

## Royal Anthropological Institute or Royal Academy? Post-Modern Anthropology as Contemporary Art

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### Abstract

It has been widely argued that postmodern and cultural relativism are replacement religions in Romantic, neo-tribal tradition (e.g. Scruton 2000, Kuznar 1997) This article attempts to better understand the nature of postmodern anthropology by looking at it through the prism of Art. Following Scruton (2000), it argues that, since the Enlightenment, Art has performed a similar function to Christianity in many people's lives and is accordingly a form of replacement religion. The article demonstrates that while modern forms of anthropology might be deemed 'religious,' the cultural relativist anthropology of Margaret Mead appears to be art whereas this is less clear with postmodern anthropology. The article argues that the boundaries between postmodern (or 'contemporary') anthropology and visual 'Contemporary Art' are essentially weak and that postmodern anthropology is usefully understood as exemplifying contemporary art. Accordingly, it has no place in scholarly discourse. It is a replacement religion by virtue of its artistic nature.

### Introduction

The postmodern style in anthropology has been examined in relation to a number of conceptual frameworks. Roger Scruton (2000, 141) has compared it to magical incantations and spells writing that, "Deconstruction is neither a method nor an argument. It should be understood on the model of magical incantation. Incantations are not arguments and avoid complete thoughts and finished sentences. Their purpose is not to describe what is there but to summon what is there"<sup>1</sup>. Andreski (1974) and more recently Dutton (1999) have dismissed this style of writing as being 'jargon' which is attempting to make the reader feel that they are in the presence of someone or something profound. As Dutton puts it, of a particular sentence by philosopher Judith Butler, "To ask what this means is to miss the point. This sentence beats readers into submission and instructs them that they are in the

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<sup>1</sup> Scruton refers to writing of Jacques Derrida. Here is an example of Derrida's style: 'If the alterity of the other is *posed*, that is, *only* posed, does it not amount to *the same*, for example in the form of the "constituted object" or of the "informed product" invested with meaning, etc.? From this point of view, I would even say that the alterity of the other *inscribes* in this relationship that which in no case can be "posed." Inscription, as I would define it in this respect, is not a simple position: it is rather that by means of which every position is *of itself confounded (différance)*: inscription, mark, text and not only *thesis or theme*-inscription of the *thesis*' (Derrida 1981, 95-96).

presence of a great and deep mind. Actual communication has nothing to do with it”<sup>2</sup>. I would argue that there is an artistic quality to the postmodern and cultural relativist styles both in anthropology and beyond. In this article, I will explore this suggestion and I will argue that some cultural relativist anthropology sits in the Romantic tradition whereby art has, for many, come to replace traditional ‘religion.’ However, where some cultural relativist literature is poor scholarship but successful art, postmodern writing is both poor scholarship (it is illogical and does not lead to the truth)<sup>3</sup> and poor art. Though it possesses artistic qualities it questions boundaries to such an extent that it is usefully compared to ‘contemporary art.’ Such a comparison provides fertile ground for further discussion by demonstrating that postmodernism is a replacement religion not merely in the ideological sense widely argued but specifically by virtue of being most usefully categorised as art.

## Defining Our Terms

Philosopher Daniel Dennett (1995, 95) argues that scholars should define their terms but “only up to a point”. One of the problems with postmodern Deconstruction, from a scientific perspective, is that its deconstruction of terms is ultimately epistemologically pessimistic. We might argue that all concepts are examples of essentialism, even if hopefully “cautious essentialism” where it is realised that the concepts are merely useful constructs (see Dennett, 95). Faced with a world which does not make sense, they attempt to make sense of it by breaking it down into component parts which are easier to manage. They create taxonomies and conceptual divisions. From a Platonic perspective, these are eternally true and are reflected in the World of Forms. For the “nominalist”, these categories are important but only insofar as they assist in answering discrete questions. Thus, the nominalist may engage in ‘cautious essentialism’: he employs a category because it is useful but he is always mindful of its conceptual difficulties. It is likely to, for example, play down nuance and neglect that which is borderline. But it is the, though imperfect, only practical means we have of gaining a foothold on the mountain of knowledge. As we shall see, many postmodern scholars – in deconstructing and suggesting the rejection of categories such as ‘culture’ – are only finding difficulties inherent in all categories (see Rees 2010a). All categories have a history, are culturally-based, play-down nuance and are underpinned by some kind of worldview. Moreover, postmodernist insistence of categories being ‘conceptualised’ in tremendous leaves in a situation where there is no room for analysis, thus stopping analysis.

In this article I will define ‘science’ as being characterised by ‘consilience’ (Wilson 1998). This means that any assertion in a given science must be reducible to the science underpinning it, so an anthropological assertion must be reducible to biology. Secondly, ‘science’ must involve certain agreed characteristics. Anthropologist Lawrence Kuznar (1997, 22) argues that these are the following:

- (1) It must be solely empirical. If a discipline is based on unprovable or inconsistent dogmas it is not scientific.
- (2) It must be systematic and exploratory.
- (3) It must be logical. This means, in particular, that fallacious arguments, such as appeal ad hominem, appeal to motive or any other form of rhetoric must be avoided. It also means that the research and arguments must be consistent.

