

# Whose Canon? Culturalization versus Democratization

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## Abstract

Current accounts – and particularly the critique – of canon formation are primarily based on some form of identity politics. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century a representational model of social identities replaced cultivation as the primary means to democratize the canons of the fine arts. In a parallel development, the discourse on canons has shifted its focus from processes of inclusion to those of exclusion. This shift corresponds, on the one hand, to the construction of so-called alternative canons or counter-canons, and, on the other hand, to attempts to restore the authority of canons considered to be in a state of crisis or decaying. Regardless of the democratic stance of these efforts, the construction of alternatives or the reestablishment of decaying canons does not seem to achieve their aims, since they break with the explicit and implicit rules of canon formation. Politically motivated attempts to revise or restore a specific canon make the workings of canon formation too visible, transparent and calculated, thereby breaking the spell of its imaginary character. Retracing the history of the canonization of the fine arts reveals that it was originally tied to the disembedding of artists and artworks from social and worldly affairs, whereas debates about canons of the fine arts since the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century are heavily dependent on their social, cultural and historical reembedding. The latter has the character of disenchantment, but has also fettered the canon debate in notions of “our” versus “their” culture. However, by emphasizing the dedifferentiation of contemporary processes of culturalization, the advancing canonization of popular culture seems to be able to break with identity politics that foster notions of “our” culture in the present thinking on canons, and push it in a more transgressive, syncretic or hybrid direction.

**Keywords:** Canon, canon formation, canons of fine art, canons of popular culture, culturalization, democratization, differentiation, dedifferentiation.

## **Whose Canon? Culturalization versus Democratization**

Exploring the long and complex history of canonization is probably the best way to clarify some features of the present debate about the canon. Placed within the movements of modernity, the aesthetization of the concept of the canon in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and its politicization in the 20<sup>th</sup> century stand out as important historical changes that I will explore here. These changes are in many respects contradictory, particularly in the sense that the former rested on a disembedding of art and the artist from society and worldly affairs, whereas the latter is characterized by a contrary movement of reembedding. This shift has, I will argue, gone hand in hand with the shift from differentiation to dedifferentiation as an outcome of long-term processes of modern culturalization, processes that could be more fully understood through exploration. The dedifferentiation of culture, particularly from politics and economics, is at the heart of contemporary efforts to deconstruct or alter established canons, but, prompted by a sense of loss or decay, it has been met by efforts to authoritatively restore or reconstruct them.

### **Modern Canons and the Disembedding of Art**

Canon debates oscillate between high and low tides. This was apparent in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the upholding of specific canons was challenged and questioned as part of what was generally conceived as the breakdown of established borders between high and low culture. In the 1980s and 1990s this challenge was met by a counter-reaction in the guise of a conservative defense of the Western literary canon (see, e.g., Bloom 1987; Bloom 1994). The basic counter-argument to this conservative reaction has been that the Western literary canon is based on unwarranted or illegitimate power relations, which has excluded writers on the basis of social criteria, such as gender or ethnicity. This argument, which still has a strong position in what otherwise seems like a fading contemporary canon debate, could fundamentally be regarded as a call for the democratization of canon formation. But it also reflects the shift in the focus of the discourse on canons from processes of inclusion to those of exclusion, the debate thus becoming pre-eminently a site for identity politics.

Although the call for democratization, in the sense just outlined, can be seen as a late 20<sup>th</sup> century feature of the canon debate, it is not the first time in history that democratic motives have played an important role in the revision or reconstruction of canons. For instance, this was the case when the vernacular European literary canons were established in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, breaking the spell of Latin as a universal superior language and thereby giving rise to both new literary canons and democratizing access to them for the reading public. There were also strong features of identity politics in the establishment of these vernacular literary canons in the guise of nationalist sentiments and the conceptualization of national

traditions. It is also noteworthy that what was later depicted as the Western canon grew out of the formation of different European literary canons and hence different languages and cultural settings. The conceptualization of a Western canon is of quite recent origin, emanating from the universal aesthetic claims that Kant made in the *Critique of Judgment* in 1790 and Goethe's notion of *Weltliteratur* (world literature) in the 1820s. It was, however, the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries that saw the formation of modern canons within the arts. In these centuries older canons based on Latin or Christian dogmas were reconstructed into vernacular or profane ones, at the same time as the concept of art was homogenized and restricted to the fine arts, in accordance with the notion of *les beaux arts* (the fine arts) established by Batteux in the 1740s.

