

The Pleasures of the Philistine

Tom Huhn

Dave Beech and John Roberts: *The Philistine Controversy*
 (Verso: London and New York, 2002), 314 pp., paperback ISBN 1-85984-374-3, £16.00,

Pleasure is the only thing worth having a theory about.
 Oscar Wilde

There is much to be gained, and perhaps still more to be learned, from the twelve contributions that compose *The Philistine Controversy*. The book has two parts: the first half contains six essays reprinted from the *New Left Review*, which published the opening salvo of the skirmish, titled 'Spectres of the Aesthetic' by Dave Beech and John Roberts in 1996 (further contributions to the controversy appeared there through 1998). Their provocative essay, which accuses philosopher J. M. Bernstein and Germanist Andrew Bowie of being proponents of what it calls 'new aestheticism', is followed by responses from each of them (indeed two from Bowie) as well as an essay by Malcolm Bull, titled 'The Ecstasy of Philistinism', which wants to advance the provocation and program of Beech and Roberts by further elaborating a positive doctrine of Philistinism in opposition to the supposed limitations of new aestheticism. The first half of the book is rounded out by a second essay from Beech and Roberts in response to the rejoinders of Bernstein and Bowie. Its title gives a good indication of just how much more broad, abstract, consequential, and serious the battle had become: 'Tolerating Impurities: An Ontology, Genealogy and Defence of Philistinism'. The second half of the collection is titled 'Philistine Modes of Attention' and consists of essays by Noel Burch, Esther Leslie, Gail Day, and Malcolm Quinn in exposition, defence, and elaboration of Beech and Roberts, whose essay 'The Philistine and the Logic of Negation' concludes the volume (again the title is a helpful marker for the trajectory of the controversy). Stewart Martin's introduction to the volume offers valuable synopses of each of the essays.

One of the many pleasures of reading this volume comes from witnessing so many intelligent people—including philosophers—compelled to give accounts of what they truly favour, how they construe what they take to be opposed to their ideas, and where they hope their inclinations will lead them. And yet just because there is so much development, occasional mischaracterization, deft understanding, and failed self-presentation throughout the essays, it is difficult to give an adequate summary not only of all that is at stake in the Philistine Controversy but even to say, finally, what the nature of the philistine is. Fortunately, in addition to Martin's helpful introduction, Gail Day's essay, 'When Art Works Crack(le)', contains a still more concise synopsis of the controversy and a crack(ing) interpretation of its more profound implications. Day begins by pointing out that 'there is some distance between, say, J. M. Bernstein's project of social epistemology ... and Beech and Roberts's attempts to reopen and update, as a practical concern for contemporary art, the longstanding debate about aesthetics and politics; she concludes that 'the debate, then, includes both dialogue and its failure' (p. 228). Day also remarks that since the participants discuss different things, and on seemingly separate grounds, one might also say that the debate truly 'never was'.

In the second of their three essays in the volume, Beech and Roberts characterise the 'dispute' they put themselves in the middle of as between critical theory and cultural studies. Beech and Roberts align themselves on the side of critical theory, i.e. provisionally with Bernstein and Bowie but against their new aestheticism; everyone in the volume, I believe, is mostly against cultural studies, (Malcolm Quinn's contribution, 'The Legions of the Blind: the Philistine and Cultural Studies', very helpfully shows exactly how Beech and Roberts take cultural studies to be not a wrongheaded but only an incomplete project; so too is Quinn's essay to be recommended for its lucid, trenchant analysis of the aftermath of the Sokal Affair in the journal *Social Text* in 1996.) The specific common ground, or what might be called the prehistory of this dialogue with participants from so many disciplines, is the aesthetics of Theodor Adorno—one of Adorno's curt remarks on the philistine in his *Aesthetic Theory* is taken by Beech and Roberts as touchstone, though by way of Fredric Jameson's 1990 book arguing for the persisting relevance of Adorno's aesthetics for a political critique of contemporary life.¹ (Although Charles Harrison, Paul Wood, and T. J. Clark are identified by Beech and Roberts as exhibiting appropriate concern with the shortcomings of recent treatments of artworks as preeminently social phenomena, they are faulted for failing to engage Adorno explicitly enough, whereas Bernstein is faulted for having subtracted the social content from Adorno's aesthetics.) The broader common backdrop, then, is the German aesthetic tradition from Kant to Adorno. More broadly still, Malcolm Bull's sweeping essay neatly places the *via negativa* of Beech and Roberts' philistine as the most recent moment in a 'history of negation' that includes English anarchism and Russian and German nihilism. Beech and Roberts will have nothing of this friendly attempt to give their philistine a robust historical and intellectual pedigree—I suspect this demurral is consistent with their idea of the true Philistine's rejection of having been made only out of the negation of something else.

