is the author of *Against Love: A Polemic* (2003); her previous book was *Bound and Gagged: Pornography and the Politics of Fantasy in America* (1996). She is a professor of media and cultural studies at Northwestern. Her next book will be about scandal in the 1990s.

Steven Rubio has taught literature, film, American studies, mass communications, and humanities at several institutions in the San Francisco Bay Area, and is currently teaching English at American River College. He believes “adjunct faculty” is just a fancy way to say “temp.” During his most recent trip to Spain, he saw a graffiti version of Guernica that covered an entire brick wall.

David Sanjek has a Ph.D. in American Literature from Washington University and has been the Director of the BMI Archives since 1991. He is co-author with his late father, Russell, of *Pennies From Heaven: The American Popular Music Business in the 20th Century* (1996), and is completing *Always On My Mind: Music, Memory and Money*. He is at work on a project, *Keeping It Real: The Persistence of Authenticity in American Popular Music*.

David Shumway is Professor of English and Literary and Cultural Studies, Carnegie Mellon University, and Acting Director of its Humanities Center. He is also director of the Film and Media Studies Minor, and he teaches courses in film, American culture, and cultural theory. He is co-editor of *Knowledges: Critical and Historical Studies in Disciplinarity* (1993), *Making and Selling Culture* (1996), and *Disciplining English* (2002), and the author of *Michel Foucault* (1989), *Creating American Civilization: A Genealogy of American Literature as an Academic Discipline* (1994), and *Modern Love: Romance, Intimacy, and the Marriage Crisis* (2003). He is at work on *Classic Rockers: the Cultural Significance of the Stars* and on a book about film director John Sayles.

Jonathan Sterne teaches in the Department of Art History and Communication Studies at McGill University. He is author of *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (2003) and numerous articles on media, technologies, and the politics of culture. He is also an editor of *Bad Subjects: Political Education for Everyday Life*, the longest-running publication on the internet.

Cultural Studies and Questions of Pleasure and Value

DAVID SHUMWAY

This essay began as a response to the question, posed as the title of an MLA Convention session, “does cultural studies have bad taste?” In order to answer that question, I have to ask another: “why ask this question?” Perhaps the answer is obvious, but it is important to my argument to spell it out. We are asking this question because cultural studies as theory and practice seems to ignore, to reject, or, perhaps, to mishandle the very issues that since the rise of the New Criticism have seemed to be central to literary studies. It is the element of criticism known as judgment, central to aesthetic theory since Kant, which is apparently absent from cultural studies. As Simon Frith has argued, although popular culture is now the subject of much academic attention, “the aesthetics of the popular continues to be at best neglected and at worst dismissed” (1996: 11). Like the New Criticism, cultural studies has focused its efforts on interpretation, or close reading, of texts – a fact lamented by some practitioners more oriented toward the social sciences. It has not had much to say, however, about the quality or value of the objects it interprets. The question may imply that this lack of judgment results in poor judgment, the taking up of “bad” art. To decide this, of course, you would need to be able to answer persuasively questions of taste. In other words, you would have to offer something that heretofore has not existed, an aesthetics that can yield widespread agreement about critical judgments.

Now, to answer the original question in light of these considerations, we can't claim that cultural studies has bad taste since we can't agree on what bad taste is. What I think we can say is that cultural studies has an aversion to questions of taste. The aversion to such questions results from the desire to avoid reproducing

bourgeois ideology. Raymond Williams has argued that the concept of taste emerged as a marker of bourgeois class affiliation in the same social transformation that produced both “literature” and “criticism” as we know them. “Literature” had previously been associated with “learning,” the knowledge that was embodied in written works. Taste differs from learning in that it cannot be acquired by study. Taste is for Williams a name for the habits of the dominant class rendered as inherent qualities. As Williams describes their function, “taste” and its twin, “sensibility,” served chiefly to help unify the bourgeoisie and “could be applied over a very wide range from public and private behaviour to (as Wordsworth complained) either wine or poetry” (1977: 48). Criticism developed together with literature as a means by which its distinction was promoted and defended. The emergence of the term “Criticism” reflects the increasing specialization of “literature” (ibid.). A new term in the seventeenth century, “criticism” shifted from the practice of commentary on learning to the “conscious exercise of ‘taste,’ ‘sensibility,’ and ‘discrimination.’” In the nineteenth, it becomes “the only way of validating [a] specialized and selective category. It was at once a *discrimination* of the authentic ‘great’ or ‘major’ works, with a consequent grading of ‘minor’ works and an effective exclusion of ‘bad’ or ‘negligible’ works, and a practical realization and communication of the ‘major’ values” (1977: 49–51).