However, the establishment of modern canons followed different paths and paces within different art forms. The pre-histories of the formation of these canons were also different. Whereas it is possible to place modern canon formation in painting and the plastic arts in the Renaissance and especially Giorgio Vasari's invention of art history with the publication of the first edition of *Le vite de piú eccellenti architetti, pittori et scultori* (The lives of the most eminent architects, painters and sculptors) in 1550, the modern literary canon formation grew out of *la querelle des anciens et des modernes* (the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns) in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century (see, e.g., Didi-Huberman 1990/2005; Kramnick 1998). By comparison, the formation of a profane modern musical canon is of later origin, although the Renaissance already gave rise to thoughts about music's independence from religious matters (cf. Goehr 2007:135p). However, the formation of a modern musical canon not only presupposed that music was adopted among the fine arts in the 18<sup>th</sup> century; it was also liberated from its dependence on words, and instrumental music was accepted as a pure form of art. In spite of these differences, there is no doubt that canon formation within different arts cross-fertilized or mutually supported one another. The creative power behind what Vasari named *disegno*, "drawing" or "design," was, for example, successively extended to art forms other than painting, sculpture and architecture and was seen as a distinctive mark of a new canonized nobility of art and genius. Likewise, canon formation within different arts rested on similar, although complex and far from transparent, legitimatizing procedures.

A consequence of modern canon formation within the arts was that a new canonized nobility of art was disembedded from social relations and societal affairs. This process, which culminated with the notion of *l'art pour l'art* (art for art's sake) in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, had its origins in the Renaissance with the uplifting of painting to a true *artes liberales* (liberal art), which liberated the artists from the guilds and separated them from servile craftsmen. It was completed by the sharp distinction between the fine arts and crafts in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, at the same time as the cult of the artist as genius peaked and was legitimated philosophically as a gift of nature by Kant and as a transcendent creative capacity by the

Romantics. As shown by Goehr (2007:205pp), these Kantian and Romantic notions played a crucial role in the formation of the modern “classical” canon of music and the change of the social status of composers in the transition from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The genius and god-like creative capacity attributed to canonized artists not only disembedded them from social concerns, but from time and space. Canonization was the primary means to save the artist and his (or in rare cases: her) work from social death or oblivion, making the artist and his work immortal. Disembedding the artist and his works from society, time and space was equivalent to de-contextualizing them – or placing them in an imaginary space above social concerns and time.

Analogous to the canonization practices in the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Church, this could be seen as a sanctification of the artist and his work, which presupposed a new outlook on aesthetics and art. Such an outlook had developed gradually since the Renaissance, but came to the forefront quite rapidly in the 18<sup>th</sup> century with the introduction of aesthetics as a new philosophical discipline and with the constitution of what Kristeller (1959) has termed “the modern system of the arts.” By means of these and other changes, art was liberated from and raised above its social and historical context. Consequently, the disembedding of art from social and historical matters spilled over to the canonized artists and their works. Elevated to a realm above social concerns and worldly affairs, creativity and its product, the work of art, took on a specific aesthetic significance that was intermingled with the genius attributed to canonized artists.

These changes were also profound with respect to the status and reception of art, which could be exemplified by the emerging conceptualizations of a specific aesthetic value and experience in the transition from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Assessments of aesthetic values worked as a counter force to the tendency of the expanding market to reduce noneconomic values to economic ones. Simultaneously, aesthetic experience took on a character of epiphany previously reserved for religious experiences (cf. Taylor 1989:419pp). The changes that fostered the formation of modern canons of art were, however, complex and far from transparent. This is reflected in the vast amount of terms that were coined and concepts that altered their meanings in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, and that still remain central in the discourse on art, esthetics and culture. In this sense, the formation of the modern literary and musical canon was even dependent on the alteration of the meaning of the concept of literature and music by which the former was confined to poetry and prose and the latter primarily to symphonic music (cf. Guillory 1993; Kramnick 1998; Goehr 2007, 2008).

The formation of modern canons within the arts in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries was based on the emergence of aesthetics and a radical change in aesthetic attitude, but the realization and implementation were primarily dependent on processes of institutionalization. Such processes were anchored in the increasing public responsibility for art, literature, education and cultural matters, with the open-

ing of public schools, museums, libraries, theaters, concert halls and other cultural institutions. This embryonic state cultural policy – compared to what was to evolve in Europe in the 20<sup>th</sup> century – confirmed the otherwise more or less inscrutable processes of canon selection. To be adopted by or integrated in a cultural institution was one of the most evident signs of the canonization of artists and their works. Nevertheless, verdicts on canon selection were not revealed by these institutions, at least not explicitly, but rather remained in a state of inscrutability or ambiguity.

