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CMLT 210: Essay 1

Criticizing the Canvas of Conformity: Exploring Reger's Isolation Against Cultural Hegemony

Austrian author Thomas Bernhard's *Old Masters* follows the diatribes and monologues of an elderly man, Reger, that he shares with his acquaintance, Atzbacher, while visiting the Kunsthistorisches Museum one day. Reger, a music critic, has visited the museum every other day, for over 30 years, always to sit on a bench in the Bordone room in front of Tintoretto's *White-bearded Man*, and on the day the book takes place, has broken that pattern to visit for a second consecutive day to meet Atzbacher. As Atzbacher relays, Reger gives many opinionated rants on art, culture, literature, society, and the state that often are shaped by his perspective as an isolated individual. *Old Masters* explores isolation and cultural critiques through the lens of Reger and his experience. Reger's rejection of societal norms and his discussions of society and culture align with the Cultural Hegemony Theory, offering an interesting critique of the dominant cultural narratives perpetuated within the museum setting.

Cultural Hegemony Theory, a Marxist concept developed by Antonio Gramsci, gives a framework for understanding how the elite social classes maintain their power and control over society through cultural narratives and norms, in addition to economic and political means. The theory proposes that ruling classes impose their worldview and values on society, enforcing societal norms (Artz and Murphey 20). Gramsci argues that cultural institutions, such as art and museums, play a crucial role in reinforcing hegemonic control (Artz and Murphey, 273), an idea that comes into play throughout *Old Masters* in its setting in a museum, with discussions of critiques on the state and society. The scholars Tony Bennett and Carol Duncan expand on this, exploring the role and employment of museums for shaping the behavior of citizens, reinforcing

societal values and national culture. For both Bennet and Duncan, museums operate as spaces where elites or the state can curate cultural narratives and uphold dominant values, connecting back to Gramsci's ideas of the Cultural Hegemony Theory. The theory also elaborates on the interconnectedness of power and knowledge, as elites use cultural discourse to maintain control, influencing how knowledge is constructed and disseminated (Artz and Murphey, 12-13).

Throughout the novel, Reger is portrayed as an isolated individual, partially by circumstance, but also by choice. His isolation can be seen as a form of resistance against cultural hegemony and societal norms as he critiques the ideas of proper behavior and conventional social interactions, resisting pressures to conform. Furthermore, Reger's intellectual strengths, as showcased through his monologues, demonstrate his independence from the hegemony, challenging the established structures of knowledge spreading, as he promotes reclaiming individual autonomy over thoughts and perceptions.

Bernhard portrays Reger as a highly isolated individual, beyond just physical isolation as his beliefs on intellectual and cultural worlds isolate him too within the framework of the Cultural Hegemony Theory, providing the stage for his perspectives on society. Reger is physically alone, having lost his wife many years before the story occurs, and since her death he has become increasingly isolated from society and culture overall. For Reger, his wife represents an Austria that has disappeared for good (Dowden 61), as she was the one who owned and loved the works of twentieth-century Austrians, and who loved Vienna, and for Reger, with her death "Vienna has become so ugly" (Bernhard 135). When she died, Reger felt he would "suffer all his life from having been left on his own by his wife" (Bernhard 11), beginning his intense isolation, and his own study of the old masters of art, literature, philosophy, and music.

When his wife died, and he found himself alone, Reger actively withdrew from conventional social norms, rejecting typical human interactions and avoiding the expectations of society, most notably avoiding all contact with people for months after her death (Bernhard 116). His withdrawal from society contributes to his overall sense of cultural discontent, positioning him as an outsider to prevailing norms. Reger explores these points of discontent throughout the novel, such as the downfall of Austrian artists, as “for decades now Austrian artists have produced nothing but kitschy rubbish which...would end up on the rubbish heap,” (Bernhard 109) as painters, sculptors, writers, and composers all produce brainless works in pursuit of appeasing the state. He also bemoans the worsening quality of government and politicians as “not a day has passed without a political scandal and political corruption,” (Bernhard 119) and the degradation of Austria, which had become a “ridiculous pygmy state which drips with self-overestimation and... has reached its absolute low” (Bernhard 154). Throughout his monologues, his arguments center around the idea that others have bought into the current society, ignoring the glaring problems he witnesses, as he, in his isolation, feels positioned to recognize and call out the issues he perceives.

In response to his isolation and the issues he perceives in society, Reger has turned to intellectual engagement, with art and the museum in particular. With his wife’s death and his isolation, he found he has been set “entirely free, wholly free, completely free,” as “the death of a beloved person is also an enormous liberation” (Bernhard 150). His freedom opened him up to making greater critiques of culture and society, allowing him to grapple with his dissatisfaction. This freedom he found amid his isolation, and the cultural discontent and criticism it sparked, is a form of resistance against cultural hegemony in itself. With his complaints of the complacency of many ignoring the issues of society, Reger rejects the enforced norms of the ruling class.

