

## Demystifying the Hamburg Hydra and the Origin of Genre: Carl Linnaeus and the Politics of the Aesthetic Commodity- Form

Manuel Yang

In 1735 the Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus and his friend Claes Sohlberg, son of a mining inspector in Falun, had stopped by Hamburg, en route to the Dutch Republic, center of cosmopolitan bourgeois learning, for their doctoral study. There the city's mayor proudly showed the "most expensive and rare object" in his collection, "a so-called hydra with many heads, the cranium having been made of weasels covered with snake skin" (American Society of Naturalists 139). When Linnaeus proved this exotic taxidermied creature to be a fake, the mayor threatened to imprison both Linnaeus and Sohlberg, prompting them to flee Hamburg immediately.

As he did with the seven-headed Hamburg Hydra, Linnaeus made it his life's work to establish a factual system of biological classification, intending to replace superstitious mythology with the categories of objective science. The first edition of his widely influential *Systema naturae* was published in the same year he demystified the Hydra. With each succeeding edition, the book expanded in the manner of an imperial territorial expansion. The analogy is meant to be neither arbitrary nor factious. Linnaeus's scientific enterprise was underwritten directly by the money of European empire and greatly facilitated the latter's conquest over the globe, both ideologically and scientifically: after the publication of *Systema naturae*, Linnaeus was first in the pay of George Clifford III, director of the Dutch East India Company.

"Primitive accumulation" is the initial and ongoing stage of expropriating common lands and destroying popular customs through the imposition of capitalist socioeconomic relations. Karl Marx cited Holland as "the model capitalist nation of the seventeenth century" in pursuing primitive accumulation. Marx quoted the British Lieutenant Governor Thomas Stafford Raffles in describing Dutch colonial history "as one of the most extraordinary relations of treachery, bribery, massacre, and meanness" (916). There were

kidnappings by native agents, slave ships, bribery, assassination, and genocide -- conditions in perfect sync with the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

In order to get possession of Malacca, the Dutch bribed the Portuguese governor. He let them into the town in 1641. They went straight to his house and assassinated him, so as to be able to 'abstain' from paying the £21,875 which was the amount of the bribe. Wherever they set foot, devastation and depopulation followed. Banjuwangi, a province of Java, numbered over 80,000 inhabitants in 1750 and only 180,000 in 1811. That is peaceful commerce! (916)

The Dutch colonial system exploited drought to "subordinate the ruggedly independently Dayak communities that controlled vast tracts of valuable rainforests" and establish the "Cultivation System or *culturstelsel*" that "compelled villages to cultivate export crops for the benefit of the Netherlands at the expense of their own subsistence" in the 1870s: "remittances forcibly extracted from the Javanese peasantry had at one point provided fully one-third of state revenues" (Davis 94-95). Giovanni Arrighi describes the primary features of Dutch capitalism to lie in "its control over world financial networks" and "the rationalization of military techniques" (45, 46). The Dutch colonists founded Fort Amsterdam (later New Amsterdam) and set up a military enclosure for privatization, which came to be called Wall Street. This set a historic precedent that fused the defining features of their accumulation: founding the abstract, seemingly innocuous realm of finance capitalism upon the material power of military violence. A myth would later develop that the Dutch had bought Manhattan fair and square from the Lenape Indians for the price of a few trinkets. It is a story that circulates pervasively to this day, especially in self-help manuals on investment, in illustrating the wisdom of financial speculation. But this cannot be true by definition, for the Lenapes held their property in common, on family and clan basis. The reality was starkly more martial: mid-seventeenth-century military conflicts with the Lenapes, such as Kieft's War (which resulted in massacres that killed hundreds of people, disproportionately indigenous) and Esopus Wars, laid the basis for Dutch financial enterprise in America.

So when George Clifford III, himself scion of a leading Amsterdam banking dynasty, hired Linnaeus and the botanical illustrator Georg Dionysius Ehret to make a study of the English garden at his Hartekamp estate and publish its results in *Hortus Cliffortianus*, it was not to simply pursue a bucolic hobby of a scientific-minded leisure bourgeois. Clifford aimed to immortalize the privatization of botanical knowledge under his own name, the organization and mastery of plants as a horticultural metaphor for organizing and mastering the world. As art historian Albert Boime points out, "Jan Wanderlaar's frontispiece for the *Hortus Cliffortianus* makes very clear the connection between Clifford's botanical interests and commercial activities": in the background, "[a]llegorical representations of the New World, Asia, and Africa pay homage to Mother Earth their exotic plants (Africa carries the aloe)" , and the "plan of Clifford's garden is shown in the foreground, and his bust appears

on a pedestal with the emblem of the serpent biting its tail, being festooned with a garland of flowers by the goddess Ceres”.

When Linnaeus returned to Sweden, he fulfilled numerous commissions for industrial and pharmaceutical uses of plants; he catalogued native plants serviceable for drugs, traveled to report on the natural productions of various sites and agricultural production, and as superintendent of the botanical garden of the University of Uppsala devoted himself to raising seeds and cultivating plant transfers from colonial satellites. Like other botanists of the period, he explored the possibilities of plant cultivation in area where cheap colonial labor was available, and studied economic plants to determine whether native-grown might substitute for imported. (Boime 474-5)

Linnaeus’s hierarchical system of biological classification in *Systema naturae* quickly became the standard for Western science and the standard for establishing racial hierarchy according to the imperialist structure of seeing. Dividing the human race into the five *taxa* of the indolent *Africanus*, irascible *Americanus*, avaricious *Asiaticus*, creative and aggressive *Europeanus*, and the subhuman *Monstrosus*, Linnaeus imbued each with physiologically determined qualities that would come to define the doctrine of scientific racism. In Linnaeus’s scientific theory, the myth of monstrosity was not expunged but preserved as a separate category. If Linnaeus’s keen empiricist eye dared to question the authority of Hamburg mayor in exposing the hydra hoax, he was not willing to abandon monstrosity as a catch-all category for the uncivilized, savage, rural, and indigenous “sub-races” who had not undergone the happy extermination of “primitive accumulation”. *Monstrosus* contained the sub-category of *Homo anthropomorpha*, which alongside of the phoenix, satyr, and troglodyte, included the hydra.

