

(Based on a series of lectures given in 1991)

## Culture From 'A Year with Swollen Appendices' Brian Eno published by Faber and Faber 1996

Let's start here: 'culture' is everything we don't have to do. We have to eat, but we don't have to have 'cuisines', Big Macs or Tournedos Rossini. We have to cover ourselves against the weather, but we don't have to be so concerned as we are about whether we put on Levi's or Yves Saint-Laurent. We have to move about the face of the globe, but we don't have to dance. These other things, we choose to do. We could survive if we chose not to.

I call the 'have-to' activities functional and the 'don't have to's' stylistic. By 'stylistic' I mean that the main basis on which we make choices between them in terms of their stylistic differences. Human activities distribute themselves on a long continuum from the functional (being born, eating, crapping and dying) to the stylistic (making abstract paintings, getting married, wearing elaborate lace underwear, melting silver foil on to our curries).

The first thing to note is that the whole bundle of stylistic activities is exactly what we would describe as 'a culture': what we use to distinguish individuals and groups from each other. We do not say of cultures 'They eat', but 'They eat very spicy foods' or 'They eat raw meat.' A culture is the sum of all things about which humanity can choose to differ - all the things by which people can recognise each other as being voluntarily distinguished from each other.

Of course, some aspects of culture are so unquestioned that we don't think we have choices about them - until someone decides to exercise such choice, as when Sister Rosa Parks chose to sit at the front of the bus.

But there seem to be two words involved here: culture, the package of behaviours-about-which-we-have-a-choice, and Culture, which we usually take to mean art, and which we tend to separate as an activity. I think these are connectable concepts: big-C Culture is in fact the name we reserve for one end of the functional - stylistic continuum - for those parts of it that are particularly and conspicuously useless, specifically concerned with style. As the spectrum merges into usefulness, we are inclined to use the words 'craft' or 'design', and to accord them less status, and as it merges again into pure instinctual imperative we no longer use the word 'culture' at all. From now onwards, when I use the word 'culture' I am using it indiscriminately to cover the whole spectrum of activities excluding the 'imperative' end. And perhaps that gives a better name for the axes of this spectrum: 'imperative' and 'gratuitous' - things you have to do versus things you could choose not to do.

The second thing to note is that humans spend a huge amount of their resources and energy exercising and defending and maintaining their cultural choices. Even the most materially disadvantaged groups of people manage to create things that make no obvious functional difference to their lives. Art came out of Auschwitz, Songs and dances (and a whole new musical culture) came out of the slave plantations. But, as social wealth and ease increase (or as other areas of control disappear or are circumscribed), questions of stylistic choice become increasingly central preoccupations, consuming greater and greater amounts of time.

As civilisations get older, a greater proportion of time and attention is spent on the things we don't have to do. More and more products, activities and groups of people are defined by their affiliation to particular stylistic choices. It is as though our attention, allowed to drift away from the imperative end of the continuum, increasingly explores the gratuitous one.

My question is this: 'What are we doing there?' We understand why it makes sense to create a hammer, or a ship, or even a telescope. These all make a difference to how much control over our circumstances we are able to exercise: they directly extend our physical bodies, make life more controllable. But, if you ask most people, including most artists, why we do all this other stuff, you'll find it hard to get a straight answer.

People will say, 'Well, it's nice, isn't it? I like it.' OK. It is nice and I like it too, but what is actually being liked? The most obvious thing would be to say that it is the way certain things have been made, the particular organisation of the lines and colours and structures of them. This supposes that we for some reason prefer some arrangements of elements over others, and obviously we do. But that doesn't get us any further. Why do we prefer some arrangements of things over others?

Is it because some arrangements are 'better' - intrinsically more satisfactory - than others? That's to say, is it nothing to do with us, but to do with the fact that those arrangements partake of some quality outside of our minds? This is what most of art history has supposed: that we respond to things as 'beautiful' because they in some sense 'contain' beauty. The beautifulness is 'out there' - which is different from saying that they arouse feelings of beauty in us. There is a very clear understanding in this theory the beauty is already in the work, and one aspires to an appreciation of it - the very word 'appreciation' implies this: that there is something already there waiting to be appreciated. So there were numerous theories about colour combination and golden sections and magical arrangements of lines to which humans were supposed to respond - naturally, as it were - strongly. The extension of such ideas led to some absurdities: missionaries supposing, for example, that the natives could be civilised by sufficiently large doses of Bach being poured over them from gramophones.

