

PANDAEMONIUM : Ken Russell's artist biographies as baroque performance

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HOW TO DO THINGS WITH A BOOK

A Note on Valorisation

‘All art is quite useless’

Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*
(1891 [2007: 4])

As I write this Europe is in the middle of a refugee crisis to which its only answer seems to be a form of collective cynicism with a veneer of liberal callousness. One might well ask how one could justify spending several years of one's life studying the work of a baroque film-maker, and from an avowedly aestheticist point of view at that, when such pressing social and political emergencies are upon us. Apart from the fact that such questions are based on false assumptions (for abstaining from activities that do not contribute to a solution for the emergency almost never means that those energies are then redirected towards such a solution), they are also guilty of a prejudice that has become especially widespread in these supposedly enlightened neo-liberal times: that the arts, philosophy, and the traditional humanities are little more than a leftist hobby, something that one indulges in when all the really significant aspects of life (and that means: economic productivity) have been safeguarded, – and even then preferably only at one's own expense, unless the appeal of one's humanist endeavours is broadly populist and therefore deserving of public money. This state of mind is the social context in which scholars of the humanities have to work today, and I would like to think of this book, among the other things it does, as a tool-box for fighting one's way out of a number of the cultural constraints that have been imposed upon the pursuit of the growth of mind. When dumbing down has become the norm in the globalised race to the cultural bottom it is time for all of us who care for the mind of man, its pursuits and achievements, its triumphs and interesting failures, to stand up and be counted.

It is in times of crisis that the traditional humanities are more needed than ever. Not because they solve the practical problems of the day, which are too terribly wicked to be resolved so easily, and certainly not because the pursuits of the mind provide some kind of relief for the harsh realities of the everyday. It is not the business of great art to provide succour. If anything, great art tends to trouble and provoke, and to leave its mark upon our sense of self. But it is exactly because they disrupt our complacency and challenge our mind that the arts and the humanities can be a force of change in society. When economics and politics divide and oppress, the achievements of culture past and present are the last remaining reminders of our better self: they are the near-ruins of an image of man that is more than a cog in the economic machine. Our true nature is not that of a labouring animal. Man is not made to live in a world where persons are marketable (and where, conversely, to not be marketable is to not be a person). As Susanne Langer argued, man is a symbolic creature: what makes us human is our ability to create meaning in the world and shape our surroundings into an environment, an ethnic domain, in which we can be at home. In times when freedom is overwhelmingly defined as joyful bondage to the constraints of labour we would therefore do well to recall Schiller's observation that man is most himself, and most free, when he is at play. Both play and

art are serious business, and the study of them is not and should not be considered a frivolous afterthought. If we lose a sense of the past we are doomed to repeat its worst excesses. To know history and to understand art is to address the most vital questions that pertain to our humanity.

A crucial aspect of this book is its contribution to our understanding of life writing, which is perhaps our most vital symbolic activity. The specific form of life writing it identifies, namely the performance of self through art, is not simply meant as an addition to the many other forms of life writing that have already been recognised (and many of which are listed in the Introduction). Rather, it is a form of life writing that questions the very epistemological foundations that are central to our concepts of self. The subject of this book is a form of artistic endeavour that connects art to life. It shows how the pursuits of artists can be intricately linked to the way we think of and create our selves in the world. To make sense of this link, I have attempted to develop a notion of the baroque that is operational for practical criticism. What makes it useful, or should make it useful, is exactly the way it straddles the gap between art and life. By connecting baroque tropes to the performance of self, Russell's work can show us how works of art are not something that stands apart from "real life" but are intrinsically involved in it. I have highlighted how the baroque, as more than just a formal matrix, allows us both to understand the complexity of the performance of self in the post-modern world and to connect that sense of self to the past. I have also suggested that a baroque sensibility can provide an effective framework for understanding our present concerns with identity politics. It opens up perspectives for thinking about the self that are non-essentialist while clearing space for manifold forms of identity-formation. The notion of baroque that I develop in this book makes it possible to situate contemporary works of art, and especially works of art that engage with issues of identity, in their social and cultural context while at the same time respecting their integrity as works of art. This may sound paradoxical, but it is not. After all, Oscar Wilde, who is one of the central philosophical references in this book, also combined a radical aestheticist outlook with equally radical socialist ideas. The notion that the aestheticist movement (*l'art-pour-l'art*) is divorced from social concerns has always been misguided: as a principled rejection of liberal ideologies of utility it was always already an act of resistance against oppressive social and cultural models.