<sup>2</sup> This was with reference to the following sentence: “The move from a structuralist account in which capital is understood to structure social relations in relatively homologous ways to a view of hegemony in which power relations are subject to repetition, convergence, and rearticulation brought the question of temporality into the thinking of structure, and marked a shift from a form of Althusserian theory that takes structural totalities as theoretical objects to one in which the insights into the contingent possibility of structure inaugurate a renewed conception of hegemony as bound up with the contingent sites and strategies of the rearticulation of power” (Butler 1997).

<sup>3</sup> For an examination of the perceived nature of scholarly enquiry see Popper (1963).

- (4) It must be theoretical, it must attempt to explain, to answer questions and, where possible, predict.
- (5) It must be self-critical, prepared to abandon long-held models as new information arises.
- (6) Its propositions must be open to testing and falsification.
- (7) As it wishes to be falsified and as anybody can, in theory, do so; science should be a public activity.
- (8) It should assume that reality as is actually real and can be understood; it should be epistemologically optimistic.

As I have already noted, we can spend a great deal of time and space debating the merits of different definitions and, indeed, of the checklist method. I would suggest that this is a useful definition with which to underpin our discussion. As Hurley (2007) notes, a useful definition involves explaining what the category denotes, explains how it operates and it avoids metaphor and emotive language. I think this definition achieves that. Some disciplines, such as fieldwork-based anthropology, can never, perhaps, be fully scientific and so Wilson (1998) argues the more they imitate science the more they will partake in science's success in reaching the truth.

How should we define 'religion'? Again, there is considerable debate over this (see Boyer 2001, Dutton 2009, Ch. 2, Fitzgerald 2000, Geertz 1966). For the purposes of this article I will define 'religion' in two different ways. On the one hand, I use it to refer to the lexical definition of religion: that is belief in the sacred as found in such 'religions' as Christianity. On the other hand, I will employ an operational definition of religion; focussing on how 'religion' functions. This is useful in making cross-cultural and cross-historical comparisons because, in some cultures, there is no clear border between the 'sacred' and the 'profane.' Moreover, it allows us to understand more because, by loosening this border, it explains secular movements which operate like religion such as Marxism or nationalism. Accordingly, I will define 'religion' as a group-based, illogical but fervently believed system of beliefs and practices which involve some sense of agency ranging from gods to fate. Such a definition helpfully prevents 'religion' from being simply subsumed into 'culture' (see Dutton 2009, Ch. 2). This means that, as Popper (1963) argues, 'religion' stands in contrast to science on much of the above checklist. It is noteworthy here that postmodernism is incongruous with our definition of science. It tends to be based on inconsistent and unproven assumptions, such as that all cultures are equal but that Western culture is 'imperialistic' and cultures can only be understood through their own concepts (see Wilson 1998). This 'cultural relativism' is highly problematic because it ultimately leads to epistemological pessimism where we can make sense of nothing. Postmodernism objects to objective logic – this is questioned as Western and imperialist – meaning that we cannot get to the truth or debate in any way (Kuznar 1997). And it is inconsistent because it attempts to use supposedly reasonable argument to undermine reason (see Bruce 2002, 221) <sup>4</sup>. In that it involves, ultimately, being subsumed into the void of Nothing, it might be argued, and Scruton (2000, 148) implies as much, that it is congruous with our definition of religion <sup>5</sup>.

How should we define 'art'? There are two main methods. The 'conventionalists' argue that 'art' is anything in a clear artistic tradition. In a sense, if it is produced to an artist (whether a painter, poet or dramatist) then it is art. I will hold to a more operational definition of art for some reasons that I have employed an operational definition of religion. Moreover, this definition becomes problematic because it means that anything can be 'art,' rendering the term less useful as a separate category. And it simply leaves us asking, 'What is an artist?' Accordingly, I will argue that 'art' is distinguished by its

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<sup>4</sup> For a detailed critique of post-modernism see Gellner (1992).

<sup>5</sup> Scruton (2000, 148) writes that the ultimate purpose of Post-Modernism – he concludes – is to take us into a void of Nothing where there no meaning other than destruction of meaning where 'absence is the all-embracing presence. It is, in short, the work of the Devil.' This sense of 'presence' would be congruous with the definition of religion that I have espoused.

ability to create an experience of catharsis or, at least, a strong, emotional and thought-provoking experience and, as part of this, it should transport the audience into the realms of the imagination. In contrast to science, art, therefore, does not have to be logical, theoretical, systematic, empirical and so forth. Art, like science, should also involve certain characteristics, otherwise it can be subsumed into another category and is un-necessary, and, as such, I would suggest these be the subcategories widely understood to be denoted by the word Art: Music, Literature and Representation and the various genres within these categories. Accordingly, ‘art’ involves ‘skill’ in one of these subgenres (see Dutton, D. 2009). Bad art would be a failed attempt at this ideal. I would define ‘catharsis’ as purging of the emotions and the intense relieving of emotional tensions, often in a way that is uplifting, thought-provoking and overwhelming. In contrast to ‘religion,’ art does not necessarily involve a sense of agency or belief or practice. Art involves creating a certain kind of emotional experience in the audience within certain accepted boundaries and taking them into the realms of the imagination <sup>6</sup>.