For the early modern Atlantic elites, “the many-headed hydra” represented “an antithetical symbol of disorder and resistance, a powerful threat to the building of state, empire, and capitalism” and “expressed the fear and justified the violence of the ruling classes, helping them build a new order of conquest and expropriation, of gallows and executioners, of plantations, ships, and factories” (Linebaugh & Rediker 2, 6). Linnaeus’s biological theory of race functioned as a scientific bookend to this ideologically serviceable myth. It was not so much a scientific refutation but a categorical reconfiguration of the myth in accordance with newly discovered principles of speciation. However, this did not go uncontested by those he categorically objectified. “Linnaeus had given the name Hydra to a genus of freshwater polyps in 1756”, which may have helped inspire the naming of Thomas Wooler’s 1817 radical “international and multiethnic” journal *The Black Dwarf* (Linebaugh & Rediker 301). Dwarves of Alps were *Homo monstrosus*, according to Linnaeus. Wooler’s *détournement* of a dehumanizing category -- and his was just one among many in the period -- into an insurrectionary metaphor of social liberation reminds us that such categories were

met with enormous resistance from below, including satirical inversion of the categories themselves.

In Linnaeus's classificatory schema, the taxonomic category of "genus" and its plural "genera" -- with etymological roots in the Greek cognate *genos* ("kin, race, stock") and Latin *genus* ("descent, family, gender, type") -- divided the world of living organisms from that of fossils. It is the same word whose phenotype, so to speak, has been expressed in such words as "gender" and, most importantly for our purpose, "genre". To speak of "genre", therefore, means to enter into the semantic field of how we define humanity, whether in racial, familial, gender, or organic terms. This is also true on aesthetic grounds. For the ability to distinguish one artistic genre from another, to evaluate its respective value is a distinctly human inheritance. The issue, however, becomes one of ideology and *kulturkampf* when the power of naming and determining genres is the monopoly of a select few, who don the mask of universally abiding truth.

Immanuel Kant is a pivotal figure in bridging the racial and aesthetic theories of genre. His 1775 *On the Different Races of Men* elaborated a Linnaean racial schema, which presupposed a climatically determined racial seed, with four fundamental categories: Whites, Blacks, Hindustanic, and Kalmuck. Twenty-four years later, he made a notorious racialization of aesthetic faculty in "Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime": "The Negroes of Africa have by nature no feeling that rises above the trifling...So fundamental is the difference between these two races of man, and it appears to be as great in regard to mental capacities as in color" (110-1). These writings, in Paul Gilroy's words, "communicate the ways that the consolidation of modern raciology required enlightenment and myth to be intertwined" (59). It is precisely this ideological intertwining of scientific enlightenment and myth that we find in the historical origin of "genre".

### **The Kantian Distinction and the Sublime as a Complicit Antithesis of Genre**

Kant's *Critique of Judgment* represents an important moment in transforming a racial category of genre into an aesthetic category. Its theoretical prowess set the framework of debate over aesthetic genres and supplied the "transcendental grounding" for what Kant perceived as lacking in Linnaeus's taxonomic theory.

In many favorable references to Linnaeus's *Systema naturae*, Kant shares with Linnaeus a passion for architectonics in taxonomy: nature is classified into the universe, humans, plants, rocks and minerals, diseases, etc. Yet Kant regarded Linnaeus's classificatory 'system' as 'artificial'. Kant criticized the 'system' for being a mere synthetic 'aggregate' rather than an analytically, logically grounded system of nature...For Kant, in short, Linnaeus's system was transcendently ungrounded. In Kant's view, scientific knowledge has to have a transcendental grounding, for it is such a foundation that confers upon scientific knowledge the status of universality, permanence, and fixity. Linnaeus's system also needs to be provided with such

universal, necessary reason, which would give it the required transcendental foundation. Indeed, Cassirer is of the opinion that in his *Critique of Judgment*, Kant was supplying precisely that which he found lacking in Linnaeus: logical grounding for natural and racial classification. (Coetzee & Roux 516)

Ostensibly, *Critique of Judgment* is not concerned with “natural and racial classification”. However, the ruse of Kant’s four defining moments in establishing “judgments of taste” -- pleasure, universality, necessity, purposeless purposefulness -- is that they *appear* as objective categories, while presupposing and thus *naturalizing* a particular kind of civilization in which these particular abstractions can be separated from the process of aesthetic contemplation and creation. This is a civilization that has divorced the aesthetic realm from everyday life by way of division of labor, bourgeois individuation, and other cultural corollaries of the newly emergent economic system based on private property. It is only when traditional popular arts and rituals, which are interwoven in the concrete labor of hunting and gathering, seafaring, planting and harvesting, are destroyed under the juggernaut of what its purveyors call “universal” and “necessary” market forces (whose dynamics are often characterized as “purposive without purpose”) simply meeting the needs and demands of consumption (fulfillment of “pleasure”), that such categorical divisions can historically emerge.

At the same time, in harnessing the critical energies of Enlightenment thought, Kant was in part fighting a rearguard action against the commodification of art, as when he made his famous distinction between “free” art and “mercenary” handicraft: “*Art* also differs from *handicraft*; the first is called *free*, the other may be called mercenary. We regard the first as it could only prove purposive as play, *i.e.*, as occupation that is pleasant in itself. But the second is regarded as if it could only be compulsorily imposed upon one as work, *i.e.*, as occupation which is unpleasant (a trouble) in itself, and which is only attractive on account of its effect (*e.g.* the wage)” (109-110). This generic divide is the irreconcilable tension that has become, in the last two-hundred-plus years, the hallmark of producing art in a capitalist society, from painting to punk rock -- “do you create authentic art/music or do you sell out?” -- which, after the Linnaean definition of *genera*, we might rephrase it as a category that distinguishes “organic” or living art from “inorganic” or manufactured commodity.