But in connecting our present cultural moment to the historical Baroque and its *Nachleben* I try to do more than merely show the continuing usefulness of the traditional humanities for understanding the world in which we live. I also want to show that baroque is difference. Historically, the Baroque was a period when world-views were in upheaval and reservoirs of potential for newness were activated. This makes the period

similar to our own, which is nothing if not globalised and differentiated. In our struggle to deal with difference (and the lack of humane response to the current refugee crisis shows how difficult the struggle is) the baroque is an unexpected hermeneutic tool – not to resolve the struggle (for that is also a political and moral project) but to make sense of its complexity and of what is at stake. As I have shown in the chapters of this book, the complex interconnections of formal conceits and ontological concerns that structure the concept of baroque can be applied to gain insight not merely into the performance of self through art or into the theatre of everyday life, but also into the tensions between competing world-views and the politics of power. As a concept the baroque opens perspectives for finding inroads into debates about multiculturalism, globalisation, and diversity, and especially about the creative solutions that will be needed to structure those aspects of post-modern life into a shared world that is made fit for people to live in, – many different kinds of people who sometimes share little more than their sense of difference. The baroque, whose *Nachleben* includes the epistemologies of Pater and Wilde and the montage practices of the Romantics and Eisenstein, is more than an exotic relic from an over-decorated past besotted with absolutist theatrics. The baroque and the many manifestations of its *Nachleben* are a toolbox for dealing with the challenges that face us today. They are a diverse repertoire of ideas, concepts, and creative strategies for understanding and living with difference. The concluding essay of the book has tried to map a number of the ways in which ideas developed in the course of my analyses can help to tackle contemporary questions of gender identity, the experience of self in a mediated world, and the many ways in which people now craft a sense of self. The discussion of the performance of self through art developed in these pages opens perspectives on ways for moving beyond established categories for doing identity. And it is this aspect of the baroque outlook on life that perhaps holds the greatest promise for strategic interventions in the way we live now.

Clearly, the implication of my closing observations on gender must be that all categories of sex and/or gender should be abolished. In the end, the notion of gender can become just as oppressive as the binary sex system because categories of gender are often simply grafted onto the materiality of sex. The fact that we now allow for several intermediate sexes or genders can in the long run only be cold comfort, as even a smorgasbord of intermediate sexes or genders will inevitably result in difficulties for people who still fall somehow in-between the several intermediate forms. The problem was never merely that there were only two sexes, although that certainly was a huge issue in itself. The real problem is the very existence of categories itself because this implies that within any given individual at least some gender or sex must be; and that means: some *defined* sex or gender that fits an established category, even an intermediate one. In

other words, giving up on the sexual binaries (male/female, gay/straight, human/non-human) may be liberating up to a point, allowing for a number of shades in-between the polar opposites (such as intersex, transsexual, and transgender), but in the end it does sponsor the production of new categories, which will inevitably have new exclusionary effects (such as transphobia). These may then perhaps be remedied with the introduction of yet another category or categories, but surely at some point we should realise that the sensible thing to do is simply to give up on categories altogether. Anyone who takes the long view can see that expanding the repertoire of “male” and “female” boxes to tick on official forms with a new box for a third or intermediate sex simply begs the question. Why should people be sexed or gendered or sexually oriented at all if they could also just be sensual, or erotic, and respond to the moment? This would be the Paterian ideal of human life as a constant flow of ever-changing impressions and our responses to them.

Who we are, should not be our gender, our sex, our race, or any other feature or combination of features. We are a constantly changing cluster of experiences that cannot be defined in any way at any moment except as change. This logic also extends to race, which has de facto ceased to exist. As individuals from different races amalgamate and their mixed offspring in turn amalgamates with other mixed offspring, race goes out the window. All human blood is mixed, and it has been so for many a century. In the United States the one-drop rule says that anyone who has one drop of black blood in their family tree is, in the final reckoning, black. But if you turn the logic around and call anyone with at least one drop of white blood in their lineage white, you would probably find that there is no such thing as a black American. As the races continue to mingle in the globalised world they will simply cease to exist because the gene-pool gradually becomes a global ocean of absolute difference. And that, again, is why all categories must go. In the real world there are only individual people with absolutely individual identities that no category can grasp except by doing deep and cruel violence to the person. Accepting individuality and giving up on categories will not lead to conceptual or practical chaos, nor will it render critical reflection impossible. It will simply make us human. It is such a world, where humans meet humans in whatever guise they desire, that is held out as the promise of the baroque, of aestheticism, and of the philosophy of montage as a way of life. As ideologies fall into disrepute (none too soon) it is to bricolage that we will need to turn if we want to re-build a human world on a small but beautiful scale. We cannot know where the mighty river of history will take us, but we can map its past trajectories and learn from its record. The future can be made. To embrace possibility and change is to take the baroque approach to life.