Back to Day, who continues, 'The question of validity ... is precisely what is at stake in the "philistine debate" ... I want to emphasize ... that validity (or something akin to it) underpins Beech and Roberts's concerns' (p. 230). And though it was Bernstein who introduced the talk of validity, Day believes it is Beech and Roberts to whom the most attention should be given because their formulation of the philistine 'not only speaks of, or from, avant-gardist gestures or "nihilistic" cries, but also indexes the very concerns with validity that it is alleged to have ignored' (p. 231). Day takes Beech and Roberts, as artist and art critic/theorists, to have not only different concerns than a critical theorist and philosopher like Bernstein but also to have misread the latter as having abandoned—in the quest for an autonomous aesthetic that would validate a likewise free subjectivity—all political and critical content from the aesthetic tradition they share. In short, and thanks to Day, the kinship within the Philistine Controversy is profitably posed as, in effect, the nature—or should we say the validity—of pleasure.

One way to understand the central misunderstanding that accounts for much of the obfuscation—and subsequent clarifications—that characterise this controversy is to pose it as having to do with how the pleasure of the philistine is imagined. It is not the

philistine per se that matters, I want to say, but rather the claims that are made on behalf of her purported pleasure. In this light, the Philistine Controversy might be renamed the *theoretico-practico-hedonism* debate, which could be taken to designate not a theoretical concern with the proper practices and place of pleasure, but rather an assessment of the *meaning* of pleasure, including especially its political and social implications, because it is just here where the understanding among the various parties to the debate founders. So too is this why the evolving clarifications and specifications by Beech and Roberts as to their hopes for philistinism as both a 'mode of attention' as well as an ongoing critical project become so crucial to sorting out what was and what might still be at stake.

Philistines can be divided into two fundamental kinds. One sort of philistine—or what is taken to be designated by the term—is a person unaware of the pleasure(s) distinct from everyday life. This philistine might also be called unschooled (suggested etymologically by the German use of the term *Philister*), uncultured, etc. The other sort of philistine is a person not unaware of culture, and presumably of its attractions, but who nevertheless rejects aesthetic pleasure in favour of some other pleasure (the simple rejection of pleasure, if such a thing is possible, would instead be termed ascetic). Beech and Roberts, as I understand them, want to take up and expand this second sort of philistine by construing her as a dialectical and potentially more positive (though somehow not relinquishing her negativity) alternative to the subject who indulges in the pleasure(s) of an autonomous aesthetic, that is, as having a 'mode of attention' no longer constructed merely in opposition to material, sensuous, or everyday life. One might call this proactive philistinism. This expansion would of course redound in turn on the character, place, and power of aesthetic pleasure—here we mark Beech and Roberts' continuity with, and continuing interest in, the aesthetics of Adorno and the German tradition. We might say that for Beech and Roberts what has been lost sight of (and what they say Adorno failed to develop) is the history of the category of the philistine, especially as it aided, contrariwise, in the construction of aesthetic pleasure. Beech and Roberts ask not only what sorts of pleasures were derogated in the construction of the aesthetic, but perhaps more importantly what sorts of political and communal possibilities might thereby have disappeared. Unfortunately, as we shall see, cultural studies is criticised for an overcompensation of this exclusion by uncritically affirming and indiscriminately valorising all pleasures. Ironically—or is it dialectically?—cultural studies thereby mimetically reproduces the same homogenisation of pleasure seen by Beech and Roberts (and many others) to be the premier limitation of traditional autonomous aesthetics. Yet cultural studies, I suspect, does not stand alone in its historical moment; one might construe the penalisation of art practices in Europe and North America that began in the 1970s as a like phenomenon.

