This paper criticizes contemporary relativist scepticism concerning the universal validity of the concepts ‘art’ and the ‘aesthetic’. As an alternative, it offers a normative definition of art based on intrinsic aesthetic meaning contextualized by innovation and refinement in the diachronic history of art media. In section I, anti-foundationalist relativism, and softer versions (found in the Institutional definitions of art) are expounded in relation to art and the aesthetic. In section II, it is argued that anti-foundationalism is conceptually flawed and tacitly racist, and is, in effect, a cultural expression of global consumerism. Section III analyses the scope of the aesthetic in non-western contexts, and then offers a critique of the Institutional definitions as also being conceptually flawed, tacitly racist, and consumerist in orientation. In section IV the positive basis of a normative definition of art is outlined in detail and defended at length against possible relativist objections. It is finally argued that the normative approach taken in this paper shows how cultural conservatism can be a left-wing project.

At first sight, it might seem that defining art is one of those specialist activities with few reverberations outside aesthetics itself. Actually, the task has explosive epistemological and cultural implications that have scarcely received the consideration they deserve.

One of the reasons for this is because the normative dimension of aesthetics has been eclipsed by a fashionable cultural relativism that is sceptical about the objectivity of aesthetic and canonic values. The possibility of such objectivity is central to normative aesthetics. Such an approach argues that some idioms of representation are more deserving of cultural prestige than others, and that some broad dimensions of culture itself have an intrinsic value which other areas do not.

In this paper I will take a normative approach to the definition of art. It will gravitate around a methodological ‘antinomy’ which focuses on the fact that our usual understanding of art and the aesthetic takes them to have universal

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1 By ‘representation’ I mean a mode of reference where the sensible or imaginative dimension of the sign has a logical bearing on its meaning. In this sense the term can encompass abstract art and even some Conceptual forms.
significance, but, at the same time, admits that they are, literally, concepts of western invention. The antinomy sharpens what is at issue here as follows:

**Thesis**: ‘art’ and the ‘aesthetic’ are forms of representation and experience (respectively) with universal validity and a justified claim to cultural privilege.

**Antithesis**: ‘art’ and the ‘aesthetic’ are merely western forms of signification, with no universal validity or justification for their supposedly privileged status.

This antinomy can be resolved from various directions. My own strategy will be to show that the antithesis is self-contradictory in terms of its substance and implications, and that there is no compromise position between it and the thesis. I will, accordingly, defend the thesis through arguments that link it to a creator-based transhistorical, transcultural, normative theory of art and aesthetic value.

In more specific terms, section I will expound the hard ‘genealogical’ version of relativism in relation to its treatment of art and the aesthetic. It will also expound the softer relativism associated with Institutional definitions of art.

Section II will criticize the former view at length, showing that it is tacitly racist and conceptually problematic in its implications for non-western representation. The basis of these problems will be shown to lie in hard relativism’s consumerist exclusion or suppression of the importance of making and the creative process. Section III shows further that the aesthetic is, in fact, an integral part of the making and perception of non-western representational artefacts. On the basis of this, the soft relativism of the Institutional definitions of art will be criticized.

In section IV, I shall trace the significance of western culture’s specialized pursuit of art as an aesthetic activity independent of functional contexts. It will then be argued that this pursuit has significantly developed the logical scope of art media, and that by relating such developments to the horizon of diachronic history, it is possible to establish the idea of a canon and to justify aesthetic judgements on an objective basis. I will extend this position by considering a number of potential relativist objections, at length.

Finally, I will draw some vital general conclusions concerning the definition of art as a way of contesting relativism.

Cultural relativism comes in varying degrees of hardness and softness. The hardest version is the anti-foundationalist or genealogical approach—which is the basis of that transdisciplinary *mélange* sometimes called ‘Theory’. It is inspired in general terms by Foucault, but has also become mixed up with many other
fashionable strains of postmodern thought (so much so that it is sometimes simply called ‘postmodernist’). Keith Moxey summarizes anti-foundationalist critique very lucidly as follows

These perspectives subvert previously established knowledge claims by characterizing them as unavoidably tainted by the values that inform the circumstances of their production. The voice from nowhere, the objectivity posited by foundational epistemology, has come to be seen as suspect because of its identification with Western culture, with the dominance of white races, with masculinist bias, and with middle-class prejudice.⁵

Applying this to art,³ it would follow that art and the aesthetic are social constructs that cannot be legitimately applied to forms of representation outside specifically western contexts. To do so would be (at least tacitly) racist for two related reasons. First, it would involve the appropriation (or in some cases exclusion) of indigenous symbolic practices on the basis of western interests; and second, such appropriation would sever the indigenous practices from that context of ritual and societal value which are the real basis of their meaning.

