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Culture and the Real World: The Folly of Critique

It's a familiar thought to understand universals in our everyday life, such as God and the law, as non-objective entities. In such a case, when languages like the normal, the neutral, the everyday and the ordinary are put into motion we understand that they are constructed and situated by others. We also know that because they claim universality such languages are persuasive and forceful. This appeal to universality, its power over us, and consequently our freedom, remains a defining issue for contemporary discourses.

This paper examines two ways of thinking about and living with the notion of universals as language. First, I examine how critical theories have attempted to invigorate responsibility, social engagement and order within this condition of the world as language. Here they articulate the problem I mention above, that on the one hand we have lost our faith in objective languages, and on the other hand we still believe in them. Here, knowing that universals are constructed can makes us cynical of our ideals, ideals that could forge notions such as progress and unity in the social sphere, and believing in universals risks endowing any individual with power over us. I look at how these theories in general attempt to understand this world without universals, and how despite this, they produce universals of their own.

What's also important is culture's role within critical theory. This is mainly because it is seen to occupy a representational space that mirrors and reflects society. Here, the task for culture is to point to itself as a construct, as a means to remind us that normative language, such as the ordinary, the everyday and the neutral are also constructed, and this is how we are able to put them into question. In this way we can see that culture is charged with the universal and tragic task of pointing out the constructed nature of *all* language, *including its own*. This is a representationalist account of language, where artworks and literature become critical tools that map relationships between themselves and the social sphere, between what something looks like and what something means.

I make the case that this predilection to universalise is a mark of an undisclosed realism at the heart of critical theory and this view of culture's engagement forms a rationalist model where culture represents the "real" world. In light of this, I claim that such theories fall into the trap of, what I term the folly of a critique whose basis is rationalism, whose methodology is realism, and whose practice is representationalism.[1]

The question of our critical role in relation to universal languages, it seems to me, is integral to the theme of "Daily Encounters", where we are given the opportunity to discuss if and how art practice clears the way to understanding or making sense of the world in some way – here in the Daily Encounters series it's the world as a construct. In my paper, it is precisely the inappropriateness of thinking that culture corresponds to a universal reality, whether this is seen as a construct or not, or in other words, whether we are realists or antirealists, that I will argue for. I want to convince you that inventing a formal relationship or correspondence theory between culture and "the way the world really is" is not only fruitless but also impossible. I also want to remind you that knowing that universals are the non-substantiated claims of interested parties doesn't guarantee that we can put them into question I hope to show that the way in which language uses the tropes of the ordinary, the everyday or the commonplace does not have any conceptual relationship to realism, if we are thinking about agency or knowledge, but instead has a truth of its own – a truth that has no correspondence to universal reality.

Culture and the Real World
It's easy to line up the many philosophers, writers and critics such as Terry Eagleton, Jürgen Habermas, Axel Honneth, Jean Baudrillard, and Ernesto Laclau amongst others who have undertaken projects to understand the world as constituted as and by language.[2] To do this, they have in one way or at one time or another established a dialectical relationship between aesthetics and politics, and then examine the tensions between them. Such theories understand aesthetics to be tied to imaginary and representational ideals; difficult to pin down, to understand and to rationalise; whilst politics is non-representational, pragmatic and organisational. Because culture is seen as an undisciplined beast that deviates from the task of social engagement, these theories

pigeonhole *reality* within our social and political everyday behaviour and *culture* in the trivial but special representational sphere.[3] This representationalist view only takes culture seriously if it *represents* the right things. If we want a *critical culture*, and to prescribe upon it *the ethical task* for social enlightenment, then we must separate it from the social sphere to be used as a tool within it. Here we can see that this understanding of the relationship between cultural production and the world in general risks assuming a fact-fiction divide, the old oppositions - that a world of norms is linear and a world of culture is pluralistic. This structures a formal and conceptual relationship between these two different types of language in as much as one affects the other.

This representationalism actively produces problems for understanding universal language codes because rather than look at how various appeals to either a "greater outside", such as God, or a solid foundational principle such as common sense are used and interested in particular circumstances, a theory of critical practice highlights instead their abstract power. Paradoxically, when we examine these theories, the kind of languages that we term ordinary, everyday and normative now appear as pure aesthetic moments. This is centrally because by separating the symbolic function and the use value of universal codes, we see the emptiness, mysteriousness and inscrutability of these "everyday" languages. Because normal languages are aesthetic, and empty, they resist order and become the mark of dominance over us. Aesthetics in the social sphere are therefore [ironically] things we have to watch out for. As such, we can say that aesthetics is politics' great offence and its redeeming defence.