### **Canon Formation as Culturalization**

It is primarily from an institutional angle that modern canon formation within the arts emerges as a process of culturalization. Historically, modern canon formation was contemporaneous and closely synchronized with the discernment of culture as a specific sphere of action, field of practice and societal sector. Obviously, what retrospectively can be termed “cultural institutions,” such as art academies, schools or salons, existed well before the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but it was not until this century that “culture” works as a kind of umbrella term that brings them together. To regard “culture” as a general term for the cultivation of humans or a product of their doings was not common until the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

This redefined conceptualization of culture was foremost marked by the constitution of the German *Bildung*-tradition in a way that fitted well with contemporary canon formation within the arts. In mid-19<sup>th</sup> century this was pointed out by Arnold (1867/2006:5) in his often cited description of culture as “a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world.” The fact that Arnold made no effort to determine what “the best” was in this respect provides a clue to his reliance on the on-going canon formation to do that work of discrimination for him. His emphasis on the “total perfection” of the human faculties by “the best which has been thought and said” articulates a prominent feature in the overall culturalization of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries: the claim that culture possessed the power to develop and ennoble the human faculties towards perfection by the assimilation of great works of art or scholarship (cf. Thompson 1990:122pp). Cultivation and canonization were closely intertwined in this process of culturalization and gave it a basic hierarchical and stratified character, both culturally and socially.

This was, however, counteracted by other traits in the culturalization of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, for example, the growing notion of the differentiation of culture into specific cultures, both in time and space. Articulated foremost by German thinkers, and particularly Herder, each single culture in the plurality of cultures was given a monad-like character, although without contradicting notions of cultivation or refinement. The late 18<sup>th</sup> century historicization of culture in Ger-

many by the introduction of the concept *Kulturgeschichte* (history of culture) also indicates that the internal differentiation of the concept of culture was understood in terms of chronology.

As part of a complicated and far from unambiguous process of culturalization, the internal differentiation of culture in time and space both worked as a prerequisite for and a problem in the formation of canons within the arts in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Closely connected to the extension of the power of the European nation-state, the internal differentiation of culture in space supported nationalist canon formations, whereas the corresponding differentiation in time was primarily seen as a problem to overcome: historical distance. The latter is an often overlooked force behind the claims for universal and eternal validity of the emerging modern canon formation of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Nationalist canons were retroactively constructed as traditions, crossing historical gaps and in some cases redrawing historical national, social or cultural borders, while at the same time being oriented towards a common ideal or classical past, the antiquity of Greece and Rome. It was mainly the overcoming of the historical distance between this ancient past and the constitution of national European cultures that paved the way for the later conception of a Western canon. The canonical focus on works of art, including written texts and musical compositions, fostered a de-contextualization of them which dispelled their historical discontinuity and cultural heterogeneity. As shown by Kramnick (1998), the translation of classical antiquity to nationalist vernacular canons even included the invention of nationalist antiquities of a more recent past, frequently built on reevaluations of works of art previously honored or belittled.

To overcome the historical distance between the past and the present was, however, not the only problematic aspect of time in the formation of nationalist vernacular canons in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. When the progressive spirit of the Enlightenment and its trust in human development influenced thoughts on cultivation and cultural refinement, more attention was paid to the future prospects of canons and the importance of keeping them open to the work of contemporary and coming artists. Although it seems like questions of the future and the renewal of canons were seldom addressed directly, they were expressed in concerns about the prospects of canonical standards of taste by worried writers like Arnold (1867/2006:86), who, obviously not without hesitation, relied on the hope “of extinguishing the taste of the bathos implanted by nature itself in the soul of man.” A similar veiled discourse on canons was present in Hegelian notions of art’s impending or future death. However, it was not until the 20<sup>th</sup> century advent of modernism and subsequently postmodernism, that the future and renewal of the established modern canons of art became a more obvious and urgent problem.

It is of crucial importance for any canon to be open to the future, that is, to make room for new entries and thereby extend the row of canonized works or persons. This openness is put most severely to the test in times of radical changes in aesthetics and the arts, as was the case when modernism and more recently



postmodernism revolutionized the art world in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Neither the works of modernism nor postmodernism accommodated themselves to the prevalent understanding of art and consequently brought with them comprehensive notions of discontinuity. To survive, canons need to repair or overcome such discontinuities or, in other words, to negotiate between the past and the present and in some way reconcile them. The renewal or survival of a canon in such a situation becomes a problem of coordinating the past with the present. However, it seems like normal canon procedure to retroactively unify or homogenize different or even disparate cultural phenomena into what emerges as a coherent tradition.

Retrospectively, the modern canons of art appear to have stood up to the test of both modernism and postmodernism. The work of representatives of both these art movements have been incorporated into what still seems like an unbroken canon of art, even though the canon discourse and debate have shifted focus quite radically. Although the status of canons within the arts has declined, they are still possible to discern. Hence, the 20<sup>th</sup> century renewal of modern canon formation that grew out of complex processes of culturalization in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries at least seems a partial success. Nevertheless, today the canons of fine art circulate in quite different social, economic and cultural settings than two or three hundred years ago and are, likewise, surrounded by other kinds of culturalization processes.