Pierre Bourdieu has shown in great detail how taste functions in the ways Williams’s argument says it does. In *Distinction*, Bourdieu shows that taste in France during the 1960s is more strongly correlated with class than with any other factor. But Bourdieu also recognizes that taste is not a simple extension of bourgeois hegemony. Not only do other classes have their own tastes, but within the dominant, the role of taste is also related in complex ways to other sources of value. In order to represent such relations, Bourdieu makes use of the term “symbolic capital”: “economic or political capital that is disavowed, misrecognized and thereby recognized, hence legitimate, a ‘credit’ which, under certain conditions, and always in the long run, guarantees ‘economic’ profits” (1993: 75). Symbolic capital is thus fungible prestige or authority, the fungibility of which depends upon its being not recognized as such. One species of symbolic capital is “cultural capital,” which is best understood as a sort of *savoir-faire*. Cultural capital is not disciplinary or scholarly knowledge (*connaissance*), but a familiarity that entails the ability to understand cultural products. “A work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded.” (1984: 2). To acquire cultural capital is to learn the various codes that permit art to be read and judged. Since such codes are modes of perception, they are most effectively taught in the household, where early access permits the denial of the existence of a code in favor of natural taste or genius. Taste, it turns out, is learned, but, like language, it is easily learned at a particular age and as part of one’s environment.

Given what both Williams and Bourdieu show about the social function of discrimination and the distinctions it produces, it is not surprising that cultural

studies would avoid engaging in arguments about taste. These two theorists, however, point cultural studies in different directions. For Bourdieu, culture is nothing more than a field of distinctions. The content of culture is irrelevant. Williams’s model, which may seem less materialist than Bourdieu’s, does take into account these various fields of which literature has been a part. For Williams, culture does more than mark status: it is the medium of social reproduction. What is represented in the texts of culture in part explains and in part represents the society at any historical moment.

If Williams is right, then cultural studies must do more than simply analyze the way culture functions. If the democratic values that drive cultural studies are to be reproduced, then the field must promote texts that embody such values. In the past, the only judgments cultural studies typically has offered have concerned political effects; specifically, whether the text is affirmative or subversive of hegemony. What is needed is a much broader range of judgments. But on what grounds can we make these judgments? Does cultural studies need an aesthetics? Has the philosophical project of aesthetics historically served to ground the actual practice of critical judgment? As Eagleton (1990) argues, the rise of aesthetics is coincident with the rise of the bourgeoisie; but as he also notes, this alone should not stigmatize the project. Williams shows that the idea of taste has been disparaged by generations of British critics starting with Wordsworth. The aesthetic in the late Victorian period came to be associated with a particular attitude toward art, rather than with the project of grounding judgments of it. The problem rather is that aesthetics has hit a dead end. As Barbara Herrnstein Smith (1988) has convincingly argued, there are no grounds for believing that we can arrive at a universal foundation for judgments of taste. A theory of artistic value can only be predicated on particular cultural assumptions. The pleasure we take in texts certainly can be interpreted in a general way on the basis of human constants, but such constants cannot account for the fact that people even in the same society predictably disagree about art, much less explain cultural and historical differences.

So far, cultural studies has been preoccupied by explaining such differences and it has often done this impressively. It has exponentially increased our knowledge of the historical and cultural relativity of taste. Cultural studies cannot abandon this knowledge, but it needs to move beyond it. The realm of culture is of limited interest as an objective entity. Cultural productions derive their meaning from the judgments of pleasure and value that audiences make of them. To refuse to make such judgments is to remove oneself from the domain of culture and to place oneself in the domain of science. Rather than return to aesthetics, cultural studies must ask culturally specific questions of pleasure and value, and it must make them as central to its project as questions of subversion and affirmation have been.

