

Modernist & Postmodern Literary Aesthetics

This thesis examines Modernist and Postmodernist aesthetics as tools for judging literature in Pat Barker and Philip K. Dick and offers a Marxist critique of the criteria for the awarding of the Nobel Prize for Literature which has established itself as the goldstandard for literature. The original citation:

...for the most outstanding work, in the ideal direction.
(Gupta 2005, p. 210).

However 'ideal' should be translated as 'idealistic' suggesting metaphysical or Idealist Kantian aesthetics. I contend that contrary to Kantian aesthetics, 'art' does not exist outside of material history, rather it is an artefact of production and consumption in a historically specific and concrete 'mode of production'. It is possible to perceive the Nobel Prize for Literature as being formed and reformed by socio-cultural elements because Allén (1997) illustrates it had constantly reinvented itself to accommodate shifts of 'taste' This was made explicit in 1964 when Jean-Paul Sartre refused the Prize because he maintained it was:

...guided by a capitalist western bloc ideology.
(Johnson 2005, p. 213.)

I shall rather perceive aesthetics as an appendage of socio-economic forces, though determined by the material base as Engels maintained 'in the last instant' see Eagleton (1976, pp. 3-6). My readings of Barker (1995) and Dick (1968) allow the necessary logic of my methodology, 'Historical Materialism', to develop because the dialectical contradictions present are yet to be resolved; we are still living in the epoch of class conflict. My methodological structure is derived from Marx and Engels:

The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men ... The same applies to mental production as expressed in the language of politics, laws, morality, religion, metaphysics, etc. of a people.
(Johnson, p, 220.)

Modernism is a multitudinous and fragmented discourse developed and contested in Brecht, (1978) Lukacs (1963) and in the discoveries of Sigmund Freud. I note the discourse of postmodernism in work of Jean-François Lyotard (1979) and his concepts of the collapse of the meta-narrative and the rise of the micro-narrative in postmodernism. These ideas will be complexified and challenged in Fredrick Jameson (1991). Alex Callinicos (1989) *Against Post Modernism* provides a necessary theoretical corrective to the postmodern thesis promoting 'the radical Enlightenment', and on this foundation I make my new criteria for the Nobel Prize: "**The literary text which most persuasively promotes social transformation**" and award the Prize to Philip K. Dick (1968) *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*. This is because it exhibits both the 'cognitive estrangement' which is a variant on Brechtian 'alienation-effect' reflecting both on imagined worlds and our own as in the contradictory treatment of Rachel and Prim by Deckard . So the text illustrates these contradictions which generate an aspiration for a new and visionary social formulation and encourages creative engagement with the radical Enlightenment by showing its opposite; a dystopia and thereby creating a desire to

construct a utopian society.

What is my critique of Kantian Aesthetics and why is Kant significant? Firstly Kant is significant in that he provided the ideology of the bourgeois writer who apparently exists outside of history and creates 'art' as opposed to the production of artefacts. Aesthetics in this view concern defining 'taste'. For Kant there are two elements (Johnson 2005, p 202) argues: 1) originality and 2) exemplarity I would add a) ontology b) an epistemology. The 'ontology' of art is in the art exists not in its being a 'use-value' but as 'recognition as a work of art' as the *Sublime* and its epistemology is the stimulation or imaging of the art object. So for Kant, we perceive beauty through our sense-experience, and having an experience of the *Sublime* universalize it in abstraction. This is a form of 'Objective Idealism', it argues consciousness determines being.

Here is a problem for Kant, yes, aesthetic taste includes a subjective judgement but it cannot be universalized in a social formulation which privileges one class or the atomized and alienated individual writer in capitalism. John Keats (1819) *Ode on a Grecian Urn* encapsulates Kant's view in nascent capitalism:

"Beauty is truth, truth beauty"-that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know
(Keats 1988, p, 346).

However the Enlightenment Project also gave birth to 'market capitalism', the bourgeoisie, and its dialectical opposite the proletariat or 'universal class' which would necessarily develop an objective interest in creating a higher and universal aesthetic. My position is that only 'labour' is creative and has the capacity to create art and thus art is a social practice only realizable when the 'means of production' are socialized. Here Trotsky encapsulates this as practice:

Under Socialism, Literature and art will be tuned to a different
key such as disinterested friendship ...Art then will become the
most perfect ethos for progressive building of life in every field.
(Trotsky 1981, p 60.)