This critical position of "taking care of language", owes a lot to a theory of Enlightenment liberalism, since it proposes that we utilise our rationale, or our reason, to be vigilant about what things mean and who organises our criteria for judgements. For example, what the facts of life are, and what are the fictions, what is an "ordinary" language and what is not. This theory, urges us to remind ourselves that we are responsible for the language we use – i.e. to take ourselves seriously. This is not such a bad thing, but problems happen when to do this good work we are asked to somehow acknowledge that when we use language it is simultaneously not "real" but also "ideal".

Therefore, and paradoxically, in order to see through, systematise, and rationalise the false and fabricated language codes made by others, we have to be suspicious of the language we use - we cannot mean what we say. In other words, somehow we have to trivialise our own beliefs as a means to put those of others into question, whilst at the same time we have to trust this language code, of scepticism as an ideal in itself.

Fish's views on critique produce two central points. First, the subject isn't capable of doubting itself, and second, the subject can't rationalise her way out of being persuaded by others' universal claims. To extend these points further, Fish's theory shows that if we went to understand universals as constructs, or the constructed nature of language we have to miraculously lift ourselves above language to be exempt from its affect; i.e. to remain austere and unconvinced by its rhetorical power. This is an impossible God's eye view of language that requires an objective viewpoint from which to look rationally down over language as a wide field of constructions. If we want to acknowledge that universals are constructed then, we have to make up our own new objective codes to put that into question. To underscore this point, it is here where this rationalism, that in many ways seeks to be *antirealist,* because it seeks to understand the constructed nature of universals *without invoking the real*, leads to realism, because it ends up believing in an objective principle anyway.

Rather than say that we are able to rationalise our way out of being convinced, caught up, or even immersed in the power of universal languages Fish writes:

> It is often claimed that reason itself is what is left when belief, preconception, and prejudice have been set aside or discounted, but reason cannot operate independently of some content - of some proposition or propositions made up of definitions, distinctions and criteria already assumed - and that content will reflect some belief or attitude that will inform whatever reason dictates.[4]

In this way Fish describes the critical subject as an impossibility because: a) the subject cannot separate what she knows from what she believes; b) the subject cannot "float

above" language; and, c) universal languages are condemned normatively, so all notions of power are regarded as "bad". Given this we can see that theories that desire to transcend, organise, cultivate and to plough "meaning" through the plural field of language do so via representationalism: they simply aestheticises politics.

Culture and Truth

Having argued that critique works by organising a model of the world as construct, and that such a model is, problematically, unavailable on the one hand and makes culture trivial and special on the other, I now want to examine what happens when we don't have a theory that structures our experience.

It is here where we can turn to Richard Rorty's notion of culture as a field of Darwinian-style competition. To take this further in Rorty's book *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity,* he connects the need to organise language as a means of constructing criteria for judgement with universalising:

> The temptation to look for criteria is a species of the more general temptation to think of the world, or the human self, as possessing an intrinsic nature, an essence. […] But if we could ever become reconciled to the idea that most of reality is indifferent to our descriptions of it, and that the human self is created by the use of a vocabulary rather than being adequately or inadequately expressed in a vocabulary, then we should at last have assimilated what was true in the Romantic idea that truth is made rather than found. What is true about this claim is just that languages are made rather than found, and that truth is a property of linguistic entities, of sentences.[5]

In this way, we can level the genre distinction between practice and theory. The truth is not out there; "world" is not out there. And we don't recognise this as a mark of lack. It simply does not exist. Likewise, Fish accurately points out that the real is not something beyond representation, but merely another category of representation. Here the

foundational character of particular languages are, for Fish: "established by persuasion, that is, in the course of argument and counter argument on the basis of examples and evidence that are themselves cultural and contextual."[6]

He goes on to say:

> The "obvious" cannot be opposed to the "staged" […] because it is simply the achievement of a staging that has been particularly successful. One does not escape the rhetorical by fleeing to the protected area of basic common sense because common sense in whatever form is always a rhetorical, partial, partisan, interested construction.[7]

So what we have here is the idea that the obvious - or the everyday, the familiar, the true or the things we accept without question - is the product of good argument and also agreement. We also are presented with the claim that theories that assume a difference between "obvious" and "staged" languages apply common sense as another rhetorical device; a device that claims neutrality because the idea of common sense clings to and relies upon the obvious. As such, Fish claims that to universalise is central to rhetoric, the art of persuasion - and all language in use is rhetorical – ergo, we are always universalising, we always believe ourselves.

