Just what is it that makes English artwriting so different, so appealing?

Review of:


While accurate and ultimately informative, the title of Mark A. Cheetham’s latest book will leave many readers guessing. Here is a beastly assemblage of terms that art historians have tended to keep in separate cages: nation and cosmopolitanism, Britain and England, and that hideous hippogriff named English art theory. To suggest the enormity of Cheetham’s task and the importance of his thesis, I’d like to begin with an episode from the book’s second chapter. In 1935 Clive Bell published an essay titled “What next in art?” in which the Bloomsbury critic argued that only those English painters who “came under the influence of Cézanne and the Post-Impressionists seem able to perceive what the English tradition is.”(90) What on earth is Bell talking about? How could the importation of French avant-garde practices serve to authenticate English art traditions? This is the kind of language game that Cheetham delights in, and it provides one convoluted instance among many of the ‘nation’ and national character in English artwriting from the eighteenth-century to the present. “We easily forget” Cheetham argues “that thinking through the frame of the nation is more than a simple expedient and not only a bad habit.”(2) This book provides an autopsy on the concept of nationhood in English artwriting, and it finds that essentialistic terms like Englishness, however much we might like to bury them in the ground, keep returning like Frankenstein’s monster to stalk ‘international’ art fairs and ‘world art history’. Cheetham concludes that “If we have objections to the nation as a category or to its supposed affinities with colonialism, for example, we need to know the history and theoretical implications of artwriting’s fixation with nation.”(143)

If Cheetham’s title is a bit unwieldy, the book itself is a model of concision and clarity. This could have been a very thick tome, with a nearly infinite number of twists and turns in the cultural discourse of nationhood. It takes considerable discipline, for example, to limit an analysis of John Ruskin’s voluminous writings to just five pages (62-7), and to do so without sacrificing Ruskin’s central place in English artwriting. The book is composed of two main chapters ordered chronologically. The first covers English artwriting from Bainbrigg Buckeridge’s *An Essay Towards an English School of Painting* (1706) to William Morris’s writings from the 1880s. The second chapter covers English artwriting during the twentieth century. Cheetham embraces David Carrier’s term ‘artwriting’ to include the full
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range of art theory, art history, aesthetics, and art criticism. As Cheetham notes, “While it is often important to acknowledge a distinction in classification between, say, aesthetics and art criticism, that difference must be historicized rather than presented as a definition. My aim in using this inclusive term is to avoid pre-judging what counts as a ‘theoretical’ approach in English artwriting.”(11 n.1) One of Cheetham’s central claims is that art writers invariably possess a theoretical frame of reference, even those who flaunt a casual, unsystematic approach. A common-sense empiricism is one particularly common default in English artwriting, and it constitutes, at the very least, a popularization of John Locke’s epistemology. Cheetham’s inclusiveness paradoxically results in a concise history of English artwriting in which nationhood and national identity recur as fundamental tropes and conceptual frames of reference.

Chapter one is titled “Englishness, Foreignness, and Empire in British Artwriting, c. 1700-1900,” and it opens with the claim that “A persistent danger in discussions of national identity is to give such constructions too much or too little credence. To put the point in theoretical language, there is a tendency to opt for essentialism or relativism as exclusive categories.”(16) Cheetham resists binaries at every turn, and he uses his key terms relationally rather than oppositionally. Nationalism and cosmopolitanism, for example, possess a powerful synergy in Cheetham’s account, each relying upon the other for coherence and emphasis.

Chapter one provides an interesting engagement with John Barrell’s classic text *The Political Theory of Painting from Reynolds to Hazlitt: The Body of the Public* (1986) and a slightly later essay, “Sir Joshua Reynolds and the Englishness of English Art.” (1990) Like Cheetham, Barrell examined a heterogeneous group of texts about art. But whereas Barrell viewed theory as a relative latecomer on the English cultural stage, most notably in Joshua Reynolds’s adaptation of civic humanist political theory in the *Discourses*, Cheetham notes that artwriting in the first half of the eighteenth century was already complex, theoretical, and self-consciously English. Drawing heavily upon the work of Carol Gibson-Wood, Cheetham reinforces the importance of Jonathan Richardson’s *An Essay on the Theory of Painting* (1715) and his *Two Discourses* (1719) to English artwriting. In a review of Gibson-Wood’s monograph on Richardson, Harry Mount suggested the possibility that “the central problematic for eighteenth-century English art theory was not, after all, the legacy of civic humanism, but rather the need to reconcile the empiricism of the English intellectual tradition with the deductive idealism of imported art theory.” (Quoted by Cheetham in note 17, p. 72) Cheetham largely endorses this proposition, and finds in the writings of both Richardson and William Hogarth a genuinely theoretical, and distinctively English, approach to artwriting.

