



Writing Visual Culture

Design History, Cultural Studies, and the Emergence of the Pop Connoisseurs

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Abstract

The institutionalisation and growth of design history within higher education institutions in the UK coincided with the growth of cultural studies (the 1970s and 1980s marking periods of ascendancy and consolidation). Indeed, both cultural studies and design history often shared the same institutional spaces: the arena of contextual studies within art colleges and art schools that predominantly taught practical art and design degrees. While design history and cultural studies might often seem at odds in terms of political objectives and pedagogic strategies, their shared energies become clearer when seen from the perspective of the much larger histories of changing 'structures of knowledge': both fields have sought to open up a space between investigations of authored activity (for instance political history, literary criticism and art history) and anonymous or amorphous activity (sociology, anthropology, economics); both fields have championed an approach to everyday life and to 'new' social and cultural agents.



What follows is an initial attempt to locate the emergence of design history within a much larger account of what Immanuel Wallerstein calls, rather grandly, 'world systems analysis' (Wallerstein 2004). The point here is that when we move away from an 'internal' account of design history, one that sees it as emerging when specific actors form associations or establish specific design history courses and degrees, then other patterns can emerge. But this also means de-emphasizing the autonomy of design history, and for a marginal discipline this can sometimes seem counter-intuitive. My claim is not that my provisional and sketchy account of design history is more worthwhile than the more familiar accounts that have retold design history's beginnings within the teaching of contextual studies within British art and design education in the late 1960s through to the late 1970s. It is simply that it allows various commonalities to become visible that could, if developed, forge some links and some shared interests across design history, media studies, cultural studies, art and architectural history, film studies and so on. My wager, at this initial stage, is that the partial surrender of an autonomous history could be worth the gain of possible intellectual connections. Of course, in a sector (of higher education institutions), where disciplinary fields are regularly and routinely asked to launch defensive and protective fronts as they compete against each other for scarce resources and jobs, such an intellectual project may seem naïve or even flirting with disaster.

My hypothesis is that a new configuration of connoisseurialism (one aimed at popular and mass-produced cultural forms, rather than at unique authorial statements) links the emergence of a series of disciplinary fields, which ironically have connoisseurialism (in a previous configuration) in their sights as antagonists. This hypothesis also suggests that we seek to understand the general conditions of possibility that allow this emergence to occur. This is not something I was able to fully address in what follows. A fuller rendering of this argument would need to be able to see the conjunctural relations between a new postwar social mobility, the affordances of a new era of mass communication (particularly in relation to television), and general levels of affluence in the 1960s and 70s. A case study for seeing these elements coalescing in interesting ways would be the emergence of the Open University in Britain in 1969. But that is for another day.



I've always been intrigued by the tonal similarities between two texts that in their own specific ways announce the modern, postwar projects of design history and cultural studies. The two texts are Reyner Banham's 'The Atavism of the Short-Distance Mini-Cyclist' from 1964 and Raymond Williams' 'Culture is Ordinary' from 1958 (Banham 1964; Williams 1987 [1958]: 3-14). The former could be seen as a rallying cry for design history and criticism; the latter a manifesto for cultural studies. They both mine the same territory in terms of class and culture. The story they tell is one of social mobility in the early postwar period, of working-class boys becoming 'scholarship boys' and ending up with PhDs. Such mobility offers them a perspective not simply to critique the intellectual hegemony of what Williams calls 'the selective tradition' of consecrated, elite culture, but also the sentimentalism that is often the result when the academy does attempt to take into consideration popular tastes (which were often grasped as the folksy tastes of a bygone era). Both writers insist on the importance of dealing with a current actuality of mass-production, of mass media forms, of North American cultural forms, and doing this while maintaining a left-wing set of commitments towards progressive thinking, and class identity.

This cursory recognition of similarities across the two disciplines suggests that it would be worth looking at design history and cultural studies, not as two distinct fields, but as aligned projects that are part of a much larger shift in knowledge production, shaped by varied historical forces. It would mean enquiring about the determining factors that allowed people like Banham and Williams, but also other writers including many of the women who were active in both design and cultural studies, to open up a rift in the academy that might allow non-sanctified objects into the intellectual conversation. This would mean – I think – taking 'design history' away from a narrative that repeats pragmatic and theoretical adjustments to teaching within art schools after the various Coldstream reports and recommendations in Higher Education within England and Wales.

I want to do this by offering a counter-narrative to the one that usually undergirds the story of the emergence of design history and cultural studies. In this I want to suggest that design history and cultural studies emerge as disciplines that deploy a form of connoisseurial attention to objects not usually accorded such attention. I realise this flies in the face of nearly all the narratives that explain what characterises both design history and cultural studies, which is the way that they set out precisely to abandon the values of connoisseurialism. Much, of course, will depend on how we describe the connoisseurial.