This is congruent with Walter Benjamin in his remark on pre-communist aesthetics:

Every document in civilization is a record of barbarism... A
Historical Materialist therefore disassociates himself from it...
(Benjamin 1991, p.248).

An example of the bourgeois artist in this period is Oscar Wilde in (Gupta & Johnson 2005 p. 8) 'All art is quite useless.' I prefer, like Alex Callinicos (1989) to locate 'a radicalized Enlightenment tradition':

Used reason as an instrument of liberation. Marx did so more
emphatically: theory, when integrated by means of socialist
organization in the struggle for working class self-emancipation
...but for Freud too, the patient's development of rational
understanding... was an essential feature of his therapy.
(Callinicos 1989, p. 172.)

Callinicos (2002) *Social Theory* argues the Enlightenment tradition is also indebted to Hegel who wrote:

Contradiction is at the root of all movement and life and it is only in so far as it contains a Contradiction that anything moves has impulses and activity.

(Callinicos 2002, p 41.)

My criterion is instrumentalist but with an aesthetic so I disagree with the view of Leftist writing Orwell (1936) argued:

... That art and propaganda are the same thing
(Gupta & Johnson, 2005 p. 6.).

Some Marxists like Adorno & Horkheimer (1947) *Dialectic of Enlightenment* the spectre of two world wars, the rise of fascism and Stalinism dashed their belief in the Enlightenment Project:

Only the conscious horror of destruction creates the correct relationship with the dead: unity with them because we, like them are the victims of the same condition and the same disappointed hope.

(Braninigan 2007, p. 13).

It was necessary to examine the criteria of aesthetics going back to Kant and in attempting to achieve discussion of the nature of the canon, in terms of positioning modernist literature concede this is impossible without an understanding the impact of Eliot (1920) when he suggested that:

This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless and of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporarily.

(Gupta & Johnson 2005, p 98.)

So Eliot, the disillusionment in the Enlightenment Project and the apparent triumph of capitalism and consumerism during the 'post-war boom' all must be acknowledged and their implosion into "pastiche" for Fredric Jameson (1992), I have some sympathy with his perspective.

Jameson must be understood in the light of Ernest Mandel *Late-Capitalism* (1978) who developed a tripartite model of capitalism. Jameson superimposed another Marxian mode derived from the British Marxist Raymond Williams on this model. Here, for Jameson late-capitalism is culturally 'residual' and he argues:

Not only are Picasso and Joyce no longer ugly, they now strike us, on the whole, as rather "realistic," and this is the result of a canonisation and academic institutionalisation of the modern movement generally that can be dated to the late 1950s.

(Jameson, 1991 p 4.)

This is, then, the relief of the postmodern... but it has had its price: namely, the primary destruction of modernist formal value...the status of art... in order to secure the new productivities

(Jameson, 1991 pp. 317-18).

Thus postmodernism has at its centre an apparent contradiction. This dissertation is positioned in Post W.W 11 literature, but has addressed the questions of aesthetics in both modernism and post-modernist narratives. I agree with Callinicos (1989) that there is a necessity for a renewed Marxist poetics:

Unless we work toward this kind of revolutionary change which would allow the realization of this potential in a transformed world, there is little left for us to do, except, like Lyotard and Baudrillard, to fiddle while Rome burns.

(Callinicos 1989, p. 174.)

I shall examine my runner-up first which is Pat Barker *The Ghost Road*, would be a worthy winner if the existing criteria of the Nobel Prize stood and is indeed a fine novel. Barker wrote:

I didn't see the point of writing an anti-war novel that only examined the tragedy that is almost part of the fabric of our national consciousness.

(Monteith, 2002. p. 27).

Barker, I argue, rejects 19th century Realism in favour of micro-narratives as we see from her shift from third-person account to Priors first person account at the beginning of Chapter Seven. We read the naturalistic first person diary entries of Prior as creating a sense of intimacy between him and the reader and commenting on the process of writing:

First-person narrators don't die, so long as we keep telling the story of our own life we remain safe.