As intuitively accurate as it is in grasping the general character of alienation that the imposition of the wage-form exerts on aesthetic production, this fundamental Kantian generic distinction, however, has confused the matter in at least two ways. First is the assumption that art -- outside the Platonic ideal -- can exist as a pure, autonomous activity completely divorced from socioeconomic relations: if handicraft is to be defined as being inferior to genuine art due to the former’s production under coercive condition of wage-slavery, how can the independence of art from such a servile condition be guaranteed in reality? In fact, historically, dependence on the wage was premised on the destruction of handicraft production, which at least afforded the artisans a modicum of control over their

means of production and enabled them to preserve the mystery of their crafts; outside of this popular realm (including the non-waged arena of collective rituals and customs, which are not what Kant had in mind), art was entirely dependent on ruling-class patronage.

The second confusion in the Kantian generic distinction stems from the automatic association of higher aesthetic value with “free art” and, conversely, aesthetic devaluation with work done for a wage. Although it is most likely true that work done under conditions of free association and for its own sake is *morally* preferable to alienated work done under command for money, it does not follow ipso facto that the product of former labor is therefore of superior aesthetic quality than the one produced under wage-labor. Can one seriously argue that the random scribbling of a child done in free play, even if it produces immeasurable pleasure and sentimental value for the young creator and his/her family members, is on an aesthetic par with, say, Joseph Wright of Derby’s “Romeo and Juliet: the Tomb Scene”?

Joseph Wright completed “Romeo and Juliet” in 1790 (the same year as Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*), commissioned by John Boydell for the sum of 300 pounds. Boydell, son of a land surveyor, was a London publisher who held a series of political offices -- including alderman, master of Stationers’ Company, sheriff, and Lord Mayor of London -- and whose business venture had the distinction of inculcating bourgeois morals through its prints and turning British prints into a competitive commodity that displaced the virtual monopoly enjoyed by the French. However, none of these economic facts -- including the “pay dispute” Wright had with Boydell for being placed in the lower second-tier bracket of commission fee for the painting -- can explain the poignant horror of Juliet’s arched back in the painting, her arm outstretched in the air as if reaching for an absolute void, as Romeo lies dead at her feet. Her entire face is invisible to the viewer, as her head is turned away from Romeo, unable to comprehend the sublime terror of her situation. Wright’s wife of eighteen years, Ann Swift, had died in 1790, and, although the painting was conceived fourteen years earlier, its power of existential immediacy that transformed a highly dramatized gesture into a stilled image of fearful symmetry derives from the artist’s inexpressible sorrow.

Slavoj Žižek’s commentary on the Kantian sublime might be apropos here in capturing the aesthetic impact of “Romeo and Juliet”:

The Sublime is therefore the paradox of an object which, in the very field of representation, provides a view, in a negative way, of the dimension of what is unrepresentable. It is a unique point in Kant’s system, a point at which the fissure, the gap between phenomenon and Thing-in-itself, is abolished in a negative way, because in it the phenomenon’s very inability to represent the Thing adequately *is inscribed in the phenomenon itself* -- or, as Kant puts it, ‘even if the Idea of reason can be in no way adequately represented [in the sensuous-phenomenal world], they can

be revived and evoked in the mind by means of this very inadequacy which can be presented in a sensuous way'. (emphasis in the original, 230)

We also may say of Wright's painting that its "very inability to represent the Thing adequately *is inscribed in the painting itself*". Here the "Thing" is Juliet's "unrepresentable" shock of disbelief at the "Sublime" event of Romeo's death (although expressed in personal terms, the aesthetic effect was part of "the industrial sublime that had its roots in the late eighteenth-century art of painters such as Joseph Wright and Philippe Jacques de Loutherbourg, who were fascinated with the flaring factories and noisome mills that complemented the natural sublimity of the darkened and blasted environments in which they often stood") (Sinnema 115). Just as the low-budget horror movie *The Blair Witch Project* tried to exploit this sublime effect by never showing the Blair Witch but intimating her presence with strange noises, stick figures, and terrified reaction of the student film crew, what the sublime negatively represents by its failure of representation, above all, is monstrosity. The social form of this monstrosity, in the eyes of the ruling class, almost always assumes the shape of popular insurrection or revolution.

In this respect, two signal executions of 1790 are worth mentioning: public hanging of the British sailor Thomas Bird for the murder of the slave ship *Mary's* Captain John Connor -- the first federal execution under the newly ratified U.S. Constitution -- and breaking the mulatto rebel Vincent Ogé's on the wheel for his revolt against the colonial French in Saint-Domingue. Bird, who repeatedly escaped impressments from serving on British warships and signed up to sail on American ships, most likely had nothing to do with the death of Connor, known as a cruel drunken captain who had murdered his first mate on the voyage. Ogé, a free "mulatto" (he disavowed the word as an "injurious epithet"), was not seeking manumission of the Saint-Domingue slaves but merely the voting rights for the "free men of color" (who were themselves slave owners) after visiting Paris in the wake of the French Revolution. For his act of revolt, Ogé was executed on the Catherine wheel and his fellow rebels of a couple hundred punished brutally.

The deaths of Bird's and Ogé constitute moments of the political sublime in the sense that they pose an irreducible mystery of insurrectionary causation. Although they both emblemized the pitiless terror of the state, each had quite a different ramification. In one case it successfully captured the popular insurrectionary imagination of the mulattoes and slaves of Saint-Domingue, igniting a fundamental expression of the revolutionary Atlantic in the last decade of the eighteenth century, and demonstrated a double movement -- dialectical reversal, if you will -- when what was intended as the "shock and awe" of overwhelming ruling-class violence backfired and the oppressed class radically reconstituted it as a central symbolic event (we might call it "myth" in the Sorelian sense) of their movement. In the other case, it was all but forgotten, except as a minor historical footnote -- although signifying profoundly that the constitutional foundation of the American republic was, in essence, a thanatocracy against the working class. No amount of painstaking

sociological and historical analysis can ever explain adequately why a particular act of state terror -- and not many others of similar nature -- inspired the oppressed and came to hold a privileged place in their historical memory.

