Froth and Its Uses   Gary Kibbins

Early in John Greyson's *Fig Trees*, a question is posed to Gertrude Stein and Virgil Thompson regarding their opera *Four Saints in Three Acts*: "Why all this frothy absurd nonsense, when fascists threaten Spain?" This is, by any measure, a reasonable political and moral question, self-reflexively encapsulating the political and moral range of the film in which it appears. Its historical references aside, the real purpose of the question is to redirect it: "Why all this frothy absurd nonsense in this ostensibly serious film about AIDS activism?" It's a question that even those familiar with the customarily oblique tendencies of experimental art and film might well ask of *Fig Trees*. The juxtaposition or integration of morally serious themes with "froth" has been a consistent and highly recognizable component of Greyson's various projects, the moral seriousness providing the centre of gravity, the froth their buoyancy. In his earlier works, the frothy part was often carefully construed to align with and support political and moral themes. One thinks of the pro-sex public service message of *The Ads Epidemic*, where the pop-musical, condom-on-the-ear stagings embodied optimism, youth, and sexual joy.

Despite the high level of heterogeneous collage in his works, the core of Greyson's political critique as well as his political allegiances have always been generally accessible and free of ambiguity. This has several advantages. In addition to providing relief from contemporary irony-fatigue, it secures a comfortable base camp from which alternative intellectual and artistic adventures can be pursued, while allowing more liberty to engage not just novel forms of expression (e.g. human-form viruses in swimming pools), but heterogeneous elements often at some considerable distance from the political themes at hand (e.g. operas). It also has important consequences for the audience. The reliable, unambiguous nature of the political analysis provides a refuge for those who might otherwise flee a film featuring albino squirrels or singing assholes. Wherever else the film may go while testing the limits of relevancy and tone, there always remains the comforting certainty of its political commitments. And the general outline of the political analyses have been quite consistent over time - so much so that if one wished to measure the development of Greyson's body of work from the early videos to the later feature length films, one might well look to the development of the froth and the adventures in collage rather than the politics.

That political certainty has been underscored by the stellar cast of radical gay artists and intellectuals who have made strategically a-historical appearances in Greyson's works, including Langston Hughes, Sergei Eisenstein, Frida Kahlo, and Michel Foucault. These illustrious figures help to assemble a loosely conceived tradition – a community of sorts - of political and artistic opposition, spanning many decades and many cultures, in which the sympathetic viewer can, perhaps justifiably, feel a participant. But Gertrude Stein? We can assume that her appearance in *Fig Trees* is not due to the acuity of her political views. Citing her enthusiasm for the writings of Nazi collaborator Marshal Petain, Richard Kostelanetz wrote that "her remarks about politics and economics are often embarrassing," even if she is redeemed somewhat by having

kept the content of those unsavoury opinions out her literary production. That is because the distinctive literary form that she developed was not designed to be a vehicle for the expression of opinions about the world. To read *Tender Buttons*, for example, an experience as exhilarating as it is strange, is to engage the mechanics and mysteries of language itself, not just literary form. But this experience of language comes without any abiding confidence that there is a recognizable, shared world to which it refers. It is a victory of language over consciousness; the artifice of syntax is experienced as a primordial mental state. Interviewed in *Fig Trees*, opera aficionado Wayne Koestenbaum expresses his personal certainty that the iconic phrase "pigeons on the grass, alas" from *Four Saints in Three Acts* is thoroughly interpretable despite its nonsensical surface, and that Stein designed it to forefront the word "ass." But there is an element of *délire* in this interpretation, a term used by Lecercle to indicate an excess of meaning that proliferates from texts deemed to have too little. In any case, this is not a form of artmaking commonly employed by activist-artists; it is, rather, its cultural if not political antithesis.