Finally, as I will draw a distinction in this regard, how should we best define contemporary or postmodern art in the sense of representational art? I would argue that, in contrast to our definition of art contemporary art is motivated by a desire to be avant-garde, to push the boundaries and to be novel. In this regard it tends to question – and deliberately flout – traditional artistic conventions and boundaries, assumes the conventionalist definition and does not necessarily involve skill or catharsis. It must be avant-garde and accordingly it must be shocking (see Scruton 2009a/b). This is perhaps most noticeably epitomised by the British school known as the New Neurotic Realists, many of them displayed in the Charles Saatchi Gallery in central London. These have included Damien Hirst – who put a cow in a vat full of formaldehyde, Tracey Emin who presented a filthy unmade bed and a video of herself talking about having abortions <sup>7</sup> and the Chapman Brothers, who are most well known for mannequins of children with their noses and mouths replaced by sexual organs. In 1998, many of these artists presented their work at a controversial exhibition at London’s Royal Academy of Art called ‘Sensation’ (see Mulholland 2003 or Price 1998)

### **The Relationship between Religion and Art**

Scruton (2000) observes that the Enlightenment involved a systematic doubting of ‘religion,’ of the sacred ideas and values which held the society together; its sense of tribalism. It led to a rise in scientific thinking, following the definition of science which we have already outlined. This led to a reaction in the form of the Romantic Movement which attempted re-sanctify the world; to, in a sense, operate in the same way as the Christianity which had been rejected. As Scruton argues: ‘Beneath the rational culture of the Enlightenment, the Romantics searched for another, deeper culture – the culture of the people, rooted in mystery . . .’ (Scruton 2000, 49). The essence of Scruton’s (2000) thesis is that there is a direct link between the fall of religion (and tribalism) and the rise of the arts and he provides a persuasive case. In religious societies, what we would now call ‘the arts’ was grounded in the religion (as the core of the culture) of that society. High art recycled the society’s myths and this can be observed from Sophocles through to Shakespeare (17-18). Scruton continues, drawing upon analysis of the ancient world, to argue that art and religion begin to diverge when religion is ‘in turmoil or declining.’ Having argued this point, Scruton suggests that modern art evidences a clear separation between religion and art. Modern high culture, he argues, tends to reflect an isolated individual in a

<sup>6</sup> For a more in-depth discussion of the definition of ‘art’ and the debates surrounding such definitions see Adajian (2007), Danto (1981), Tilghman (1984) or Davies (1991). See also Scruton (2000, 2009a/b).

<sup>7</sup> Having been shortlisted for the ‘Turner Prize,’ Emin’s ‘My Bed’ was displayed at the Turner Prize Exhibition at Tate Britain in London in 1999. It included condoms and a pair of pants with menstrual stains on them. See Saatchi Gallery (Accessed 8<sup>th</sup> February 2011).

quest for a community or lapsing into solitude and mental anguish. It replaces the religion which has been lost and can never truly be regained. It is religion's surrogate in a number of ways.

Firstly, it permits ritual, especially so with regard to music and theatre, in which, as in Durkheim's (1995) analysis, a kind of effervescence can be experienced. On a private level, even reading a novel or a poem can permit us to enter another world and experience a kind of transcendence of ordinary life. Secondly, if a canon of literature is created, partaking in part of that canon is a means of partaking in a transcendent experience with an 'imagined community' (see Anderson 1983) of fellow religious seekers. Thirdly, the literature itself can become a new way of binding society together and Scruton sees it as no coincidence that the decline in theology is paralleled by a rise in the academic appreciation of the arts. Fourthly, 'high art,' unlike popular culture according to Scruton, operates rather like the myths that form a part of religious discourse. Vaguely based on truth, they permit us to meditate on the meaning of life. Scruton insists that popular culture is merely a shallow relation to high culture. Its literature does not permit us to seriously contemplate the human condition and nor does it create catharsis. And, fifthly, in some cases at least, this literature transports us to a world where there is once again a community and rituals, such as in the works of Wagner. Romanticism sits in this tradition in two key ways depending on the Romantic tradition in question. It either creates a new religion which attempts directly to replace the lost religion, such as with Romantic nationalism, or it achieves elements of this in a more subtle way by taking us into the depths of the imagination, as in Romantic art.

### **Margaret Mead's Ethnographies as Art**

Margaret Mead (1901 – 1978) was perhaps the leading figure in cultural relativist anthropology and she has been described by others as first and foremost a 'writer',<sup>8</sup> her scholarship having been widely discredited (see Freeman 1983 or Orans 1986). Nevertheless, she sits in the Romantic tradition by virtue of illogical and fervent beliefs and, most importantly, the prizing of tribal life as unique, (she advocated cultural relativism), special and, possibly superior to Western life. Mead's *Coming of Age in Samoa* (Mead 1928) was not scientific and was successful but not for scientific reasons (see Orans 1986).