## **Multidimensional Culturalization**

Culturalization was neither a completely autonomous process nor the only one that affected the modern canon formation of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. If one, in a consciously anachronistic way, speaks of culturalization as a “cultural turn,” in these centuries, it becomes clear that the concept basically refers to a complex and elusive process whereby notions of culture changed the agenda of thinking, practices and social affairs in a general sense. In this respect, the culturalization that stood out in the 18<sup>th</sup> century can also be described as a cultural imaginary, comparable to the social imaginaries with traits of utopian schemes that Taylor (2004) argues paved the way for modernity and enabled people to imagine their doings, themselves and social life in new and meaningful ways. As a cultural imaginary it was, of course, related to and overlapped other important long-term processes of modernity, for instance, secularization and democratization. This is revealed by the close kinship between the concepts of civilization and culture in the transition from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the corresponding meanings of becoming “civilized” and “cultivated.” Likewise, the contrast between these concepts, pursued especially in the German-speaking parts of Europe, played a crucial role for the succeeding meanings attributed to culture in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and particularly for the development of descriptive anthropological conceptions of culture.

Even though the culturalization of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries has many facets, its relationship to long-term processes of secularization and democratization seem particularly crucial from the angle of canon formation. Culturalization can be conceived as part of a long-term process of secularization, in the sense that notions of culture and art were dependent upon the dissolution or cessation of religious society, beliefs and practices. In many respects, culture and art took over when religion withdrew. This substitution of culture and art for religion was made into an explicit and enduring concern in the discourse on culture, especially by thinkers who, like Arnold (1867/2006) and Eliot (1948/1962), concerned themselves with the safe-guarding of canonical standards of taste.

Since the 18<sup>th</sup> century culturalization has had an overall hierarchical and stratified character, its relationship to processes of democratization was and has remained controversial and tense. By contributing to the stratification of society as well as to practices and artifacts, culturalization stood in an enduring problematic dialectic relationship to democracy and particularly strivings for increased equality. As a dominant trait of the culturalization of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the differentiation between “cultivated” and “uncultivated” persons and social strata not only worked as an obstacle to overcome class antagonism, but also as a powerful tool for the imagination of the self, others and society. Primarily based on rising conceptions of civility and a new kind of humanist training, this facet of culturalization broke the order of the feudal nobility and the clergy and paved the way for a new bourgeois cultural elite that stressed the importance of cultural distinctions. Nevertheless, in an age of new opportunities for upward social mobility and economic upheaval, combined with class and political conflicts, culture was also rhetorically designated as a democratic and egalitarian force, not least by Arnold (1867/2006:53) who described “men of culture” as “the true apostles of equality” and proclaimed that a thorough cultivation of people would transcend political conflicts and class antagonism.

However, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century the consensus to pursue the democratic and egalitarian aims of culturalization as a downward movement, from top to bottom, seems to have been almost total among taste reformers and saviors of the canons within the arts (cf. Bjurström 2008). This downward movement was primarily legitimated by the threat of cultural leveling and its supposed effect on people. The threat remained a central part of the culturalization process till the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the moral critique of mass culture was countered by more affirmative conceptions of popular culture, and the movement of postmodernism transgressed the established borders between high and low culture. These changes also affected and marked a shift in the canon debate. Based on culturalization processes that took off in other directions than previously, canons of fine art were now questioned as unwarranted saviors of the evaporating border between high and low culture. In the mid-1960s, Sontag (1965/2001:302) declared what was at stake when she described “the new sensibility,” which according to



her marked the “abandonment of the Matthew Arnold idea of culture” and would make the distinction between high and low culture “less and less meaningful.” A few years later, similar notions led to more explicit calls for the democratization of culture, most prominently by Gans (1974/1999:175) who spoke for cultural pluralism and the need for a general acceptance of “the specific standards of every taste public.” To combat cultural inequality and the placement of high culture above politics, Gans (1974/1999:131) also proposed a politicization of culture that would “make the political values of high culture (and popular culture) visible, force discussions of these values, and lead to criticism of culture as conservative or radical.”

From the viewpoint outlined here, Gans’ call for the politicization, democratization and equalization of culture in the mid-1970s could be read as an indication of more widespread tendencies to reembed high culture, including the fine arts and their canons, in political, social and historical contexts. Hence, there was also an effort to turn to the long-term culturalization processes emanating from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, by relating them to other processes crucial for the understanding and development of modernity.