The historical sublime shatters any generic conceptualization of revolution, which would have us believe that it is no more than an automaton-like reflex to economic exploitation or a manifestation of herd mentality instigated by a charismatic figure or proto-statist vanguard organization. Analogously, the aesthetic sublime demonstrates the sterility of analytical categories aimed to explain art by disabling the power of reason in the face of “terrible beauty” that art shines forth. Peter Linebaugh clarifies the connection between the sublimity of political power -- albeit that of counter-revolutionary capital punishment, specifically the drawing and quartering of Robert-François Damiens, who attempted the regicide of King Louis XV -- and aesthetic power.

The passion caused by the sublime is astonishment which suspends all motions of the soul except horror. The sublime is an irresistible force which entirely puts an end to reasoning. Burke illustrated the sublime by referring to Damien. Thirty-five years later his aesthetics of the sublime enjoyed tremendous recapitulation as he engaged (or created) the modern arts of rhetoric in order to amplify the terror of the French Revolution. If Tom Paine showed that such punishments produced emulation among the poor, then Edmund Burke showed how skillful use of the media representing execution could arouse stupefying emotions. (445)

The Burkean sublime, according to Terry Eagleton, is “an imaginary compensation for all the uproarious old upper-class violence, tragedy repeated as comedy”, socially connoting “the memory trace of an historically surpassed barbarism” as well as “the challenge of mercantile enterprise to a too-clubbable aristocratic indolence” (54) -- in other words, an aesthetic signifier of emergent ruling-class hegemony in the transition from feudalism to capitalism. As much as the sublime works as an antidote to generic analysis of art, abolishing it in the stupefying overflow of affective, transcendental experience, the accompanying aim is to stultify analysis altogether. In other words, the generic system (which, however complex and differentiated, derives essentially from the Kantian *actus primus* of dividing art from handicraft) imprisons rationality to categorize and evaluate its value on an Eurocentrically preordained hierarchical basis, while the sublime offers a temporary reprieve from this conceptual “prison-house” by seemingly shattering its wall of categorical bricks and mortar. But this experience of shattering and stupefaction is eventually incorporated back as the “manure”, so to speak, for fertilizing a newly expanded and revised version of the generic system.

Notice how the structure of development here mirrors the structural boom and bust of the capitalist market. Whether it is the shattering and stupefying aftermath of a disaster (Katrina, Fukushima) or a transgressive species of cultural expression that initially punctured -- even horrified -- the expectations of the public, invariably it becomes an occasion for

market penetration. This is why in the post-Kantian genealogy of modern art, every new avant-garde (the term came into provenance in the 1820s as a Saint-Simonian vocabulary that instrumentalized art as a means of social reform, whose most explicitly concrete expressions were the financial capitalist *Crédit Mobilier* and the imperialist Suez Canal Company) becomes the newly lionized commodity of the art market. A signal example is the reduction of the Dadaist howling against art into the institutional fabric of the Pompidou Center's official exhibition in 2005. Genre is hence indivisible from the power of financial mechanisms; beneath its surface pulsates the unmistakable beating of the commodity-form.

### **Genre as a Ghost of the Commodity-Form**

In characterizing African's "trifling" nature, Kant adduced the fact that the "religion of fetishes so widespread among them is perhaps a sort of idolatry that sinks as deeply into the trifling as appears to be possible to human nature" (111). When Kant said that a "bird feather, cow's horn, a conch shell, or any other common object, as soon as it becomes consecrated by a few, is an object of veneration and of invocation in swearing oaths", little could he foresee that, sixty-eight years later, a fellow German would turn the same West African cultural practice on its head and formulate the theory of commodity-fetishism against the socioeconomic system produced by their civilization.

Marx's theory of commodity fetishism posits that in a capitalist society commodity becomes a ghostly force, producing an aura that mystifies people into thinking that it -- particularly in its most universal form of money -- has irresistible, supernatural-like power over them, despite the fact that it is they themselves who create the commodities through their labor.

the commodity-form, and the value-relation of the products of labour within which it appears, have absolutely no connection with the physical nature of the commodity and the material [*dinglich*] relations arising out of this. It is nothing but the definite social relations between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things. In order, therefore, to find an analogy we must take flight into the misty realm of religion. There the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men's hands. I call this the fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour as soon as they are produced as commodities, and is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities. (165)

Kant and his aesthetic successors' attempt to establish art as "autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own" is consequently nothing more than an illusory gambit, a dissembling attempt to preserve art as free from commodification (its "mercenary" nature) by identifying its power with precisely that of the commodity while repressing their awareness that this is

actually what they were doing. If the aura of the commodity erases and abstracts labor into a set of physical-psychological discipline and the economically reductive calculus of the wage, profit, and cost, then aesthetic genre erases and abstracts this irreducible monetary social reality into a seemingly natural endowment of a particular art -- genre is a sort of double dissimulation, giving the appearance that art can maintain a royal bloodline of non-monetary value in a kingdom where the commodity is the absolute ruler.

However, I am far from suggesting that the universally co-opting character of the commodity-form is nearly omnipotent, in the manner of the Frankfurt School's totalizing notion of the "Culture Industry" -- as much as it is hard to resist the temptation of describing the aesthetic commodity-form as a monstrosity that expands and grows stronger by absorbing and feeding on each new resistance, including near-fatal blows that generate depressions and crises within the system. Rather, the problem is how to rout the dissimulation that these apparently asymmetrical concepts of the genre and the sublime have exerted on the succeeding history of aesthetic imagination -- a dissimulation in establishing a fictive autonomy for aesthetic activity, posing it illusorily as being impervious to commodification, when it is precisely this apparent non-"mercenary", non-commercial quality that qualifies it for a privileged sector of consumption (e.g., lucrative investment opportunity embedded with the aura of cultural distinction).

