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The Space of Reception: Framing Autonomy and Collaboration

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Abstract:

In this paper we analyse the ideas implicit in the style of exhibition favoured by contemporary galleries and museums, and argue that unless the audience is empowered to ascribe meaning and significance to artwork through critical dialogue, the power not only of the audience is undermined but also of art. We argue that unless (i) *indeterminacy* is understood, (ii) the *critical* rather than *coercive* nature of art is facilitated, and (iii) the conditions for *inter-subjectivity* provided, galleries and museums preside over an experience economy devoid of art.

I Introduction

The communicative basis of art has always been unique in the way it involves expression without argument, and in some cases, evokes ideas which make a point. In this paper we

regarding interpretation but neither is it a case of explicit rule-following. Hence the object of our appreciation when in dialogue about a work is never fixed. We are constantly re-aligning our perceptions based on new ideas, analogies, metaphors and examples. The in-flux nature of the art object is its strength. While the artwork must offer the promise of resolution in

order to prompt interpretation, it must never provide it. All the patterns of our communicative strategies nonetheless reveal our aim is to reach correctness and consensus. The fact that we never reach this end does not undermine the integrity and the insight such exchanges provide, but rather conditions them.

In this paper we assume that art is *critical* by definition, as opposed to *coercive*. As a critical entity, art occasions a rationally grounded interpretative process. This means that in the descriptions under which we perceive a work, there is a sense in which we might misrepresent a work's meaning. On the other hand, the descriptions we raise may be those through which the work is more insightful, satisfying or pleasurable, (where certain pleasures are susceptible to acculturation rather than simply given). That is, we do not treat rationality and emotion as polarised. Coercion, on the other hand, operates on a kind of mindless pleasure. A coercive work plays to our prejudice, distracts us from care, flatters our concepts of self-worth and by these means shapes experience through a kind of positive reinforcement. A coercive work can be like a mindless training device if you will. This is what we would call entertainment rather than art.

The sense in which art is critical, is not necessarily that it criticises. Instead its critical aspect is defined as such by the kind of engagement it invites. Above in discussing indeterminacy the dialogical nature of artistic reception was highlighted. And this involved a volatile configuration as art. This necessarily engages one's subjectivity. The idea of subjectivity is not a straightforward concept. It might be thought that one is referring to personal impressions or idiosyncratic responses. However, when one can be said to be responding to art critically rather than some chimera one imagines in its place (where art is treated as springboard to private reverie), one is necessarily engaging with a public system of meaning. The way one locates this system of meaning is in finding the terms by which

one can communicate indeterminate meanings. The larger the group within which one engages in dialogue about indeterminate meanings, and makes oneself understood, the more one is settling upon a shared system of meaning. It is in this sense that art is critical. In this way, art's *indeterminacy* creates the conditions of the establishment of *inter-subjectivity*. The more communicable one's response to an artwork, the more publicly structured one's response can be said to be. The thought is that to communicate feeling one must have structured that feeling according to shared terms.

Art can broaden what one can conceive, or how one carves up experience and in turn what one *can* experience. Because it does this without argument, it presents an interesting example of the way one can have commitments without intolerance to opposing views. This does not make the commitment any less strong but if taken as a model for engaging more broadly, it does influence the way one engages with difference or opposing views. The practice of artists might be where we need to look in order to find a model for commitment compatible with tolerance; or commitment compatible with pluralism.¹

The above concepts, *indeterminacy*, *art-as-critical rather than coercive*, and *inter-subjectivity*, are the terms by which we will analyse the assumptions demonstrated by certain contemporary gallery and museum practices. We find that many standard practices undermine the potential of art to model "commitment with tolerance". An analysis of these practices suggests that mistaken assumptions made about indeterminacy and subjectivity undermine the critical aspect of art in favour of either passive learning or the coercive aspect of art. When this is the case, control of art is in the hands of the museum or gallery professionals and the power of art is diminished.

¹ For a fuller account of these key terms of analysis, see McMahon (2014).

In the following three sections we focus on “art as information”, “art as personal branding” and in contrast, “art-engagement-as-a-model-for-pluralism” respectively.