While the culturalization tied to the emerging modernity of the 18<sup>th</sup> century was mainly a process of differentiation, the late 20<sup>th</sup> century reactions to it were characterized by dedifferentiation, particularly in the shape of postmodernism and the so-called creative industry or experience economy. Slightly more than twenty years ago, Lash (1990:11pp) conceptualized this dedifferentiation process by pointing at the blurring of the distinction between the cultural and the social in a broad sense, in combination with the loss of autonomy for cultural spheres, but he attributed these changes primarily to postmodernism. In doing so, Lash (1990:39pp) also pointed to the dedifferentiation of cultural economy, thereby contributing to the discourse on the cultural turn of economy in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century that is still continuing, in which the concept of culturalization is explicitly used, but in a quite restricted sense (see, e.g., Ray & Sayer 1999; Gay & Pryke 2002; Power & Scott 2004; Sum & Jessop 2005). As indicated by conceptions of the mutual economization of culture and culturalization of economy, this cultural turn is primarily conceived as a dedifferentiation of culture and economy, not as a more general or all-embracing shift to culture. It is, however, in accordance with most of the cultural turns proclaimed since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century in the sense that they are understood as a simultaneous shift to culture and loss of its autonomy. Culture is, from this point of view, infiltrated by numerous processes of late modernity, such as globalization, mediatization and digitalization, which affect and reorder its external as well as its internal borders. Evidently, culture could already be seen from the start as a crucial part of or intersected by such late modern processes. For example, mediatization is a process whereby culture becomes increasingly mediated and dependent upon communication media, and globalization implies the transformation of local, regional or national cultural settings. Hence, re-

lating culturalization to other processes of modernity, like democratization, secularization, mediatization or globalization, can be seen as a way to grasp its elusive movements. Likewise, the proposed long-term shift in the appearance of culturalization itself, in the transition from an early modern phase of differentiation to a late modern phase of dedifferentiation, should be regarded as a tentative approach to grasp its more general appearance.

Yet, it seems deceptive to solely regard late modern culturalization as a process of dedifferentiation. This is indicated not least by the contemporary status of and discourse on canons. Certainly, notions of the contemporary irrelevance of the canons within the fine arts or claims for opening them to putatively lower forms of art support general views of the dedifferentiation of high and low culture, but they could hardly be attributed to the canons themselves. Canons that are open to mixing or that actually mix high and low standards are still rare. Nevertheless, political, social, economic and technological changes contribute to generate contemporary constructions of so-called alternative canons or counter-canons.

In light of the long-term formation of the canons of fine art and their adjustment to more or less revolutionary changes in the arts, they have been exposed to and affected by complex and changing processes of culturalization. The formation of the modern canons of fine arts dates back to the time when culture acquired its original autonomy by the completion of the transformation of the Latin derivative *cultura* from referring to the cultivation of crops to the cultivation of the mind and the constitution of culture as a cognitive category, action sphere and institutionalized entity. In this respect, modern canon formation rests on and seems to stand and fall with some of the basic constituents of a multidimensional culturalization, which among other things comprised the differentiation of culture from nature and the emergence of culture as a cognitive explanatory category for understanding people's ways of thinking, their actions and behavior and hence as a tool for self-reflection. The culturalization that had its origins in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and can be regarded as a constituent of modernity was the result of the mutual interaction of what emerged as ontological, anthropological, institutional, aesthetic and hermeneutic dimensions of culture (cf. Fornäs et al. 2007). However, it was mainly the institutional, aesthetic and hermeneutic dimension of this process that had bearing on the parallel formation of canons within the fine arts.

Canon formation was a crucial prerequisite for the constitution of cultural institutions, such as public schools and museums. Furthermore, as pointed out by Guillory (1993:31) every construction of a syllabus, display of works of art or similar selective pursuits of cultural institutions “*institute* once again the process of canon formation.” Correspondingly, the constitution of a specific aesthetic attitude in combination with the upheaval of art above social or worldly concerns was a prerequisite for making canon formation within the fine arts of particular significance. Moreover, this canon formation was dependent on changing cognitive outlooks and hermeneutic procedures in the reception and interpretation of art.

Together, these changes not only served to elevate works of art above worldly affairs and to constitute the autonomy of art, but they also made processes of canon formation more or less inscrutable, having the appearance of being constructed by an invisible hand.

## **The Social Reembedding of Canons**

From the start, modern canon formations of the fine arts arose as imaginary entities or phenomena. This imaginary character of canons was radically reinforced when they were secularized by the fine arts and emancipated from the church and religious practices. While the Christian canon of scripture, which had already evolved in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century is in many respects comparable to a modern literary canon, it comprised a complete and uncontested list of biblical texts; the modern canons of fine art, on the other hand, had – and still have – the appearance of imaginary entities or totalities. As such, they could be contested each time they were listed with claims of completeness or consensual selection. In the Roman Catholic Church, however, verdicts of canonization were embedded in a legal system, the so-called canon law, and were officially proclaimed. The Christian canon of sacred scripture was fundamentally closed, in contrast to the canons of fine art, which were – and still are – open to new entries as well as expulsions.

This also marked a turning point in the meaning of the word “canon.” The word has had multiple meanings since antiquity, basically referring to “pipe,” but also “rule,” “list,” “measuring rod” and “model.” Christian canonicity was deeply rooted in the meanings of “rule” and “list,” while the secular and aesthetic use of the word, which originated in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, primarily referred to “measuring rod,” “model” or “exemplary” (cf. Thomsen 2010, Olsson 2011).