However, I would suggest that part of the success of *Coming of Age in Samoa* lies in the way in which Mead presented it. It was, in literary terms, a very successful piece of work because it was able to transport the reader to a lost, ideal, perfect world and bring that world to life. And, putting aside our arguments over other religious dimensions to Mead's work, this is, I think, significant. It is difficult to find an example that singularly encapsulates this quality and I am wary of being accused of providing insufficient evidence or engaging in some kind of appeal to instinct. But let me provide the following example of Mead's style. This is from her second ethnography:

"In the centre of a long house are gathered a group of women. Two of them are cooking sago and coconut in shallow, broken pieces of earthenware pottery, another is making beadwork. One old woman, a widow by her rope belt and black rubber-like breast-bands, is shredding leaves and plaiting them into new grass skirts to add to those which hang in a long row above her head. The thatched roof is black with thick wood smoke, rising incessantly from the fires which are never allowed to go out. On swinging shelves over the fires, fish are smoking. A month old baby lies on a leaf mat, several other children play about (. . .) It is dark and hot in the house (. . .) The women have laid aside their long drab cotton cloaks, which they always wear in public to hide their faces from their male relatives-in-law (. . .) One woman starts to gather up her beads, 'Come, Alupwa!' she says to her three year old daughter. 'I don't want to!' The fat little girl wriggles and pouts. 'Yes, come; father will be home from the market and hungry after fishing all night'" (Mead 1942, 19)

<sup>8</sup> See Sandall (2001).

Whether they are accurate or not, Mead describes these wistful little snippets of life. Her style is thick with sensual description, it is active, it is a present tense stream-of-consciousness allowing you almost to take part in it, it subtly conveys important pieces of ethnographic information through what is, in some ways, a kind of prose poem which drifts off dreamily with no real ending when the father returns: ‘His hand plays affectionately with her hair as he scowls up at his wife, who is sullenly descending the ladder.’ Each of Mead’s little scenes are poetic in this way and, indeed, the particular chapter of *Growing Up in New Guinea* (Mead 1930) is simply a series of these ‘Scenes from Manus Life’ with no clear connection between them. Ultimately they culminate in the following: ‘When will Molung die?’ asks little Itong, and ‘Come for a swim,’ she adds, diving off the veranda without waiting for an answer’ (24). Mead’s style seems to me to be like that of a skilled novelist. There is a degree to which Mead’s work is first and foremost ‘literature’ and, I would argue, a very high standard of literature.

Equally, if we briefly look at an example of contemporary style in anthropology, we can also see – in a very different way – its artistic dimensions, though it is not as successful as Mead.

“This article explores continuities and discontinuities in conventional and changing meanings and uses of *essuf*, a term which denotes approximately the ‘wild’, ‘solitude’, or ‘nostalgia’ in dialects of the Tamajaq language spoken by Tuareg peoples in Mali and Niger. In this analysis of creative reinventions of *essuf* in both local and ‘borderlands’ spaces of psycho-social crises, oral art performances, and ‘modern’ literature, the wider goal is to produce more nuanced anthropological understandings of local/global and structure/agency connections. The data illustrate the connections between sacred spaces – literal, imagined, and remembered – in African philosophical modes of thought and socio-political power and agency. The Tuareg case opens up perspectives on how cultural spaces of varying scale are affected by selective remembering, and creative re-enacting of key philosophical notions. The data caution anthropologists against reifications and binaries of global and local, and structure and agency” (Rasmussen 2008, 609).

This is an abstract summary of an anthropological article by Susan Rasmussen. In quoting it, I am not meaning to criticise the article or suggest it is of no academic value. That is not the issue. I quote this abstract because of its style and what this style achieves emotionally. It focuses on an obscure tribe, immediately quoting its language. This creates a sense of mystery and takes us there because we can, at least partly, hear the tribe speak. Otherwise, I would submit, it is very difficult to understand. The sentences, despite not quoting, are lengthy, often going over four lines. It is substantially composed of anthropological and other social science jargon such as: ‘continuities and discontinuities’, ‘selective remembering’, ‘borderlands’, ‘psycho-social crisis’ and ‘reifications,’ all of which could be expressed in more everyday and immediately understandable English. There is the peculiar use of the backslash – which creates a kind of energy and immediacy. The widely understood term ‘modern’ is placed in quotations as if to indicate that the writer does not accept such, one guesses, simplistic, common categories and, accordingly, it subverts – without demonstrating the intellectual right to do so – these very same categories. This kind of writing, in my view, creates the impression – through an opaque style - of profundity and being in the presence of a profound mind. And it is, in this sense, a kind of art <sup>9</sup>. Philosopher of art Denis Dutton is well known for his ‘Bad Writing Contest’ which he ran between 1995 and 1998. As part of this, he highlighted many examples of jargon-filled, verbose academic writing, arguing that the aim of much of such writing was merely to create a sense of profundity and inflate weak or unoriginal ideas rather than to communicate clearly (see Dutton 5<sup>th</sup> February 1999). For Dutton, the example I have cited – from one of the world’s leading anthropology journals – would be a worthy contender in his contest, if not actually a winner. He remarks (Dutton,

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<sup>9</sup> For an interesting discussion of aesthetics see Denis Dutton (2009) and for a critique see Torres (2010). There are many other examples of this anthropological style. See also Helmreich (2007, abstract).

