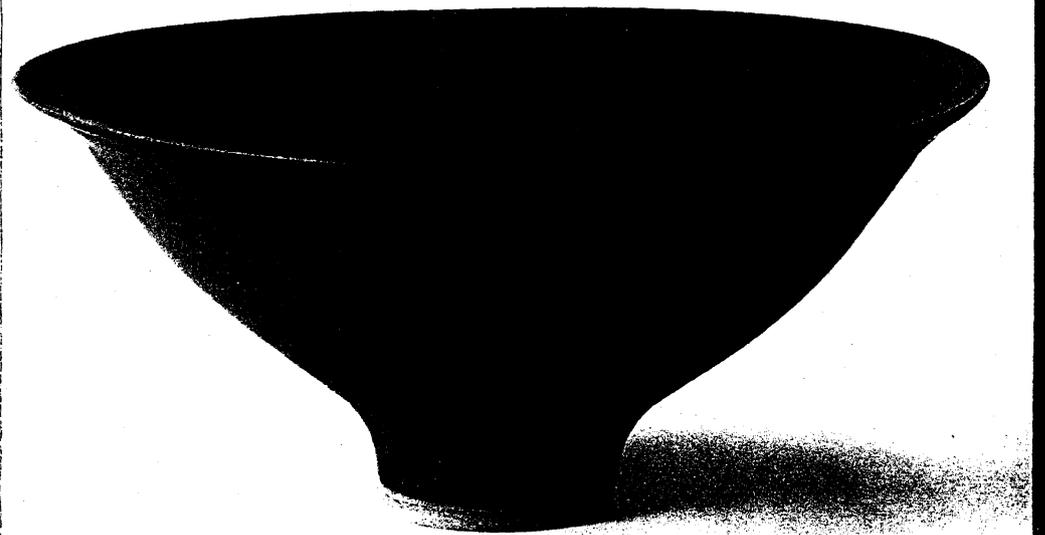


OXFORD READERS

# Aesthetics



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group confrontation of the two sexes differs strikingly from any situation that I have practically encountered in my own society, where flirtation is extremely individualistic. In my society, instead, any imagined group confrontation between the sexes is almost always portrayed as a battle. David Byrne's 'Women vs. Men,' which depicts a war with trivial motives but no end in sight, is a musical reflection of this idea.<sup>15</sup>

I think that in both cases, listener self-projection sheds light on social experience. Of course, I probably cannot fully get inside the mindset that conditions Nigerian experience. But consideration of alternative ways of relating to other human beings assists one's understanding of the way one actually does interact with others. What about our society makes the situation to which Olatunji's music belongs so unimaginable for us? Could the 'Women vs. Men' mindset be modified by considering the whole conjunction of social male-female attractions as jubilant and something worth celebrating with dance? Precisely because Olatunji's music suggests situations foreign to my own experience, I find my imagination stirred to seek answers to such questions as 'Who are the people making this music?' and 'Who am I?'

More fundamentally, the open-ended sociability of music puts us in touch with what is common to human beings across societies. The capacity to feel and to respond to musical stimuli is not limited to a particular group of people. By reminding us of our common human makeup, music serves a universal human function. Music locates us first within the human community, and only second and in some cases within our particular society.

Music—both our own and that of other societies—clarifies our place in the world by allowing us to explore different human ways of encountering it. The musics of different societies focus on different features of that place and underscore different ways of understanding it. One society may focus, in its construction and appropriation of music, on human beings' relationship to the supernatural, as Nettl suggests. In another society, one may engage with music as an individual with a certain social role to fulfill. Our classical tradition, by encouraging 'disinterested' listening, may obscure this function of music. But it, too, gives us a sense of who we are in the world—most commonly a sense of ourselves as capable of empathy with the range of human emotional experience, unimpeded by personal motive.

Understanding one's place within the world—and particularly within the social world—is important to ethical living. Ethics concerns thought-mediated behavior, and a large extent of the mediation that thought provides is shaped by one's sense of self in relation to others. Music's contribution to this sense makes it ethically important. This role of music also helps make the ideal of harmonious living with others seem both coherent and delightful.

[*The Music of Our Lives* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 10, 12–16, 138–9, 150–1, 172–4.]

Toward the end of President Reagan's tenure, the *Miami News* published a remarkable cartoon by Don Wright, which showed silhouettes of Ronald and Nancy Reagan in grass skirts dancing around what appears to be a sacrificial shrine (Fig. 1). Ronald holds a goat over his head, Nancy a chicken in each hand. Ronald says, 'What's the astrologer say to do next, Nancy?' Answer: 'Sacrifice the goat, singe the chickens and pound the lizard to powder!'

The cartoon's images of the Reagans echo, quite deliberately, the popular imagery of the witch doctor. Herbert Ward's 1890 Victorian travel book *Five Years with Congo Cannibals* contains a strikingly similar illustration, though drawn without the same satirical intent (Fig. 2). It portrays a so-called witch doctor, similarly clothed in sketchy costume, dancing around a fire and holding over his head a fetish figure.