Just as no one can grasp or have access to the canons of fine art in their entirety, recognizing or knowing them is always imbued by uncertainty or doubt and in the end left to personal or subjective judgments. In this respect, a listing of canonical works, in, for instance, a syllabus, can only be seen as a more or less adequate representation of a canon or an indicator of its imaginary totality (cf. Guillory 1993; Goehr 2007). Correspondingly, the distinction between overthrowing the evaluative principles of a canon and revising it is far from unambiguous. In addition, the imaginary character of a canon could underpin uncertainty on its status or even sheer existence.

Uncertainties on the status of the canons of fine art seem common today, as indicated by calls for the saving, restoration or reestablishment of the Western canon or national canons. Simultaneously, the canon debate seems less urgent and intense than at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which could be read as a sign of the lessening importance of canons in general and the canons of fine art in particular. Likewise, the need to implement the latter seems of less general importance than before, particularly in the agendas set by national European cultural policies from

the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Up to at least the 1970s most of these agendas were built on efforts to democratize the access to the canons of fine art by giving as many people as possible the opportunity to acquaint themselves with high culture and supply them with the necessary means to appreciate it. This was mainly a matter of democratizing the canons of fine art from top to bottom, giving people the opportunity to reach up to and appreciate high culture without lowering its standards or popularizing it. These agendas were built on and followed the old order of cultivation and especially the German *Bildung*-tradition, although in most cases with more pronounced democratic aims and the support of popular education or cultivation movements, that since the 19<sup>th</sup> century have pursued the conquest of high culture from below by cultivating people to high cultural standards.

The agenda of cultivating people to high culture had a dual or ambiguous democratic character. Anchored in state policies as well as popular movements, cultivation could be seen as a step towards democracy both from above and below. This strengthened the justification of cultivation enterprises, but did not tackle the fact that the popularization and diffusion of high culture threatened to turn it into *gesunkenes Kulturgut*. In accordance with the so-called trickle-down theory, cultivation became something of a Sisyphean task that counteracted social and cultural equalization, since the upper social classes tended to desert the parts of high culture that became appreciated by the masses and thereby endlessly redefined high cultural standards, making them unattainable to lower classes.

Nevertheless, the processes by which culture trickled down did not seem to significantly affect or alter the continuing formation of fine art canons in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Yet, the closer one gets to the present, the less is left of the prior efforts to cultivate people to the standards of high culture. The effort to democratize the canons of fine art has undergone a fundamental change: cultivation has, in brief, been overtaken by representation as the highway to the democratization of culture. Implementation in terms of cultivation or self-cultivation is no longer the primary concern of efforts to democratize canons, but rather identity politics in terms of who has constructed the canons and who is represented by them. It is telling that the question, “Whose canon is it?”, tends to appear as primary in any contemporary discourse on the status of canons.

The shift from cultivation to identity politics has also brought with it supplementary changes in the discourse on canons. This is indicated by the displacement of focus within the canon discourse itself, from the works of art to the artists or, in other words, from works to persons. The distinction between works and persons has always been blurred in canonization processes, but the emphasis has successively been transferred from work to person with the intrusion of identity politics at least in the sense that the representation of social identities seems to have become more important than what works of art represent. Correspondingly, there seems to be a displacement of democratic concern, from broadening the access to a specific canon to altering its social and cultural representation.

The shift to a kind of democratic representational canon politics has also contributed to the plurality of canon formations, regardless of the high-low cultural divide. This has occurred primarily in an intermediated way through the justification of the formation of genre specific canons within popular culture. This is in contrast to the construction of most so-called alternative canons and affirms the spontaneous character and complexity of canon formations. When consciously constructed, a canon does not seem to work, whether the intention to do so could be seen as democratic or undemocratic or coming from above or below. Without the workings of a more or less invisible canonical infrastructure, such a canon construction becomes too visible and too much a completed list that is difficult to keep alive and open to new entries. Hence, the spontaneity and complexity that canon formations seem to require may work as a serious obstacle to the consciously intended construction of a democratic representational canon based on identity politics.