Let me just give you a couple of examples of how the connoisseurial – in one guise – is used to stand in for all that a putative design history, emerging in the 1970s might set itself



against. This is Jon Bird describing the situation in Middlesex Polytechnic as it established 'art and design history courses, a new cultural studies and MA design history degree' in the 1970s: 'we wished to be actively involved in the rapidly developing specialism of design history by specifically resisting tendencies to reproduce the descriptive and historiographical categories of bourgeois art history' (Bird 1986: 33). Bird goes on to explain what bourgeois art history is or was: it signifies 'the historical development of a discipline of connoisseurship which in its distinctive forms valorizes the individual (male) artist, the masterpiece, and the idealized Nation-State, as the dominant and appropriate objects of study' (Bird 1986: 39, n. 5). A similar origin story is supplied by Fran Hannah and Tim Putnam in their *Block* article 'Taking Stock in Design History' from 1980. They quote Bridget Wilkins when she suggests that the sort of history of design that links 'art deco' to De Stijl or constructivism, is not 'Design History' but 'applied art connoisseurship'. While they recognise that 'the connoisseurial method' 'knows the periodisation of design criteria intimately', they also insist that it is blind to the way that it 'operates within boundaries of current social cachet and market valuation which it does not need or want to see' (Hannah and Putnam 1996 [1980]).

There are two things that are worth saying at this point. Firstly, that at *exactly the same time* that 'Design History' is identifying itself as 'not [bourgeois] art history', so too are a significant faction of art historians. Thus, design history and the so-called 'new art history' are co-terminus (in the UK the Association of Art Historians [recently rebranded as the Association for Art History] is established in 1974, and the Design History Society in 1977). And co-terminus with this are other 'new' (inter)disciplinary initiatives such as cultural studies and film studies which purposefully reject a straightforwardly evaluative version of aesthetic attention. So, the anti-connoisseurship of design history, allows us to recognise a general trend amongst forms of historical and critical endeavour (aimed at films, industrial and domestic design, TV and newspapers, and so on). Such research fields have had previous incarnations, but ones that were often the province of amateur historians and existed outside of the academy and often avoided theoretical self-reflexivity. The second thing worth saying is that the description of connoisseurship as besotted with individual genius and an expensive cannon of art is both *historically* accurate (as it existed in the postwar period) and fundamentally misconceived. This needs some explanation.

The image of connoisseurship as a central antagonist, which as we have seen underwrites the desire for design history (and a similar set of references could be used for describing the emergence of cultural studies) and can be seen to determine the way that these new disciplines fashion themselves as oppositional, is of a tired, self-satisfied, pompous connoisseurialism, with one foot in the grand auction houses of Europe and



America and the other firmly wedged under the high tables of prestigious universities. This image had an actuality to it that is best captured by first person testimony. This is the art historian Robert Rosenblum remembering his graduate experience at New York University's Institute of Fine Arts:

My graduate training in the 1950s at the Institute of Fine Arts was often marked by the mysteries of attribution, usually supported by the discernment of quality, another word that evoked initiation into a cult. I vividly recall seminars in which we gazed silently at Italian paintings and drawings in order to determine their authorship. The ambience was often like a spiritualist seance in which the ghost of Giotto or Giulio Romano might be conjured up to claim authorship or denounce an imposter. [...] John Pope-Hennessy, known for papal infallibility in attributions, was heard explaining impatiently to a puzzled beginner, 'It's not by Francesco di Giorgio because it's not by Francesco di Giorgio'. [...] The familiar phrases 'So-and-so has an eye' or 'So-and-so has no eye' speak for the exclusivity of this society of connoisseurs (Rosenblum 2005: 3).

In the 1970s this was the sort of image that sprang to mind when people mentioned connoisseurship and it is an image that is still in circulation. As Richard Neer has suggested, any attempt to resuscitate connoisseurialism as an activity would hardly benefit from the welcoming embrace of self-declared connoisseurs. My argument, however, is not that connoisseurialism should be resuscitated. My intention is simply to observe how a new kind of connoisseurialism can be seen at work in design history and cultural studies. Indeed, it would be by observing this that these disciplines might want to recognise some general similarities across disciplines, as well as, perhaps, limiting the amount of effort that is put into connoisseurialism, albeit under names like 'genre study' and so forth. What remains clear is that we need a different understanding of connoisseurialism (one not possessed by the ghosts of John Pope-Hennessy and others) if we are going to see a version of it at work in design history, cultural studies, film studies, and other cognate disciplines.