The theme of pleasure is, of course, a common one in recent theoretical writing. What its use often amounts to in cultural studies is the proclamation of an identity. While I don’t wish to reject that usage, I think we need to assert more generally that

pleasure is a significant element of the experience of art. In a sense, my move here is to try to embrace the wide application of “taste” that Wordsworth rejected. Of course, in doing so I’m also appealing to the more literal meaning of “taste” as a particular kind of sense experience. To put it perhaps too crudely, cultural studies should be interested not in art that is in good taste, but in art that tastes (or looks or feels or smells or sounds) good. My hypothesis is that if you want to understand the longevity of art, its entertainment value is among the most important factors. So, if we want to know why people have read Homer and Shakespeare over the years, the place to start is with the guess that their works have tended to yield pleasurable experiences. These experiences certainly differ depending on the context of reception. As Lawrence Levine showed, Shakespeare could yield different pleasures for nineteenth-century American audiences of different classes.

In aesthetic terms, what I am arguing here is that Kant’s distinction between the “agreeable” and the “beautiful” is untenable. Here is how Kant makes the distinction:

As regards the *agreeable* everyone acknowledges that his judgment, which he bases on private feeling and by which he says that he likes some object, is by the same token confined to his own person. Hence, if he says that canary wine is agreeable he is quite content if someone else corrects his terms and reminds him to say instead: It is agreeable to *me*. . . . It is quite different (exactly the other way around) with the beautiful. It would be ridiculous if someone who prided himself on his taste tried to justify [it] by saying: This object (the building we are looking at, the garment that man is wearing, the concert we are listening to, the poem put up to be judged) is beautiful *for me*. For he must not call it *beautiful* if [he means] only [that] *he* likes it. (1987: 213)¹

This distinction is usually regarded as the basis upon which art may be distinguished from other, less elevated sources of pleasure. Yet, readers of Kant have disagreed about the nature of the distinction. Is it essentially one of the subjective and contingent versus the objective and absolute? Or, is it mainly a matter of the sort of pleasure that each experience yields, brute, simple sensory pleasure – most often exemplified by sex – as opposed to refined, distanced, intellectual appreciation?² Or, finally, as Bernard Gendron has suggested, is it merely the distinction between that which can be argued about, and that which cannot be (2001: 9–10)? Gendron’s conception has the effect of relativizing the distinction, thus defeating the chief purpose for which it has been typically invoked. He notes that we now may regard some objects as worthy of argument that were not so regarded in Kant’s time – for example, the pleasures of wine and food. Such pleasures are usually held to be precisely what the idea of the aesthetic is meant to exclude. Yet, Gendron’s observation that we do argue about such tastes is accurate. Food and wine critics and their readers don’t believe that such criticism merely expresses

private preferences. Indeed, the language of wine criticism today is arguably more precise and makes a stronger case for intersubjective validity than does most literary criticism. While literary scholars have tended to regard poetics, the descriptive analysis of literary works, as a dead end, wine writers make use of a shared vocabulary that describes the tastes and aromas of a wine in terms of those associated with other familiar objects: citrus, pear, tar, chocolate, herbs, etc. Moreover, the common use of numerical ratings claims a precision in judgment seldom claimed by literary critics in or out of the academy. No one, of course, believes that these ratings are objective, but a great many people find them to have enough validity to be basis for their own decisions about what wine to purchase. Is there a literary critic who commands anything like the authority of wine critic Robert Parker? His *Wine Advocate* often strikes fear in the hearts of wine producers from Bordeaux to the Napa Valley.³

Another argument that might distinguish “base” sensual pleasures from those “higher” mental ones is that the latter require training while the former do not. We are all born with the capacity for the sensual pleasure, but in order to aesthetically appreciate *Beowulf* one must not only learn to read, but learn to read a dead language and appreciate its distinctive qualities. But tastes for food, wine, and even sex are not innate. While our senses equip each of us to experience these pleasures, they do not guarantee we will actually experience a particular thing as pleasure. Consider the typical American’s response to thought of eating such Chinese delicacies as sea slug or the typical East Asian reaction to the idea of consuming the congealed spoiled milk known as cheese. Americans drink much less wine than the French or Italians because Americans are much less likely to learn to drink it at home. Universities in the United States often offer wine-tasting courses, and the international advocacy group Slow Food has developed a curriculum for use in primary schools to teach children an appreciation for the traditional foods threatened by American fast-food’s expansion. While the West has largely lacked a tradition of *ars erotica*, other cultures have long regarded sexual pleasure as something worthy of cultivation. All pleasures are learned, and all may be increased by further learning.

