

Abstract Art as Alternative to Multiculturalist Education

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Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., never tired of professing how much they owed their devotion to civil rights to their faiths. Hinduism and Christianity inspired their struggles for social justice. In American public education today, we want our students to respect and extend the legacy of these two heroes. However, while we champion their politics, we are apt to adopt a more neutral stance toward their religions. Much of this is due to our commitment to the separation of Church and State. But our wariness may also be motivated by qualms about how certain religious doctrines block the road of inquiry. We may feel, for example, that there must be other ways to awaken a passion for democracy than to enshrine creationism.

Multiculturalism has inspired us all to resist attacks of social discrimination and to appreciate the benefits of social diversity. There is no disputing these hard-won accomplishments and the need to further them. What concerns me here is how multiculturalism affects humanities education. How well does it enable us to inherit the full range of available works of self-understanding and use them to stimulate our students' and our own self-understanding?

The reason for my worry, which I shall explain in what follows, is that multiculturalism threatens to erase the achievements and insights of abstract art, one of the twentieth century's most stunning inventions. It requires that work in the humanities operate as a vehicle of seemingly immediate representation. In contrast, we can better affirm the continuing, educational value of this nonrepresentational art that stresses its mediums if we understand its works to be valorizing our indeterminate selves and our engagement in an experimental adventure. Abstract art releases us from the idealization of cultural identity. Appreciating this point broaches a way for us to carry on the struggle for democracy as one for the recognition of our existential freedom.

My argument has three parts. The first part reminds us of the centrality of cultural identification and historicist analysis to multiculturalist humanities education. In the second, I sketch out a theory of abstract art that explains why works of formal transformation in artistic mediums elude understanding in historicist terms. And lastly, I point out how such works evoke our negative and positive liberty and hence, in an alternative fashion to multiculturalism, foster a more just society.

IDENTITY AND HISTORICISM IN MULTICULTURALIST TEACHING

By now, multiculturalism is a concept that is familiar to most educators. It proceeds from the sense that our society is composed of different cultures. Their friction can incite attempts to establish the dominance of one culture as the official representative of society as a whole. In this process, features of the other cultures get denigrated or ignored, rendering members of those cultures more apt to be treated

unfairly. Multiculturalism resists this trend by promoting an appreciation of how our society may be enhanced by the contributions of increasingly diverse, equal, peacefully coexisting, and communicating cultures. This movement is fundamentally educational, as well as political, and has been changing how we approach the humanities.

For those of us who teach in this field, one of our chief aims is to help students cultivate their self-knowledge. Traditionally, we encourage them to reflect on their experiences and views in the light of texts that employ unfamiliar terms of understanding. We hope that by learning the language of such texts, they will broaden, deepen, and refine how they understand themselves. If we are multiculturalists, then, we will want them to develop a clearer and stronger sense of their cultural identities and their relationships to other cultures. The two of course go hand in hand: one's cultural identity *is* one's involvement in the historical interaction between one's culture or cultures and others'; that interaction in turn can only be interpreted from the perspective of a specific cultural identity. Reflecting on this dimension of their experiences and views should bring home to students the good of participating in constructive intercultural exchanges and the injustice of supporting destructive ones. The best guides to such reflection would accordingly be texts that understand the world in ways that belong to distinct cultures, texts that exemplify cultural understanding, explicitly or implicitly, emphatically or unconsciously.

This would seem to cover humanistic work in general, since all of it is rooted in some cultural context — including abstract art. Take Norman Lewis's *Phantasy II*.¹ Sure, the painting appears to be simply an arrangement of vertical and diagonal planes sometimes bounding, and sometimes floating free of, blotches of red, yellow, green, and other colors in a shallow, ambiguous space. But is not the fact that Lewis was an African-American man from a proletarian background, trying to prove himself in New York at the end of the nineteen-forties, key for understanding why and how the painting was produced? Fueling the rise of multiculturalism has been the development of historicist analysis like this. Historicism provides the movement with a supporting method of inquiry, criticism, and education. Virtually everyone now accepts that humanistic and artistic works stand to reveal and be revealed by their historical origins in a conjuncture of cultural forces, thus illuminating our own cultural identities.