One notable aspect of English artwriting is that many of its key texts were authored by professional artists, including Richardson, Hogarth, Reynolds, James Barry (who doesn’t garner a mention in Cheetham’s book), William Morris, and Wyndham Lewis, to name a few. The list grows even longer when skilled amateurs like John Ruskin and Roger Fry are added. A familiarity with artistic process
appears to have generated, in many of these texts, occasionally anecdotal and frequently hybrid analyses. From this perspective, Artwriting, Nation, and Cosmopolitanism complements the reassessment of English Modernism more generally. It is a counterpart, in many ways, to Lisa Tickner’s Modern Life and Modern Subjects: British Art in the Early Twentieth Century (2000) and David Peters Corbett’s The Modernity of British Art 1914-30 (1997). These studies revalorized the ‘impurity’ and literary qualities of British painting, just as Cheetham has now done with English artwriting. As Cheetham argues in chapter one, “Hogarth’s modernity was in part his radical refusal to separate word and image. This is not necessarily a conservative move… Visual culture is not simply, purely visual, nor is writing simply, purely textual. Hogarth shows instead that ‘writing’ and ‘visual culture’ are mutually constitutive.”(31) Roger Fry and his formalist heirs would have taken great issue with this claim, but their texts were no less hybrid and ‘impure’ than those of Hogarth and Lewis. What is exceptional and instructive about a text like Hogarth’s The Analysis of Beauty (1753) is that it posits vision as a cultural construct and it thematizes the interdependence of word and image in the publication’s two etched plates.

Taking the interdependence of image and text even further, Cheetham analyzes meta-pictures that engage in a kind of theoretical vision. In the introduction, Cheetham reproduces a photograph of Richard Long’s England (1967), in which a rectangular frame and a white circle are placed in an English parkland. “Long’s work shows that there is always a viewpoint about what constitutes nature and nation.”(6) In chapter one, Cheetham examines Joshua Reynolds’s female allegory of Theory, painted for the new Royal Academy of Arts spaces in Somerset House. She holds a scroll bearing the phrase, apparently conceived by Reynolds, that “Theory is the knowledge of what is truly Nature.” Contrast this with Hogarth’s subscription ticket of “Boys Peeping at Nature” (1730-1) in which putti playfully look up the skirt of a many-breasted sculpture of Diana of Ephesus. These are both representations of aesthetic ‘theory’, and they clarify and complement their creators’ theoretical texts. Cheetham notes, for example, that “Reynolds’s naturally rendered muse is a surrogate for the male gaze.”(55) Lockean perceptions of ‘Nature’, Reynolds suggests, need to be abstracted into a generalized Platonic knowledge that is uniquely available to men, and especially to men of taste. What bears repeating is that these concepts – nature, art, theory, and nation – are inextricably visual and textual constructs.

Art-writers in Britain from the late eighteenth to the late nineteenth century came to “see their English empiricism as truth, not theory.” (71) And while empiricism was ostensibly universal, it was simultaneously viewed as an English mode of viewing and representing the world. This view of nature was deeply conditioned by Britain’s expanding global influence: “What I am calling ‘imperial empiricism,’ then, is a confidence in observed fact and the concomitant mapping of this mode of vision onto all one sees, whether it is a landscape or a people.”(49) That John Constable created a paradigmatic vision of the English landscape is a truism
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that Cheetham helpfully destabilizes through the introduction of Homer Watson. Problematically known as “the Canadian Constable” (57), Watson was born and raised in the village of Doon, Ontario. Watson’s provincial origins shaped his career as a landscape painter, even and especially as he rose to international prominence. In 1936 towards the end of his life, Watson wrote to Eric Brown, the Director of the National Gallery of Canada:

There is at the bottom of each artistic conscience a love for the land of their birth. It is said that art knows no country but belongs to the world. This may be true of pictures but great artists are no more cosmopolitan than great patriots, and no immortal work has been done which has not had as one of its promptings for its creation a feeling its creator had of having roots in his native land and being a product of its soil. (61)