The anti-foundationalist approach also holds (characteristically) that normative conceptions of art and the aesthetic are problematic even within western culture.⁴ This is because their dominant canons and forms do not significantly reflect the experience of women, or socially disadvantaged classes, or marginalized racial groups.

In respect of this issue, Moxey points out as a warning

... the scholar who affirms the notion of aesthetic value, the idea that there is some spiritual sustenance to be found in works of art which sets them apart from the rest of the paraphernalia of everyday life, without recognizing that such an understanding of aesthetic value is a characteristic of a social elite with the cultural capital to appreciate it.⁵

On these terms, art and the aesthetic are, in effect, a function of the fetishization of luxury commodities and their consumption. They reflect the tastes and interests of the dominant white male middle-class patriarchy. Insofar as the

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³ The genealogical approach is massively influential across most of the leading journals of art history, literature, and cultural theory. Moxey seems to be setting himself up as a something of an ideologist for the tendency. Other influential exponents include W. J. T. Mitchell, Victor Burgin, Judith Butler, and most feminist writers on the arts.

⁴ This angle is especially emphasised by thinkers such as Griselda Pollock, and in more general terms, Pierre Bourdieu. See for example, the former’s *Vision and Difference; Femininity, Feminism, and the Histories of Art* (London, Routledge, 1988), and the latter’s *The Field of Cultural Production* (Oxford, Polity Press, 1993).

⁵ Moxey, *Practice of Persuasion*, p. 132.
disempowered do figure in western art, it is in roles defined by the dominant class rather than by themselves.

The hard relativism of the anti-foundationalist approach, holds, then, that art and the aesthetic are culturally specific terms which not only lack transhistorical value and significance, but are, in fact, implicated in various forms of social oppression.

A rather softer relativist approach to this issue is found in the Institutional definitions of art. These hold that art can be defined, but that aesthetic criteria are not involved (unless, by definition, one defines ‘aesthetic’ as that which pertains to judgements about art”). This means, in effect, that any kind of object or state of affairs can become a work of art if it is designated as such by an artist on the basis of some theoretical position.

The advantage of this approach is that by dispensing with the restrictive necessary link to aesthetic qualities, it seems to democratize art in a way which can encompass hitherto marginalized or excluded idioms. Art thus becomes universally significant by giving up its traditional normative base.

This approach has putatively strong empirical support. For it is a fact that, in the course of the last century, the range of artefacts counted as art has gradually expanded until there are no limits on what kind of thing or states of affairs it can encompass. What we mean by art now involves this expanded field.

It might seem that Institutional definitions offer us, accordingly, a promising way of dealing with the antinomy noted at the start of this paper. On these terms, the Institutional approaches would form a ‘synthesis’ which resolves the antinomy between the universalist thesis and the relativist antithesis by retaining the concept of art as universal but cutting its connection to normative and aesthetic dimensions of meaning. The ‘strong empirical support’ noted above, suggests, indeed, that this synthesis is gradually establishing itself in common usage as what we now mean by ‘art’.

There is, however, a problem with this imagined resolution of the antinomy. It consists in the fact that the antithesis and synthesis are both internally problematic and/or contradictory. I will now show this in relation to the hard relativist position.

II

Hard relativism’s anti-foundationalist strategies hold, characteristically, that art should be understood as a discursive practice whose meanings are generated on the basis of context-dependent social activity. How meaning is produced rather than

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6 The major representatives of Institutional theories are, of course, Arthur Danto and George Dickie. However, a similar strategy is also found in theorists such as Jerrold Levinson, and even in Nelson Goodman’s late work.

7 Thierry de Duve’s *Kant After Duchamp* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1997) takes this approach.
objective ‘foundational’ categories is what is decisive to cultural analysis. The emphasis on production serves to emphasize the shifting and unstable nature of meaning, and the fact that it is given its character by changing power relations (pertaining to race, class, and gender).

On this approach, the artwork is interpreted primarily from a consumerist (that is, spectator or reader) viewpoint as something created as a means to socially meaningful ends. The ends in question constellate around the presentation of information or narrative, or the use of these for persuasive purposes. Representations document, clarify, or distort the experience of the communities who produce and receive them. They centre on the social ‘production’ or ‘construction’ of meaning.

