

Hinterland



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Don't be afraid: if art is rubbish, we must say so!



In order to assess the value of any art, we require a critical faculty. This is not just a means of sorting the wheat from the chaff; it

also enables us to extract the maximum pleasure from the best, by understanding why a picture, building, poem, novel, symphony or film has merit. What's more, it can help us discern when apparently bad things are actually good. Much music now widely regarded as sublime was, when first heard, dismissed as awful: Ravel, now recognised as a true genius of 20th century music, was often misjudged at first.

But how do we acquire a critical faculty? And how do we learn to apply it? These are among the questions raised by a recent book provocatively titled *What is Wrong with Us?* The subtitle, *Essays in Cultural Pathology*, gives a foretaste of the assault on modern culture contained within the essays. The book is edited by Eric Coombes, a retired teacher of art history and aesthetics, and Theodore Dalrymple, a former prison doctor and psychiatrist - and a prolific cultural columnist. "Can any of us," they ask, "entirely banish from our hearts and minds grave misgivings about the condition of the culture we now inhabit?" They claim, with justification, that those misgivings are rarely expressed in public forums or the media, and are dismissed "by state-supported bureaucracies and commercial vested interests". The Arts Council is savaged.

The theme is that the "educated non-specialist" who might shape opinions about culture has an under-developed critical faculty. He or she is ripe for learning about genuine aesthetics, in order to join with others to change the climate of appreciation about modern cultural figures and their work.

"Tracey Emin is important not as an 'artist', but as a kind of celebrity," Coombes writes in his introduction. It is a useful distinction. His judgment - his deployment of his critical faculty - is that Emin's work is poor, but the general assessment that she adds to the gaiety of nations means most take an uncritical view of it. The phrase "confidence trick" is not used, but we get the idea.

Coombes is not talking about modern-day Ravels, if there are any, but people producing culture that is objectively rubbish, and will still seem objectively rubbish in 100 years' time. Dalrymple, in his essay *Built to Destroy: The Nihilism of Modern Architecture*, writes of the sheer ugliness and offensiveness of much

contemporary building, quoting Le Corbusier's line from 1941 that "we speak these days about revolution, and we are making it with pride". He reflects not just on how much building since the Second World War has replaced well-designed, humane structures that were part of our heritage, but also on how many of these modern buildings clash violently with what remains from the past.

Most of the essays deal with visual arts: but there are also discussions about how the debasement of the English language has helped undermine the critical faculty, and how a determination to destroy national identity in this country has made us careless of protecting our heritage, or even embarrassed about doing so, in case it should conflict with the great multicultural project. But the main theme is that of the impotence of the "educated non-specialist" to take on those who now lead the profession of architecture, or those who are our most celebrated living artists, and to tell them that their self-indulgent work is objectionable to the general public

who, in the case of a building, have to live with it (or, even worse, *in* it) for decades after. Beauty is no longer a consideration; architecture especially is used to promote political points rather than to appeal to a sense of the aesthetic, to wipe out the past.

Our educators are not good at developing the critical faculty; they must improve. A sense of the truly excellent in all genres, and an understanding that architecture should harmonise with and not confront other buildings, should be feasible. Perhaps there is hope. The recent critical assault on the absurd Covent Garden production of *Meistersinger*, of which I wrote here last week, showed that in music some of us have had enough. The next step is for concert audiences to boo vigorously the cacophonous, formless effluent that passes for much new music - and which seldom gets a second public performance - and for sponsors to cut off the money for such drivel. "What is wrong with us" is that we don't complain because we are afraid to. That cowardice must end.