It must be admitted, though, that a painting like *Phantasy II* is less useful for a multiculturalist teacher than one that pictures the world more recognizably. Because Lewis's work does not show us much about the Harlem society around him, its cultural understanding has to be reconstructed using sources of information about the painter and his world that are external to the painting. In fact, if we are primarily interested in cultural understanding as such, it makes sense in general to favor the study of other kinds of works. Historical documents and scientific, philosophical, critical, and artistic works that comment directly on cultural history are more valuable for this multiculturalist teacher and her students. True, in order to master the historicist mode of inquiry, it is a good idea for students to practice it on texts

whose cultural awareness is only latent. But this understanding in the end rests on factual evidence and not on feats of imagination.

This is what troubles me. I agree that the way to encourage students to reflect on their cultural identities is to have them learn the language of texts that think about the world in cultural terms. Nor can I deny that these texts must be primarily ones of historical documentation and explanation. The problem is that this approach demotes artistic, imaginative works to second-class status in humanities teaching. (And if they get little respect there, where else are they going to be taken seriously?) I am especially concerned that historicism largely obscures the point of abstraction in the arts, reducing abstract art to a more or less dazzling, but rather superfluous, form of decoration and rhetorical emphasis. It is so much more.

ABSTRACTION AS TRANSFORMATION IN ARTISTIC MEDIUMS

What is artistic abstraction? Before we pursue this question very far, let me note that I do not want to restrict the phenomenon to the visual arts. We commonly talk about marked degrees of abstraction in works of dance, cinema, or poetry. It is hard to describe what Anthony Braxton is doing to Charlie Parker's "Bongo Bop" without reaching for the term.² Abstraction can be found in all the artistic mediums. Indeed, lingering on the Braxton example suggests that we can conceive of abstraction as principally a process of transformation. But what gets transformed? How? Into what?

A comparison might help. Since we are approaching the question of abstraction philosophically, we might do well to return to the origin of all our footnotes: Plato. For Plato, the result of abstraction is *eidos*, form. The form of a thing is what that thing truly is, its essence; this form can only be grasped by the mind. It stands in logical relation to other forms, being eternally itself. In contrast, a form's material incarnation, perceived by the senses, is merely a changeable, transient appearance, which is contingently related to other material things. It is a starting point. Through the process of understanding, of knowing, the material accidents of a thing are subtracted, transforming it into truth. Abstraction thus reveals how each thing, by virtue of its form, is part of a comprehensive, cosmic whole crowned by the idea of goodness; it enables us to see how things must and ought to be. It is our window to perfection.

Thinking of Stéphane Mallarmé and Piet Mondrian, we could say that some abstract art, particularly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, affirms this Platonic conception. However, as this art grew more and more associated with the experience of modernity, to the point where it became synonymous with modernism, it abandoned any claim to reveal necessary truths. The rapid succession of artistic revolutions and the excitement they aroused taught artists to prize above all how things could be made different and new. Artists increasingly pursued abstraction as an experimental process. Their aim was still to disclose a form, but not one that pretended to be essential. This form was fresh and renewing because it was a transformation of a more familiar one, an act that expressed daring, inventiveness, and a love of exploration.

Oddly, this version of abstraction was perhaps most cogently described not by an artist or aesthetic thinker, but by the philosopher Louis Althusser when he was theorizing not artistic but scientific practice. Althusser wants to draw a sharp line between ideology and science. An ideology is based on beliefs that support and are supported by established practices. A science is composed of beliefs that have attained the status of knowledge. How do the latter do this? Speaking quite schematically, Althusser describes a process whereby what is categorized as “Generalities I” is transformed by “Generalities II” into “Generalities III.” “Generalities I” comprises a set of received beliefs. It is altered by a second set of beliefs that constitutes a theoretically defined, coherent method of transformation — an intellectual means of production, so to speak. The product of this alteration is a third set of beliefs.³