(Barker 1995, p. 115).

These are juxtaposed with feverish memories of Dr. Rivers recounting his anthropological pre-war expedition to Melanesia to research head-hunters who ironically are 'dying through a lack of war'. Dr. Rivers ponders:

Was this the suppressed memory?

(Barker, p. 96).

After recalling a minor trauma with his father and then remembering attending church with his father and the iconography in his father's churches:

In one of his father's churches, St Faith's, at Maidstone, the window to the left of the altar shows Abraham with the knife raised to slay his son, and, below the human figures, a ram caught in the thicket by his horns. The two events represented the difference between savagery and civilization

(Barker, p. 104).

Abraham here is a metaphor for Dr Rivers and Isaac for Prior but Rivers rather does sacrifice his sons just as on the island of Vao 'bastard sons' are sacrificed (Barker 1995, pp103-4). He cures them of their trauma only to return to France to die and kill. Then the positioning of a newspaper headline praising the war in quasi-erotic jingoistic

language is placed at the beginning of Chapter Fourteen:

SHEER FIGHTING
BOTH SIDES PAY THE PRICE
HUNS WAIT FOR THE BAYONET
(Barker, p. 203).

It is a powerful insertion of text as it is then placed layer upon layer with the realities of war in Priors diaries without any narrative sequence.. Finally, (Barker 1995 p, 276) Njiru the crippled witch-doctor whom Rivers recollected from the anthropological pre-war expedition comes to haunt the ward as Dr. Rivers sits, an emasculated analyst/doctor who has sent his patients back to France to their deaths and cannot anaesthetise the pain of their physical mutilations either.

Grey light tinged with rosy pink seeps in through the tall windows. Rivers, slumped at the night nurses' station, struggles to stay awake. The edge of sleep he hears Njiru's voice, repeating the words of the exorcism of Ave. O Sumbi! O Gesese! O Palapoko! O Gorepoko! O you Ngengere at the root of the sky. Go down, depart ye. And there, suddenly, not separate from the ward, not in any way ghostly, not in fashion *blong tomate*, but himself in every particular, advancing down the ward of the Empire Hospital...

(Barker, p. 276).

For Barker neither Primitivism nor Modernism has the solution because of the postmodern rejection of the radical Enlightenment tradition of social transformation.

Pat Barker dismisses 'stream of consciousness' techniques of High Modernism. Instead, Barker embraces both a post-colonialist and post-modernist shifting of perspective rooted in both the objective and subjective. She is employing a Panoptic methodology.

Mark Rawlinson *Pat Barker: New British Fiction argues*:

Barker's imagined great War is a revisionist historical construct, which examines versions of the war to reveal a secret war, the dimensions of 1914-18 which have been overlooked by different pressures created by official remembrance, the literature of protest, and an abiding train of popular militarism in Britain.

(Rawlinson 2010, p 68).

Thus, I argue that Pat Barker literary technique and orientation are those of a post-modernist, post-colonial novel, which can be located as 'factual fictions' (Johnson 2005 p. 371.), or 'metafiction'. Prescott notes as significant the subtitling by Norman Mailer (1968) *Armies of the Night* with 'History as a Novel, the Novel as History' (Johnson p.371). I note that there although there are an abundance of apparently Freudian references to the psychoanalyst Dr. Rivers, the historical Rivers (1923) *Conflict and Dream* rejected Sigmund Freud (1921) *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Freud extended his dream methodology to incorporate a psycho-biological conflict:

The goal of all life is death
(Freud 1995, p. 613).

Without a dialectical materialist explanation of the war that Lenin (1916) located in 'moribund' or late capitalism in the export of Capital from monopoly capitalist states and

therefore towards imperialism psychoanalysis was to be stretched to explain why humanity had slain millions of young men. Pat Barker really examined a feature of 'monopoly capitalism', world war, from the perspective of the post-modern novel in which she finds no coherent explanatory meta-narrative.