Private correspondence with author 30<sup>th</sup> October 2010), ‘The writing seems awfully pretentious. Not meaningless, but it is certainly academese’<sup>10</sup>. Put simply, this style of writing is not ‘science’ because it is unclear and thus illogical and where it is clear it is arguing something scientifically questionable – that anthropologists are engaging in ‘reification;’ that they are possibly literally believing that concepts are real things. It is closer to ‘art’ because it does involve some kind of emotional experience and journey into the imagination. It achieves this in a sense of making us think of ‘Africa’ and ‘tribes.’ It also confuses the reader and makes them, possibly, feel that they are in the presence of someone profound and, for some, this might lead to an intense emotional experience. But this is more a mark of religious discourse than artistic discourse. Accordingly, though this might broadly be understood as ‘art’ it is not especially in-depth or successful art. Moreover, it is not in a clear genre. But it seems closer to ‘art’ than ‘science.’

A second example of such style, produced by Rees (2010b), is worth assessing at some length. As background, I should point out that in an attempt to provoke a detailed criticism of the scientific model of anthropology and the much criticised ‘culture’ category (see Kuznar 1997), I (Dutton 2010b) wrote a comment piece for the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (perhaps the world’s most prestigious anthropology journal, chosen by me for this very reason) criticising Rees (2010a). The precise nature of the debate is not really relevant to our discussion here. What fascinated me was the linguistic nature of Rees (2010b) rejoinder to me. It is powerful and does, possibly, induce an emotional experience in some readers.

### **On the challenge - and beauty – of (contemporary) anthropology**

Rees’ rejoinder begins by stating his argument: ‘The challenge – and beauty – of (contemporary)<sup>11</sup> anthropological enquiry’ (895) is that it escapes the conception of science advocated by Karl Popper. This is ‘critical rationalism’ - in essence, is that ‘science’ must be strictly logical, open to falsification, epistemologically optimistic, public and a number of other factors (see above). Accordingly, there is an objectively accurate understanding of the world which can be increasingly known. So, Rees’ argument is that ‘(contemporary) anthropology’ is a ‘challenge’ and ‘beautiful’ because it rejects critical rationalism.

There are three difficulties at this stage.

1. Rees’ expression is unclear. What is he trying to say by placing ‘and beauty’ between dashes when there does not appear to be any need to? Why is ‘contemporary’ placed in brackets? Is he talking about ‘contemporary anthropology’ or ‘anthropology’ more broadly? The punctuation structure renders this – and thus his essential argument – unclear. Accordingly, the argument itself is an appeal to ambiguity and is not logically sound.
2. He is not using neutral language. By terming ‘(contemporary) anthropology’ a ‘challenge’ involving ‘beauty’ he is appealing to the emotions of the reader. Implicitly, a ‘challenge’ is positive and only the weakling or coward demurs from it. Thus, Rees is appealing to popularity; the desire to be regarded as adventurous and brave enough to accept a ‘challenge.’ By extension, it might be argued that those who disagree with Rees – such as Dutton (2010b) – are cowards or reactionaries.

<sup>10</sup> Denis Dutton is no relation of mine. He sadly died on 28th December 2010 and I am most grateful that, though presumably very unwell, he took the time to correspond with me and give me his advice on this research.

<sup>11</sup> Popper (1957, 160) observes that many historicist movements draw a clear divide between themselves and everything that came before which they perceive as inherently outdated. They ‘contrast their “dynamic” thinking with the “static” thinking of all previous generations...’ and draw a clear line under the past because their thinking is ‘so staggeringly novel.’ Terming your intellectual movement ‘contemporary’ implies that opponents are ‘old-fashioned’ – an appeal to novelty – and seems to be in line with Popper’s summary of what is, as we shall see, an implicit religion. The idea that we are ‘Modern’ likewise draws such a divide (see Scruton 1996).

3. The word ‘beauty’ is not neutral. It is flattering the reader – another appeal to popularity - and suggesting that agreeing with Rees’ ‘anthropology’ involves creating something ‘beautiful.’ It may imply that the anthropology advocated by Rees’ opponents is, at best, less beautiful than his own.

The word ‘beauty’ is vague but Rees does not define it rendering any argument based around it inherently weak. This argument is not explicitly pursued in the subsequent body of the essay which, instead, goes off on various different tangents to respond to specific criticisms in Dutton’s (2010) comment piece <sup>12</sup>. Accordingly, the central stated argument is a ‘Red Herring’ which may confuse the reader.