In relation to art, this viewpoint is as radically distorted as it is influential. However, to judge the full scope of its error requires that we explore it, initially, in a non-western context. In this respect, it is clear that the hard relativist position involves a general theory about meaning, rather than one which is confined exclusively to the interpretation of western culture. Indeed, its heavy contextual emphasis might seem to protect against any temptation to judge other cultural products in terms of western standards.

If applied to non-western representation, however, we find a surprising outcome. The discursive practice approach is profoundly—if unintentionally—racist in terms of what it implies for such artefacts. Its status as a consumer-oriented variety of western instrumental reason becomes apparent.

At the heart of this is the way in which the process of making is relegated to an entirely secondary role, or suppressed altogether, and the audience’s involvement is located at the level of consumer rather than participant. These points need great emphasis. The primary significance of art in non-western cultures is as an activity which is formative both from the producer’s viewpoint and from that of the audience. In terms of this, the process of making the object as well as the finished product are sources of significant value. Indeed, Chantal Maillard observes that the purpose of traditional Indian art is

\[\text{to embody the canons, rhythms and matter-spirit life lines of which the universe is made for the intimate participation of those who contemplate the object.}^8\]

This metaphysical complexity of creator and audience involvement is equally pronounced in much Far Eastern and African work. Vis-à-vis the latter for example, Susan M. Vogel notes in relation to tribal art of the Baule:

To approach art from the Baule perspective entails speaking of experiences that are not primarily visual, and of art objects that are animate presences indistinguishable from persons, spirits, and certain prosaic things. Even when the Baule people are clearly

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8 Quoted in the Mukherji paper cited in note 21.
talking only of a wood sculpture, they may describe it as capable of volition and action that most western readers will find incredible.\footnote{Susan M. Vogel, *Baule: African Art/Western Eyes* (New Haven, CT and London, Yale U.P., 1997), p. 83.} In this and many other cases of non-western art,\footnote{See, for example, the debates in *Modern Japanese Aesthetics: A Reader*, ed. Michele Marra (Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 2003).} the whole \textit{special} role that representation characteristically plays is much more than a means to some ritualistic end of communication or persuasion, and the social ‘production’ of meaning. The work is more akin to a living and creative force based on its physical presence as a made artefact or on what that presence embodies.

Hard relativism, of course, could analyse all this through talk of ‘polyvalent’ layers of signification or whatever. But if anthropology, art history, and other analytic disciplines approach representation primarily in these terms, they lack the conceptual wherewithal to make sense of the primacy of making and participation. They are locked into the consumer dimension of experience.

Of course, all \textit{analysis} by definition can only articulate its object at a relatively abstract level, but when we are dealing with sensibly or imaginatively specific artefacts such as pictures, sculptures, poems, dances, and music, this becomes an especially distorting factor that must be compensated for.

Unfortunately, in treating representation as a discursive practice, hard relativism reduces it to just one form of cultural production among others. And even if its special status is recognized, this is usually taken to involve no more than descriptions of the relevant ritualistic beliefs and social values that surround it, rather than those sensible and imaginative factors that are also implicated in representation’s privileged status and which, indeed, \textit{enable} those ritualistic beliefs and social values (an issue I shall consider at length in the next section).

The underlying problem here is that while any intelligent activity and its outcomes might be said to involve the ‘production of meaning’, this is not a sufficient characterization of representational practices. They and cognate areas of experience involve much more by virtue of complex processes of making. Ironically, while the ‘production’ metaphor has its origins in artifice, its application to the semantic domain actually distorts our understanding of the artefact. Far from assimilating meaning on the model of artifice, the strategy has the effect of recontextualizing artifice as a variety of signification.

The details of this are very revealing and worth dwelling upon. First, it is clear that the metaphorical linking of ‘production’ and meaning is driven by a contemporary western interest. For if meaning is understood as something that is ‘produced’ or ‘constructed’, then it seems close to middle-class fantasies of natives and workers, fields and factories. It appears earthy and real, and far removed from the despised ivory towers of pure knowledge. Meaning, in other
words, is here articulated through a metaphor whose political correctness is highly congenial to contemporary western relativism.

Unfortunately this fantasy engenders an even stronger reverse dynamic. For to understand meaning on the metaphor of production or construction, is to reduce it to the means–end model of western instrumental reason. But at the same time, through this reduction, it now appears that artifice and meaning amount to very much the same kind of thing. They can, accordingly, be analysed on a common methodological basis as modes of signification. Ironically enough, by linking artifice to signification the latter is able to dictate the terms in which the former is understood. Complex forms of making are thus reduced to the status of signifying practices, and adapted thereby to the special interests of western academic relativism.