Donald Davidson's essay "The Folly of Trying to Define Truth" finesses these points:

> Truth is […] an indefinable concept. This does not mean we can say nothing revealing about it; we can, by relating it to other concepts like belief, cause, and action. Nor does the indefinability of truth imply that the concept is mysterious ambiguous or untrustworthy.[8]

Davidson's point here is crucial, for it leads us to see how realism and rationalism are connected in a theory of critique, whilst simultaneously allowing us to envisage truth without representationalism, or a theory of culture's relationship to society. We move

past the question of realism that crops up in critical theory as a means to understand the world, because we overcome the need to theorise a totalised concept of language. And we see that without a comprehensive epistemology [theory of knowledge] we don't suffer at the hands of language, nor should we give up on its ability to make meanings.[9]

Consequently, we can cast off thoughts of a critical theory that places culture external to normative languages, because as Davidson claims - defining truth is folly – and as Fish outlines, normative languages aren't as normative as we assume. Therefore, a *theory* of a critical cultural practice that seeks to "make sense" or to inscribe a path through the difficulties of a pluralised condition, conjures up truth as ambiguous, mysterious and that is surrounded by violence and fear. This conclusion derived from Davidson, connects up nicely with Rorty's ideas that rather than having a theory that cultural constructs such as art and the literary field should operate as a means to critique, and to expose the false languages of power that claim truth as false, here culture, in its most pragmatic sense already tests and contests meaning without total organisation: as Rorty argues, "truth is a property of linguistic entities".[10] Truth is what culture does naturally. In effect culture doesn't consist of means, only ends.

Both Fish and Rorty present a groundless world, where we can no longer think of a meta-textual rationalism that separates the real from the representational and where the notion of constructing "safe" criteria for judgments that move on a scale from the "most mediated fictions" to the "less mediated real" is troubled all the way down. Rather than say that one type of language is fictional and another fact, we understand that truth is immanent to all language but not related to either of these distinctions in a comprehensive hierarchy of meaning. In this way, rather than identify that culture's job is to fill the gap between a non-existent world and the subject, Rorty sees the pluralistic evolution of language as central to the political field. Likewise Fish says there's no such thing as ordinary language in an abstract formal sense because language is never context free.[11]

It is here where I'd like to attend to the notion itself of "daily encounters". As I have hoped to show, the assumption that our encounters are daily is another way of saying that

what we think is consistent in our lives tells us more about our world than the things that aren't consistent. It also lends itself to the assumption that art has an ethics of social engagement, an emancipatory role, where knowing that the world is a series of construction gives us power. A hierarchy established by these methods is incorrect because it assumes a basis from which such criteria of consistency can be defined. And theorising that the world is a construct does not supply a space where we are now more free to organise ourselves, and it.

Taking this into account, it is a mistake to imagine that art practice, literature or culture in general, is exempt from, is cynical of, or steps away from its involvement with the political and the concerns of groups and individuals within the social sphere. Whilst culture seems to create a diverse field for the play of meaning and interpretation, these performances are where we practice our beliefs. They just might not be the type of beliefs that we always agree with, that suits our taste, or match up to our convictions. Cultural objects in literature and art practice operate without apology, and drawing attention to their own construction or fabrication has nothing to do with them being "real" or "false" for the same reasons I lay out above. Therefore, knowing that languages aren't fixed, and that we *can* change our beliefs according to various contexts, does not make them, or us superficial or weak. Also, such texts bear no relationship to a set of pre-determined or future conditions from which to pin down agreement about the nature of our ideals; they are non-representational.

This disinterest in culture's role as a philosophical servant, or as the illustration for the theorising of world, actually entangles culture and politics. Culture may lose its ethical status as the key to a redemptive politics, but it also loses its trivial role as a representational tool that points to its own limitations on the one hand and takes a [foolish] moral high ground on the other.