Another theory suggests that we respond not to what things are in some intrinsic sense, but to the way in which they are different from other similar things we have seen. Thus we are engaged not in a simple act of looking at something but in the more complex act of looking at something in relation to the background of expectations that other similar things in the same medium have aroused.

It's easy to drift off the subject here, and people have been doing it for centuries. What happens to you when you engage with a piece of culture (when you look at a painting, get a haircut, go to a movie)?

What happens to you when you go to a movie? You sit in a chair, and you watch a world construct itself before you. Then you get a description of some people in that world. You watch the working out of the interactions between the people and the world they're in. What do they do? What would I do? You are watching the collision of implied value systems within a proposed environment. This is called 'drama', and when we see that the value system is doomed to fall disastrously we call it 'tragedy'. When it falls ludicrously we call it 'comedy'. For millennia, fiction and theatre (and now film and TV) have been about this - about the proposal and description of a world and the dynamics of value-laden interactions within it.

It's interesting to note that neither the proposed world nor the value system involved in the collision needs to be 'realistic' for us to be interested, just as a chess game doesn't have to represent a realistic military conflict. We are interested in our own grasp of those processes. We want to know the rules, and we want to rehearse our ability to extrapolate from them.

When Chekhov wrote his stories, what was revolutionary about them was his reluctance to imply a moral judgement of his characters. He portrayed a world not of free will - where people are 'good' or 'bad' because they want to be - but a world where people are more or less the results of their environment: where their choices are limited, a repertoire of possibilities derived from the grammar of their upbringing and circumstances. In this world, we try to cope with people by being sympathetic to their plight. If they hurt us, we do not call them 'evil' but instead we see them as victims too. In fact we do not believe in 'evil' as an intrinsic quality that they might have.

The Rambo series represents a different kind of story. In these films the world is clearly divided into 'good guys' and 'bad guys'. There is a life-or-death struggle, where there is no time for fine judgements or discussions of how things got that way. Just as the existence of evil is a given thing so is the duty to fight it. In a Rambo film, people 'are what they are'. They are not emergent, changing, complex or fluctuating. There is no point in trying to delve into their motives, since these are obvious: they are us and therefore good, or they are possessed of the devil and want to eradicate us. It is fashionable to regard these films as stupid, but don't they in fact depict some kind of real crisis? There could, surely, be times when we are required to act with such blunt distinctions, times when it is 'them' or 'us'. And how would we do that? Maybe Rambo knows how, where Chekhov wouldn't.

What are we watching in these films? We are seeing ideas being exercised for us, seeing how things fit together or don't, what the implications of collisions between them might be.

What about haircuts? Getting a new hairstyle is asking the question: 'What would it be like to be the kind of person who has this kind of haircut?' And what's the use of that? Well, isn't this what we do that makes us different from other animals? Isn't it the fact that we have this huge amount of cultural rehearsal in how things could otherwise be, how things could look from someone else's eyes, that enables us to understand each other and co-operate with each other.

To explain: it's usual to think that human culture starts with language, that this is the great divide. But I think it starts with empathy, and empathy is beyond language, a pre-condition for it. What connects us is not our ability to speak to each other: that is just one of the products (a great one) of our ability to imagine what things look like from each other's eyes.

Humans have this ability to an extraordinary degree. Hundreds of times during a day, we inhabit other minds, other worlds, other sets of assumptions. If we didn't, we'd be unable to function in society. All communication depends on finessing an already vast bundle of assumptions (about who you are and where you are speaking from) with a few sentences or gestures. People who are used to inhabiting each other's mental words do this with tremendous economy: the wink that's worth a thousand words, for example, or the slight shift in intonation that carries a whole paragraph with it. Language is the sharp edge of this, but it is only a door in the vast reservoir of experience of other worlds and other views that we all carry about.

And I think that when we engage in cultural acts, transactions, whatever you want to call them, we rehearse this ability to step from one set of assumptions to another, from one perspective to another. And I think we get better and better at it.

This is why I think the world could be getting better - though of course fundamentalism is the deliberate attempt to limit the scope of this ability, to say, 'We will only accept one view of the world.' Since this is strictly impossible (even when you're insulated by immense wealth), fundamentalism is always riddled with glaring internal contradictions.

As is pragmatism - but we expected that.

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