The notion of ‘discursive practices’ involves a globalization of this approach. Such practices are presented as a general way of understanding all cultural products. Every activity—including artifice and representation—is cleansed of its concreteness and/or physicality and repackaged as a mode of meaning or signification. It is, in other words, reduced to an informational schematic within the consumerist discourse of academic relativism. The western empire of signs enters its most complete imperialist phase.

We have found, then, that when thought through in the context of non-western representation, hard relativism’s ‘discursive practices’ emerge as tacitly racist. Such notions embody a distorted version of western instrumental reason as the global basis for understanding cultural activity per se. In its very eagerness to be politically correct, in other words, hard relativism achieves the opposite. And the contradictions do not stop here. For hard relativism’s theory of discursive practices is conceptually tied to an anti-foundationalist epistemology that has its own major logical problem. It consists of the fact (familiar to analytic philosophers but apparently unknown to postmodern thought) that any absolute or hard relativism will always be in contradiction with itself. On these terms, then, we must ask whether or not the theory of discursive practices is itself a discursive practice, or something more.

Its protagonists are logically committed to the view that—despite its global application—the theory cannot claim definitive objective status. It is just another form of discursive practice. This, however, leads to a broader contradiction. In epistemological terms the theory wants to affirm the primacy of historically specific or (in Moxey’s terms) ‘local knowledge’. But this, in itself, is a claim about the universal conditions of knowledge formation. As such, it logically presupposes some meta-theory that can explain the, in effect, foundational role which is here being tacitly assigned to the historically specific (and its component notions such as ‘perspective’ and ‘difference’).

The systematic critique of anti-foundationalism is a major theme of my book Philosophy After Postmodernism; Civilized Values and the Scope of Knowledge (London, Routledge, 2003).
If such a meta-theory insists that all conceptual schemas merely have truth-value relative to contexts of production and use and that this is a brute unanalyzable fact about the world, then the act of ‘closure’ in the italicized clause of the sentence contradicts the openness that is affirmed in the first part. If, however, we affirm the first part of the sentence alone, then this requires a meta-theory to explain how diversity of perspectives is possible, and why it should have a decisive epistemological role. This, of course, restores the foundational dimension.

Hard relativism’s notion of representation as a discursive practice is, therefore, not only problematic in both racist and epistemological terms through its unrecognized western consumerism, but is also part of a more general self-contradictory discourse.

III

As one might expect, these and related problems carry over into hard relativism’s critique of art and the aesthetic. At first sight, however, this might not appear to be the case. For when describing the special status of representation in non-western cultures earlier on, the complex processes and experiences involved seem to be metaphysical or religious rather than aesthetic. If, therefore, ‘art’ and the ‘aesthetic’ do not figure in the special status of such representation and the responses to it, then the case for them being fetishized, exclusively western cultural constructs remains intact.

The case is, however, terribly mistaken. Superficially, it sets up non-western representation as an authentic ‘Other’ against which we can criticize the fetishized western concepts of art and the aesthetic. However, through its implied marginalization of making, hard relativism also conceals or distorts non-western representation’s aesthetic core.

It is true that the terms art and the aesthetic are western concepts, but what they conceptualize is something of transhistorical and transcultural significance. It focuses on what follows from representation’s sensible and/or imaginative specificity.

These factors can be clarified by asking a question that is steadfastly avoided by hard relativism, namely how is it possible for non-western representation to be invested with the extraordinary levels of ‘ritual’ metaphysical and religious significance noted earlier? What is it about the making of such representations which facilitates the belief that they can bond the creative process, the work, the world, and the audience in an intimate living relationship?

An easy answer is that processes of mimesis are often accompanied by the belief that it enables one to become the object of imitation, or at least share in its being. But why should beliefs of this kind arise? Is it just a case of the poor non-westerners being wholly deluded by superstition, or is there something about mimesis in itself which can act, at least in part, as the ground of such belief?
The ubiquitous high regard in which representation is held suggests, of course, the latter.

Now it might be argued that the sensory or imaginative vividness of mimesis simply give its meanings more immediate cognitive impact than those of mere linguistic reports. Such vividness represents its objects as if (however vaguely) they were immediately present to the body—and thence potentially amenable to manipulation. In principle—the argument might continue—this is a sufficient explanation of why representation can engender and sustain broader networks or metaphysical and religious belief. They are grounded in a sense of control of the object that arises in the making of representations. There is, accordingly, no need to bring in the aesthetic.