In conclusion, works of art do not tell us anything about the world, and texts speak only of themselves. Instead they inscribe the political moment, embodying law and holding

truth as immanent. As Jacques Derrida identifies, literature is something "on the basis of which the public realm and the realm of the political can be and always remains open." [12]

[1] This text looks to Donald Davidson's essay, "The Folly of Trying to Define Truth" in *Truth*, ed. Simon Blackburn and Keith Simmons, OUP, 1999, 308-23. In this essay Davidson articulates the difficulty of connecting truth with observable human behaviour. Ultimately, Davidson argues that there is no schema or criteria for truth upon which to build meaning. Alternatively, truth is immanent to language and because of this there is "no single, transcendent concept to be relativised". 316. I take up Davidson's point attributing "the folly of truth" to the folly of critique in as much as I argue that the rationalism of critique is based in realism – it demands and produces an objective concept of the social and cultural sphere whilst at the same time attempting to understand the same sphere as non-objective.

[2] Jürgen Habermas sees the diverse and unwieldy nature of cultural practices to be problematic, because this interferes with ideal communicative processes, preventing his dream of a Hegelian unity between art and social praxis. As such it is understood that we should adopt an all round sceptical position regarding the mechanisms of language itself, unless as we see for Habermas that communication can take place with ideal criteria for interpretation and agreement set in place. Ernesto Laclau in his essay "Identity and Hegemony," associates the place of power an abstract locus of totalized symbol, "an empty place", "a zero" there to be filled. Opposing Butler's claim that a "symbol that resists symbolization is a symbol of resistance itself", Laclau holds onto power as an indeterminate concept, as essence without system and as an aesthetic space that links albeit unstably the ethical and the normative. We are offered a world of aesthetics that resists politics, where aesthetics are carefully placed as a "real"; a careful recipe of domination and aporia that is immanent to politics. In the above theories there is a resistance to picture and explain "world" and yet each call upon an aestheticised normative, originary or ideal politics, defining something above or below the textual world. For Habermas' discussion on the role of culture in the social sphere see "Modernity, An Incomplete Project", in Hal Foster, ed., *Postmodern Culture*, London, 1985, 3-15. For Laclau's argument and a further discussion of this problem of representationalism with Butler see Ernesto Laclau, "Identity and Hegemony," in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality. Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, Verso, 2000, 65

[3] This need to organise culture, as a systematic requirement for social progress is seen in Habermas' theory of art as a social project. Also, this treatment of culture as distinct from the realities of emancipatory social practices is draw out in Stanley Fish's essay "How Ordinary is Ordinary Language" in *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*, Harvard University Press, 1980, 97-112, where Fish challenges the distinction between "ordinary" and "literary" languages. I too, take up this concern that there are no grounds to produce such a distinction and that such distinctions result in an authoritarian view of politics and a conservative view of culture.

[4] Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally*, In the section "Rhetoric," Chapter 21, under the sub-section, "Force," 518

[5] Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*, Cambridge University Press, 1989, 7

[6] Ibid., 30

[7] Ibid., 491-2

[8] Donald Davidson, "The Folly of Trying to Define Truth", in *Truth* 309.

[9] In the introduction to *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth,* Rorty quotes Davidson's "The Myth of the Subjective": "Beliefs are true or false but they represent nothing. It is good to be rid of representations and with them the correspondence theory of truth, for it is thinking that there are representations that engenders thoughts of relativism", Cambridge University Press, 1990, 9

[10] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*, 7

[11] Stanley Fish, in "How Ordinary is Ordinary language?" in *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*, Harvard University Press, 1980, 106-7

[12] Jacques Derrida, "Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism", in *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, Simon Critchley et al., ed. Chantal Mouffe, London and New York, Routledge, 1996, 77-88. Derrida argues that without the motifs of emancipation inherent to the singular practices of our individual beliefs in freedom one cannot pose the question of ethics, 82. This assertion is entirely significant to Stanley Fish's

neo-pragmatist theory, clearly influenced by both Derrida (and Levinas). This is because, for Fish, like Derrida, subjective autonomy is intrinsically linked and is constitutive of democracy as a destabilizing practice of belief. As such, it is this problem of the locus and the legitimacy of both ethics and emancipatory discourses that are immanent to all political practice and the notion that ethics is embedded within cultural practices that defines culture as something that universalizes as much as any other discourse.