Stein's extensive influence includes filmmakers Stan Brakhage and Hollis Frampton, both of whom, in their very different ways, identify, question, and reconstitute the elemental parts of the cinematic apparatus, in light of which Stein's influence can be easily surmised. And both filmmakers remained quite remote from what is commonly identified as activist artmaking. Greyson's relationship with Stein is less easily surmisable. In *Fig Trees* steinian elements function alongside decidedly non-steinian elements, their essential incompatibility assuaged through skillful collage work. They are integrated formally and visually, but not conceptually. The considerable artistic labour embodied in *Fig Trees* was committed to achieving something formally harmonious out of conceptual incongruities. But why? Greyson's work is typically anchored in activist intentions, and so he must reject, it would seem, all barriers separating art and life. Stein's unsavoury political views notwithstanding, why import the work and aesthetic ideas of a writer who "took the difference between art and life as axiomatic"?[i]

Jacques Rancière has recently identified "… the two great politics of aesthetics: the politics of the becoming-life of art, and the politics of the resistant form."[ii] Greyson's work is generally understood to be an emblematic instance of the becoming-life of art, refusing the barrier between art and life which is a necessary condition of art's "autonomy." Stein's work is an exemplary instance of resistant form, embracing art's autonomy. Rancière treats both approaches rather even-handedly, but there has of course been a rich history of hostility between what has often been perceived as two contradictory tendencies and motivations, even if that hostility has been generated by academics and theorists more than artists. Adorno and Brecht famously established the two positions as a virtually unresolvable opposition; one either made autonomous art, or one made politically engaged art. For Adorno, committed art creates its own paradox through its reactive strategies. That is, the more forcefully it represents the world which is the object of its criticism, the more it becomes trapped in the logic of the thing that it critiques.[iii] Having assumed the form required for critique, it is no longer able to envision or represent a liberating otherness to this world. To abandon

autonomy is to abandon negation, the only meaningful political tool art has at its disposal; to be able to embody a politics, art must be silent about its politics. Or, as Schwab has said discussing Samuel Beckett, "Such writing needs to practice a certain "indifference" towards the possible referential worlds of language in order to draw attention to itself as politics." For Brecht, the artist must develop ever new methods of critique, opposition, and audience engagement, and these tools must be drawn from and linked to the world it is critiquing. There is no question that the trajectory laid out by Brecht has been the more influential among those who insist on the political potential of art. And although flexibility has crept into the picture in subsequent decades, the original antinomy continues to cast a long shadow. Even though such antinomies are generally welcome ingredients in the kind of strong form of collage that Greyson practices in *Fig Trees*, the linkage between political activism and the modernist language experimentation of Gertrude Stein remains a stretch by any measure.

The incongruity of political content and autonomous aesthetic effects is not always perceived as a barrier. Raymond Williams and his colleagues in the Communist Party Writer's Group, for example, made much of their admiration for James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*. When the awkwardness of the art and politics conjoinment cannot be easily avoided, however, two general approaches present themselves. One can either rearticulate the artwork in question in order to make it compatible with received ideas of the political (the approach of Adorno and Barthes), or one can reconfigure the concept of politics in order to accommodate a wider range of culture (the current approach associated most strongly with those working in the field of "affect" and "sensibility").[iv] Failing either of those strategies, an essential incongruity is taken as one of the conditions marking the relationship between the artwork and politics, and the problem moves to another level. One such instance occurs in an essay by Christian Prigent's "A Descent From Clowns," appearing in Engagement and Indifference: Beckett and the Political," where this definition appears: "A political discourse can perhaps be understood as a discourse that believes (and reproduces this belief) in the adequation of word and thing (the exigency of "true speech")…"[v] This is the language required to 'speak truth to power,' and of demystification, the language used by AIDS activists Tim McCaskell and Zackie Achmat. Beckett, famously wanting to push language and representation to the point of failure, produces the opposite: "Beckett's literature tells us that there is something that cannot be named, qualified, determined, that there is something suspended and empty at the heart of the relation that persons, speakers, hold with the world, with things and their bodies, with others." Prigent, and everyone else who attempts to think through the political in Beckett, must start with the work's radical refusal of "true speech." Those with faith in art's potential to represent moral judgments while simultaneously embodying autonomous aesthetic values will have to look elsewhere. [vi]