However, the work qua representation (unless the creator is genuinely deluded) must also be understood to have at least some difference from that which it represents—if only through the artist and audience’s knowledge that the work was created. This means that it cannot be sufficiently characterized as an indirect expression of control. There is always an additional element involving the dialectic of cognitive proximity to, and distance from, the represented object—a dialectic mediated (in the audience’s case) by the activity of another individual or creative ensemble. Indeed, in representation all the factors in this relationship mutually enhance one another. There is formative power at work in and through the sensible and/or imaginative particularity of the medium.

This extraordinary bonding—or ‘at homeness’ with the sensible world—is intrinsic to the making and direct perception of representations, and is composed of varieties of aesthetic experience.12 These intrinsically valuable experiences facilitate the belief that representation is the kind of privileged activity which can realize the metaphysical and religious effects noted earlier. Through the power of aesthetic embodiment, these abstract ideas find an appropriate and distinctive sensible manifestation. Belief in their ritual potency is thus enabled by their aesthetic power.

To those who imagine that the aesthetic amounts to little more than ‘significant form’ this analysis may come as a surprise. The surprise is understandable in that most thinkers in the analytic tradition have been content to use ‘aesthetic qualities’ or ‘expressive properties’ and the like as logically primitive terms. Even twentieth-century formalism has tended to stress those ‘felt’ effects arising from the contemplation of harmonies of line and colour, etc., rather than the ontological structures whose aesthetic embodiment makes those effects possible.

However, the most substantial and profound theories of the aesthetic do engage with such structures. Kant,13 Schiller, Schopenhauer, Hegel, Heidegger,
and Merleau-Ponty (among others) all have a cognitive emphasis in their theories of art which allows clear connections to be made with the non-western avenues of meaning described above.

Most notably, all these thinkers see the aesthetic as an enhancement of our cognitive powers which can only be achieved through the reciprocity of sensible form, powers of understanding, and, in the case of art, creative transformation. As such, the varieties of the aesthetic make at least indirect connections with other fundamental areas of experience. (Astonishingly enough, even Clive Bell takes us in this same direction. His extreme formalism is underwritten by a much neglected account of its broader metaphysical significance.14)

We find, then, that the hard relativist approach to art utilizes an analytic framework which grossly distorts the significance of non-western representation by implicitly degrading the importance of making. Additionally, in its reductive eagerness to stigmatize the aesthetic as a merely western construct, it attacks a notion that is fundamental to non-western traditions, and that is, indeed, probably many thousands of years older than its western conceptualizations. It is this which constitutes real cultural contradiction.

Matters fare equally badly with soft relativism as found in the Institutional definitions of art. They dispense with making and aesthetic formation in favour of acts of designation that can accommodate the western Duchampian tradition. Such theory, indeed, implicitly makes that tradition into the paradigm of artistic creation insofar as ready-mades and the like focus on the art-constituting act of designation, rather than mere distractions such as aesthetic formation. Around thirty thousand years of worldwide artistic creation is thus redefined on the basis of the supposedly definitive status of the ‘ready-made’.

I have criticized this position on logical grounds at great length elsewhere.15 For present purposes, however, I will consider the interesting light it casts on the putative ‘strong’ empirical support for Institutional definitions that I noted earlier. This support consists of the de facto truth that, throughout the last century the concept of art has developed in a way which allows any item or state of affairs, in principle, to be designated ‘work of art’. To put this more bluntly—like it or not—it is a fact that artistic meaning has now been entirely colonized by specifically western theory and its managerial support structures.

Now while the artworld may assume, thereby, that colonization by the west has been ratified by the sheer passage of empirical history, the moral dimension argues otherwise. The fact that western cultural colonization has evaded the

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exposure of its tacit racism for so long is a philosophical scandal of the highest order. And even if we cynically allow that the passage of time deadens our sensitivity to established moral turpitude, there is no guarantee that this will remain so.

In this respect, we should recall that at the start of the twentieth century the British Empire encompassed about a third of the world. In de facto terms, its truth seemed unchallengeable. In terms of de juris issues, however, things changed, its subjects articulated their anger, and its aspirations were gradually destroyed by events. The Institutional and cognate theories of art would do well to be mindful of this precedent. However naturalized their position may seem to be, there is always the possibility that it will be destabilized by an accumulation of logical and ethical critiques such as the present one.

IV

I shall now consider an important objection to my arguments which will also allow me to introduce some further positive features of the normative definition of art.