I imagine that Beech and Roberts find the responses by cultural studies to the derogation and disappearance of suspect pleasures more blameworthy than the 'new aestheticist' response of Bernstein, Bowie, et al. What is truly philistine—in the first sense of unschooled—is the manner in which cultural studies, by valorising aesthetically the pleasures of what used to be called the everyday, suck whatever oppositional purchase aesthetic pleasure might once have had out of critical discourse. Cultural studies

facilitated the acculturation of the philistine. And by doing so, it removed whatever possibilities the second sort of Philistine might have harboured, not to mention the history that first made the philistine possible. One can further imagine

Beech and Roberts thereby finding themselves in the mid-1990s without a culture within and especially against which to make meaning or to take pleasure from. It was culture—in the hands of cultural studies—all the way down. The spectres of the aesthetic are then not merely the ghostly philistines whose eyes are studiously evaded by the new aestheticism, but also the ghosts of the philistines disappeared by cultural studies' affirming, inclusive embrace. The project of Beech and Roberts wants to put flesh on these spectral philistines and pay attention to what might be reflected in their eyes, or more pressingly, inscribed across their flesh. (Noel Burch's sympathetic essay, 'The Sadeian Aesthetic; A Critical View', details how the modernist aesthetic is already complicit in producing its opposite as a fleshly and feminised pleasure.) Beech and Roberts suggest both that the body requires liberation (from aesthetics) and that the body (in particular, its pleasure, though it requires its advocacy by philistinism) points the way to some other liberation. Stewart Martin aptly describes the latter as the overcoming of 'species-being alienation' (p. 9). The opening paragraph of their first essay revives the well-known image from Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: 'Like Odysseus strapped to the mast, the aestheticized body obtains its delights by immobilizing, restricting and denying itself (p. 13). While Horkheimer and Adorno take Odysseus as an instance of the inextricability of domination and self-domination (with immobilising and immobilised pleasure the reward), Beech and Roberts instead posit the body as the victim not of domination but rather of (new) aesthetic theory. Aesthetic theory—or, better, new aestheticism—is then but their name for the most recent means of dominating bodily pleasures: 'Thus we seek to take the philosophical defence of what it [the recent revival of the philosophy of aesthetics] considers to be pleasure out of the realms of ethical abstraction and make it concrete through the demands of precisely those bodies that are suppressed by the philosophy of aesthetics: the philistine and the voluptuous' (pp. 13-14). By way of a philosophical sleight of hand regarding the purportedly unresolved tension between particular and universal, Beech and Roberts proceed to suggest that therefore any aesthetic claim to liberation through art must occur by way of partisanship, and that the Philistine is to count as the most engaged partisan in the (aesthetic) struggle for liberation. Bernstein and Bowie are accused of having too readily abandoned partisanship for the sake of an aesthetics of autonomy.

Given the complexities of the ensuing debate, it should come as no great surprise that the philistine is a complicated partisan. Witness one of Beech and Roberts more rebellious characterisations: 'Whereas the new aesthetics might speak of the "blindness to aesthetics" [Bowie] as a reproach to the (would-be) philistinism of the Left, the philistine is entitled to turn round and speak of the blindness of aesthetics, accusing it of abstinence, idleness and a hatred of the body intoxicated, surrendered and seduced' (p. 15). The philistine is not coextensive with the intoxicated, surrendered and seduced body, but rather is someone who identifies with and speaks on behalf of that kind of thing. And thus far it seems that the sole ground for philistine partisanship with the above referenced body is

that it has been excluded. Although the fact of exclusion provides hardly promising grounds for aesthetic recommendation, it might be that it is the very best circumstance for recommending something politically. Thus the political component of the Philistine Controversy has to do with imagining solidarity and sympathy with pleasures and bodies excluded from, and for the sake of, the pleasures and bodies we find ourselves already encumbered with, not to mention quasi-liberated from.