I shall now show why and how Philip K. Dick (1968) *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* fulfills my revised criteria for winning the Nobel Prize for Literature. He developed both an innovative new poetic in synthesizing a form of popular literature, Science Fiction, with philosophical issues such as class, religion and alienation often associated with the radical Enlightenment. He therefore meets my criteria: **"The literary text which most persuasively promotes social transformation"**. Although Dick (1968) is certainly not a piece of 'Socialist Realism' which the Marxist critic George Lukacs (1963) would acquiesce to such as Gorky (1906) *Mother*. It transcends those boundaries to achieve the same consequences using 'cognitive estrangement'. What Science Fiction does is to challenge the hegemony of the cultural domain of late-capitalism. A Marxist definition of Science Fiction was articulated by Darko Suvin (1979):

A literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence of estrangement and cognition.
(Suvin 1979, p 7).

In other words, Raymond Williams (1980):

It must cause a crisis of possibility, a reworking in imagination, of all forms and conditions.
(Williams 1980, p. 209).

What Science Fiction does then is show us a view of reality after being defamiliarized and then act as a mirror in which we see ourselves and the society we live in and thus I read Dick (1968) in the light of these Marxist commentators.

Hence we are shown by Dick (1968) a world devastated by 'World War Terminus' which was a very real possibility in 1968 with Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) after an exchange of nuclear weapons between the U.S.A and U.S.S.R.

Plekhanov commented:

The social mentality of an age is conditioned by its social conditions, this is nowhere quite as evident as in the history of art and literature.
(Eagleton 1976, p. 6).

In the wake of the war human colonization of other planets is necessary because of the nuclear fallout. Humans are given the choice:

Emigrate or degenerate! The choice is yours.
(Dick. 1968, p. 6).

The world has been devastated by imperialist war, the 'highest stage of capitalism' explained (Lenin 1916). Social polarization is complete. This is manifested by dialectical 'doubles'. Rick Deckard and John R. Isidore, both humans but Rick is of the privileged 'labour aristocracy' while Isidore is a 'special'. They are 'schizoid' as a result of being damaged by nuclear fallout, but are a metaphor for the proletariat and lumpen-proletariat. Isidore does manual work:

Classed as biologically unacceptable.... Once pegged

a special, a citizen, even if accepting sterilization, dropped out of history. He ceased, in effect, to be a member of mankind.

(Dick 1968, p. 14).

Rick is described by his wife as:

a crude cop... You're worse, his wife said.....You're a murderer hired by the cops.
I have ever killed a human in my life....
Iran said, 'Just those poor Andy's'.
(Dick, p.1).

Androids ('Andy's) are built by the Rosen Association which is the incarnation of 'accumulation for accumulation's sake' (Marx Capital, Ch., 32) as servants on Mars to the colonisers, another 'dialectical' double, Nexus-6 androids look like humans, are highly intelligent desiring freedom from slavery imposed by their creators. There's a striking double here as well Rachel, who is an Android member of the Rosen Association who sleeps with Rick and Prim who he 'retires':

An android doesn't care what happens to another android,
that's one of the indications we look for.
(Dick, p 99).

Rick says this as he questions Luba Luft, an opera singer he admires but then 'retires'.
Rick comes to question the dominant ideology:

Do androids dream? Rick asked himself
(Dick, p. 183).

For Debord (1992):

Pseudo-needs are imposed by modern consumerism...an unlimited artificiality which overpowers any living desire.
(Debord 1992, p. 34).

Deckard's 'electric sheep' is significant here as is the 'mood organ' which humans use to generate emotions at will. We are 'shown' the contradictions of late-capitalism by defamiliarization.

I delineated criteria for the Nobel Prize, understood it related to Kantian aesthetics, constructed a Marxist critique, extended this to Postmodernism, made a reading of Barker (1995) which saw it as potentially fulfilling the original criteria given 'shifts in taste' and seen her novel as postmodernist. Then appraised the developments in Marxist theory regarding Science Fiction as a genre, 'read' Dick (1968) in this light and therefore as his novel inspires the reader to contemplate a potentiality for social transformation in the radical Enlightenment tradition awarded him the Prize because Marx argues cogently (1852):

The social revolution... cannot take its poetry from
the past but only from the future.

<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch01.htm>

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