To see connoisseurialism at work in archaeology sees attribution fulfilling other kinds of duties than establishing if a painting is worth millions because it is by Rubens or a few thousand because it is simply in the style of Rubens. The simple definition of connoisseurship as 'the attribution of artifacts to particular hands, or times, or places' (Neer



2005: 1) looks very different if an attribution is being made about which region a Victorian needlepoint sampler is from, or if a film belongs to film noir or another film cycle. Looked at from across disciplines and within a much larger historical purview, we could say that connoisseurship emerged as a solution to a specific set of problems. And it emerges not just in what we now call art history, but in museums of antiquarianism, in archaeology, and in the auction house. The greatest period of connoisseurship was the later nineteenth century and early twentieth century and the main proponents were often concerned with the medieval period (or earlier archaeological periods). It was a response to the fact that many of the artefacts of the ancient and early modern world were anonymous, or had been misattributed, had lost any connection with a place of origin (as they had been pillaged, sold, and sold again). In this, the first aspect of connoisseurship is not to decree value but to try and establish a site of production.

Richard Neer, an art historian specialising in Classical Athenian vase painting argues that: 'When the archaeologist classifies a newly excavated potsherd as Naxian Geometric or al-Ubaid ware, she is using connoisseurial method: determining origin on the basis of style. Connoisseurship differs from ordinary pottery sorting only in degree, not in kind' (Neer 2003: 3). For Neer connoisseurialism of one kind or another (and stripped of its attachment to authorship) is fundamental to any act of scholarship that categorises the world and then mobilises those categories as evidence of culture. So, we could say that a connoisseurial perspective isn't significantly tied to the question of value and quality. Indeed, the questions it is most curious about are more fundamentally taxonomical: what kind of a thing is this? What kind of activity produced it? How do we group it with things that are like it?

It is perhaps no wonder that the endless deliberation of whether a painting is by Rubens or not, and seeing this as the pinnacle of an approach to art, could feel so decadent and so entitled by the postwar period. A connoisseurial perspective aimed at authorship isn't particularly attuned to a culture where everything is already 'attributed'. In a world where the style of a painter is often recognisable at a hundred yards, the idea of a connoisseur deliberating for hours over seemingly incidental marks so as to say who it is by might seem both extravagant and anachronistic. Indeed, Harold Rosenberg suggested that sometimes modern styles (he was writing in the 1950s) are an extended signature. We recognise a painting by Pollock, for instance, when we enter the room. Of course, in a banal sense, connoisseurialism might be useful in the auction houses when trying to authenticate a Pollock or a Chagall (though the provenance documents would also receive a form of connoisseurial attention) but we don't need to it to distinguish between a Pollock and a Chagall. Or between a Pollock and a Robert Motherwell. But learning that such paintings are



called 'abstract expressionism', and being attuned to their energies could also fit under the capacious umbrella that Neer gives to connoisseurialism.

For Richard Neer connoisseurship is a fundamental activity of recognition:

everything that counts as evidence for human activity in the distant past—derives from some form of connoisseurship in that *it is connoisseurs who identify the evidence as such*. [...] Many of the attributions involved in this degree-zero connoisseurship are so basic as to remain tacit. For example, the seemingly obvious distinction between man-made artifacts and natural things involves a tacit attribution. When an excavator throws away what she perceives to be pebbles and saves what she perceives to be artifacts, she is making a connoisseurial judgment: in the broadest possible sense, the artifacts are those things she sees as being in the style of humans (Neer 2005: 5).

For Neer this means that connoisseurialism is the basic ingredient of any investigation of human culture. For him it is a form of attention that overcomes a fake distinction between formalism and historicism. But we could say that the connoisseurial method is likely to be misused during a period where so-called high art is perhaps 'over-attributed'. What does it do when it hasn't got to arbitrate between fakes and originals, when it hasn't got to 'place' an anonymous shard of pottery? In one sense, it then becomes the 'eye' that claims this Cezanne is exquisite, or that this an antique Queen Anne chair rather than a replica.

And this is where my argument comes back to the 'co-terminus' emergence of cultural studies, film studies and design history (along with a 'new art history'). They can be seen as responding to a moment when the connoisseurial curiosity is again aimed at fundamentals of attribution, taxonomy and expertise. Take, for instance, a film. Who is it 'by'? Why would we give it the name of a director when a play is given the authorial name of the writer? So, something like 'auteur theory', which suggests that an 'auteur' could be found in the cinematographer, or the lighting designer is clearly a connoisseurial response to the collective endeavour of Hollywood. So, we could say that an 'educational' project of attending to industrial and domestic design, of attending to 'industrial' entertainment through mass media (film, radio, TV, magazines, etc.), as well as an anthropological approach to modern society all appeared in rough synchronicity as a multipronged response to a shared



situation. Many of the significant design historians that started publishing at the end of the 1970s and early 80s were involved with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham (as has been noted by Grace Lees-Maffei 2009: 361 ff.), which suggests that similar kinds of methodological sensitivities were at work in both fields.

