

Nordau's *Degeneration* and Tolstoy's *What Is Art?* Still Live

Gene H. Bell-Villada

Louis Torres and Michelle Marder Kamhi (2000) have put together what is in many respects a substantial work of scholarship. Though their book is a polemic (one might dub it "advocacy scholarship"), their arguments are backed by ample reflection and reading, even on subjects they frankly dislike. Their close analyses of statements by abstract artists, and their account of the critical reception of abstraction itself, while inevitably partial, are also useful and informative. Their considerations as to whether photography, architecture, and crafts belong to the category of "art" can only be described as provocative and stimulating, despite the absolutism of their stance (a position that, it should be said in all fairness, is shared by many individuals across the ideological and aesthetical spectrum). Their 24-page "Bibliography" casts a wide net, and they even list my own volume, *Art for Art's Sake and Literary Life* (1996), a citation for which I, as any other vain scribbler, am naturally grateful.

As the authors themselves note, Rand's reflections on aesthetics were not extensive; nor were they consistently sophisticated or even well-informed. Hence for Torres and Kamhi to build an argument on so meager an output, while a pioneering effort, is in itself problematical. Still, their enterprise is not unprecedented. Marxist aesthetics, to take an analogous instance, is an entire intellectual sub-field, despite the fact that Marx and Engels's original musings on art and literature were of a scattered and casual sort. The Marxist tradition, of course, is lengthier in life span. There have been some major Marxist critics, and even such political figures as Trotsky and Bukharin had their own fascinating insights into art in their speeches

and writings. It remains to be seen whether a libertarian aesthetics can demonstrate a corresponding potential for development and growth.

When I first looked into *What Art Is*, I expected it to consist in part of some examination of the kinds of art and artists deemed worthy by its authors. Once their exposition of Rand's aesthetic is done on page 130, however, the book becomes an almost relentless broadside against the entire Modernist canon, along with harsh attacks on more recent trends in museology and feminism. The feeling by page 300 is of a philosophical Johnny-One-Note. Given this disproportion in contents, their book might instead have been entitled *What Art Is NOT (according to Rand)*. Even George Lukács, for all his Stalinist rejection of the avant-garde, had his counter-preferences in nineteenth-century European realism and Thomas Mann, and he stated these judgments clearly.

What I find particularly troubling in Torres and Kamhi's obsessive dismissal of virtually all now-canonical twentieth-century artworks, moreover, is the absence of any larger theory of historical causality, any overarching attempt to explain the reasons why Mondrian, Schoenberg, and Joyce came up with the kind of work they did. Their only source—to which they return repeatedly—is a book by clinical psychologist Louis Sass, in which modern art is seen as demonstrating the classic symptoms of schizophrenia. I have not read Sass's volume, and the good doctor may or may not be right, but their constant recourse to him as sole explanation strikes me as a rather facile monocausalism. Even if Sass's diagnosis of Kandinsky and Beckett's mental health is in some way valid, the two Randians never feel compelled to account for the countless "schizoid" artists who have regularly emerged and feverishly produced over the last one hundred years. Lukács and the Soviets had their own misguided hypothesis for explaining away experimental art: to wit, the Western world was "decadent" and Modernism reflected that decadence. The more professorial Renato Poggioli in his *The Concept of the Avant-Garde* examines the phenomenon within the wider context of bourgeois-democratic society and its norms, and its familiar dynamic of "alienation." And in the two chapters that I devote to Modernism in

my *Art for Art's Sake and Literary Life*, I trace its emergence to the constant innovations in product technique under industrial capitalism, the pressures to be up-to-date, and the isolation of certain kinds of artists from the needs of the market. Whatever the merit of those previous attempts, I would have liked to see something analogous in *What Art Is*. However, their only argument (with a touch of moralism) is that these artists are somehow sick.