Regardless of how one values it, artistic autonomy is a thoroughly artificial construction. Works made under its sign required that autonomy in order to get made, but doing away with it afterwards is both legitimate as well as necessary. The trick for both artist and viewer involves balancing both contrary

dimensions of the work at the same time, a lesson learned imperfectly by Jorge Luis Borges, who, in a moment of personal political transcendence, accepted a literary prize from General Pinochet. Those who either revile the autonomy of art or fetishize it, will fail to see the specific contribution that art makes to politics. "Aesthetics has its own politics," as Rancière says; politics cannot be simply imported intact into the work from some other place. "Art is not, in the first instance, political because of the messages and sentiments it conveys concerning the state of the world. Neither is it political because of the manner in which it might choose to represent society's structures, or social groups, their conflicts or identities. It is political because of the very distance it takes with respect to these functions, because of the type of space and time that it institutes, and the manner in which it frames this time and peoples this space."[vii] Greyson uses Gertrude Stein to help create that distance, a distance which comes in four discrete components with four discrete proximities: reportage and analysis of the work of activists doing political work (properly speaking); art which is concerned with the representation of that political work; art which is concerned with the representation of autonomous art (that of Gertrude Stein); and art which partakes of the forms of autonomous art (both Stein's and Greyson's playfully steinian elaborations). Greyson plays the middle man, as it were, orchestrating the mutual incompatibilities of pure art and political activism. The mistake awaiting the casual viewer would be to assume that the part of *Fig Trees* concerned with AIDS activism constitutes the work's essential core, and the stein/operatic framing, lacking ethical urgency, takes on a secondary role whose task is to decorate and help advance the political message. Such a response greatly diminishes the accomplishments of the film.

The image of Gertrude Stein cavorting in the same filmic space with AIDS activists embodies an argument concerning the heterogeneous nature of political alliances. Seeing her filmic representative standing by the pond feeding the ducks is a way of insisting that it is the totality of who she is, not just her literary works, that is drawn into the virtual community of political and cultural work projected by the film - and that includes, unavoidably, her unsavoury political judgments. There is no political litmus test. We get instead a collage of "good" politics as well as "bad" politics, and of moral, political themes as well as amoral and apolitical aesthetic themes. There is an hypothesis at work here: progressive politics needs, for political reasons, to ally itself with forms of culture not pre-saturated with tendentious politics. Stein represents – through her literary work, and maybe her misguided politics, as well -- the cultural "other" to progressive political discourse so essential to its humanity.

Even if Henri Bergson's contribution to the study of laughter now a plays a minor role, he provided the finest guideline for its study. "We shall not aim at imprisoning the comic spirit within a definition," he said. It is "a living thing… we shall treat it with the respect due to life." Laughter has a certain independence, accompanied by certain inalienable rights. It is common for commentators on laughter to claim that it is both liberated, and liberating, and to speak of laughter as something strangely disassociated from the subject who

laughs. Bergson speaks of an "absence of feeling" accompanying laughter: "…step aside. Look upon life as a disinterested spectator: many a drama will turn into a comedy."[viii] Deleuze identifies decadence and degeneration in the need to incessantly express anguish, solitude and guilt, whereas the "horizon of our counterculture" contains authors who make us laugh, even when the topic is ugly or terrifying; "…it is hard to even read Beckett without laughing, without going from one moment of delight to the next." One can sense in these and other similar accounts of humour a desire to see laughter as a means of escaping narcissism and pettiness, and use it as a means of bodily and intellectual self-transcendence.

Most laughter is not of this elevated kind. The first and until recently the most prominent account of humour, the "superiority" theory, accounts for the feelings of pleasure derived from laughing at others. Not terribly admirable, it accounts for the large majority of laughing situations, and is used quite liberally in *Fig Trees*. Once we have noted an essential ethical distinction between laughing at the likes of Stephen Harper or Bono, and laughing at the vulnerable or the powerless, the use of laughter for the purpose of ridicule still deserves its own, less exalted, category and status. The "incongruity" theory, which has attracted the most academic interest in recent decades, is concerned with the formal characteristics of the joke, finding, as the term suggests, a linking of items that don't logically or categorically relate. Collage, too, is founded on incongruity, suggesting structural similarities. The artist working with collage perhaps wishes to invoke laughter only sparingly and strategically, and resists developing the incongruities into fully formed jokes; the artwork might then contain many but not all of the contributing characteristics of a joke, lacking those elements required to spark laughter. The viewer recognizes the theatricality of the joking assemblage, if not the fully formed joke, resulting in a kind of virtual or silent laughter. We could call this art-humour, although it is by no means limited to art. But that is not the only possible response to the not-quite joke. An active viewer can often sense what is missing, respond accordingly by virtually supplying the missing elements, and transform the virtual laughter into vocal laughter. Toy trains, palindromes, zoo animals, and Pythagoras (who, according to legend, never laughed, but who engineered his own collage of music and geometry), together or separately almost but not quite funny in their own right, reflect Wayne Koestenbaum's claim that Stein was "playful more than funny." Sometimes the line separating the two is hard to locate. Some might not be able to read twenty continuous pages of a text like "Many Many Women" without, at some point, spontaneously breaking into laughter.