For our purposes, what is important to note is that “Generalities I” is not a set of material things. Althusser’s process of abstraction does not proceed from or act on parts of the sensory, physical, or natural world; it does not underpin a correspondence theory of truth. It begins rather with already constituted forms that belong in significant part to the familiar world of ideology. The process registers these forms *qua* forms and then subjects them to a principled method. The results are thus patently products of this transformative process rather than the natural outgrowth of ideological truisms. Conversely, the process is evidently motivated and governed by all too human beliefs and desires. Whatever sense of permanence and necessity the old forms might have commanded gets diminished by this process rather than, as in Platonic abstraction, enhanced. Indeed, we could say that Althusserian abstraction is essentially anti-Platonic. It looks skeptically at anything that passes for a Platonic form for evidence of a contingent, interested, or artificial process. It subtracts from the form its idealization.

Critics have questioned whether such a process can adequately explain the sense of truth that we associate with science. Although the tenability of Althusser’s epistemology hangs on this issue, I am content to sidestep it for now by demurring on any claim of abstract art to knowledge. To establish the art’s claim to practical significance, we can simply remark that the forms it produces enable us to formulate new beliefs about our experiences that may, as we reflectively integrate them into the rest of our webs of beliefs and desires, determine our actions until we learn more. I do not mind staying in the realm of provisional opinion here. The main thing that Althusser gives me in this discussion is an account of the process of abstraction in the arts that departs from Plato’s in two ways. First, Althusserian abstraction does not pertain to states of affairs. It does not attempt to represent the world. Secondly, *a fortiori*, it is uninterested in representing the reason for how things are in the world. It is not searching for the metaphysical ideal behind the material mess. Instead, it focuses on demonstrating how it is possible to transform a form in a more or less methodical fashion, yielding a different mess — one that more of us have a part in creating.

The appeal to method introduces one last, key ingredient of this account: namely, the concept of medium. As I observed, forms are beings in a human world

of language. Their existence manifestly depends on the capacity of their habitats to support signification. In the arts, such habitats, such material and conventional conditions of signification, constitute the mediums of works. Accordingly, just as we perceive material things only against the horizon of a natural world that we also register, so the forms that we perceive also draw attention to their mediums. Lewis's planar lines and patches of red, stymieing a representational reading, welcome being considered strictly as phenomena of painting. This is why Clement Greenberg famously defined abstract art as art that stresses its mediums instead of covering them up to create the immediate illusion of nature.⁴ Abstract dance does not let you forget that it is dance rather than gesticulation; jazz pieces sound abstract when they direct us not to a familiar sentiment that they immediately represent, but to a form whose transformation, using the resources of this musical tradition, stimulates a somewhat unrecognizable feeling. It is this orderly employment of what the medium has to offer to signification that is designated by the concept of method. On second thought, "employment" is too inartistic a word — "celebration" is more fitting, for the best of this art enlarges our appreciation of its medium's fertility.

Abstract art, in short, invites us to delight in the transformation of contingent forms that a medium engenders — "delight" because the product suggests a new feeling rather than represents an old one. This art steers away from discourse about necessity or immediacy. With this conception of abstract art in mind, let us return to the worry about multiculturalism and historicism. Why might a multiculturalist approach to humanities teaching, particularly one that privileges historicist inquiry, be unsuited to abstract art?

The reason is that historicism treats all art as fundamentally representational. Of course, historicism need not deny that Lewis is trying to do something quite different from what Giotto was after; it might include all the points we made above about the nature of abstraction in its interpretation of *Phantasy II*. But to reach satisfaction, this mode of inquiry has to explain Lewis's recourse to abstraction as being in turn caused by historical events and structures. Perhaps, for instance, he is seeking recognition from his white colleagues in abstract expressionism and their burgeoning, mainly white audience. By looking at the painting with an eye to certain marks of the work's context, and with supplementary information about how to understand that context, the historicist teacher and student can see in it a black response to nineteen-forties America. Its abstract manner or style aside, the painting ultimately *represents* a cultural drama, despite itself.