I do not suggest the cartoonist was copying Ward, but both draw upon a stock of deeply held and patently enduring cultural imagery about the 'other'—the generalized conception of people on the losing side of the colonial and imperial encounter. Both the figures of the Reagans and the Ward witch doctor, for example, are depicted in classic ballet positions, a similarity that helps exemplify the paradox of representing the other: Difference can only be communicated in terms that are familiar.

Two strategies are used when representing other cultures or their works of art. Exoticizing showcases the differences between the cultural group being displayed and the cultural group doing the viewing, while assimilating highlights the similarities. Whether we are describing a text or an exhibition, otherness is either made strange by exoticizing or made familiar by assimilating.<sup>1</sup>

In exoticizing, the differences of the other are portrayed as an absence of qualities the dominant, often colonizing, cultural groups possess. In the cartoon and engraving, three features of civilized man are missing in the witch doctor character: rationality, symbolic (as opposed to true) animal sacrifice, and an orderly bourgeois sense of propriety. Imagine what little effect the *Miami News* cartoon would have had if the Reagans were dressed in vestments and placed primly behind a lecturn with a holy book, 'sacrificing' only bread and wine.

Both the editorial cartoon and the engraving represent so-called savages as controlled by emotions and unable to calculate rationally. Myth making here is not isolated from real life; it is part of the process whereby our beliefs about other people are shaped. Radio and television news, for example, report that black South Africans belong to tribes when they are in conflict with each other and to political parties when they dispute with the white regime.

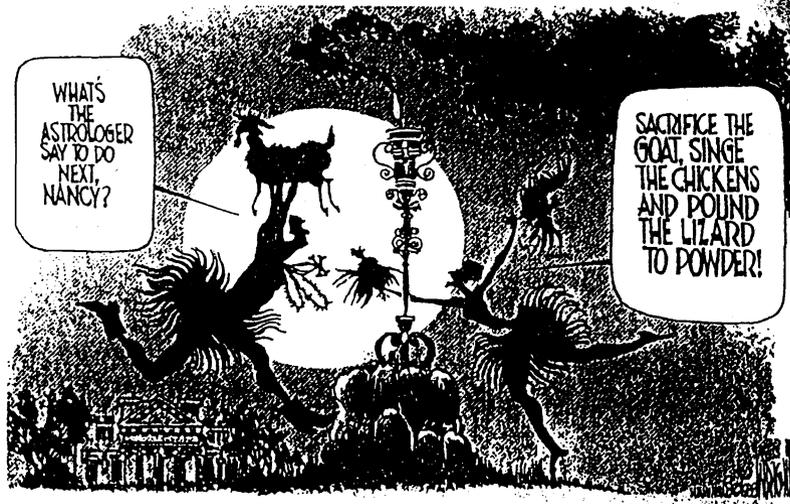


FIG. 1. Don Wright's cartoon published in the *Miami News*, 1988



FIG. 2. *Antics of the Charm Dancer*, S. Northcote (published 1890)

Likewise, journalists refer to the leaders of Columbia's Medellín cartel of cocaine dealers as part of a clan of closely knit persons who act in concert. If the other is different from us, one feature of that difference is his identification with social groups that claim his loyalties in ways that impede rational calculation.

Conversely, otherness can also be positively valued. Recent writings about American Indians or definitions of Afrocentricity often romanticize minority and Third World cultures as possessing a less aggressive attitude toward nature and a more group-oriented attitude toward social life. Yet these assertions still embody a depressingly familiar set of beliefs: The other lacks the rationality of modern man, or the other's thought process is circular rather than linear. These images of the other are turned not so much on their head as on their side. Assigning positive values to the other may be novel, but the racial and ethnic stereotypes used to arrive at these conclusions are shockingly familiar.

The image of the other is derived not only from assertions about cultural differences. The use of a ballet pose to portray the Reagans and the African witch doctor was probably not consciously intended; neither was it accidental. Negative images need positive associations to make them work. If familiar devices were not used, the consumers of the image would have nothing onto which to graft cultural, racial, or ethnic differences. The politics of producing the image of the other requires a poetics of difference *and* similarity. The familiar becomes the bridge through which we understand the exotic. [...]

Exoticizing often works by inverting the familiar—showing how a well-known practice takes an inverted form among other peoples. The common belief that Africans practice animism is an example. The anthropomorphic tendency of most Western religious belief is inverted, thus creating the notion that there is a class of people who worship beings created not in their own image, but in the image of nature. That such beliefs have never been documented in a non-Western religion has not stopped legions of writers from describing Africans as animists.

