

Biennialism, or the Neo-universalisation of Art

By Dave Beech

Over the last decade and a half, partly in response to the rise of the Biennial as a dominant force in art's global economy, art's critical thinkers have been increasingly concerned with the tense conjunction of a seemingly uniform world culture and the commodification of diverse local and national cultures within a global market. Homi Bhabha is not convinced that there is a genuine political and cultural will "to turn the presumption of equal cultural respect in to the recognition of equal cultural worth".ⁱ In effect, however, Bhabha's complaint, correct as it is, merely swaps one form of universalising violation for another: in place of the liberal, western universalising principle of tolerance, Bhabha calls up the bourgeois universalising principle of cultural and aesthetic value. The question of value, though, opens more wounds than it promises to heal.

While some valuable research is being done into the conspicuous political issues around nationality, identity and globalisation that Biennialist hospitalityⁱⁱ inevitably highlights (whether intended or not), the inquiry into the hegemon's violation of difference has left unquestioned the way in which Biennialism confirms the objectionable idea that art is the universal cultural form through which these issues are best addressed. Art is not above such responsibilities, of course, but art's own structures of distinction and domination should not go unnoticed in the critique of Biennialism. Indeed, the false universalisation of art is one of the instruments through which the false universalisation of neo-imperialism is achieved within the Biennialist ordering of culture. Any critique of the political hegemony promoted and processed by Biennialism will, therefore, contain a radical flaw if it does not involve the critique, also, of the false universalisation of art that fuels Biennialism.

Raymond Williams explained that he turned his attention to culture as a direct act of opposition to what I'm calling the false universalisation of art. This involved a twofold operation, matching a critique of the established confiscation of culture with a radical opening out of culture's suppressed complexity. Here is the nub of the problem for Williams:

We use the word culture in these two senses: to mean a whole way of life - the common meanings; to mean the arts and learning - the special processes of discovery and creative effort. Some writers reserve the word for one or other of these senses; I insist on both, and on the significance of their conjunction. The questions I ask about our culture are questions about deep personal meanings. Culture is ordinary, in every society and in every mind.ⁱⁱⁱ

If this double movement has lost its novelty, it retains a great deal of its urgency.

In the late-40s and early-50s, Williams' argument that culture is ordinary was all novelty and no urgency. In an essay from 1948 entitled *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (that triggered Williams' cultural writing), Eliot sought to preserve a restricted sense of culture. "Culture may even be defined," Eliot argued, "as that which makes life worth living." Although a great fan of Vaudeville, Eliot did not argue that life is made worth living by such pleasures. Quite the opposite. "We are therefore pressed to maintain the ideal of a world culture", he concludes, "while admitting it is something we cannot imagine."^{iv} Culture, for Eliot, is beyond ordinary modes of perception – as rare in every society and as it is in every mind – but whatever it is, the legitimacy of this universal culture is, as a minimal requirement, not limited by geography or history. In this way, Eliot carefully outlines a hierarchy for which minority culture occupies the place of universal culture.

Like Matthew Arnold before him, Eliot does not universalise minority culture by restricting its circulation to a minority – an elite. Quite the contrary. Eliot regards this rare culture as a world culture. Arnold is not content with a defence of culture against anarchy; he speaks also of culture's need to 'prevail': "Culture ... is not satisfied till we

all come to a perfect man; it knows that the sweetness and light of the few must be imperfect until the raw and unkindled masses of humanity are touched with sweetness and light”^v. The most accurate concept for describing this kind of cultural power is not elitism, it is hegemony – the political, social and cultural processes by which meanings are fixed as universal. Art, hegemonised as universal culture, does not assert its power through exclusion. It is through art’s nominal inclusion of ‘all’, as Arnold puts it, that it legitimates its dominance and discounts all cultural rivals as rivals to culture *per se*.

Williams’ insistence that culture is ordinary thus cuts to the quick of art’s hegemony – and to the deployment of art’s hegemony which remains central to the ambitions of Biennialism. Francesco Bonami, Director of the 50th Venice Biennale, wants Biennialism to be “a polyphonic exhibition where a group of voices and thoughts speak within the same context”^{vi}. The image of multiculturalism provides a new background to art’s universalisation without challenging its hegemony one iota, as demonstrated in Bonami’s hope: “a necessary threshold between art and the world is crossed by the viewer in order for him/ her to experience the real world as *transformed by the vision of the artist*” (my emphasis). Art’s hegemonic universalisation, then, is the cultural prerequisite of Biennialist political diversity. And, certainly, any appearance of political diversity within Biennialism should not be taken as proof of a cultural challenge to art’s hegemony.