The gap in their analysis becomes especially evident in their onslaught against abstract art and artists. Now, let me say that I happen to like a great deal of abstract art. (There are plenty of mediocrities and frauds in the field, no doubt, but that is true of every movement in history.) I also will grant that, in this instance, much of it comes down to a matter of taste: either you like the stuff or you don't. Some of my best friends hate abstract art, just as plenty of educated folks I know simply can't stand Virgil, French neo-classical paintings, opera, classical music in any form, cool jazz, literary satires, Leo Tolstoy (see Ayn Rand on this score), or Brahms. Most of us have a "taste system" that we live by. In some ultimate sense, all tastes are acquired and also have a purely personal dimension, though to some degree they can be explained by such factors as temperament, upbringing, historical moment, and class.

But the question of *why* some styles of art become dominant is an issue having more to do with politics, economics, and history than with subjective preferences and personal disorders. Which brings me back to the abstractionists. It is certainly true that, as the authors point out, influential critics such as Meyer Schapiro and Clement Greenberg gave moral encouragement and support to the Abstract Expressionists starting in the 1940s. Critics, though, seldom command the power to bring about wholesale shifts in public taste; other, larger forces help set the stage. Surely Torres and Kamhi must be aware of the crucial role played by the New York corporate elite in weaning American artists away from 1930s Socialist Realism and leading them toward pure abstraction. Surely they must have heard tell at some point that the triumph of abstractionism in America had not a little to do with high-level anti-Marxist politics. Surely they must have some passing familiarity with Serge Guilbaut's *How New*

York Stole the Idea of Modern Art (1983), a seminal study that traces the above process in close detail. In this regard, see also Frances Saunders's recent history, *The Cultural Cold War* (2000), in which this strange episode is further fleshed out, and the invisible hand of the CIA is shown to have been at work in many of the artistic battles of the forties and fifties. If Pollock, Rothko, Ad Reinhardt and the rest were mere schizoids, well, the mighty captains of industry and finance in Manhattan seem to have had no objection to subsidizing those painters' colorful pathologies.

In one of the few occasions on which Torres and Kamhi suggest an alternative, they cite Alec Sologob—a museum guard at the MOMA in New York—who along with his co-workers deems Barnett Newman's stripes and Rothko's panels comically absurd, and who reportedly finds true solace in Monet's water lilies and Cézanne's woods. Ah, the irony. During their time, as we all know, the Impressionists and their immediate successors endured scorn and vilification in the press. Their canvases were consistently rejected at the yearly Salons, were sometimes spat upon at special exhibitions and relegated to a few bourgeois dustbins. The very name "Impressionism" started out as a term of abuse. Theirs is among the prime instances of monstrous public incomprehension followed by universal acclaim (mostly posthumously, alas).

History is repeating itself, for in this respect *What Art Is* demonstrates a telling kinship with two well-known polemics from a century ago: *Degeneration* (1895) by Max Nordau, and *What Is Art?* by Tolstoy (1899). Nordau (1849–1923), a German-Jewish physician who wrote novels and achieved considerable fame in his lifetime, also caused a brief sensation with the publication of *Entartung*, a 550-page attack on the Modernist ethos and its practitioners. Making expert use of his training as a doctor, Nordau looks extensively at his creative subjects in the light of the medical literature of his era, and regularly diagnoses them and their works as manifesting the neurological symptoms of "degeneration." (Sound familiar?) Among the figures to whom he subjects his erudite assault are Ibsen, Nietzsche, Wagner, Oscar Wilde, Tolstoy, and the French Symbolists. The concept of *entartente Kunst*, of course, survived long enough to serve as the topic of a

certain notorious Nazi art exhibit by that same name.