In order to achieve a blending of serious content and humorous form, it is common to assume a provisionally amoral posture. Many contemporary tendentious stand-up comedians (Margaret Cho, for example) rely on heavy doses of irony and parody in order to forestall the kind of moral judgments which stifle laughter. These are usually instances of instrumental humour, humour with a lesson to teach. And while there is much politically-targeted humour in *Fig Trees*, its central form of humour is non-instrumental, having no task to perform related to the content of adjacent political themes. This conforms to another type of humour, which we might for present purposes call autonomous humour. There are many versions of this

form of humour, all of which focus on the resistance to meaning and purpose. Freud of course establishes the associated pleasures of joking and humour in childhood experience, where the child seeks to employ language "without regard for the meaning of words or the coherence of sentences."[ix] In this way both nonsense and the child who articulates it are "liberated" from the burdens of producing rule-laden meaning. Similarly, Deleuze praises "laughter – not meaning," finding paradigmatic instances in Beckett and Kafka; Simon Critchley describes a form of humour requiring the "bracketing of belief;" and similarly, Roland Barthes extols the *jouissance* of texts which forgo the signified as "… that uninhibited person who shows his behind to the Political Father."[x]

Or better yet, many behinds, as political art seeks a community and a consensus. Viewers collectively recognize the representation of an injustice, on the basis of which a momentary community based on both antagonism toward the object of critique and shared oppositional values among the viewers is formed. 'Superiority humour,' which shares with ideology critique the tendency to construct us/them oppositions, has the structure appropriate to the creation of such a *sensus communis*.[xi] Autonomous art and autonomous humour, on the other hand, lacking the same steady relationship with shared world concerns, moves in another direction, isolating viewers in their individualized sensibilities. Both have specialized functions and capabilities, each able to do what the other cannot. The artwork which assumes the form required for ideology critique, for example, is not well equipped to envision a liberating otherness to the present world. For that we need the silliness of the palindrome, the arbitrariness of the albino squirrel, the inappropriateness of the arbitrary libretto, the syntax-twisting prose of Gertrude Stein. Critchley makes this point in regard to autonomous humour, which can "…project another possible *sensus communis*, namely a *dissensus communis* distinct from the dominant common sense;" it is able to, in other words, project "how things might be otherwise."[xii] And this humour of dissensus requires something that ideology critique cannot provide - a break between perception and the world, a glimpse of something beyond the horizon of our culture.

The quietism associated with meaning-avoidance strategies and the rarified strategies of autonomous art mirrors the problems associated with meaning-saturation strategies. It isn't clear whether the Political Father could see that behind from his vantage point, or would care if he could. Humour shares with irony many of the same questions of interpretation that become more uncomfortable the more insistently one presses for political interpretations. This 'undecidability' problem - exhilarating for some, exasperating for others – is, in its current form, the legacy of Warhol: does that soup can express critique? or celebration? One can say that it is the empowered viewer who decides, but it might also mean that the artwork shows that undecidability is decisive in itself, and denies that there can be a proper answer to the questions it poses. The world is complicated, it seems to say; we just don't know. Such works are then exhilarating for those who see in undecidability the fostering of dynamic speculation and critical thinking, and exasperating for those who see it as a proxy for the quietism of acceptance and non-thought. In a related critique of humour in art,

Rancière claims that the 'ludic' mode has largely replaced the critical mode. "Humour is the virtue to which artists nowadays most readily ascribe…" while becoming "almost indiscernible … from the powers that be and the media or by the forms of presentation specific to commodities."[xiii] Contemporary advertising regularly engages in its own version of "autonomous" humour, the most successful and memorable of which have little or nothing to do with the use-values or qualities of the product, but which instead engage in a kind of 'play with the signifier' familiar in contemporary art making.