It has been acknowledged that art and the aesthetic are concepts of western origin. But if this is the case, to describe them as having being colonized by the west in tacitly racist terms might appear to make no sense. Unfortunately, it makes perfect sense. For while the terms ‘art’ and the ‘aesthetic’ are western, that which they articulate is not. However, it is important to clarify what is involved here in more detail.

I earlier described the significance of a complex zone of experience that is intrinsic to representation. This experience—whatever name we give to it—is distinctive to the perception of sensible or imaginative representation, and is presupposed by the complex bodies of association and belief that different cultures are able to derive from such representation. The production of artefacts grounded in such experience cuts across historical and cultural boundaries and needs a name of its own—even if it is not pursued separately from functional or ritual contexts.

In the west, the term ‘aesthetic’ names the relevant area of experience, and the term ‘art’ names the productive activity in which it is embodied. Now while these terms name existence independently of western interests, the fact that they have been named at all independently of function is indicative of a special relation to them. Through its political and economic expansion, the west has developed cultural contexts and techniques whereby art and the aesthetic have been developed as specialist interests in their own right. This has enabled the respective representational media to have their logical scope developed to a quite extraordinary degree.

Now, as we have seen, the consumerist mind-set of hard relativism negotiates such media primarily on a western means–end model addressed exclusively to
what their social meanings are. This not only diminishes the significance of making in general, but, in particular, the way in which individual representations are positioned in relation to the *logical scope* of their medium. Such positioning involves a complex negotiation between the medium as a semantic and syntactic code and the way in which meaning focuses, fundamentally, on the individual artefact’s way of embodying it.

We are thus led to the decisive point. The example of non-western art shows the centrality of making. This is equally important for western art. For to develop the logical scope of a medium is—literally—to *make* new idioms of representation. If a work *achieves* something in terms of developing this scope—that is to say, if it innovates or refines in relation to it, then (over and above any broader social functions it may serve) the work has an objective value which representations that merely repeat established patterns and formulae of production do not.

By virtue of its *creative difference* from other representations, it opens up new possibilities of aesthetic experience. *This is the basis of an authentic canon of major works and artists or creative ensembles.*

These arguments invite four important questions. First, why should the medium-based creative differences just noted be regarded as anything other than mere technical inventions; second, why should they be of any interest to anyone other than a western audience; third, who decides which differences are creative and which are not; and, fourth, why is the ‘logical scope’ of a medium not simply relative to the cultural context in which it is produced?

The answer to the first two questions is broadly the same, and has yet another interesting paradoxical outcome for relativism. By developing the logical possibilities of a medium, the artist opens up new ways of presenting the world. This means that the relation to medium and audience is renewed and developed in complex aesthetic terms.

Such aesthetic renewal and development is almost a model of what life (in its positive modes) symbolically aspires to, and it also connects, of course, with the fundamental experience intrinsic to perceiving representation that I described earlier. It is, accordingly, transcultural and transhistorical in terms of its significance. In most cultures, this aesthetic experience remains closely integrated with metaphysical and religious ritual. In the west, however, it has been gradually developed independently from this context, to both its advantage and disadvantage.

The advantage is the fact that the variety of idioms in specific media have been more diversified in the west because of the development of art and aesthetic culture as specialist practices. The disadvantage is that this specialization has been so intensive as to exhaust the possibility of further revolutionary innovation—while leaving the expectation of such innovation in place.

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16 The idea of a canon of visual art is argued in detail in ch. 4 of my *The Transhistorical Image; Philosophizing Art and its History* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2002).
In respect of the latter, I have shown in great detail elsewhere (in relation to the visual arts) that there are conceptual limits to what communicative codes such as pictorial representation can sustain in terms of their logical development. When those limits are reached, art pushes in new directions—such as the development of abstracting and abstract tendencies. When these have reached their limits, the expectation of continuing innovation leaves only one more possibility, namely ad hoc signification wherein an item or state of affairs is designated as art by an artist on the basis of his or her specific interests.

Unfortunately this entails that artistic meaning is now almost exclusively directed towards, and consumed by, the western artworld’s managerial structure, that is, a loosely defined network of critics, art historians, curators, collectors, and journalists. This gives us our paradox. While the arguments rehearsed a little earlier show the potentially universal significance of innovation or refinement in relation to the logical scope of the medium, recent western ‘Conceptual’ art practice collapses this. ‘Artistic’ meaning is locked into the world of managerial and market interests. It becomes exclusively an object of concern to western cultural fashion or those who have been colonized by such fashion.