Assimilating strategies are less easy to read. They appeal to the audience's sense of the familiar and natural. They don't stop exhibit goers in their tracks with such thoughts as 'What in the world is that?' Assimilating is inherently a more subtle exhibiting strategy than exoticizing. In the so-called primitive or tribal exhibits in fine art museums, art objects are usually isolated from any sort of context. Encased in a vitrine, they are provided with a label that reveals more about the collectors who donated them than about their maker, their iconography, or their history.<sup>2</sup> The governing assumptions behind these displays are that primitive objects mysteriously embody the same aesthetics as modern art forms and that curators and museum audiences are able to appreciate such objects because they are the heirs to a familiar aesthetic tradition whose history encompasses the primitives who make primitive art.

What they truly inherit is a capitalist world system that has acquired things from other peoples and transformed them into objects of modern art.

The controversial 1984 MOMA exhibition "Primitivism" in 20th Century Art' provides us with a classic example of the assimilating strategy.<sup>3</sup> Objects were brought together either because they were known to provide models for modern artists or because they were known to exhibit perceived affinities. For William Rubin, the curator of the exhibition, affinities exist because artists working independently on similar formal problems arrive at similar solutions. This is a pure structuralist interpretation. Considerations of content, such as iconography, or questions about intention and purpose, such as the religious role of an object, or even the examination of the contexts of production and use are omitted as possible factors that influence the final form of the object. History is omitted from consideration. Objects are defined as the products of individuals who accidentally derive their work from a limited stock of available forms. The result is assimilating because cultural and historical differences are obliterated from the exhibiting record. Rubin's exhibit turns the African, American Indian, and Pacific makers of the objects displayed in his exhibition into modern artists who lack only the individual identity and history of modern art.<sup>4</sup> Given the curator's insistence that context is absolutely irrelevant to the exhibition of affinities between the primitive and the modern, the only place in history allowed for the artists of other cultures and their works is as a footnote to the development of art in the West. [...]

The Pompidou Center's answer to MOMA's 'Primitivism' exhibition, the 1989 'Magiciens de la Terre' consisted of two entire halls of artworks derived from vastly different cultural traditions, yet the master narrative for the whole exhibition asserted a fundamental underlying similarity in spirit and intent among the producers of such disparate works of art.<sup>5</sup> In this sense, the curators of 'Magiciens de la Terre' did no better than the curator of 'Primitivism.' By juxtaposing a work by Richard Long with a sand drawing by Australian aboriginal artists, the curators conflated Long's attempt to return to the elemental with the Australian re-creation of an alternative universe—the 'dream time' in which the cultural world was wrested from nature. Given the audience's lack of familiarity with Australian cosmology and art, the act of conflation becomes an act of assimilation: the Australian artists become echoes of Long. As Yogi Berra once said, 'It's *déjà vu* all over again.' There is, in effect, no substantial difference between the 'Magiciens' exhibition's juxtaposition of Long's work with the Australian aborigines' sand drawing and the 'Primitivism' show's juxtaposition of Kenneth Noland's *Circle* painting with a New Guinea shield exhibiting concentric motifs.<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, the curators of 'Magiciens' could be seen as more egalitarian than the curator of 'Primitivism.' They deny that Third World artists and contemporary artists differ in self-consciousness. All, in their view, are equally conscious about the sources and meanings of the art they create; perhaps it

would be fairer to say that all are equally naive about the magical and elemental sources of their art. The cost of this egalitarian strategy of assimilation, however, is the elimination of cultural context, motives, and resources from the record. [...]

No genre of museum has been able to escape the problems of exoticizing and assimilating inherent in exhibiting other cultures. That includes museums that restrict themselves to examining diversity within their own societies. The same museums that make the products of others into a minor digression in the history of modern art also treat the art and artists of their own traditions the same way. What happens to an artist who moves outside of the Paris–New York orbit? How do so-called 'regional' traditions get created in the stories curators tell in exhibitions? Cultural centers and peripheries are determined by museums, not by nature. The only hope is to develop more reflective exhibitions that question their own assumptions. This would have its parallel in the new research in anthropology and history, in what is coming to be called the 'History of the Other' or the 'Anthropology of the Imaginary,' which is less about the examination of people's everyday lives than an examination of how images and ideas about imaginary and unknown worlds come to appear real and even effect what is real. This new field demonstrates how the image of the other is formed partly from images of class, ethnicity, and gender in Western cultures, partly from negation and inversion of Western self-images, and partly from images transmitted by explorers, colonials, and other occupants of cultural and imperial frontiers.<sup>7</sup>

The solution will not be to invent new tropes of representation or new exhibiting devices for museum displays. Every venture into the unknown is based on an analogy with the known. Exoticizing and assimilating are all we have to reach out to the unknown. At best, they enable us to approximate other experiences and to appreciate new forms of art; at worst, they prevent us from truly learning about other cultures and their works of art. The error is not in using these strategies, but in failing to reflect on our own work when making analogies with the other and in treating our works as if they were naturally occurring—as if they did not also carry the unacknowledged baggage of other associations.<sup>8</sup>

[ 'How Museums Define Other Cultures', *American Art*, 5 (1991), 10–15.]