The diversity of genre specific canon formations of popular culture – or what might be labeled minor canons, in comparison to the major canons of fine art – seems more like the outcome of dedifferentiating processes of contemporary culturalization than recent shifts in the canon discourse. Such minor canon formations have played a crucial role in the rising acceptance and status of popular culture in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Besides, canon formation from below, in terms of the high-low distinction, seems to contradict some features that have paved the way for undermining the canons of fine art, such as the questioning of the romantic cult of the artist as genius. While the cult of the artist as genius thrives with the formation of popular canons, it is declining and becoming the object of deconstruction in the sphere of high culture and the canons of fine art. The latter can be comprehended as part of Benjamin's famous diagnosis of the loss of art's aura, in the sense that the demise of the genius of the creator of fine art reduces art's potential or factual cult value. But as Benjamin (1936/1999:219) writes, "cult value does not give way without resistance" and tends, in ways he did not anticipate, to become retrenched and flourish in settings of popular culture. This has developed into a paradoxical contemporary situation, where the aura of fine art is still declining, while the aura of popular culture is rising. However, to regard this as a strict transmission of aura from high to popular culture does not seem right, since the cult value of the former and the latter rests on different premises, attitudes, infrastructures and, not least, forms of reception. Rather, as revealed by, for instance, a comparison of the contemporary celebrity cult and the cult of the artist as genius deriving from the Romantics, the auratic features of popular and high culture descend from different, though in some cases overlapping or collateral sources. Resting mainly on the attention of the media or what Franck (1998) has characterized as a more comprehensive economy of attention, the contemporary celebrity cult is quite immune to the demise of the aura of genius that contributes to the disenchantment with fine art and its canon.

However, the reembedding of fine art canons in social, cultural and historical contexts seems to be the main driving force behind their disenchantment and loss of aura. Historically, this reembedding not only breaks with the social disembedding of the modern canons of fine art that became evident in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, but challenges or rejects their claim of universality and eternal validity. A canonized art work's ability to stand the test of time or gain global reverence does not completely refute such challenges, since it is always doubtful whether the work's universal character is maintained by its aesthetic qualities or some other kind of power. Likewise, it is hard to deny that all generalizations or claims to universality in terms of aesthetics or art in a fundamental way are bound to historical times and social contexts.

Nevertheless, refutations of universal claims that rest on identity politics and the reembedding of canons in terms of social identities have an equivocal character. The main reason for this is that social identities are social and historical constructions. Hence, they are not fixed or stable and in many ways are incommensurable over time. Just as canons make up imaginary cultural continuities, the extension of social identities over a century or several centuries has an imaginary character. Canons are built on intertextual dialogue in a broad sense, and some identities are more fixed or stable over time than others, but as historical or rather trans-historical entities, they are always the products of retroactively unifying or homogenizing processes. In this respect, one could even say that the critique of the Western canon of fine arts based on identity politics does itself a disservice, since it tends to disguise the complexity of social identities, social and cultural settings, aesthetic idioms and languages lumped together under the umbrella term "Western." The term "Western" is, both literally and metaphorically, in need of a translation of historical facts to the present to work as a more or less specious entity of canon or social identity. To comprehend an unbroken Western literary canon, originating from Greece antiquity of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, as Bloom (1994) does, presupposes the translation and incorporation of classic texts into different vernacular contexts. It was not possible to conceive the term as representing a more or less homogeneous culture, civilization or political unit until the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the rise of the United States as a political super power and the emergence of a post-colonial situation. Of course, such an understanding of Western civilization is reasonable in terms of a global political and economic order, but it seems like a misconceived conception of a literary canon, not least in the sense that it is problematic to regard canonized writers like Shakespeare, Joyce or Beckett as defenders of that civilization or world order.

### **Democratizing or Authoritatively Restoring?**

Whether one defends or criticizes the Western canon, it seems a misconception to relate it to a coherent social identity or a unity of works of art. There is no direct



or uncomplicated way in which canons represent social identities, although the construction of so-called alternative canons, mostly based on gender, the minority status of ethnic subcultures or multiculturalism, might give the contrary impression. Naturally, the latter canons could justifiably raise the self-esteem and cultural consciousness of subordinated social categories or groups, but they mainly seem to work as politically motivated alternatives to more established or recognized canons. Even though institutionalized in some cases as part of an agenda of gender equality or multiculturalism and lacking the real means of canon formation, they tend to be stuck in the position of a subordinated canon or are not being recognized as “real” canons. Moreover, by confining themselves to a specific social identity, they close themselves to trans-cultural influences, in a way that contradicts the transgressive, syncretic or hybrid character of much of contemporary culture and art. In this respect they come close to the contrary pole of the contemporary politicization of canons, represented by nationalist and populist political parties and movements.

The idea that canons represent social categories or groups, either dominant or dominated, has been a strong impetus behind the contemporary politicization of canons. The question, “Whose canon is it?”, has become the common ground for the political use and critique of canon formations as well as efforts to change, destroy, restore or save them. Hence, this question is at the heart of strivings to democratize as well as to restore or save the authority of canons. Moreover, as pointed out by Guillory (1993:28), behind this lurks a conspiracy theory on canons, whereby they are seen as products of the decisions of a dominant social group aimed to exclude representatives of other groups.