Tolstoy in *What Is Art?* also singles out those same Symbolists (whose lyrics he dismisses as unintelligible) and Wagner, plus expending plenty of nasty words against the Impressionists (need I say more?) and Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. According to Tolstoy, the touchstone for judging art is: can Russian peasants understand or gain from it? If not, then its value is nil. Though Torres and Kamhi never state their premise outright, throughout their book there is an implied notion that art should be easily accessible to everyone. Certainly this is a worthy ideal to strive for, but do the authors really believe that most Americans will automatically take to Shakespeare, Bach, and Monet without previous training? They reject every avant-garde musical movement of the twentieth century as unlistenable. How many young listeners do they see flocking to hear Bach or Beethoven these days? (Classical record sales in the U.S. stand at four per cent, and falling.) Moreover, they dwell unstintingly on some of the more marginal, absurd, or problematical aspects of the musical avant-garde, yet failing to note that some of its products—e.g., certain works by Stravinsky and Bartok—have entered the standard concert repertoire, while many avant-garde harmonies and rhythms have been fully absorbed by film soundtracks and TV advertising. (In this regard, see Bell-Villada 1996, 198–201.)

Unfortunately, the weakest portion of *What Art Is* turns out to be the last and potentially most promising part, "Teaching the Arts to Children" (297–315). According to their prescription, teachers in the classroom should simply defer all "tangential issues, whether historic, biographical, technical, or esthetic," and have students ask, "*Do I like it? How much? And Why or why not?*" (313; emphases in the original). This smacks of the tiredest sort of fin-de-siècle aestheticism once proposed by Walter Pater in *The Renaissance*, wherein the Oxford don states that the basic issue is, "What is this song or picture to *me*? . . . Does it give me pleasure? and if so, what degree of pleasure?" Pater accordingly rules out as "unprofitable" any attempt to trace the relationship of beauty to "truth or experience" ([1873] 1959, xii–xiii).

Torres and Kamhi's own counter-approach builds on something as flimsy as a supposed "experiment" that Rand had "conducted on

occasion with guests," in which she would have them listen to recorded music and then more or less free-associate in response (477). For alleged "Objectivists," this is a surprisingly *subjectivist* way of conveying the experience of high art to young minds, and totally contradicts the logic of the premises they so expertly and painstakingly set forth in their first hundred pages. There are also some egregious errors in this section; for example, they pooh-poo as "misguided" an art educators' guide for its having asserted that Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony is "like a long walk through woods and fields in the country. If you listen closely, you can hear birds calling, a storm coming up, and many other things" (309). In fact, the supposedly silly quotation is an accurate account of Beethoven's own intentions in writing this work, and also a precise description of its movements—the first, the second (which ends with two bird songs), and the fourth (which depicts a rain storm). Torres and Kamhi here promote historical and biographical amnesia with a vengeance.

On a concluding note, I must say that I find depressingly familiar the authors' attack on, for example, Joyce and Beckett for not offering more physical action in their novels, and in particular for portraying the world as bleak and hopeless. Joyce, let us recall, heralded from colonial Ireland, while Beckett produced his best writing shortly after World War II—not exactly times of high hopes and sunny merriment in Europe. The general problem, however, is that the authors of *What Art Is* want art works that will give us uplift, not dark truths, that will depict handsome and courageous heroes who triumph over all odds, not stories of the less-than-fortunate folks who simply get by day by day. In this, they share much in common with your typical bourgeois moralists, Stalinist commissars, fascist theoreticians, religious imams, proper schoolmarm, and Hollywood executives, all of whom want their narratives to come thoroughly equipped with positive heroes, or happy endings, or racial glories, or good guys trouncing evil, or the projection of an ideal man. Not for them the very real angst and/or deprivation that are the lot of most human beings. Joyce's now-classic book of short fictions, *Dubliners*, let's not forget, for years was rejected for publication in

Ireland because of its "bleak" vision of that then-sad country. In this regard, I would submit that the best of Joyce and Beckett stands far closer to the truth of twentieth century human life than do *The Fountainhead* or *Atlas Shrugged*.

But truth, alas, is not a major concern for professional ideologues, whichever be the little stripe they occupy on the political spectrum.

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