The reason why the aura of art objects did not disintegrate immediately with the touch of technological reproduction, as Walter Benjamin hoped for, is because the said "aura" was not simply a modern variant of the religious fetish, that is, a myth of artistic originality serving the role once imputed to the divine power of religious icons. Although the machinery of technological reproduction did make the arts more accessible to the general population, it did so largely through the spectacular effects of mass advertisement and entertainment. Consequently, the machine could not exorcise the ghost of aura because the machine was in fact a form of the ghost -- the new ghost of the commodity-form, that is. To the extent that the means of technological reproducibility was democratized as a mass consumer good, the general result was then not to annihilate aura but multiply it even more, making it seem as if everybody could turn into an imago, the immaterial capitalist source of aura, as it became a readily available, instant entrepreneurial mechanism. With the massification of the cultural means of production (making arts relatively accessible to a wider public), aura thus comes to be seen as an obtainable property by anyone, whereas the sublime arrests critical and rational intellect in its steps and prevents people from grasping how the machinery works as an organic apparatus of cultural capitalism. The sublime dissolves limits, while aura generates limits between the worker and the commodity, the viewer and the art object, transforming the relationship into a monetary and cultural hierarchy while repressing it under the appearance of universal necessity.

Foucault noted in his renowned lecture on Kant's "What Is Enlightenment?" (1784) that "criticism indeed consists of *analyzing and reflecting upon limits*" [emphasis original].

But if the Kantian question was that of knowing what limits knowledge has to renounce transgressing, it seems to me that the critical question today has to be turned back into a Positive one: in what is given to us as universal, necessary, obligatory, what place is occupied by whatever is singular, contingent, and the product of arbitrary constraints? The point, in brief, is to transform the critique conducted in the form of necessary limitation into a practical critique that takes the form of a possible transgression. (*The Politics of Truth* 113)

What Foucault means here by “possible transgression” does not mean the generic transgressions of a new avant-garde or a progressive multiculturalist rearrangement of the literary canon to overcome the reflexive Eurocentrism of the so-called “Western Canon”. He is bidding us to reflect upon the very limits presupposed by our aesthetic thought that produces generic limits. For genres also exist on the basis of limits, patrolling the borderline between (high) art and (low) handicraft, romantic comedy and art house movies, etc., and it is these generic limits that in part determine the typology and value of art, the effect of its aura as a commodity-form.

At the end of Harold Bloom’s *Western Canon*, Bloom gave vent to his displeasure over the Foucauldian and Marxist turn in literary studies by remarking that “A Marxist or Foucault-inspired historicist can insist endlessly that the production of the aesthetic is a question of historical forces, but production is not in itself the issue here...yet the undeniable economics of literature, from Pindar to the present, do not determine questions of aesthetic supremacy” and declined to “agree with the Marxist critics that the Western Canon is another instance of what they call ‘cultural capital’” because “a nation as contradictory as the United States of America could ever be the context for ‘cultural capital,’ except for those slivers of high culture that contribute to mass culture” (36). A more intellectually blighted defense of Western classical literature is hard to imagine, given that it is not the academic Marxists and Foucauldians who have contributed to the decline in cultural and literal literacy but the inexorable logic of the consumer capitalist market; if Bloom’s “elegy” is to have any correlation to reality, it must address the relentless social permeation of corporate ethos and information technology -- both as a means of production and consumption -- which has been displacing biblio-illiteracy at an even more accelerated pace than what Marshall McLuhan could have ever envisioned in the 1960s. That this economic reductionism of art should reach its most incandescent apogee in the United States, where the engulfing flame of pragmatic cash flow melts all other non-monetary values in the heat and smoke of profit margin, is not in the least contradictory. We might even say it is an all too inevitable consequence of “American” culture, wherein classical Western literature used to function as either a superficially imitative holdover from British ruling-class education or Book-of-the-Month-Club/Mortimer-Adler-like digestion of middle-class cultural consumerism. Hence “cultural capital” is not a question of “slivers of high culture that contribute to mass culture” but how cultures, be they high or low, become endowed with the qualities of the commodity, including those arts that ostensibly struggle against this development by

claiming virtual independence of “aesthetic supremacy” from “historical forces”, whose range, *pace* Bloom, are far wider and more complex than mere “economics” and “production”.

The Bloomian lament is pathetically feeble for the same reason that it plods on the Kantian distinction at a historical moment when it cannot be even more irrelevant as a strategy for resisting the commercialization of culture. When Bloom states, “the dilemma that confronts partisans of resentment” -- whom he derisively call the Foucauldians, Marxists, and literary theorists of all ilk -- is “either they must deny Shakespeare's unique eminence (a painful and difficult matter) or they must show why and how history and class struggle produced just those aspects of his plays that have generated his centrality in the Western Canon” (24), it is Bloom who exposes himself in a Freudian slip. For it is Bloom who is the real “partisan of resentment” here, unable to confront his more historically and theoretically minded colleagues’ increasing “eminence (a painful and difficult matter)” and thus trying desperately to undercut their academic “stock value” by resuscitating an old chestnut of “Western Canon”, an ahistorical, culturally meaningless genre that rings hollowly today, at best, in a Pythonesquely parodic register. In other words, the late Bloom is unconsciously living out his theory of “anxiety of influence”, which, although empirically vacuous in what it had to say about the creative process of the Romantic poets, was highly revelatory about the market-driven psychology of competition rampant among U.S. academics, even in the field of unprofitable U.S. literary studies, wherein status-anxiety -- an ideological implant injected in the wake of a propaganda class war that would have us believe in the actuality of classlessness -- operates with a vengeance as in the rest of American society.

That is, after all, one of the dire lessons dispensed by the historical origin of the “genre”: artists who had lost their feudal patronage and been thrown onto the vulgarizing force field of the market seized upon it as a means to preserve their ever-thinning status of intellectual, artistic privilege, to maintain an illusion that they were “unacknowledged legislators of the world”. In the nineteenth century, the various drifts of *l'art pour l'art* -- which developed in France as an ideological compensation for its constricted industrialization and as an idealized marker for the revolutionary bourgeois legacy of the French Revolution -- the historical construction of modernism and its twentieth-century successors converged on this progressively diminishing point of illusory privilege. What remains is an echo of a death rattle, whose clownish epigones Bloom and others nostalgic for the “good old days” of the “Western Canon” are playing helplessly in the emptying, economically unviable theater of the humanities in the neoliberal university. The genre of “Western Canon” is no more than an obsolescent cipher that establishes the myth of literature and university as free, autonomous institutions where value conceals its indelible associations with power and money.