Beyond Reger himself, the museum he visits every other day, another source and victim of his criticism, operates as a site of hegemony as well. Museums are cultural institutions, that as Bennett and Duncan explain, were founded to promote the beliefs and culture of the ruling classes while shaping the behavior of the common visitor. As a prime example of the curation and presentation of hegemonic values, the museum setting is crucial to understanding Reger's critiques of the perpetuation of cultural hegemony when coupled with his deep isolation.

Throughout the novel, the Kunsthistorisches Museum is used as a symbolic backdrop for discussions on the curation and contestation of cultural hegemony for Reger. As a cultural institution, the museum, as argued by both Bennett and Duncan, plays a crucial role in shaping societal values and narratives. In this setting, Reger's interactions with art highlight the interplay between individual resistance and institutional control. His intellectual isolation is a point of focus as he engages with the artworks, challenging the museum's prescribed narratives, critiquing the choice of displays, as well as the idea that artists are geniuses, believing "all these so-called old masters are really failures," as there "is not a single painting to be seen...painted with genius, or even painted with extraordinary competence" (Bernhard 152). The museum, as a cultural institution, aligns with the Cultural Hegemony Theory, in their perpetuation of dominant values and norms. Reger's intellectual pursuits within the museum space, however, position him as a dissenting voice, disrupting the hegemonic control exercised by the museum and pervading cultural norms overall. His criticism and search for the humanity of art masters, as shown in his discussion of recognizing the failings of artists, are a form of resistance, offering a perspective on the relationship between individuals and cultural institutions. As Reger analyzes his relationship with the museum over the years, his dissent becomes apparent, demonstrating tensions between individual intellectual autonomy and the institutional reinforcement of societal

norms. The museum, as a backdrop for Reger's intellectual resistance, becomes a microcosm of the broader societal struggle over cultural narratives and values.

Reger's rejection of societal norms and his intense focus on Tintoretto's painting showcases his role as a resistant intellectual challenging cultural hegemony. It is in front of the *White-bearded Man* that Reger comes to his conclusions on the failures of the so-called geniuses and masters of art, furthered along by his isolation. His isolation serves as a deliberate distancing from convention, a form of resistance against dominant cultural narratives. Through his disdain for societal conventions, Reger actively resists pressures to follow along, positioning his critiques as a counterpoint to the prescribed values perpetuated by the cultural hegemony. His rejection is not only an act of defiance, but also his search for intellectual autonomy, as Reger navigates the museum space and his own interactions with art and literature within his commitment to scrutinizing, dissenting, and discovering the humanity of artists, all in search of resisting the current Austrian state he despises (Bernhard 154).

While Reger's isolation, rejection of societal norms, and intellectual resistance throughout the novel showcases a deep exploration of cultural critiques, there are certain limitations to applying the Cultural Hegemony Theory to *Old Masters* that warrant consideration. One possible limitation lies in the individual nature of Reger's resistance, as his isolation is deeply personal, driven by the circumstances of his life, and may not resonate universally. Critics may argue that Reger's intellectual pursuits represent an elitist form of resistance, detached from the broader struggles faced by society, and indeed it is worth recognizing Reger's wealth and privilege enabling him to pursue this that many do not possess. Furthermore, there is potential for questioning the extent to which Reger's criticisms truly challenge hegemonic control of cultural institutions, as his rejection of norms could be seen as a

retreat, rather than effective resistance. That could prompt discussions about the efficacy of individual dissent within the broader context of resisting cultural hegemony, though an important counterargument is that all involvement in resistance must begin at the individual level. While the criticisms and limitations of the application of Cultural Hegemony Theory to Reger and *Old Masters* are important to note, the application of the theory helps further an overall understanding of the conversation around resistance of the individual that can occur when isolating oneself from majority ruling beliefs.

Exploring Reger's isolation, cultural critiques, and rejection of societal norms within the museum setting provides a lens for understanding the dynamics of resistance, cultural hegemony, and intellectual pursuit in Thomas Bernhard's *Old Masters*. Reger's intellect and isolation, though deeply personal, suggests a method of resistance in broader societal struggles against dominant cultural narratives. By applying Cultural Hegemony Theory, it becomes easier to shed light on the dynamics between individual resistance and institutional control, highlighting the complexities of Reger's character. The validity of his critiques, focused within the context of the museum as a cultural institution and tool of the state, presents arguments that are useful to bear in mind as individuals who interact with the museum and the state in modern day, particularly with implications of dissent and challenging the hegemonic forces on current issues such as repatriation, diverse representation, and more.

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