Biennialism reformulates the universalisation of art in politically relativist mode. Art’s universalisation is preserved by Biennialism only by burying the assumption of art’s universality deep within its political instrumentalisation. Taking issue with Biennialist multiculturalism, therefore, leaves art’s hegemony intact. As such, art’s old hegemony is not jettisoned by Biennialism for the full complexity of culture. By bringing together artists from every continent, Biennialism reconfirms art as universal culture rather than challenge the established hierarchies of cultural division. Within Biennialism, therefore, art is effectively the criterion for civilisation in comparisons between nations in exactly the way that it has been used previously in comparisons between classes and individuals.

The division between the cultivated and the philistine is always unacceptable within any given society; between national cultures it simply makes no sense.

In Laclau's theory of hegemony, the universal does not have a concrete content of its own, "different groups, instead, compete between themselves to temporarily give to their particularisms a function of universal representation"^{vii}. In other words, it is the struggle between conflicting social agents, not the ostensive value of that content as described by the dominant group, that sets the content of the universal: "no specific content is *predetermined* to fill the structural gap"^{viii}. This is possible, Laclau says, because the universal is an 'empty signifier' that manages to appear full and immutable despite the fact that every universal (nation, humanity, the common good, etc) is just the name or symbol of an irredeemable social lack. "The relation by which a particular content becomes the signifier of the absent communitarian fullness is exactly what we call a *hegemonic relationship*"^{ix}.

Eliot and Arnold make the mistake, according to Laclau's thinking, of believing that art's cultural dominance corresponds to its actual, inherent aesthetic quality. The assumed equivalence of cultural dominance and aesthetic value is precisely the sort of closure that Laclau undoes. However, Laclau overstates his case by claiming that the aesthete's attempt at *persuasion* is nothing more than an act of hegemonic struggle masquerading as an inquiry into the truth. It is true that art's universalisation is a hegemonic act, and also that there is no part of culture predetermined to occupy the place of universal culture (in particular, that there is no necessary equation of cultural power and cultural value), but this does not bar (nor is brought about by the contingency of) all first-order criteria. Hegemony is not simply the battle of political wills; struggle over the content of the universal is pivotal to hegemony itself. In fact, insofar as Laclau subordinates content to power, he only ditches the old base/superstructure model of economic determinism in order to insist on a new base/superstructure model of the determinism of brute force.

Consider, by way of contrast, the example of feminism. Women ‘policised’ their predicament by universalising their private conditions, representing each woman’s individual predicament as an instance of the injustice against all women, or of injustice as such. When Brecht says that the institutions and objects which are thought to be natural are really only *historical*, he means that they are the result and site of struggle. Masculinist hegemony can be taken as natural only until it is challenged by feminism, which shows it to be historical not primarily through force but through argument. The emancipation of women must crack the antecedent universal and simultaneously form a new one. It needs to be noted that this new universal cannot merely contain the old masculinist content plus the addition of the previously suppressed female content, for the old masculinist content presumes and provokes that suppression. The content of the universal has to change. The old masculinist universal must be transformed in the process of the generation of a new universal. And for this reason, we should not think of a politicised universalisation as the mere extension of the universal to include previously ineligible content or even as the replacement of one universal with an antagonistic universal. That which is excluded does not seek to be absorbed into the regime that denies its existence; it seeks to disturb the false universal by introducing a radical split between those who hold onto the old universal and those who take their cue from the fate of the excluded. We must say, not that women ought to be included in any fair assessment of the universal, but that the plight of women, not the alleged superiority of men and all ‘their’ achievements, is the point of true universality: “of identifying universality with the point of exclusion”^x.

What this means is not merely that the woman identifies with other women and becomes conscious of their shared predicament, but that, further, she demands that her life be incorporated into a transformed universal. Transformed, that is, because her inclusion in the universal cannot leave the universal as it was beforehand.

- what about the human rights of women, children, members of non-white races, criminals, madmen ...? Each of these supplementary gestures does not simply apply the notion of human rights to ever new domains (women, blacks ... can also vote, own

property, actively participate in public life, etc.), but retroactively redefines the very notion of human rights.^{xi}

Feminism, in this way, transforms *the content* of the universal. What's more, it is because of the nature of the transformation of the *content* of the feminist universal that it can be seen as in the interests of men to join the counter hegemonic struggle against the masculinist universal. Hegemony conceived as entirely contingent apart from the real effects of power and force does not adequately account for this, except negatively as the dominion of feminism over men. What needs to be introduced, here, is the possibility that the dominant (eg men) are liberated by a universal based on the point of exception (eg feminism).