We are thus led to the third question posed earlier, namely who decides which differences are creative in terms of how the logical scope of a medium is developed. Hard relativism (especially in its feminist and postcolonialist forms) holds that this canonical question is decided by white male middle-class patriarchy on the basis of its preferences and interests. Its affirmation of this, however, is characteristically based on an almost fanatical consumerist viewpoint. If, however, we opt for the non-racist medium-and-making based approach that hard relativism suppresses or marginalizes, rather different conclusions must be drawn.

The most important point is that developments of a medium’s logical scope can, in principle be identified on the basis of analysis and rational argument based on the evidence of comparative history. Masaccio’s importance, for example, is based primarily on the aesthetic effects that are enabled through his ‘clinching’ of mathematical perspective as a method for integrating pictorial space, plastic values, and narrative meaning.

Likewise, while an avant-gardist like Gauguin may represent women in a way that conflicts with the moral standpoint of western postmodern female academics and their colonial subjects, his way of articulating pictorial space opens up possibilities that any other artist can work with. In this respect, artists such as Paula Modersohn-Becker and Frida Kahlo are able to build on these possibilities.

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17 These limits are explored in *The Transhistorical Image*; and in my *The Language of Twentieth-century Art; A Conceptual History* (New Haven, CT and London, Yale U.P., 1997).

18 For example, the great bulk of Griselda Pollock’s work treats pictorial art as though it had no significance over and above its role as visual documentation or in relation to the disclosure of social, race, and gender ‘positioning’.
and articulate them on their own terms. The innovations and refinements that an artist adds to a medium’s logical scope do not remain essentially tied to any race, class, or gender interest. They can be used, abused, and creatively transformed according to circumstances.

Of course, women and non-western racial groups have been institutionally excluded from participation in the development of the canon. But if, as I am arguing, the canon is conceptually connected to the logical scope of art media as modes of making representational artefacts, then this has no necessary bearing on the validity of canonical judgements. If world history had been matriarchal in its direction, the same possibilities would have been open for development. We would be talking about different individuals involved in the developmental process, but what was developed would involve reference to the same criteria of making. Canonical judgements, in other words, would be determined by the kind of productive activity being judged, rather than by the identity of the judges.

And again we are led to a paradox. One of the great relativist precepts is that a work’s meaning is historically specific. It is determined primarily by the societal conditions of its production, the audiences to which it was originally addressed, and the subsequent history of its reception. Any alternative to this is deemed ‘ahistorical’.

However, this consumerist standpoint actively suppresses the other great dimension of cultural history, namely diachronic transmission—the way in which what is made at one time serves to enable and/or contextualize what is made at other times. It is this comparative horizon which allows canonical judgements to be made on an objective basis. Such judgements can aspire to objectivity through arguments concerning the diachronic history of art media as developing modes of creative artifice rather than as sources of consumer gratification or resentment alone.

In this way, indeed, aesthetic judgements concerning art are themselves authentically historicized. For while one can simply make arguments as to why one artist or work is objectively more important than another (vis-à-vis the logical scope of a medium) in the final analysis what really counts is something more. It is the fact that these judgements centre on achievements that open up new perceptual or imaginative ways of engaging with the world. If one artist does it first and others are able to take it further, then interpretational perspectives, in the broadest sense, are transformed. The world is aesthetically different.

I shall now consider the fourth and final objection noted earlier. Surely what counts as representation is culturally specific, and thence the development of a medium’s logical scope will likewise be culturally determined. It should also be emphasized that in many cultures what is most important about representation is that it aspires to repeat the time-honoured idioms rather than ‘develop’ them in new ways.

In response to this one must note that in many cases the same communicative
code operates across great historical and cultural divides. Pictorial and sculptural representation, for example, are based on the conventionalized use of visual resemblance to achieve reference to *kinds* of three-dimensional items or states of affairs. (If such a work could not be recognized as depicting at least one such three-dimensional visual kind there would be no grounds for calling it a representation.)

This code of visual reference is found world-wide. What differs radically is the cultural iconography of the code. What the ‘likenesses’ or kinds of depicted subject-matter mean and how they are used will admit of the most extreme variety. If, however, we are talking about the logical development of a representational code *qua* code, we mean ways in which its basic modes of reference and idioms of physical articulation are extended, rather than how it used in specific cultural contexts. Such usages may be instrumental in stimulating logical development, but they are not constitutive of it. This means that in a culture which focuses on a medium’s logical scope (in terms of semantic, syntactic, and phenomenal structure) what it develops in that respect has a genuine transhistorical and transcultural validity in that it opens up new ways for the code to be applied.