### **Creative Tensions in Conceptualizing Genre**

Indeed the museum is no more autonomous and free from power and money than literature or the university. For example, as you enter the Ahmanson Building of the Los Angeles County Museum of Arts (LACMA), the first exhibit you see on the first floor is the Art of the Pacific, which includes artifacts taken from the Pacific islands during Captain James Cook's 1778 expedition. It is located at the bottom of the stairs that lead up to the general collection of Western arts. Unlike the ascendant collection, the ceremonial and ritual indigenous objects are unlabeled, affixed with no explanatory note (in order to identify the objects, you must pick up a stack of ringed laminated sheets with a rudimentary, non-descriptive list, kept in each corner of the exhibit). They are given no discrete signification, chronologically or culturally, let alone aesthetically. The implications cannot be clearer: these are "primitive" arts predating the higher flowering of occidental art, enmeshed thoroughly in the anonymous, uncivilized fabric of everyday life that cannot distinguish individuated, aesthetic consciousness. As if to prove the truth of Walter Benjamin's statement that "there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism", the source of the funding for the collection and the building stems from Howard J. Ahmanson, an heir of Home Saving of America: Ahmanson is renowned for financing conservative and rightwing Christian political causes, such as the anti-gay Proposition 22, pro-intelligent-design outfit Discovery Institute, the California Independent Business Political Committee that had been instrumental in expanding conservative control of California state government, and Western Center for Law and Religious Freedom that helped ban Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* from Kern County school district in California.

The act of collecting and cataloging these artifacts for the depository of civilization also stems from barbarism, specifically of imperialism and the Linnaean system. Daniel Solander, Swedish naturalist who studied under Linnaeus and major propagator of his teacher's taxonomic system in England, accompanied James Cook's first voyage to the Pacific aboard the *Endeavour* in 1768. The voyage mapped the coast of New Zealand and Australia for the British empire, opening up Botany Bay for its subsequent colonization as a British penal colony. Botany Bay earned its name from the enormous collection and classification of its plants made by the *Endeavour* botanists, Solander, Herman Spöring, and Joseph Bank. The modern aesthetic sense in which we associate the word "genre" came into circulation in French during the following decade of the 1770s, when Cook was making his second tour of the Pacific, which yielded the LACMA booty from the Hawaii Islands. This was a decade that saw the appearance of European works of art in three different genres: Joseph Wright's "The Alchemist in Search of the Philosopher's Stone", Benjamin West's "The Treaty of Penn with the Indians", and Francis Goya's frescoes.

Joseph Wright's "Alchemist" portrays the Hamburg merchant-chemist Hennig Brand discovering phosphorous in the late 1660s. Wright places Brand, a veteran of the Thirty Years' War -- whose religious, intra-imperialist militarization of Europe makes up the immediate background of Dutch aggression in Java and America -- in a posture of sacred

supplication, which has been compared to El Greco's St. Jerome and St. Francis. Wright sacralized scientific technology that formed the engine of industrial capitalism (the Watt steam engine was completed in 1775). Benjamin West, who was Wright's talented protégé at the Royal Academy of Arts, absorbed well the lesson of aestheticizing politics at the service of power. For his "Treaty of Penn with the Indians" depicts another necessary illusion of the period, the 1683 peace treaty between William Penn, Quaker founder of Pennsylvania colony, and the Lenni-Lenape Turtle Clan chief Tamanend -- whom the Dutch called "Saint Tammany" and whose name, through many societies, festivals, and institutions, became enshrined as an emblem of the peaceful, law-abiding relationship that the European colonists supposedly forged with the natives. The idealized image of the "Treaty of Penn" erases from view the grand theft that the Penn family justified in the fraudulent 1737 Walking Purchase, which expropriated 1,200,000 acres of land from the Lenape Indians (the foundations of Wall Street and Pennsylvania are thus linked directly by the massive state robbery of the Lenapes).

Francis Goya may have drawn inspiration from both Wright and West in some of his paintings. For example, the "lighting, from below" in Goya's "Self-portrait with Dr Arrieta" (1820) "is particularly reminiscent of Wright, but most striking of all is the spirit of admiration for science", and he may have borrowed the "cross-legged stance" in West's work (including "Treaty of Penn" and family portrait): "He painted the Duke of Alba leaning on a pianoforte almost exactly as young Raphael West leaned on the arm of his mother's chair" (Hughes 374; Connell 127). However, Goya's frescoes in the church of the Charterhouse of Aula Dei and Sobradiel Palace, in contrast, seem like paintings that belong to an earlier epoch, the work of an apprentice artist in league with the medieval guild tradition. There is nothing here to presage the artist that Goya would later become. When we take Goya's later masterpieces, such as the 1794 *Yard with Lunatic*, the aquatint print series *The Disasters of War*, and the Black Paintings of 1819-1823, and their grotesquely honest power -- which John Berger has defined as "honesty in the full sense of the word meaning facing the facts *and* preserving one's ideals" -- we find ourselves unable to reconcile that it is the same person who worked on these paintings, which make Wright and West's painterly visions appear immediately outdated as relics of eighteenth-century bourgeois and colonial imagination, showing them up as fine art equivalent of glossy advertisements. "Saturn Devouring His Son", perhaps the most famous of the Black Paintings, still manages to shock us with its force of absolute cannibalistic madness -- the severed limbs of a war casualty dangling from a leafless tree in "A heroic feat! With dead men!" in *The Disasters of War* intimate the historical source of this monstrous image -- because it turns the mythical image of monstrosity inside-out, not as a signifier of the sublime that rationalizes state power but as a fiercely personal metaphor in which Goya's consciousness of his mortality and of the fractiously self-destructive condition of political power (the fall of the bourgeois *Progresista* government and the restoration of monarchical absolutism under Ferdinand VII with the aid of French invasion) blurred convulsively.