I want to argue, in a similar fashion, that art (artists, aesthetes, curators, etc) can be liberated by the critique of art's universalisation. Culture today is analogous with pre-feminist misogyny, in which the established universal (art/masculinity) is neurotically protected from the perceived threat of the 'lower' particular (philistinism/femininity) in a monstrous imaginary in which its own pejorative misrepresentation of the 'other' (imbecilic philistinism/weak femininity) is seen as having nothing to add to the universal. Hence, neither feminism nor philistinism would challenge the established universal if it merely promoted the characteristics assigned to it, pejoratively.

The philistine stands for true universality not because it excels in the best and highest but because its universalisation would bring the hegemonic values and categories of the best and the highest into disrepute^{xii}. Universalising the philistine would mean disabling the intellectual and institutional instruments of cultural privilege because it promises a new (counter-hegemonic) universal through a substantive identification with the structural point of exception. The typical Biennialist model of multiculturalism seeks to remedy the problem of exception through inclusion in the given universal. As such, Biennialism is itself both the institution into which the excluded are to gain access and the institution

through which that access is to be extended. Art in Biennialism comes off as the cure, not the ailment – this is, of course, typical of the workings of hegemony. Biennialism thus fails to challenge culture's own universalisation of art. Effectively, the Biennialist is a global heir to the Victorian philanthropist^{xiii} who is so convinced of his own universal values that he considers his Christian duty to consist of permitting as many unfortunates as possible access to the philanthropist's own culture: the very act of philanthropy extends the hegemon's power. Here's the problem: Biennialism does its 'good cultural work' by opening its institutions to previously excluded nations, peoples and cultures.

What makes the false universal false is its suppression of antagonism in a divided and damaged society. Art is a classic case of the false universal. Actually existing universalism is not culpable because it is secretly particular; it is internally fractured because it establishes its neutral mastery through the implementation of a split between that which is universal and that which is not. Just as Imperialist and Native are not two equal terms in the universal conception of humanity, for they are each split from within by their relation with the other, the aesthete and the philistine are cultural subjectivities that prove the impossibility of a neutral universal. If there is to be a universal for culture then it must be a Left-style universal predicated on antagonism and struggle, not the Biennialist universal predicated on the value, authority and power of art. If so, then we can be sure that the true universal of culture will not be the ideal subject of hegemonic culture, the aesthete, but must begin with the point of exclusion, that which has no proper place, namely, the philistine. It is not sufficient to identify the particular content of the supposedly neutral universal (identifying art as the culture of the ruling class or whatever) because its power, like all hegemony, lies in its recruitment of a wider spectrum of the population to its legitimated values. Biennialism, as an institution of art's global recruitment, claims to challenge the old universalisation of western modern art, but what it succeeds in doing is extending the pre-existing cultural hegemony through the neo-universalisation of art.

ⁱ Homi Bhabha, “Culture’s in between – concept of culture”, *Artforum*, Sept 1993

ⁱⁱ For a critical reading of hospitality as a form of hostility, see Jacques Derrida, “Hostipitality”, *Acts of Religion*, ed. Andijar, New York: Routledge, 2001. For an extension and application of Derrida’s critique of the notion of hospitality to the field of cultural relations, see my “Garibaldi Fought Here!” in *Pop Fiction: the song in cinema*, London: Intellect Books, 2005

ⁱⁱⁱ Raymond Williams, “Culture is Ordinary” (1958), *The Raymond Williams Reader*, London: Blackwell Publishers, 2000

^{iv} T. S. Eliot, *Notes towards the Definition of Culture*, New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1949, p. 62

^v Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy* (1932), London: Cambridge University Press, 1963, p.69

^{vi} Francesco Bonami, introduction to the 50th Venice Biennale, 2003.

^{vii} Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipation(s)*, London and New York: Verso, 1996, p.35

^{viii} *Ibid.*, p.92

^{ix} *Ibid.*, p.43

^x Slavoj Zizek, *The Ticklish Subject*, London and New York: Verso, p.224

^{xi} *Ibid.*, p.180

^{xii} See, Beech and Roberts, *The Philistine Controversy*, London and New York: Verso, 2002

^{xiii} For a discussion of the contradictions of cultural philanthropism, see my untitled contribution to Elisabeth Price (ed), *Small Gold Medal*, London: Bookworks, 2001

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