But 'an attention to the new conditions of design' is much bigger than a bit of cultural studies and a bit of art history. We can see it, for instance, in the work of the Independent Group and in various global Pop Artists and Photorealists who often take 'mod cons' (modern conveniences), cars, new urban scenes, forms of mediation (like TV) as their insistent object of attention. If we want to get a sense of how 'connoisseurialism' emerged as a newly energised focus, which was also newly resistant to elite high culture, then we need to recognise a new connoisseurial *problematic* that had as its object the taxonomical problem of a new mass industrial culture. We could, for instance, look at a book by Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel, aimed at teachers, called *The Popular Arts*, and published in 1964. Hall and Whannel suggest that the drive that undergirds their project is twofold. They are social changes. One is the revolution in communications. We could also see this more broadly as a revolution in production – the production of things, knowledge, entertainment. Radio, for instance, relies on new electronic and plastics industries as well as new ways of producing and disseminating music and other forms of entertainment. The other is a revolution in consumption. This is Whannel and Hall:

The second is a more recent development and can be identified, not so much with the industrial revolution as a whole, but rather with one particular phase of that revolution – the phase of high consumption and increased leisure which has become a feature of some societies in the middle of this century. During this phase a widespread change in attitudes and style reveals itself among the younger generation – a change which reflects itself partly their enhanced economic status and partly the changing design of social values in the society as a whole (Hall and Whannel 1964: 20).

In recognising 'a younger generation' who might be more finely attuned to the nuances of mass culture, Hall and Whannel are noticing that connoisseurial authority is shifting. In Thomas Crow's recent Paul Mellon Lectures, titled 'Searching for the Young Soul Rebels: Style, Music, and Art in London 1956-1969', he describes the natty dressed, modern Jazz



loving 'mods' as connoisseurs of entertainment and style: clothes, music, scooters, are their specialist topics, the objects of their expertise. For Banham, it was the fan and mass cultural aficionado who were the new pop-connoisseurs. Such connoisseurialism required being media savvy: to be 'skilled in the use of the medium' was to be 'trained to extract every subtlety, marginal meaning, overtone or technical nicety from any of the mass media. A Pop Art connoisseur, as opposed to a fine art connoisseur. The opposition, however, is only one of taste, otherwise the training required to become a connoisseur is the same' (Banham 1981 [1963]: 94). When Banham names something as 'Pop art' he is not referring to the artworks associated with Warhol, but with the commercial culture associated with Hollywood, Coca-Cola, and comics.

But connoisseurial curiosity (rather than connoisseurial complacency) isn't – as I've been at pains to point out – aimed primarily at reshuffling the pack of values, it is also aimed fundamentally at the taxonomical problematic of 'what is this' and 'how do we attend to it'? If a previous connoisseurial curiosity suggested that you should look away from the most obvious stylistic elements to look at fingernails and ears, then a rebooted connoisseurialism aimed at 'mass culture' was similarly tasked with finding the most productive form of attention.

I don't have much time to explore this but we could also look at Lawrence Alloway and 'The Arts and the Mass Media' [1958] and 'The Long Front of Culture' [1959] and see this work as fundamentally puzzling a new connoisseurial curiosity. This, for instance, is from 'The Arts and the Mass Media: 'The repetitive and overlapping structure of modern entertainment works in two ways: 1. It permits marginal attention to suffice for those spectators who like to talk, neck, parade; 2. It satisfies, for the absorbed spectator, the desire for intense participation which leads to a careful discrimination of nuances in the action' (Alloway 2006 [1958]: 57). The essay was first published in 1958. Here Alloway is suggesting that a new connoisseurial curiosity that is aimed at mass-culture wouldn't necessarily be characterised by inordinate amounts of concentrated attention, but something much lighter, more dispersed, and more capacious in its reach. Thomas Crow's sense of the new connoisseurs in the streets of London in the late 50s, informs the connoisseurial curiosity as it fashions itself into pedagogic puzzles that will call themselves 'cultural studies', 'film studies', 'design history', 'fashion studies', and so on. The way to study these things might not be the 'disembodied cool contemplation', but as 'fans' who are likely to spot the nuances of lighting in b-movie psychological dramas, or who might feel it all rushing by in the way that Raymond Williams describes TV.



The new connoisseurial curiosity, I want to suggest, is still with us, and indeed it is even more problematic today in our digital era. What I want to suggest is that it is worth making this curiosity a subject of attention. It is an unfinished problematic: how do we attend to our mass produced, mass-consumed, industrial, electronic world?

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