Since neither objectivity nor susceptibility to reasoned argument seem to explain the distinction between the agreeable and beautiful that founds aesthetics, the explanation must be located in the desire to distinguish among pleasures. The way in which the idea of the aesthetic is most often used is to maintain that pleasure in beauty is fundamentally different from the pleasures of the senses, or the “lower” pleasures. If it might be conceded that food and wine could perhaps reach the level of art, most would argue that there remain sensuous pleasures that could not be so elevated. Thus, pornography might seem to be the utter antithesis of the aesthetic. Unlike a great meal or an exceptional bottle of wine, the pornographic work is a representation. It is in this sense more like the aesthetic object than other, literally consumable sources of immediate pleasure. But, unlike those objects considered

aesthetic, the pornographic work is designed to elicit immediate sexual stimulation. If it distances the audience in any way, its success as pornography is inhibited. Yet, pornography often comes in the guise of some kind of aesthetic form: pornographic movies have plots; the pictures in skin magazines borrow all manner of convention from the fine art of photography; Anaïs Nin's stories in *Delta of Venus* make use of figurative language typical of highly valued poetry and prose.

Clearly, pornography is regarded as the lowest form of pleasure because the specific pleasure it yields is regarded as evil, either because sexual pleasure itself is evil or because vicarious sexual pleasure is. The desire to segregate some pleasures from others is a basic motive for the maintenance of the distinction between the agreeable and beautiful. I propose that we drop the overt or covert moral judgment that renders those pleasures we call aesthetic better than other pleasures. Accepting this proposal does not entail the reductionism that it may seem to at first. That all pleasures are valuable does not mean that all pleasures are the same. That one's liking for Shelley and one's liking for a particular sexual position do not have different epistemological foundations doesn't mean that we can't distinguish between the two.

So far, I've been arguing that Kant illegitimately created a special faculty for the appreciation of the beautiful as distinguished from the merely agreeable. By dismissing this distinction, I may seem to be devaluing art by rendering it merely pleasurable. But as Philip Sidney pointed out (in his "Apology for Poetry") several centuries before Kant, poetry instructs and delights. The instructive value of art corresponds to a third form of liking discussed by Kant, the "good." This term can be glossed as referring to an object's moral value, its positive or useful effects. Kant holds that the good and the agreeable have interestedness in common, while the beautiful is disinterested. "We call *agreeable* what GRATIFIES us, *beautiful* what we just LIKE, *good* what we ESTEEM or *endorse*" (1987: 210). Kant's distinctions have been used to justify the notion of art for art's sake, which holds that true art is by definition what we "just LIKE," and not something that we like because of its moral, political, or other useful content. Thus, aesthetic theory in the twentieth century could be said to be founded on the opposition of instruction and pleasure. In finding an aesthetic suitable to its own ends, cultural studies would do well to go back to Sidney and reject this opposition. The field's interest in works with "subversive" power, and its focus on determining the precise political message of the texts it reads, would suggest that it takes for granted that art instructs.

Of course, there are theoretical objections to the idea that works of art "instruct," a conception that may be seen as a version of the theory that such works function in culture by causing or influencing behavior. While this theory is opposed by those who would emphasize the agency of the audience in the reception of the work, cultural studies has not been able to reject it. Indeed, it would be hard to imagine a theory of the political import of art that did not

accord works some kind of influence. Sometimes this influence is said to function at a less than conscious level: for example, interpellating the subject rather than instructing the rational mind. Even those commodities that audiences have been able to appropriate for their own oppositional ends must be assumed to have a primary and contradictory influence that the empowered audience is refusing. The Birmingham School emphasis on audience usage does, of course, diminish the importance of the objects used, yet it does not necessarily render them noninstructive. The punks whom Dick Hebdige argues appropriated the detritus of postindustrial capitalism made such objects teach new lessons. "Instruction," in the broad sense I'm using the term, is entailed in most conceptions of works of art and representation found in cultural studies. To say that a work instructs is not to say anything about what is learned, so the term should not be understood to imply a theory that denies agency to audiences.