This sentiment was probably indebted to Ruskin as well as Constable, and Cheetham notes key episodes when “Watson was struggling honestly with the issues of cosmopolitanism, of being true to the international and the local in both the landscape and himself, of being a Canadian subject in the British Empire.” (61) This was a prerogative that was available, predominantly if not exclusively, to white imperial subjects. John Ruskin extended the tradition of imperial empiricism into a more coercive and condescending belief that “cultures, like individuals, evolve from a preference for abstraction to an understanding of naturalism.” (67) Ultimately, Cheetham emphasizes the spatial and geographic conditions that both impelled and mediated a picturesque conception of landscape. A fundamental component of English art and artwriting in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was the freedom and liberty to ramble, colonize, and empirically represent.

Chapter two is titled “Indigenes, Imports and Exports: Englishness in Artwriting from Modernism to the Twenty-First Century”. This might seem to be unpromising territory given Roger Fry’s known aversion to English contemporary art and Wyndham Lewis’s infamous slogan to “kill John Bull.” (90) But it was precisely the need to make English art Modern, and to render it cosmopolitan, that compelled artwriting to dwell on “the Englishness of English art.” Nikolaus Pevsner coined this phrase for his BBC lectures of 1955 and subsequent book. For Pevsner, “The Englishness of English Art” constituted a sly admission of his own Germanic training, while simultaneously dismissing precisely the kind of Germanic national essentialism that such a phrase evoked. Cheetham touches on each of these authors, but it is his inclusion of Herbert Read, known as a proponent and popularizer of Continental high theory, that is most surprising. Cheetham describes Read as “a one-man import-export concern whose ‘product’ was modernism.” (92) But it was Read’s preoccupation with cosmopolitan modernism that made the limits and conditions of nationalism apparent. “Read’s cosmopolitan art theory is partly if not largely German in derivation. Ironically, it allows him to assert the individuality of
an indigenous English tradition,” which drew particularly heavily upon the writings of Wilhelm Worringen.(96)

As Cheetham’s book approaches the present, his examples skew towards the archly conservative, on one hand, and the post-colonial, on the other. Peter Fuller’s resurrection of the title Modern Painters for his journal finds an odd kinship with the writings of Rasheed Araeen, at least in their explicit consideration of national identity and representation. Gilbert and George’s The Nature of Our Looking (1970) resonates, by the end of Cheetham’s book, with Richard Long’s England (1967) and Yinka Shonibare’s Global Underground Map (2006). These three artists uphold the tradition of the artist-theorist inaugurated by Jonathan Richardson, William Hogarth, and Joshua Reynolds. And despite the three hundred year period that they span, these artists share a preoccupation with the nation, and visual art’s relation to it, that would appear to thoroughly validate Cheetham’s thesis.

One critique that could be leveled against Artwriting, Nation, and Cosmopolitanism is that it veers towards the obvious. Who could doubt, following Linda Colley’s Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837 (1992) for example, that English culture was marked by a profound surge of national identification and that England and/or Britain formed a fundamental cultural unit? One fear that I had while writing this review was that I might bulldoze a complex text into a parking lot of similarly shaped ideas. For one of the qualities of Artwriting, Nation, and Cosmopolitanism that I wish to emphasize is its equanimity. Not only does it suggest that English artwriting has been inherently theoretical, but it suggests that the discipline has yet to step outside Modernism’s implicit assumptions when valorizing certain texts over others. Cheetham’s book is neither Whiggish in its view of English progress nor entirely skeptical of its accomplishments. It is post-colonial art history in certain key respects, which enables it to step around many of the pedagogical camps and chronological periodizations in British art history today. In this, the book shares a great deal with what could be termed the ‘imperial turn’ in British art history over the past decade, in which concepts like state, nation, and empire have become central to, and contested within, the history of visual art and culture. Far from obvious, therefore, the book is filled with surprising observations and telling juxtapositions. Most important for the field, I suspect, will be a greater attentiveness to the vocabulary of English artwriting and a greater circumspection when the key terms in Cheetham’s title arise. While Cheetham refuses to answer “what the English tradition is”, as Clive Bell so boldly asserted, he amply reveals the centrality of that question to English artwriting over the past three centuries.

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