Nothing perhaps indicates more strongly the complexity of canon formations than the fact that there is no general or single criterion that could explain the attainment or lack of canonical status. This is not to say that social identity has got nothing to do with the formation of a canon, but that it is not the only and in most cases not even the prime factor behind an artist’s success or failure to attain canonical status. Neither does this mean that canon formation is a perfectly democratic, fair or equal enterprise. Quite the contrary, such formation does not constitute an exception from social affairs in general and consequently must be considered to reproduce power relations, inequality and other features of social life (cf. Guillory 1993). Canons are and have always been socially embedded, which makes the late 20<sup>th</sup> century social reembedding of them a disenchanting democratic enterprise. However, emanating from notions of a crisis in the contemporary canon formation or even a lack of a recognizable canon per se, contrary political measures have also been taken to counter this reembedding by restoring the authority of canons, foremost to support nationalist agendas.

The politically motivated canon restoration is different from the one pursued by those, who like Bloom (1994:33pp), try to save the high cultural canons of fine art and resist any attempt to politicize and reembed them socially, culturally or

historically. As shown by Lykkeberg (2009), the confluence of arguments for canon restoration and charges of cultural elitism justified the construction of the official Danish canon, a dubious populist political enterprise, serving the purpose of securing and strengthening Danish national identity. But even if one disregards its populist character, the status of the Danish cultural canon seems uncertain, especially in terms of acceptance, which has been rather reluctant, to say the least. The enumeration of ninety-six cultural works and artifacts that were selected by expert committees and presented as the Danish cultural canon in 2006 still appears as a list, not as a canon in a proper sense.

The main reason behind the reluctance to accept the Danish canon as a canon is probably not the controversial selection of works and artifacts it is based on, but rather that its construction breaks with the explicit and implicit rules of canon formation. Contrary to what seems to comprise proper canon formation, the explicit and politically motivated construction of a canon becomes, in brief, too visible, too transparent and too much of a claim for or critique of power. Without the support of the means of proper canon formation, it is too obvious who it is who has constructed the canon, and hence provides an answer to the question, "Whose canon is it?". Thus, efforts to democratize, save or restore a canon tend to strengthen notions of canonization as a battle field of identity politics, making it more controversial.

It remains to be seen if the turn to identity politics will substantially alter the processes of canon formation or merely appear as a historically specific moment in their development. Nevertheless, the advancing canon formation within different genres of popular culture, which could hardly be attributed to specific social categories or groups, whether singled out as scholars, critics or fans, gives evidence to the spontaneous character of canonization and its more or less inevitable emergence and progression. Of course, the future prospects for this canonization of popular culture is also dependent on its institutionalization, including its implementation in schools, museums, award arrangements or criticism, but it nevertheless provides important clues to the workings of canon formation in general. This canonization is characterized by the same controversial problems of canon inclusion and exclusion that have dominated the debate on the high cultural canons of fine art since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Exclusions from popular culture canons are no more than those of the canons of fine art based on consciously or actively pursued decisions, but rather the result of the confined and unequal access to cultural works and the means of cultural production and consumption (cf. Guillory 1993). Representatives of subordinated social categories or groups are filtered out before they become subjects of canonization. However, the canonization of popular culture has a more democratic character than in the fine arts, since it is less confined by the possession and accumulation of cultural capital.

On the other hand, popular culture canons are still subordinated to the canons of the fine arts, not least because they lack the institutional support and breadth of

the latter. Notwithstanding, it cannot be ruled out that the emergence of canons of popular culture marks the beginning of the end of the fine arts canonical hegemony, analogous to the way the rise of vernacular canons in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century dethroned and altered the status of the religiously based Latin canon. One thing that speaks in favor of such a development is the fact that the contemporary social and historical reembedding of canons does not seem as threatening to the canons of popular culture as to those of the fine arts, since the former have not gone through a similar phase of disembedding. The dedifferentiation of contemporary processes of culturalization seems to point in the same direction and even speaks in favor of the mixing or joining of high and popular cultural canons. At any rate, a mixture is not unlikely if one considers that the canons of fine art once were contenders for canonical status and gained their positions through a long and complicated historical process. Moreover, this history reminds one of the fact that the canons of fine arts have not been completely closed to the incorporation of popular genres, as evidenced by the canonization of the novel in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Even though the canon debate and critique does not seem as intense at present as in the 1990s, it is unlikely that processes of canonization are becoming less significant or will evaporate in the future. Such a scenario might seem credible from a conservative high cultural point of view, but is contradicted by the emerging visibility of the canonization of popular culture genres. This emerging visibility will presumably change rather than destroy canonization, maybe making it less significant, but it will probably also alter, although not abolish, the tension between culturalization and democratization. Through its dependence on the dedifferentiation processes of contemporary culturalization, the canonization of popular culture has the potential to break with the identity politics that fosters notions of “our” culture in the present thinking on canons and push it in a more transgressive, syncretic or hybrid direction.

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