Where there is attempt at counter argument it is an appeal to authority and intuition: ‘many of those anthropologists who have conducted research in the new domains have found themselves in an open, undefined space to which their established analytical terms did not speak and which rendered the stakes of their discipline unstable and even uncertain’ (896). It does not matter how many anthropologists feel this way, it doesn’t make their decision philosophically sustainable and we might ask, ‘Which anthropologists? Do these anthropologists have a reputation for logical thinking?’ This is an appeal to faulty authority and, perhaps, ‘the majority’ though Rees does not attempt to render his inductive argument more persuasive by stating what percentage of anthropologists take this view. He refers to this change as ‘extraordinarily exciting’ (896). Again, this is appeal to popularity. It plays on the emotions.

Secondly, Rees’ defence uses a great deal of ‘appeal to jargon,’ of unclear or obscure language such as ‘it creates a no-longer, not-yet situation that invites genuine conceptual innovation’ (896) or the assertion that anthropology should be focused on studying ‘the emergent’ or that it exists in an ‘open, uncertain space’ (896). What does it mean to conduct research in ‘an open, undefined space’? And why should this ‘space’ be kept ‘open’? This is, again, appeal to popularity. Are you ‘open’ or ‘closed’ to new ideas? Rees effectively states that Westbrook (2008) – whose book his original article critiqued (Rees 2010a) - is ‘closing’ this space as if he is stopping people from thinking. Westbrook’s suggestions for anthropology are closing-off rather than opening-up which is problematic because these ‘open spaces’ ‘invite genuine conceptual innovation.’

Thirdly, Rees engages in appeal to verbosity as evidenced in very long sentences with many clauses. For example, page 896, par 2 is composed of two sentences, the first of which – involving no quotations - is 73 words long <sup>13</sup>. Taken together with the jargon, this has the psychological effect of intellectually intimidating or beguiling the reader, compelling him to accept Rees’ arguments for invalid reasons.

Rees then summarises Popper’s view of science and suggests difficulties with it. For example, he states: ‘One can certainly think through the conceptual presuppositions one brings to research without articulating them in the form of a falsifiable theory’ (897). This is stated as a crucial criticism and yet there is no attempt to back it up at all. The fundamental issue is whether we can have understanding without some kind of theory. Dutton suggests we cannot because science involves building on previous knowledge and even language is ultimately underpinned by a worldview and thus theory. Rees would require some kind of conceptual framework to make sense of these cultures and this would, to some degree reflect his culture because it would be expressed through his language – and if he tried to

<sup>12</sup> I refer to myself in the third person here as a way of better looking at this debate as an uninvested outsider.

<sup>13</sup> Butler’s (1997) Bad Writing contest-winning sentence was 94 words long. Rees’ (2010b) competitor is the following: ‘Given that time and space are limited, however, I can merely claim that, owing to the various departures from the ethnographic project of classic modernity that anthropology has seen since the 1980s, many of those anthropologists who have conducted research in the new domains have found themselves in an open, undefined space to which their established analytical terms did not speak and which rendered the stakes of their discipline unstable and even uncertain.’

express it through foreign categories he would still have to explain them through his language - and it would therefore be based on certain implicit assumptions. I suppose he could try to avoid language and make sense of the culture through abstract painting. But, as I've said, this would not be science. It would be a kind of art. So, in essence, Rees' philosophy leads us into a situation where 'contemporary anthropology' can become 'contemporary art,' where the conceptual borders are blurred.

Rees' second reservation is that Popper's model basically makes research boring because it reduces everything to 'yes/no logic' (897). But this is the essence of science and logic. Either an argument is logical or it isn't. Either it can be backed up, to a reasonable degree, with empirical evidence or cannot be. Moreover, we might submit that Rees' is a strawman understanding of 'logic.' Inductive logic is not simplistic 'yes slash no' but straining over the issue before carefully and hesitantly coming to a conclusion. Rees then argues that Popper's model denies the 'theory-less but epistemologically not naïve' (a further appeal to jargon) effort to move beyond what one already knows' (897). He argues that this view of science would lead to 'impoverished research' and 'meagre role' – appeal to insult, popularity and, lastly, a kind of threat.

Thereafter, essentially, Rees argues that fieldwork involves disorientation and a shattering of preconceptions. This may be true, he notes Dutton arguing, but expressing them – through language – involves some kind of category system and, accordingly, no matter how implicit, some form of theory about how things operate because a world-view, and thus theory, underpins language. Clearly, Dutton is defining 'understanding' differently from Rees and so Rees' argument here is based on equivocation. Rees is now talking about understanding *ex nihilo* which is comparable to the 'understanding' one might reach due to a mystical experience (see Rambo 1993). It may be the case that fieldwork involves a breakdown – comparable to religious experience – so that one feels that insights come from nowhere and nothing makes sense. But this does not mean that they really do come from nowhere – this is appeal to intuition. As part of this, Rees asserts that fieldwork 'literally derails the scenarios and assumptions that one has laid out beforehand . . .' (897). This is a misuse of language – possibly reification fallacy - because fieldwork does not literally have rails.