It is interesting to note just how aesthetic the philistine has thereby become. The partisanship of the philistine, precisely because it is based on pleasure—and especially its communicability and the potential for solidarity it expresses—could not fit more squarely into the Kantian aesthetic tradition, which formulates the possibility of the most robust and truly humane community on the idea of an insistent, unavoidable wanting to share inarticulable pleasures. What entrenches Beech and Roberts still more deeply in this tradition is their commitment to finding and formulating a new kind of pleasure (or at least a previously excluded one) to serve as the basis for a new kind of community—and, they argue, ethics. Insofar as the 'voluptuousness and excess' that has historically been denied by aesthetic theory is now to be brought front and centre to form an art practice and aesthetics that will include a philistine 'form of attention', might we not conclude that philistinism is for Beech and Roberts the most advanced form of aestheticism?

And such a conclusion is neither dismissive of their project nor out of keeping with what they hope to offer positively with the term 'the counter-intuitive conception of the philistine' (p. 273). Beech and Roberts pose one of their own continuities as follows: 'As we have continued to insist, Philistinism rests on a far broader philosophical, artistic and political project than our detractors would suggest: no less than the reinvigoration, within cultural theory, of a Marxist tradition of dialectical negation' (p. 274). And they believe that the philistine, especially considered as a spectre, already contains the seeds of the demise of ... something: 'What we have been urging all along is that the Philistine's otherness be reconfigured as a challenge to cultural division; the counter-intuitive concept of the philistine thus converts its violated otherness into a critique (and violation) of art's failed totality' (p. 273). Thus we can see that Beech and Roberts place themselves within a Hegelian-Marxist tradition that views the continuing life (now lives) of art as the symptomatic expression of an unresolved, contradictory condition of human life, and that they pose the philistine—at least in its counter-intuitive guise—as the most timely, productive 'challenge' to cultural division, specifically directed at 'art's failed totality'. I take the ambiguity of the phrase 'cultural division' to suggest that the divisions between one culture and another are of a piece with the divisions within a single culture, say between the aesthete and the philistine. Thus the challenge of the philistine would encompass, and point toward a resolution to, both sorts of division. By extension then, 'art's failed totality' should be judged as complicit with the persistence of cultural division.

Chief among the reasons not to quarrel with these conclusions include the much-noted adversarial character of modernist art and aesthetics, the recent work on mourning and the end of art in modernist and pop art,² and most importantly, Adorno's own aesthetics, which extensively addresses modernist art's intrinsic, unavoidable failures. In other

words, the 'critique of art's failed totality' is already understood to be something of central concern to modernist art and aesthetics. What more might the philistine bring to the table? In a word: urgency. The Philistine Controversy has not changed the stakes—and this further recommends it- in our most pressing cultural debate: how are pleasure and solidarity together possible? It does, however, powerfully express how much more consequential that pressure has become. The Philistine Controversy looks forward to an as yet unspecified 'form of attention' that would keep us unsatisfied with whatever solace an aesthetics of autonomy might provide; so too is it reminiscent of the somewhat maddening conclusion to Herbert Marcuse's 1937 essay on *The Affirmative Character of Culture*, which ends with a passage from Nietzsche: 'By eliminating affirmative culture, the abolition of this social organization will not eliminate individuality, but realize it. And "if we are ever happy at all, we can do nothing other than promote culture".'¹³

Notes

1. Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno, or, the Persistence of the Dialectic* (Verso: London, 1990).
2. Bernstein's work is discussed in this collection as an aesthetics of bereavement. For the relation of modernist painting to mourning see Yve-Alain Bois, *Painting as Model* (MIT Press: Cambridge, MA, 1993). One recent philosophical discussion of the end of art thesis is to be found in Arthur C. Danto. *After the End of Art* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1998).
3. Herbert Marcuse, 'The Affirmative Character of Culture, in *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory*, trans, Jeremy J. Shapiro (Beacon Press: Boston, 1968), pp. 88-133.