Historically, however, when works of art were explicitly judged, it was most often on their moral or political value, and not on their pure formal beauty or their success as entertainment. It is only in the twentieth century that art for art's sake has become widely accepted. And even in this century, it is hard to argue that purely formal criteria in fact account for the dominant cultural judgments. As Jonathan Arac has argued, "the main line of academic and public discussion of literature in the English-speaking world since the nineteenth century has not been primarily or fundamentally aesthetic" (1999: 769). Consider the New Criticism. While this movement seemed to make aesthetic judgment an accepted part of academic literary study for the first time, the practice that followed from the triumph of New Critical theory was not mainly devoted either to purely formal analysis or to aesthetic judgment. It was, in fact, typically devoted to interpretation of texts that were already regarded as having formal excellence, and such interpretation tended to emphasize the moral value of the work being read. Such reading amounted to an implicit judgment of the work's moral worth. Arac believes that twentieth-century American critics perpetuated a Victorian conception, the "moral aesthetic," deriving from Matthew Arnold but found even in Walter Pater, that "baldly mixes realms to which Kant had devoted separate critiques. For the main traditions of philosophical aesthetics, a moral aesthetic is no aesthetic at all . . ." Arac goes on to quote Frith, who argues that for pop music fans "aesthetic and ethical judgments are tied together: not to like a record is not just a matter of taste; it is also a matter of morality" (1999: 774–5).⁴ In other words, the most typical practice of criticism – whether by fans, journalists, or academics – seems to follow Sidney or Arnold rather than Kant, though without necessarily invoking the particular Christian or humanist morality they assumed.

Academic New Criticism seldom engaged in explicit aesthetic discrimination. In this respect, the New Criticism perpetuated the status quo in literary studies, for the philologists and literary historians who had previously dominated the discipline also dealt with literature that others had judged to be great. English

professors' arguments didn't canonize Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton, and their arguments didn't canonize Eliot, James, or Melville either. However, this is not to say that professors had no role in the construction and perpetuation of the canon. It is rather to say that that role was not mainly one of explicit aesthetic judgment. Rather, the major professorial influence on the canon was the attention paid to certain works.⁵ Texts that critics repeatedly interpreted in new ways – each scholarly article depended on a new interpretation – accrued value simply by being frequently and rewardingly discussed. The second of those terms is crucial. The first point is simply a variant of Smith's maxim that "Nothing endures like endurance" (1988: 50). The second one is meant to allow that texts that are repeatedly reinterpreted have qualities that enable such performances. Some of those qualities are formal: for example, complexity. Some of them are moral or political; the texts either raise important issues of moral or political conflict, or they effectively support a particular position in such a conflict. These qualities are relative; they depend on the context of reception to be realized. But they are also intrinsic in the sense that they exist in the texts and not merely in the minds of critics.

It is perhaps obvious where I am going with this historical excursus. Cultural studies has already begun to create its own canon by virtue of the attention it has paid to particular objects. Whether many of these choices will long endure is not a question that interests me. What does concern me is the typical reaction with cultural studies to the realization of this more or less inadvertent canon formation. The resistance to judgment within cultural studies is so strong that any selection is immediately treated as an ideological symptom. I want to argue that cultural studies must accept the inevitability of selection. There is too much produced for all of it to be noticed, and, for reasons I have just suggested, random notice is not likely to engage readers or critics. My argument is that cultural studies needs to be more conscious of the project of canon construction, engaging in ethical-aesthetic criticism on its own terms.

The reality of inadvertent canonization should lead us to wonder about the long-term effects of cultural studies' tendency toward symptomatic readings. It might be argued that practitioners of cultural studies find texts that are surreptitiously infected by pernicious ideology more interesting and attractive than those which seem to explicitly endorse or represent the political and moral values on which cultural studies is founded. Some clearly take Marx's call for a "ruthless criticism of all that exists" to mean that we shouldn't find anything good under capitalism – except that which is subversive of capitalism. Hence, the one value cultural studies has sought and found is "opposition," which seems to be so common that it is hard to understand how the status quo could stand up in the face of it. More curiously still, such subversion is most often found in the most seemingly mundane and apolitical works of mass culture. Explicitly left-wing artists have seldom been the focus of cultural studies.