Rees then argues that, for Dutton, this 'derailment' is mere 'noise' whereas for him it is at the heart of fieldwork and it is a turning point in making sense of the object of study. This involves emotive language. Moreover, it a false dichotomy to suggest that something which 'distracts the researcher from her actual business' (897) is inherently useless to that 'business.' A distraction might, sometimes, aid useful developments. Rees also refers to the hypothetical anthropologist as 'she' and 'her.' This novel practice – usually it is 'he', 'he or she' or 's/he' – is, thus, not neutral and is making a political statement. Rees is conveying himself as pro-feminist, as leftwing (see Ellis 2004) and thus, I submit, attempting to engravate himself with the assumed politically left-wing readership of social anthropologists (see Kuznar 1997).

Next, Rees defines 'science' in a very broad manner as 'knowledge-producing practice' (897) and later as 'thoughtful, sincere research' (900). Firstly, we might ask, 'Which is it?' because a 'knowledge-producing practice' is not necessarily 'sincere' or 'thoughtful' and 'thoughtful, sincere research' might not produce knowledge. Secondly, these definitions are so broad that 'science' could be merged into 'art' – which can be thoughtful, sincere, involve research and produce knowledge – and become meaningless as a separate category. Thirdly, these definitions are highly novel – they are stipulative - and are nowhere near most lexical or theoretical definitions of 'science' and to engage in debate we must agree on how we are defining our terms (see Hurley 2007). Rees is keeping his model as 'science' by redefining 'science' stipulatively. Thus, Rees engages in the fallacy of equivocation because it is quite obvious when he is discussing 'science' as examined by Popper that it is defined in a very different way and this is nowhere made explicit.

Rees then distinguishes between anthropologists who define 'humans' and work from there – a

scientific method – from those interested in finding out if there are other human groups who escape our categories of apprehension. In doing so, he is engaging in a logical practice of essentialism. But this is a false dichotomy. Critical rationalists are, by definition, interested in having all their assumptions challenged and this includes their categories. He argues that his form of anthropology has ‘a sense of wonder’ – another appeal to emotion. Rees finds Dutton’s conception of ‘culture’ ‘delimiting’ because he wants to ‘avoid beginning with answers’ (899). This is deductively impossible. In Logic, you must begin with some truths, some boundaries and some agreed definitions ultimately underpinned by Mathematics or you cannot go any further. But, Rees argues, ‘culture’ prevents him, for example, asking questions which ‘insert movement into our established categories of knowledge/thinking . . .’. These include questions such as ‘Are humans elsewhere conceptualized differently?’ Where and in what ways do we see *humanum* in motion, in metamorphosis?’ (899). Again, this appears to be at least partly an appeal to jargon. Why use the word *humanum*? Why code switch? Moreover, it is further evidence of false dichotomy. Evolutionary anthropologists, for example, may indeed insert movement into categories by, for example, questioning the borders of the ‘human’ essence.

Rees suggests that ‘insistence’ on the use of this ‘culture’ category is limiting because everything is seen as grounded in culture. He gives a series of examples of potential human thought – including that inanimate objects have ‘language’ - and asks rhetorically ‘All culture?’(899). They are ‘all culture’ because the term ‘culture’ means the entire way of life of a people and Rees’ denotations therefore involve various degrees of extension within the ‘culture’ category. Rees ultimately argues that perceiving others through our own categories is ‘symbolic violence’ (an appeal to emotion and to abuse and, for the reader, popularity). Rees suggests that the consequence of Dutton’s approach is ‘boredom’ (899) which is another fallacious argument – an appeal to novelty. To suggest that Dutton’s model leads to an ‘eternal repetition’ (899) is hyperbole.

Rees summarises by asserting that the ‘significance’ of his ‘philosophically inclined anthropology of thinking’ is that by seeing ‘culture’ as one of many ways of thinking about humans it ‘opens up a space’ beyond the assumption that anthropology – as a science of humans – is a science of culture (899). This metaphor does not clearly state why his model is ‘significant’ to anthropology. In essence, he is arguing that by not assuming anthropology is a science of culture he is achieving a situation where, for some, anthropology is not assumed to be a science of culture. This is a circular argument – it begs the question - and it does not justify the ‘significance’ of Rees’ anthropology in any way.

Rees ends his rejoinder by referring to ‘Dutton’s Dilemma’ (899-900). He quotes Dutton’s concern that rejecting ‘culture’ has become illogically popular in anthropology leading, sometimes, to unfair peer-review treatment of those who employ it. Rees states, ‘These lines document how Dutton’s holding on to his theory-based conception of science has seemingly alienated him from much of contemporary anthropology’ (900). With emotive language such as ‘alienate’ this is an appeal to threat – you will be alienated if you accept Dutton’s view rather than mine – and, regarding Dutton, to popularity: reject your theory, embrace mine and you will not be ‘alienated’. Lastly, Rees claims to ‘hope’ that he has shown that anthropology is science – but he stresses his stipulative definition (this time ‘thoughtful, sincere research’) – and that the ‘beauty’ of ‘(contemporary) anthropology’ is that it occurs ‘beyond either/or oppositions’ (900). This could be interpreted as an appeal to pity. Who, after all, wants to dash someone’s hopes, especially if they stress that their research is ‘thoughtful’ and ‘sincere’?