The generic categorization of the arts serves no useful function in helping us understand either the arts of the 1770s and thereafter or situate the individual artistic development such as we find in Goya. By the mid-eighteenth-century, a new crop of art collectors emerged among the industrial bourgeoisie of middle and northern England, who actively sought to purchase contemporary arts for investment and transformed “genre” into a category of speculative capital. This was the logical culmination of scientific and economic “demythification” originating in the previous century. Linnaeus demystified the hydra into a scientific category of race and, in the process, the mythically sublime effect of its monstrosity was diminished. Aesthetics thus became the province of the inexpressible, the unrepresentable, a role traditionally discharged by religious power wedded to the monarchical authority of the state. But the inexpressible and the unrepresentable soon came under the sway of the commodity-form, which utilized genre as a means of hierarchically differentiating the products of human labor. As Marx declared famously about the commodity, “it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties” (163). Hence genre can be understood as a sort of a legal concept that draws borders and defines property, a representatively modern invention that is indivisible from eighteenth-century capitalist development.

Fredric Jameson has opined that “genres are essentially contracts between a writer and his readers; or rather, to use the term which Claudio Guillén has so usefully revived, they are literary *institutions*, which like the other institutions of social life are based on tacit agreements or contracts” (135), institutions that bear thoroughly the marking of modern capitalism that predominantly defines the relationship between the worker and the capitalist in contractual terms. The contractual analogy, however, is only true insofar as we assume that the relationship of a writer to his/her readers is one of direct producers to consumers, without the intermediary of the literary and publishing industry. However, at no point in the formative history of literary institutions did writers and readers convene consensually to draw up a contract called “genre” and countersigned the document, no more than private property emerged, according to the Rousseauian myth, when certain wily entrepreneurs put up stakes on a particular land and claimed it as theirs. But it is exactly what the contractual analogy occludes, namely the institutional pressure of the market as defined by corporate capital, which determines -- in the last instance, as it were -- the formation and survivability of a genre in our contemporary society. In short, “genre” is nothing more than another word for “market niche”.

It is of course possible to make an argument for “genre” as a useful device in simply cataloguing and classifying various works of art. This is fine as long as we recall that there is nothing neutral or innocent about the structure of classification. When Foucault famously cited the Borgesian representation of *Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge*, an imaginary Chinese encyclopedia -- which inspired his *Les Mots et les choses* -- he was underscoring precisely this point. What we can easily see in the case of the imaginary Chinese “celestial emporium” (constructed as an absurdly alien cultural system), Foucault

wanted us to see vis-à-vis categories of Western science. His genealogical and archaeological method was intended to render the “mute ground” of juxtaposition among such categorized entities to become visible. It sought to show how seemingly “universal, necessary, obligatory” categories of classification that Western sciences promoted were “singular, contingent, and the product of arbitrary constraints” complicit with the historical operation of power. When such *Verfremdungseffekt* is produced in relation to an outside culture, it risks exaggerating differences and projecting images of exoticism; when we produce the same effect towards the categories of our own culture, as Foucault suggests, we expose the working of the powers that distort and often define our perceptions of the world.

As we have seen, the concept of “genre” is clearly marked by the singularity of historical capitalism, contingency of commodification and market exchange, and arbitrary constraints of imperialist racial ideology. But such an exposure is a critical project of negation and, on its own, might appear -- wrongly, as in Bloom’s eyes -- as a denial of literature or the arts, for it does not state the “ground” upon which the archaeological-genealogical method lies. As much as Foucault may have envisioned his method as a refusal to presuppose any “formal structures with universal value”, some informal “structures” must be posited, if only because otherwise there is nothing to justify a critique of power (for if everything is simply arbitrary effects of power, there is no basis upon which to prefer class struggle over authoritarian repression or free, creative activity over wage labor -- this was the crux of the Chomsky-Foucault debate). Moreover, the history of archaeology and genealogy, given the former’s collusion with imperialism and the latter with the preservation of mythical racial and class hierarchy, teaches us that such methods themselves must be scrutinized carefully under the lens of historical investigation, even if their notation is merely metaphorical.

Alain Badiou has remarked that, in Foucault’s method, “It almost seems as if, in some way, the discursive truth of a time comes at the price of stripping this time of its generic procedures”: “his understanding of history is methodical and at bottom consists in deposing the singularity of a time in a subtraction of its genericity, while I would proceed the other way around, I would pick up a given time from the point of its genericity” (Bosteels, 311-312). For Badiou, “generic procedures” and “procedures of truth” are interchangeable phrases. To come to terms with the “generic” is synonymous with coming to terms with the “truth”. Foucault’s method aimed to historicize genre/truth so thoroughly as to extinguish the basis on which such a method can be conducted in the first place. This goes back to the Kantian meta-epistemological question of whether we can think about our own thinking and gain theoretically meaningful insights, or if this is not an act analogous to trying to lift yourself up with your own hands. In other words, can we come up with a working theory of aesthetic value that can persuasively explain all the arts of all times and cultures without the marking of ethnocentricity or personal taste -- in lieu of a helpless cultural and historical relativism that cannot evaluate the relative merits of Derby’s “Romeo and Juliet” and a

child's random scribble. Badiou's solution, to "pick up a given time from the point of its genericity", suggests a return to this universal theoretical project.

