

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Pigheaded

Adam Leipzig · Monday, November 22nd, 2010

Good morning, class. Today we'll talk about language.

Let's compare these two passages. They are both from a recent edition of the LA Times. Our question is, Why can we describe food better than we can describe a movie?

Example 1:

"Fried pigs' ears are on the menu too, cut like thick fries, crunchy and curiously sticky at the same time, their richness cut by a scarlet harissa aioli. A few bites are interesting, but they're so rich I wouldn't want to eat an entire order by myself."

Example 2:

"The film is too long on exposition in some places, too short in others, never just right."

I will grant that it is much easier to describe pig's ears than narrative exposition. But it isn't more important. Pig's ears are, well, pig's ears. Exposition is about how we tell our stories and how we understand our lives.

I'm not carping critics, because the contrast is all too typical. Plus, our national dialogue about creative culture is further degraded by other typical statements – like this one: "Hollywood's 'creative' personnel and their TV network distribution outlets have deliberately unleashed literally unparalleled levels of profanity and graphic language upon the public" (Parents Television Council, 2010 report).

Social conservatives always seem to believe our culture is going to hell in a hand basket and they have a nostalgic fantasy about halcyon days when art was clean and simply made and nobody used bad language. (That nostalgic image is false.) Social progressives, on the other hand, proclaim we are living in a time of diversity and great creative expression, which should be respected and glorified, and audiences who can't see the value in an artist's work are blinded by their generational and cultural prejudices.

This is all colossal misdirection.

To re-make our language about creativity, let's start here: Culture is not defined by "obscenity," "indecenty," "diversity," "multiplicity" or any of the terms hurled by the Right or the Left. Our

society has become too polarized along so-called wedge issues, and the discussion of culture is least served when it comes from a political point of view, as when the Right complains about vulgarity and concludes that culture is offensive, or when the Left celebrates diversity and concludes that culture is cool. Culture is not a matter of red vs. blue, of one political stripe or another. In fact, culture is not defined by any single thing.

“Culture” is the creative output of our society, the collective work of millions of individuals who make movies, books, plays, television shows, paintings, dance, buildings, music – work that expresses parts of themselves to be shared with the community-at-large. Creative work surrounds us and we define ourselves when we embrace, ignore or reject it.

Especially, we define ourselves by our ability to define it.

Culture is about our souls and our future. Culture is hope and sweat and muscle cramps and erasing until it is right, representing how we see the world, bravely and vulnerably, through our means of expression. As long as we don’t have the words to describe our culture, we allow ourselves to be shaped by a force for which we take no responsibility.

On the other hand, if we find the new language to explore our culture, it will bend in an upward-facing arc.

Homework assignment: Write a paragraph about something creative and describe it as best you can. Or, fry some pig’s ears. Whichever seems more appealing to you.

Image from Marco Ferreri’s 1973 film, La Grande Bouffe

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