The difficulties of keeping the incompatible norms of art and ideology critique in a mutually reinforcing dynamic explains the appeal of keeping them apart; certainly there are many who would be pleased with such a solution. Maybe art should just leave symbolic political representation to critical documentaries, agit-prop gestures and the community arts, and leave political activism to political activists. Perhaps the Political Father would take note if the artwork simply abandoned the resources of autonomous art and made codified but content-reliable statements of the kind that might otherwise appear in an op-ed piece or a spirited dinner conversation. In some deep sense, AIDS activism and Gertrude Stein's work really have nothing to do with each other. In *Fig Trees*, despite the illusion of linkage achieved through fusing collage techniques, they are not linked as much as pleasingly juxtaposed. Nor does *Fig Trees* rely on dubious assumptions about the content of artworks and its ability to alter human behaviour, for *Fig Trees* is not an activist artwork, whatever that may actually be. It is not a call for mobilization affected through an artwork. It contains, rather, representations of activists who have *already mobilized*, and who are in no need of art's imprimatur to legitimize their sacrifices and their accomplishments. In fact, *Fig Trees* intimates that it may well be the other way around. Instead of exhibiting the usually unconscious anxiety of the artwork's relation to the 'real' of non-art, *Fig Trees* represents the world of political action in itself, achievements which in some sense constitute the political artwork's ideal other.

And sympathetically juxtaposed to the representation of actual activists, Greyson invokes Gertrude Stein and autonomous art. After a couple of decades of politicized art-making, during which time political art has itself become an orthodoxy, it's as if Greyson is exploring anew what political art actually is. David Weir cites André Breton's "agonizing" over "how it might be possible for avant-garde, leftist artists to give our works the meaning we would like our acts to have." This Weir compares to "our own facile elision of the two into 'political art'." Breton, however, does not see such an adaptation of aesthetics to politics as a solution, as he "was coming to the problem from the perspective of a poet, not a theoretician or an ideologue." "…the poet," comments Weir, following Breton's logic, "has everything to lose by writing ideological poetry." Complaints of the "ideological poetry" sort are common enough from the political right, committed as it is to an aesthetic tradition whose job is to embody transcendental, spiritual values for the privileged. But more recently, there have been many concerns similar to Breton's coming from the left, voicing concerns regarding the general ease with which artists have accepted content-based characterizations

of the political in art, with often unquestioned assumptions about the relation such work has to viewers, 'consciousness-raising,' and real-world effects.[xiv]

Given the range of competing claims and demands, one could get the idea that all strategies regarding the politicization of art are flawed, accompanied occasionally with traces of self-delusion. It's correspondingly tempting to conclude that, unlike the experience of the historical avant-garde, for whom the range of strategic and formal options was rapidly expanding, those available to artists today are just as rapidly contracting. Whether or not the logic of the spectacle has finally engulfed the making and distribution of art in contemporary culture has become at the very least a legitimate, if unfriendly, question. But that is certainly the view of cultural theorists Paul Baudrillard and Paul Virilio, to cite two well known examples, for whom all contemporary art, powerfully framed by art's institutions, has become collusive. And it is reasonable to wonder to what extent that logic has subversively imposed itself on the making of political art. Has the reverse of Breton's concerns occurred? That is, is it now the case that we would like our political actions to have the meaning that our artworks have? In a moment of strategic cynicism, one might say that the often invisible and frequently thankless work required of political activism cannot compare to the careers awaiting the successful political artist. Aesthetics has its own politics, Rancière points out, which are different than and not to be confused with or reduced to the worlds of political struggle that lie beyond the worlds of screenings, galleries and museums. This much can be surmised from *Fig Trees*, in which Greyson is attempting to resolve problems associated with art's politics "as a poet." "Critical art has to negotiate between the tension which pushes art towards 'life' as well as that which, conversely, sets aesthetic sensorality apart from the other forms of sensory experience," says Rancière, and *Fig Trees* is an accomplished embodiment of that process of negotiation. It is for this reason essential to see that there are two politics Greyson is celebrating in *Fig Trees*, one which is specific to art, and one which is not.