Badiou's redefinition of the "generic" is radical in the original sense of the word; it goes to the root of attempting to define humanity against the grain of the Linnaean schema, through a philosophical grounding in Marx's communism and species-being. As Bruno Bosteels noted,

[w]ith the notion of the generic, which according to Badiou is the most important conceptual contribution of *Being and Event*, we finally come back to Marx. It is, after all, he who, in the posthumous *Manuscripts of 1844*, and the *Grundrisse*, speaks of the possibility of the human as a generic species-being... Perhaps there is no better description of the fundamental idea behind communism than to have confidence in this capacity of *changing* human nature itself -- that is, above all, of transforming the human being from an egotistic independent individual, whose self-interest is so often invoked as an ideological legitimation for the natural superiority of capitalism, into a generic species-being. (31-32)

Were we to attempt an analogous transformation of "genre", from an aesthetic category that reifies the "egotistic, independent individual" artist and his/her works into to a universal category of free creation by all "generic species-being", premised on the abolition of money and class relations, we find our imagination quickly running dry. This is in part because the conception of a generic universal humanity -- as well as their arts -- is a historical product inseparable from the general cultural contribution of the bourgeois revolution; to conceive antithetical values and social relationships that can actualize the promise of universal equality and self-realization -- which bourgeois society can only promise rhetorically and fulfill through the necessarily inequitable accumulation of wealth -- therefore, means to play prophet to a future event that may not arrive at all and, if even if it does, would be far too complex for any individual or collective imagination to prognosticate.

As much as its impulse towards universality is a necessary counterweight to Foucauldian historical relativism, Badiou's call for generic resistance to complicity with history is, in the end, a historical gesture as well, crafted within the twentieth-century linguistic epistemology of logic: "The generic is, then, a subset of U ["a universe for the language situation"] that is not *constructible*...The generic is exactly that instance of multiple-being that is subtracted from the power of the One as it is contained in language" (*Theoretical Writings* 117-118). Here genre is conceived as a universal depository abstracted from language. Philosophy's self-exile in the kingdom of linguistic determination, from logical positivism to cognitive revolution to the post-linguistic turn, parallels the period of virtually totalitarian corporate domination of the mass media and correspondent disarticulation of individual human expressions in increasingly fragmented soundbites, most recently through various social media networks. That such disarticulation, when pushed to its limits, can produce a distinctive aesthetics that redefines the possibilities of genre in the

fundamental, Badiouian sense, turning the disembodied Orwellian corruption of language on its head, is conceivable. Thus, Samuel Beckett's work for Badiou is an exemplary expression of "the generic": in Beckett, "writing was an act ruled by a strict principle of economy" which required him "to subtract anything that figured as mere circumstantial ornamentation, any mere secondary amusements, since, if its destiny is to say generic humanity, writing can and must restrict itself to exhibiting, or to detaching, these rare functions" (*Conditions* 252). The Beckettian aesthetics thus goes in the opposite direction of mass-media disarticulation, wherein communication is reduced almost entirely to "circumstantial ornamentation" and "secondary amusements" -- an aesthetics appropriate for the twilight days of an exhausted capitalist civilization in which its instruments of accumulation threaten its own existence through nuclear technology, ecological disasters, and irrationality of the financial market.

At such a historical conjuncture, the idealization of any aesthetic model, let alone the articulation of a coherent generic consciousness, is impossible. No singularly unifying mythical image, such as that of the "hydra", is possible when the ruling class lack any pastoral memory of the lands they have enclosed and no longer share a reified notion of their culturally distinctive community, the inverted, counterrevolutionary image of the commons. What is left for us to maintain as dissident "figures of descent" is then a necessary creative tension between the Foucauldian drive to historicize all genres to their vanishing point and the Badiouian recognition for a need to radically reconfigure genre as a revolutionary point of departure, for an end to what Marx called the "prehistory of human society" and embryonic steps towards genuinely universal forms of aesthetics created out of everyday practice without fetishism or teleology. Anything else will most likely yield the Linnaean lie or collusion with the commodity-form.

### **Works Cited**

American Society of Naturalists. *The American Naturalist*, Vol. 10 (1876).

Arrighi, Giovanni. *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, and the Origins of Our Times*. London: Verso, 2002.

Badiou, Alain. *Theoretical Writings*. Ed. and trans. Ray Brassier and Alberto Toscano. London and New York: Cotinuum, 2006.

---. *Conditions*. Trans. Steven Corcoran. London and New York: Cotinuum, 2008.

Berger, John. *Selected Essays of John Berger*. Ed. Geoff Dyer. New York: Vintage, 2003.

Bloom, Harold. *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*. New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1994.

Boime, Albert. *A Social History of Modern Art, Volume 2: Art in an Age of Bonapartism, 1800-1815*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990.

Bosteels, Bruno. *Badiou and Politics*. Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2011.

Connell, Evan. *Francis Goya: Life and Times*. Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2005.

Davis, Mike. *Late Victorian Holocaust: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World*. London: Verso, 2011.

Eagleton, Terry. *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990.

Foucault, Michel. *The Politics of Truth*. Ed. Sylvere Lotringer. Trans. Lysa Hochroth & Catherine Porter. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007.

Coetzee, Pieter Hendrik and A.J.P. Roux. *The African Philosophy Reader*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. London and New York: Routledge, 2003.

Genesio, Jerry. *Portland Neck: The Hanging of Thomas Bird*. Scotts Valley, CA: CreateSpace, 2010.

Hughes, Robert. *Goya*. New York: Knopf, 2006.

Jameson, Fredric. "Magical Narratives: Romance as Genre" in *New Literary History* (Autumn 1975), 135-163.

Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Judgment*. New York: Cosimo, 2007.

Linebaugh, Peter and Marcus Rediker. *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2000.

Marx, Karl. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. Trans. Ben Fowkes. London: Penguin Books, 1990.

Sinnema, Peter W. *The Wake of Wellington: Englishness of 1852*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006.

Zizek, Slavoj. *That Sublime Object of Ideology*. London: Verso, 1989.

### **Suggested Citation**

Yang , Manuel. "Demystifying the Hamburg Hydra and the Origin of Genre: Carl Linnaeus and the Politics of the Aesthetic Commodity-Form". *Trespassing Journal: an online journal of trespassing art, science, and philosophy* 2 (Winter 2013). Web. ISSN: 2147-2134

**Manuel Yang** has taught history at the University of Toledo, Monroe County Community College, Lourdes College, and Bowling Green State University. His most recent writings have appeared in *Reconstruction*, *Gendai shiso*, *Rekishite no 3.11*, and *J-Fissures*. He is currently preparing two books, one a travelogue-meditation on post-311 Japan and a comparative text on the New Left and its prehistory. He lives in the San Gabriel Valley.