It is this "despite itself" I mistrust. If we are truly interested in learning from artworks, we should strive to be as receptive as possible to the ways they put *our* assumptions into question. Abstract art, at least as I have theorized it, rejects representation in general and cultural representation in particular. It denies that its works refer to necessary forms of life, including the cultures of predefined peoples. It has nothing to say about immediate experience, without the modifying intervention of some artist's work. In the works of those who do have something to say about such experience, such as those who are trying to capture experiences that are the property of a culture, this art simply finds a medium's forms free for transformation.

To insist that it portray the world in cultural terms, therefore, is to betray the art's project.

Let me be clear: I am not at all denying that historicist inquiry motivated by multiculturalist concerns has a place in education. I have not laid a finger on its legitimacy, within certain limits. Such inquiry can tell us a lot about how features of a historical world find their way into an artwork. Moreover, outside the humanities, historicism is an invaluable tool of social-scientific research. I am merely pointing out that when it expands beyond its limits, and specifically when it attempts to explain the significance of an abstract artwork, it exposes its limitations. It fails to account adequately for what there is to learn from this specific kind of art.

ABSTRACTION FOR EXISTENTIAL FREEDOM

At this point, a humanities teacher may conclude that not only has she no interest in doing an injustice to abstract art, she would just as soon leave it aside altogether. If such art fails to represent our immediate experience of the world in any terms, then it is unclear what it really has to offer most students. It would appear to have nothing to say not only for cultural self-understanding but also for any self-understanding save that of what it means to be an artist, and solely one interested in form for form's sake at that. If one does not see oneself as the next Lewis, then what is the point of learning abstract art's language?

I believe this art speaks to all of us about our freedom. About our negative liberty, it echoes Michel Foucault: "Do not ask who I am and do not ask me to remain the same: leave it to our bureaucrats and our police to see that our papers are in order. At least spare us their morality when we write."⁵ And about our positive liberty, it recalls Ralph Waldo Emerson: "Life only avails, not the having lived. Power ceases in the instant of repose; it resides in the moment of transition to a new state, in the shooting of a gulf, in the darting to an aim."⁶ Freedom from identity, freedom to experiment: this is for Jean-Paul Sartre human existence.⁷ We are invited to relish this condition of ours when we learn the language of works of abstraction.

As I explained, such works direct our attention not to a natural phenomenon but to a form in a medium. Plenty of people and incidents have testified that the effect of this can be shocking. Why? I do not think it is merely that this move is unexpected. T.J. Clark has explained that zooming in on form carries a negative charge; it expresses disenchantment with the traditional project of representation that has become too compromised with our industries of distraction and spectacle.⁸ In recent writing, I have tried to elaborate upon Clark's reasoning in order to claim that the experience of negativity in the focus on form is rooted even more deeply in what Sartre calls our consciousness's "nihiliation" of its intentional objects — its realization of its estrangement from the world and itself. As a conscious being, I am not what I am conscious of, including my body, my feelings, and my history. I can become aware of this alienation, my nothingness, when the content of experiences I recognize suddenly metamorphoses into form. For instance, at one moment, I am reminded of someone I lost. At the next, I realize that I am absorbed by a twelve-bar blues structure — which distances me from the experience of loss. This is a

distancing that has its own pathos. Of course, it would take much more argument, engaging with the details of *Being and Nothingness*, to make this account convincing.⁹ Since there is no room for that here, let me simply remind us of how central the experience of strangeness is to modernist artists and critics like Arthur Rimbaud, Bertolt Brecht, Arnold Schoenberg, and the Russian Formalists, and to philosophers dedicated to illuminating the medium of philosophy, like Jacques Derrida. They suggest that abstract art encourages us to understand ourselves as, at bottom, homeless strangers in a world we are passing through.

We cannot be ourselves, let alone be entirely members of a culture, even if we want to. This can feel like deprivation, especially if we are inclined to cling to the warmth of the families into which we were born. But abstract art invites us to make of this feeling an adventure, to compound it with the joy of exploration. Charlie Parker took the blues, elaborated upon its chords, and then soared on flights of polyrhythmic and melodic invention. He powerfully articulated a new sentiment, “a state of nervous, jittery exhilaration.”¹⁰ Musicians following him discovered further ways to transform blues and bop forms, such as, in Braxton’s case, letting go of tonality and venturing on pointillist clouds. In the process, they transformed themselves with still other experiences. We may lack identity, but this need not be a condition that we suffer. We can understand that we are free to create forms that celebrate creation and self-creation.