Along with Freud's laughing children, we want Gertrude Stein on our side, where we think she belongs. Politicized art, paradoxically, needs to form a larger (selective) alliance with 'non-critical,' autonomous art. If a criticism should be made of *Fig Trees* in this regard, it is that the film is just so enormously handsome that much of the polemics associated with bringing Gertrude Stein – with her reactionary personal politics and her frothy literary practice – into an alliance with radical AIDS activists loses some of its edginess in a ceaseless flow of political passion and playful beauty.

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[i] Marjorie Perloff, 21st Century Modernism, Malden Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 2002, p. 46.

ii Jacques Rancière, <u>Aesthetics and Its Discontents,</u> Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009, pp. 43-44.

iii This point is made in following way by Rancière: "Insofar as it asks viewers to discover the signs of Capital behind everyday objects and behaviours, critical art risks being inscribed in the perpetuity of a world in which the transformation of things into signs is redoubled by the very excess of interpretive signs which brings things to lose their capacity of resistance." <u>Aesthetics and Its Discontents,</u> p. 45-6.

iv Here, for example, is part of a spreading definition of the political from Davide Panagia, which will come to include the lighting effects of Michel Mann's films as being political in nature: "Politics happens when a relation of attachment is formed between heterological elements: it is a part-taking in the activities of representation that renders perceptible what had previously been imperceptible;" from his book, <u>The Political Life of Sensation,</u> Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009, p. 3.

v Christian Prigent, "A Descent from Clowns," in <u>Engagement and Indifference: Beckett and the Political,</u> ed. H. Sussman and C. Devenney, State University of New York Press, 2001, p. 74. Beckett of course was active in the French resistance, and so does not present the same set of problems as the reactionary Stein.

vi Beckett, whose work remained magisterially aloof from politics, provided helpful background material through his wartime involvement in the French Resistance.

vii Jacques Rancière, <u>Aesthetics and Its Discontents,</u> p. 23.54.*****

viii Henri Bergson, "Laughter," from <u>Laughter, Essays on Comedy: Bergson and Meredith,</u> Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1984, p. 63.

ix Sigmund Freud, <u>Jokes and Their Relation To the Unconscious,</u> ed. James Strachey, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981, p. 77.

x Gilles Deleuze, "Nomad Thought," in <u>The New Nietzsche,</u> translated and edited David B. Allison, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986, p. 147; Simon Critchley, <u>Humour,</u> New York: Routledge, 2002; and Roland Barthes, <u>The Pleasures of the Text,</u> New York: Hill and Wang, transl. Richard Miller, 1975, p. 53.

xi Such generalizations are aren't always justified, however, as there is no accounting for audience response when it comes to irony and satire. The following is a summary of the results of a study of responses to The Stephen Colbert Report on Comedy Central: "There was no significant difference between the groups [liberals and conservatives] in thinking Colbert was funny, but conservatives were more likely to report that Colbert only pretends to be joking and genuinely meant what he said while liberals were more likely to report that Colbert used satire and was not serious when offering political statements." See "The Irony of Satire: Political Ideology and the Motivation to See What You Want in the Stephen Colbert Report," Heather LaMarre, Kristen Landreville, Michael Beam, in <u>The International Journal of Press/Politics,</u> 2009, vol. 14, no. 2.

xii Simon Critchley, <u>Humour,</u> New York: Routledge, 2002, p. 90.

xiii Jacques Rancière, <u>Aesthetics and Its Discontents,</u> p. 54.

xiv See, for example, an interview with Victor Burgin (Victor Burgin and Hilde Van Gelder, "Art and Politics: A Reappraisal," in <u>Eurozine</u>), where Burgin complains about some political artists "parading their moral narcissism;" and Owen Hatherley, "Post-postmodernism?," in <u>New Left Review</u> 59, Sept. – Oct., 2009, a strong criticism of Nicolas Bourriaud's book "The Radicant." Both articles include a critical assessment of the exoticism and careerism associated with certain strains of "political art."