Now if a culture places emphasis on repetitions of the same it will not have a universal canonic significance, unless its mode of representation contains a logical element or elements which have not yet been developed elsewhere. This does not mean that such a representational practice is ‘inferior’, for it may well be that its practices—however repetitive—have a genuine distinctiveness from which other cultures could learn.

The upshot of all these arguments is that we can distinguish art from mere representation on a normative basis. The term ‘art’ is necessitated (as a universally significant category) when representations are able to achieve something distinctive by extending the logical scope of a specific medium through innovation or refinement. The normative definition of art, in other words, is bound up with both the intrinsic aesthetic significance of representation, and the comparative historical relations of its specific instances. Historical distinctiveness is, in part, constitutive of a work’s aesthetic value.

CONCLUSION

At the beginning of this paper I claimed that the task of defining art raised ‘explosive’ epistemological and ethical issues. By now it should be clear that the dramatic tone of this observation is entirely warranted. The antinomy between the ‘thesis’ (of art and the aesthetic’s universality) and the relativist ‘antithesis’ (assigning only western significance to them) has been resolved.

19 For an elaboration of the logical basis of pictorial representation see the Appendix to my book *The Transhistorical Image*. 
This was done by showing that hard relativism and the Institutional definitions of art entail various contradictions and tacitly racist attitudes that radically problematize their theories. Both turn out to be surfaces of a narcissistic western globalism which colonizes the cultural world with its distorted consumerist mind-set (while fondly imagining that it is doing something of the opposite significance).

Relativism’s problems centre on the exclusion or marginalization of making and its profound connections with aesthetic experience. I restored the importance of these factors in relation to non-western art, but also showed them to have a transhistorical and transcultural significance. Indeed, by further emphasizing the significance of works which make refinements or innovations that extend the logical scope of a medium, I was able to offer the basis of objective justification for art historical and aesthetic judgements concerning the ‘canon’ of art.

The strategies and arguments summarized here have a much more general significance. For varieties of relativist anti-foundationalism pervade all aspects of contemporary culture. From geography to cultural studies, recent continental philosophy, and the social sciences, we find anti-foundationalist sentiments professed almost to the degree of an orthodoxy in some areas. What makes these so dangerous is that—while nominally being radically opposed to it—they tacitly perpetuate both the mind-set which is at work in global consumerism and the mediocre politics which sustains it.

This all converges on a ‘master narrative’ which holds that conceptual schemes are culturally specific and have no validity outside their individual contexts. At first sight this is extremely egalitarian. But it takes away a supreme right, namely the right to be true or false, right or wrong in objective terms.

In this respect, consider the First Pillar of Islam, which holds that there is no God but God, and his prophet is Muhammad. For Muslims this not a social construction but rather a truth about the nature of things. And this is how conceptual schemes mainly work outside the western anti-foundationalist appropriation of them. They are intended as universal truth-claims concerning the objective nature of reality. To recontextualize them as culturally specific social constructs is, in effect, to degrade them and their believers. It is to define them within a new global world-order where they cannot be what they take themselves to be. They are, rather elements in a conceptual zoo whose keeper is western anti-foundationalism and its global consumerist infrastructure.

This tacit racism can be challenged head-on by means of systematic refoundational epistemology and ethics. Or it can be resisted in a more piecemeal way through criticizing its specific manifestations. In this paper I have made a move in the latter direction. Through defining art on a normative basis, one is, at the same time, contesting the nature of culture per se in the most vital terms.

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376 DEFINING ART, DEFENDING THE CANON, CONTESTING CULTURE

20 I offer this in Philosophy After Postmodernism.
We are thus led to a final and extremely positive paradox. For insofar as relativism, tacit racism, and global consumerism are manifestations of the same *market-driven* western mind-set, this carries an extraordinary critical implication. It means that *cultural conservatism* of the critical and normative kind advocated here, is now a *left-wing* project.21

Paul Crowther, International University Bremen, PO Box 750561, D-28725 Bremen, Germany. Email: p.crowther@iu-bremen.de

21 The arguments in this paper came together through a reading of Parul Dave Mukherji’s unpublished paper ‘Visual Politics and the Binary Logic of Art History: From Maillard’s “Western Misunderstandings” to Bryson’s “Gaze and the Glance”.’ This was presented at a symposium hosted by the Slovene Society of Aesthetics in October 2002.