But why shouldn't cultural studies, as a discipline committed to the idea that knowledge is inherently political, champion works that openly express its democratic values? If art instructs and delights, then what a work instructs is always a relevant concern. Perhaps cultural studies has failed to champion work on this basis because its practitioners are as much put off by didacticism as were the New Critics. In the interpretation of the latter, moral lessons had to emerge from art organically, out of "tensions" and qualified by "irony." Explicit teaching was a flaw that usually condemned the work to a status below that of art. One would think that cultural studies would not share this criterion, but its persistence may explain the reluctance of the movement to embrace explicitly political art. Consider, for example, the treatment (or lack of it) of filmmaker John Sayles. Sayles's films, from *The Return of the Secaucus Seven* (1980) to *Sunshine State* (2001), have consistently expressed progressive political positions on issues that cover virtually the entire range of concerns addressed by cultural studies: race, gender and sexuality, class, and disability. Yet a search of the usual databases finds very little scholarly writing devoted to Sayles. Of the 10 or so articles and book chapters, only a few are recognizably related to cultural studies. Given this fact, it is a bit risky to use this essay to try to understand the field's response to the filmmaker. Nevertheless, I believe we can find some clues there.

Sayles's most traditionally left-wing film, *Matewan* (1987), was trashed for failures of historical authenticity and "truth status" in *Radical History Review*, while an article in *Appalachian Journal* made virtually the opposite argument in praising the film (Brier 1988; J. Williams 1988). The film tells part of the story of the Stone Mountain Coal War, which took place in West Virginia in the spring 1920, with a focus on the "Matewan massacre." In this incident, union workers and their allies, including local lawmen, won a shoot-out with Baldwin-Felts agents hired by the mine owners. The film's story ends with this victory, which helped to spur a brief period of union militancy but which also ended in defeat at the Battle of Blair Mountain in August 1921. Sayles tells the story from the miners' point of view, and he chooses to emphasize the value and valor of their struggle, and to play down its unsuccessful outcome. One of the film's chief concerns is the multiracial and multiethnic make-up of the union. It thus addresses explicitly the way in which the ruling class used race and ethnicity as wedges that would divide workers, a tactic that temporarily failed in the face of union solidarity. Why have cultural studies ignored this film that advances the very sort of race and class analysis the field itself conducts?

The similar fate met by Sayles's later film *Lone Star* (1994) is even more perplexing. The old-left class politics at the center of *Matewan* have never been the central concern of cultural studies in the US, but *Lone Star* is mainly a film about identity politics. One would have thought that cultural studies would have embraced it, since it might be argued that the film itself is a work of cultural studies. As Rosa Linda Fregoso observes, "*Lone Star* reads like an application of Chicana/o

borderlands theory" (1999: 139). Yet only two articles have appeared, neither of them in locations one might regard as central to cultural studies (Fregoso, Limón). Both of these articles agree that the film deals explicitly and progressively with race and class issues, although they disagree about whether its gender politics are progressive. For my purposes, this disagreement is less important than the fact that some discussion of the film is taking place. But why is it so little and so marginal?

I can't provide the definitive answers to these questions, but several alternatives come to mind. One is that Sayles's films fail to attract the attention of those in cultural studies because of their traditional forms. *Matewan* takes its basic structure from Westerns such as *Shane* and *High Noon*, while *Lone Star* also borrows from the Western but is fundamentally a murder mystery. *Matewan*'s narrative is chronological and uncomplicated, while *Lone Star*'s story is Faulknerian in its complexity, but both films end with what can easily be read as closure. Since cultural studies has typically been drawn to formal innovation, Sayles's explicitly progressive politics may not be enough to overcome this bias. If so, cultural studies would seem to be held hostage to an aesthetic invented by those it otherwise regards as its enemies. It was an article of faith among the proponents of High Modernism that progressive politics and formal innovation must go hand in hand. Thus, critics in the *Partisan Review* circle believed that T. S. Eliot was a revolutionary, but naturalists like Theodore Dreiser or the proletarian writers were not, whatever their stated political positions.

