

HAMLET: Do you see yonder cloud that's almost in shape of a camel?

POLONIUS: By the mass, and 'tis like a camel indeed.

HAMLET: Methinks it is like a weasel.

POLONIUS: It is backed like a weasel.

HAMLET: Or like a whale?

POLONIUS: Very like a whale.

Just as the clouds to Polonius took whatever shapes Hamlet told him to see, art becomes a priest to many gods. At various times, it has been justified or attacked on grounds that it improves morals or destroys them, develops emotional health or breeds lunacy, elevates or pollutes society, increases intelligence or dulls the brain, stimulates problem-solving skills or deadens creativity, offers investment opportunities or dupes a gullible public, teaches patriotism or undermines a nation's values, instills respect for our fellow voyagers on spaceship earth or breeds elitism, teaches other school subjects or teaches nothing of consequence, offers spiritual enlightenment or leads to idolatry, provides leisure class diversion while improving working class taste, and keeps women out of trouble as it imparts marketable skills to men.

The subtleties of oppression are found throughout aesthetic philosophy. One approach to aesthetic study is sometimes called cultural literacy, which refers to familiarity with those books, works of music, and objects of art deemed 'masterpieces' by 'expert' consensus. This is a form of social adaptation—the embracing of elitist values in order to rise socially. An example occurred in 1874 when Harvard University offered the first art history class in the United States. Open only to wealthy White males, its purpose was to place them on a cultural level equal to that of their European counterparts.

A second approach might be called philosophical literacy. It involves studying the ideas of individuals our culture has christened 'great thinkers.' It too is a form of social adaptation. The sheep are told by the wolves which exemplars to memorize if they wish to run with the pack, pretending that they too are wolves. The fantasy lasts as long as the wolves are amused. It ends when the wolves get hungry.

Another approach is that of critical theory—the study of values underlying a culture's broadest assumptions. In the case of art, this includes identifying who magistrates the line separating 'fine' and 'popular' art, who determines what 'good' art is, and how those folks save their seats at the table of culture. Aligned with Habermas' (1971) theoretical orientation—in the form of critical teaching—I wrote *Dogs Playing Cards* because I have seen oppression deny so many their right to participate in the American experiment; to serve as dog catcher or president; to make, view, or teach whatever art they choose. Because of this, we all—oppressors as well as oppressed—inheriting a diminished legacy.

In a variety of guises, a three-fingered-fist—patronage, education, and censorship (Efland, 1990)—has been used to control the arts throughout Western history. True to its name, art education places one foot in the arts and the other in education. Each field both builds and mirrors culture. To extend the metaphor, art education holds visual language in one hand and verbal language in the other, offering tandem tools for prying open the clenched, iron fist of power.

The three forms of controlling the arts are often disguised as rationales. Rationales can be classified as pragmatic or romantic. Pragmatic rationales, intended to secure power, historically have been used by two types of institutions: the state and the church. Their targets fall mainly into four categories: women, the under classes, racial and ethnic groups, and minority religions, in that order. This order is determined largely by the numbers involved in each category. Romantic rationales for art education can be tagged with the label 'art for art's sake.' I call these rationales romantic not because they are, but because they appear so. Their intent is more covert than that of the state and church rationales: it is to maintain power already attained.

The nature of a culture's power conflicts determine which art educational rationales dominate at a given time. If we envisage a continuum with creative freedom on the left, indifference in the center, and censorship on the right, we find that powerbrokers gravitate leftward when they feel secure. Romantic rationales emerge. Under stable conditions art is not needed to acquire power, so overt agendas disappear. Powerbrokers become champions of culture. Governmental and private endowments appear. Censorship abates, patronage diversifies, and art educators are free to teach as they choose. Leaders praise the arts as central to a well-rounded education. Because they feel secure, they tolerate critical voices, creative thought, expressive freedom, and heightened connoisseurship. Art can thrive in such a setting.

However, when powerbrokers begin to lose ground, they tend to retreat to the middle ground—indifference. Art patronage can become elusive. Indifference results in an artistically unschooled populace which in turn creates a visually illiterate culture. Since art education is not perceived to serve practical ends, it is deemed unimportant. It becomes a caricature of itself. An example of this occurred in the mid-twentieth century. Modernism flourished within the art community but was popularly ignored. Meanwhile, sentiment in art education was to decry 'adult' knowledge such as art history or social criticism. The public, unschooled in art viewing, failed to grasp the innovations of modernism. "Why should we pony up the time and money to view art we don't understand?" the public reasonably asked. Had art curricula in the schools been robust at mid-century, the public may have kept pace with the art of its time. The gap between artist and public would have narrowed rather than widened.

A telling measure of the waste wrought by this approach is that so few artists who grew up during this time credit their public school art educations for helping them. Many of today's educational policymakers came of age during this period. Visually ignorant, they by definition do not know what they are missing; consequently they do not value it. Under such leadership, it is not surprising that visual illiteracy is commonplace and art education is considered a curricular frill.

The third point on our continuum, censorship, occurs when powerbrokers become frightened. They become conservative and move to the political right. Gift-wrapping their tactics in the rhetoric of God and country, they co-opt art education, and art itself, to serve their ends. Power is consolidated in the state, the church, or both. If power lies with the state, artists may be trained to produce state propaganda, or to develop economically exploitable skills. During the United States' revolutionary period, for example, as the infant nation struggled for economic self-sufficiency, industrialists implemented art education programs intended to produce able designers and improve craftsmanship. It was hoped that this would make colonial products more competitive with those of Europe.

If a culture's power is concentrated in the church, as it was in the middle ages, art education is often used to train technicians to disseminate dogma. In such circumstances a culture's leaders impose their visions on the masses. The sound of silence echoes across the land as the visions of artists go slip slidin' away. Patronage shrinks, education ossifies, and creativity dies.

Such circumstances are never inevitable. In a democracy, powerbrokers are helpless to push society without its consent. In *Dogs Playing Cards* I take you through a brief, revised survey of Western civilization. I topography certain cultural arenas—censorship, patronage, education, ethnicity, sex, violence, and art education—to explore their potentials for oppression. Following my historical survey, I discuss each of these separately. I call the reader's attention to the untapped political potential of art education, one of our culture's most under-utilized means of education. Its network is already in place. Let us use it.