### **Contemporary Anthropology and Contemporary Art**

Rees does not prove that his version of anthropology is ‘science’ because he employs a stipulative definition and uses a process of equivocation. Secondly, there is no engagement with aesthetics in this essay – the word ‘beautiful’ is nowhere defined – so we must conclude that he has not proven that

‘(contemporary) anthropology’s occurrence ‘beyond either/or oppositions’ possesses ‘beauty.’ Thirdly, he has not proven that his form of anthropology occurs ‘beyond either/ or oppositions.’ This metaphor is vague and undefined other than through further metaphors and jargon and Rees himself – exemplifying such an anthropology - employs such oppositions to criticize Dutton’s logic such as accusing Dutton of quoting him ‘out of context’ (898). As such, none of Rees’ arguments are logically valid and even if they were they would still be fallaciously argued.

But we can also assess Rees’ style in terms of art. It plays on the emotions of the readers, thus potentially creating strong emotional experiences. In its opacity, it confuses and intimidates the reader, thus potentially making them believe they are in the presence of something profound, a possible road to catharsis. The degree to which it takes us into the realms of the imagination is questionable but there is an extent to which it does this by describing what it feels like to be anthropologist and what fieldwork feels like from a subjective perspective. Accordingly, in a broad sense, this appears to qualify as ‘art.’ What renders it less than successful art is, I think, a matter of degree. Whereas Mead clearly transports us to another world, this is less clear with Rees. Whereas, I would argue, Mead’s writing may, at points, produce a kind of catharsis I would submit that Rees merely provokes emotion. Thinking about it destroys its power which is not the case with successful art (see Lawrence 1931)

Accordingly, it may be possible to compare the style of ‘contemporary anthropology’ to what is sometimes called ‘contemporary art’, as in representational art. An institutional definition of ‘art’ renders ‘contemporary art’ as being ‘art’ but its artistic status is sometimes questioned because it is, often, not interested in aesthetics or artistic skill and nor does it necessarily create catharsis. Its purpose is, in essence, to be innovative and to create emotion, in particular shock. A well-known example is the British artist Damien Hirst’s Cow suspended in a vat of formaldehyde. It might be argued that the style of Rees and Rasmussen is comparable to this. To the extent that Rasmussen is saying anything, she is arguing for being radically new and rejecting traditional conventions and categories such as the use of ‘culture’ or ‘modern.’ These traditional methods are rejected in favour of presenting a piece of writing which does little more than insist it is avant-garde, induce emotion and – through its opacity – the feeling of something profound. It also breaks with scholarly convention because it essentially advocates a situation – though not necessarily consistently – where there are no ‘rules’ and, as such, anything goes; art and science can essentially be merged as one (see Rees 2010b). Both contemporary anthropology and contemporary art imply a very broad definition of their discipline. For Hirst’s cow to be ‘art’ we must define art as that engaged in by an artist or anything in an art gallery and we must do the same, as Rees seems to concede, for contemporary anthropology to be ‘science.’ As we have seen, Rees’ definition of ‘science’ – ‘knowledge producing practice’ or ‘thoughtful, sincere research’ – is extremely broad and really means that all research is basically science and, as such, ‘science’ is ‘science’ if it is engaged in by a scientist. As we have noted, this is a problematic kind of definition. By virtue of categorizing such anthropological writing as ‘art’ we can see that both cultural relativism and postmodernism are replacement religions in both of the senses discussed by Scruton.

## Conclusion

This article has raised a number of questions about the boundaries between categories. We have examined the central points of difference between science, art and religion and also the points of cross-over between religion and art. We have done so in order to better make sense of postmodern or ‘contemporary’ anthropology, how we should best comprehend its style and how we should best categorize it. I would conclude that postmodern anthropology can be compared to postmodern art. This comparison can be made not simply because the philosophy implicitly advocated by both disciplines is very similar but because being an audience to either one involves the same experience: an induced, manipulated emotional reaction including – due to the confusion of categories involved – a

feeling of the profound.

As we have observed, there is an extent to which we might also understand postmodernism in terms of ‘religion,’ in the operational sense of the word, and ‘art’ has in many ways become a replacement religion. The ‘religious’ dimensions to postmodernism have been examined elsewhere and cannot be divorced fully from its ‘artistic’ nature. But, in essence, whereas Mead’s writing does appear to be ‘art,’ postmodern anthropological style is effectively contemporary art. Indeed, to a certain degree, Rees (2010b) implies that it would be acceptable for academic anthropologists to present their artistic expression as research. Perhaps some contemporary anthropology is better suited to the Royal Academy of Art than the pages of the Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute. But that aside, this article has demonstrated that postmodernism can be usefully understood as a replacement religion by virtue of its artistic nature and I think that this will be a fruitful pasture for further discussion.

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