The critical debates of the 1930s also suggest another explanation for the failure of Sayles's films to capture the imagination of cultural studies. My conversations with a number of people in the field revealed dislike for *Lone Star* precisely because it was so explicit. Clearly, reviewers in the popular press do often respond this way to Sayles. For example, a reviewer for the *Village Voice* (an organ one might expect to be friendly to Sayles's politics) found *Matewan* to be a "union snooze, full of ideological pieties, improbable heroes and 'hissable villains.'" Another review called it a "dime-store morality play." The *Washington Post* found it incredible that the good guys could be so good and the bad guys so bad (quoted in J. Williams 1988: 346). If practitioners of cultural studies share these responses, it would suggest the lingering power of the tastes formed by modernism and art for art's sake according to which didacticism is the worst sin. If so, it would be ironic that, while the right accuses cultural studies of political correctness – that is to say, a very crude form of didacticism – cultural studies lacks the courage of its own convictions and behaves much as the right does. If either formal conservatism or didacticism were indeed behind cultural studies' response to Sayles, it would reveal the degree to which questions of pleasure can trump questions of instruction even in an audience apparently devoted to politics and explicitly opposed to taste.

However, the negative response to Sayles may not be to his didacticism *per se*, but rather to what might be called his "pedagogy." Instead of objecting to the explicitness of the film's politics, the objection would be rather to the epistemo-

logical implications of the way in which the message is presented. It could be argued that any instruction carries with it assumptions about the character of knowledge itself. Those assumptions can range from the rigid absolutism entailed in much theology to the mindless relativism typical of college sophomores. Since cultural studies is informed by theories that tend more toward relativism than absolutism, we might guess that it would favor works that teach questions rather than answers. To some extent, this corresponds to the field's interest in "subversive" or "oppositional" works, which need not propose anything positive. The issue may again be one of pleasure rather than theory. A work that is explicit in its politics may seem to leave nothing for the audience to figure out, thus frustrating the desire to actively read the work. I don't agree that this charge is accurate of Sayles's films, but it could be plausibly made of *Matewan* and *Lone Star*.

Didacticism or rigid pedagogy cannot account for all of the omissions that have characterized the work of cultural studies. Whole fields of artistic production have been ignored. Indeed, with the partial exceptions of literature and the visual arts, cultural studies has excluded most of the traditional arts. There is little analysis of classical music, dance, or theater. This suggests that cultural studies has been too willing to accept the categorical distinction between high and low culture that John Frow has shown to have become untenable by the late twentieth century (1995: 23–6). As Frow notes, the privileging of the "low" does not solve this problem, but merely reverses "the distribution of value between the two poles" (1995: 27). Instead of restricting itself to popular or mass culture, cultural studies should be about reading cultural production in general, not only to criticize the ideology of the dominant, but also to endorse and explicate works that themselves challenge that ideology.

As an example, consider playwright Robert Myers, whose work represents a useful point of comparison with Sayles's films. Myers's plays might be described as archival, in that they incorporate not just the facts of historical events, but the very language of historical documents. Like many of Sayles's films, these plays address themselves explicitly to political questions. Unlike Sayles's films, they do so without preaching – or least without seeming to preach – since the meaning of the work must be discovered by the audience in the pieces of archive the playwright gives us. Myers's first produced work, *Atwater: Fixin' to Die*, tells the story of Republican political consultant Lee Atwater, relying mainly on Atwater's own words. The play offers so little overt judgment of its protagonist that it was as popular with Atwater supporters in South Carolina as it was with his detractors in New York. The very genre of the play seems to depend on the viewer's perspective. Atwater's early death from a brain tumor is a tragedy to those who revere him, but poetic justice to his opponents, who would see the play as a satire. Atwater's contradictions make him an interesting character to audiences regardless of their politics. The brain behind the notoriously racist "Willie Horton" attack ad against Michael Dukakis in the 1988 presidential campaign, Atwater was a devoted fan

and amateur performer of blues and soul music. This devotion is unlikely to redeem Atwater in the minds of those victimized by his politics, and it raises the important issue of the difference between personal affection (or prejudice) and institutionalized racism. The lessons this play teaches may be too subtle to reach everyone, but they may be more intellectually satisfying as a result.

