

Countering the Canon

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The idea of a canon refers to a body of work held to be the most important within a particular tradition, or sometimes to the parameters that surround the work associated with a given author. The concept derives from the Greek word *kanon* that means measure or rule.

The canon is centrally involved with questions of inclusion and exclusion and in the context of contemporary culture that process of selection centers on questions of aesthetic value. That is, an item is selected for inclusion in the canon of, say, literature on the basis of the quality of its expression of 'universal' aesthetic values. Such a list of 'great books' would include the work of Homer, Shakespeare and T.S. Eliot amongst others while Bach, Beethoven and Mozart form the core of the European classical music canon.

The formation of a canon involves a process of judgment and discrimination. The authority and grounds for which have been challenged not least from within the domain of contextual and cultural studies.

The whole idea of a canon as 'the good and the great' has been questioned on the grounds that there are no universal grounds for aesthetic judgments so that those which are employed can be understood as distinctions of taste and power associated with class-based groups.

In particular, the policing of the boundaries of a canon of 'good work' had led to the exclusion of popular culture. From a contextual and cultural studies perspective, perhaps the more pertinent issue is the exploration of the conditions and processes that underpin the formation of a canon at a particular time and place.

It is important to question the power structures behind any given canon.

Think about the history of the medium you study. Write a list of those included within the canon, and another list of those excluded from the canon.

Furthermore, thinking more broadly about what could be defined as a canon will help you analyse their relevance to the contemporary condition.

As an example of a broader notion of a canon, think about beauty. Is there such thing as a universal concept of beauty? Who defines what beauty is?

Recommended Reading:

Mitter, P. *Western Man: Reflections on the construction of beauty in the West.*

Modernism and Grand Narratives

There are three primary uses of the term modernism within cultural studies: namely, (i) the cultural experience of modernity: changes caused by the industrial revolution; (ii) an artistic style associated with being modern; and (iii) a philosophical position that asserts the possibility of universal knowledge.

Here, we are looking at the latter (iii); a philosophical position that asserts the possibility of universal knowledge.

Modernism has been associated with the enlightenment, and the age of reason that would lead to the idea of universal truths that would lay the foundations for humanity's path of progress. Modernism as a structure of feeling has a confidence in scientific reason and modern science to find the truth that heralds progress.

As we have assessed, the idea of universal rights and wrongs leads to the discrimination of its counterpart.

Grand Narrative

Like the Canon, the Grand Narrative as a term is used for an overarching story or metanarrative that claims universal validity as a foundational scheme that justifies and explains all facets of the human project. Thus grand narratives are totalizing schemes that seek to explain every aspect of

life under their rubric. Examples would be Marxism, Christianity and science.

The power of the modern grand narrative has been the subject of a critique by postmodern writers, most notably Jean-Francois Lyotard. For Lyotard modern knowledge rests on its appeal to grand narratives, whereas the postmodern, in arguing that knowledge is specific to its historical context. While science has brought us medicine, increased food production and global communications, it has also generated pollution and sophisticated weapons systems of mass destruction. The questioning of the certainties of modern science is part of what Lyotard describes as 'incredulity towards metanarratives'. By this he means that there remain no viable grand narratives, or elevated standpoints, from which to pronounce universal truth. For Lyotard, we should resist the totalizing terror of such dogmas in favour of the celebration of difference and understanding located within particular contexts.

Subverting and bringing to attention grand narratives.

Both the *canon*, *modernism* and *grand narratives* assume universal truths based on aesthetic judgment. As we have come to see throughout this lecture, there is no 'natural' way of seeing. Meaning is 'constructed' within the context in which it becomes visible. The examples presented within this lecture, propose to make visible the way in which meaning is constructed.