What does all this have to do with democracy? Or with the civil rights struggle? I think this account of abstraction as indeed fostering a kind of self-understanding itself starts to transform the form of the struggle; it broaches a different way to carry it forward. According to the multiculturalist paradigm, the project of liberating citizens from unnecessary and harmful constraints and treating them more fairly requires that we recognize and respect their cultural identities. Abstract art suggests that we have no such things. The idea that we do is a quintessential product of Platonic abstraction; it is an idealization of cultural forms in our lives. To be sure, we adopt plenty of personas, some of which are based on these forms, for practical and conditional reasons, but there is no core self that we each have to be. Crimes of cultural misrecognition and disrespect aside, I wonder if we may not experience even acts of “proper” cultural recognition, particularly overzealous ones, as similarly distorting and confining.

Abstract art scrupulously refrains from trapping us in such personas and demonstrates what liberty is good for. It reminds us that we are not visiting this place to be true to ourselves or our original communities. We are here to enter the New World. Furthermore, abstract art emphasizes that the only way that we do this is by constructing this world. It encourages us to take pride in building and maintaining a democracy as part of our finding fulfillment together, not in who we are but in that we create. This social project of course calls for forms of collective action inspired by a sense of solidarity, the third quintessentially democratic virtue. One limitation of much abstract art, it must be acknowledged, is that it does not especially highlight this virtue. But there are exceptions to this rule, and there can be more, with jazz

being perhaps the most prominent exception, since the music is all about sensitive, exploratory response to a group's ongoing, shifting interaction.

The cultivation of cultural identity in the humanities risks cutting us off from the legacy of abstract art. This is unfortunate because an appreciation of what that legacy has to offer our self-understanding can revitalize our sense of the promise of democratization. It is for this reason that Lewis was disturbed by "the limitations which come under the names, 'African Idiom,' 'Negro Idiom,' or 'Social Painting.'"¹¹ He insisted to the contrary that

the excellence of [the artist's] work will be the most effective blow against stereotype.... This concept treats art not as reproduction or as convenient but entirely secondary medium for propaganda but as the production of experiences which combine intellectual and emotional activities in a way that may conceivably add not only to the pleasure of the viewer and the satisfaction of the artist, but to a universal knowledge of aesthetics and the creative faculty which I feel exists for one form of expression or another in all [people].¹²

When Lewis placed his confidence in this human faculty, he was not denying that we live under diverse material conditions that determine our feasible choices. He was simply driving home to us that when we make specific decisions between those choices, and when we transform the artistic and social forms in which we participate, we freely create, in a medium no one could own, meaning for our lives.

1. To view a reproduction of the painting, consult the Museum of Modern Art's website at <http://www.moma.org/collection>.

2. A recording of Braxton and his band's version of this piece may be found in *Anthony Braxton's Charlie Parker Project*, hatOLOGY 612-2, 2004. The original piece is on Charlie Parker, *The Complete Savoy and Dial Master Takes*, Savoy 17149, 2002.

3. See Louis Althusser, "On the Materialist Dialectic," in *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Vintage, 1969).

4. See Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," in *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate*, ed. Francis Francina (New York: Harper and Row, 1985).

5. Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon, 1972), 17.

6. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance," in *Essays and Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York: Library of America, 1983), 271.

7. See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, trans. Carol Macomber (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2007).

8. See Timothy J. Clark, "Clement Greenberg's Theory of Art," in *Pollock and After*, ed. Francis Francina.

9. See in particular the Introduction and Chapter One of Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956).

10. This fine phrase comes from Richard Cook, *Richard Cook's Jazz Encyclopedia* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 46.

11. Norman Lewis, quoted in Ann Eden Gibson, "Black Is a Color: Norman Lewis and Modernism in New York," in *Norman Lewis: Black Paintings, 1946-1977* (New York: Studio Museum of Harlem, 1998), 15.

12. *Ibid.*