If the playwright's politics are ambiguous in *Atwater*, the title of *Dead of Night: The Execution of Fred Hampton* makes Myers's position in that work as plain as day. Here Myers used the FBI's own files, obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, that show the Bureau to have planned the Chicago Black Panther leader's murder in 1969. But if that is the most striking historical interpretation that the play offers, it is not its dramatic focus. The central character is neither Hampton nor one of his government antagonists, but William O'Neal, the FBI informer who infiltrated the Panthers and helped the feds to arrange the attack. O'Neal told the bureau of a weapons cache at an apartment used by the Panthers, and that provided a pretext for the raid in which Hampton was shot. Events are presented within the frame of the last two hours of O'Neal's life, immediately before he commits suicide by running into traffic on an expressway. This device succeeds on a number of levels. As a structural element, it connects the worlds of the Panthers and the police, so that we experience the events from both perspectives. In terms of dramatic impact, O'Neal provides a complex point of identification for the audience. We experience his tortured responses to the events, making them emotionally powerful. It might be said that O'Neal's personal experience is a distraction from the political facts, but if so it is a strategic distraction. Because the facts are so clear, we do not need to have them as our constant focus. By fixing our attention on O'Neal, Myers allows the historical truth to emerge out the events to which the character was witness, thus avoiding the appearance that the playwright is preaching.

In the aesthetic theory I have been developing here, a work of art that fails to delight – that is, to provide pleasure – fails as art. Thus, a purely didactic work – one we might be inclined to label “propaganda” – might have value for the lessons it teaches, but not as art. Conversely, a work of art that delights but does not instruct is trivial. Wallpaper is the proverbial example. A work that gives pleasure, but gives bad instruction, qualifies as flawed or even pernicious art. Why try to distinguish propaganda from other forms when we know that all art instructs? I want to argue that propaganda usually fails to achieve the status of art because in it instruction overwhelms pleasure, and/or because of the absolutist character of the instruction. Propaganda has its place, of course, but a political understanding of art needs to be able to insist that art is more than simply propaganda dressed up to go out. Such insistence does not deny the political character of art, but rather specifies the way in which art is political. I would argue that neither Sayles nor Myers are propagandists despite the explicitly political character of their work. Their work teaches us history – new interpretations of

past events – and implicitly advocates a politics for the present. Their work also provides the pleasure of well-executed and innovative narrative and dramatic form. Form in this sense is not sugar coating for the politics, but a way to embody the abstraction of political theory in the details of everyday life. Such embodiment must qualify and complicate the politics, but that is what makes the teaching of art different from the teaching of the party platform. Myers may do this more successfully than Sayles, whose films may be less pleasurable because they are leave less to the viewer's judgment.

I've mentioned the films of John Sayles and the plays of Robert Myers as examples of the kind of politically invested art that cultural studies has neglected. Both artists provide pleasure and both help us to better understand the past and its relation to the present. Or at least that is my argument. I don't expect everyone in cultural studies to agree with my judgments of Sayles and Myers. Thus, while it may seem I am assuming that we in cultural studies can agree on which artists are the ones all of us should endorse, I am in fact arguing that we in cultural studies need to discuss our many differences on this question. What I hope is that when these discussions occur, they will not boil down to whether the artist's politics are “correct,” or to the artist's gender, race, class, or sexuality.⁶ Both are relevant concerns, but they should not be the only concerns. Art that is politically flawed may still be politically valuable. Correcting the unrepresentative character of the canon is itself a political necessity, but it is also politically limited. We in cultural studies should be arguing more about what works we think are valuable and less about what pernicious effects other works may have.

NOTES

- 1 I use the standard pagination for the Kant corpus.
- 2 Smith's critique of Kant treats the distinction mainly as a matter of the subjective and objective, but my sense is that objectivity has not been the main issue in the typical application of the distinction since the mid-twentieth century.
- 3 For an account of Parker's influence, see Langewiesche 2000.
- 4 Arac attributes the phrase “moral aesthetic” to Buckley (see e.g. his 1969). The quotation is from Frith 1996: 72.
- 5 On the role of academics in the formation of the American canon, see Shumway 1994.
- 6 I am using “correct” here in the sense invoked on the left prior to the right's “political correctness” smear campaign of the early 1990s. The earlier meaning identified a tendency, probably derived from the pretensions to science of some Marxists, to measure all discourse by its degree of approximation to a specific political line. This has some validity perhaps in dealing with theory or critique, but it cannot allow for the messiness of art.

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