II Art as Cultural Information

Many galleries today use two models of audience engagement: one involves providing information and the other providing experiences. The method and rationale of the former is to provide audiences with a sense that the gallery is educative and in the current climate this tends to take the form of descriptions and monologues from experts in the field. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, art galleries in particular assumed that their audiences shared the same cultural knowledge or at least aspired to, and so the effort was all on the part of the audience to calibrate their cultural stock with some idea of the standard gallery audience. Today audiences are very diverse regarding background knowledge and experience, but the gallery’s response to this is often counter-productive.

It is standard practice in galleries to provide captions, interviews with the artist and curatorial justifications in an effort to inform the audience of the best descriptions under which to perceive a work so that it can be perceived in its best possible light. However, this approach inadvertently provides the audience with the impression that they have been provided with a single correct way of approaching the artwork. When was the last time you heard a group in a gallery arguing about the interpretation of a visual art work, the way book club attendees argue about the interpretation of a novel? People understand that to find a novel insightful one engages one’s subjectivity but at the same time, one aims to find the correct interpretation. This prompts one to be interested in other perspectives and to share one’s own. In the process one’s subjectivity develops further toward inter-subjectivity. But underlying this process is the understanding that even though one behaves as though

there is a correct interpretation that one seeks (irrespective of lack of consensus), it can only be apt if it engages one's own subjectivity. As Andrea Witcomb argues:

texts that only present information, such as ... narrative based exhibitions, cannot connect with experience because information renders the critical faculty inactive. This is so because the presentation of information does not encourage deep attention. For [Walter] Benjamin only art can do that precisely because it engages affective forms of response.²

Implicit in art gallery exhibition designs are assumptions about what one can expect of art and how the audience should orientate toward the work. When communication is limited to a one way monologue from gallery to audience, the audience learns to defer to the gallery expert. Typically the communication is limited to written or audio information, that is, a narrative consisting of facts about the work and expert opinion about the relevant stylistic aims. This approach produces a passive audience. The process is not critical but coercive.

This approach is based on an implicit intentionalism regarding the basis of the objective interpretation of an artwork. "Intentionalism", refers to the philosophical view that the meaning of art depends on the intention of the artist, and this intention can be either explicit, implicit or hypothesized. On the other hand, "anti-intentionalism", broadly conceived, suggests that the meaning of the artwork, whether painting, film, music or novel, is largely created in reception. The more standard versions of anti-intentionalism or formalism as it came to be known, limit the basis of an interpretation to perceived qualities of the artwork.³ A more enlightened anti-intentionalism, however, such as the position defended by the poet and essayist T.S. Eliot (1888-1965), holds that the relevant reception

² Witcomb discusses Walter Benjamin. 1979. *Illuminations*. Translated by Harry Zohn and edited with an Introduction by Hannah Arendt. London: Fontana Press. (2013, 269).

³ For an example see Wimsatt and Beardsley [1946] (1969).

involves sharing a tradition with the artist.⁴ While T. S. Eliot focused on art traditions to explain appropriate interpretation, the New Criticism to which Eliot's views gave rise, further developed his conception of formalism. According to reader-response theory for example, one's interpretation of a work can only be endorsed by a community if members of that community understand one's reasons for responding in just that way and this relies on sharing a tradition, experiences and training.⁵ But furthermore, this implies that just by attempting to communicate one's perceptions of an artwork, one inadvertently goes some way toward calibrating one's terms of reference with one's interlocutor and hence, toward making of one's interlocutor, someone with whom one shares community.

According to the philosopher Stanley Cavell, both intentionalism and formalism were attempting to solve an anxiety about authorship which was based on a misconception of the artist and of artistic meaning. For Cavell, interpretation was not settled by considering the artist's psyche and intention, nor by a given set of objective properties of the artwork. The relevant basis for interpretation was masked rather than clarified by this way of carving up the possibilities.

Consider that, on the one hand, unless an individual's subjectivity is engaged, that is, unless one feels and cares about the meaning and significance of a work, one cannot be said to be engaged by a work, critically or otherwise. The idea of subjectivity is not a straightforward concept as we saw above. Subjectivity is cultivated away from the private into a shared communicative space upon developing shared terms of reference through dialogue: a given and asking for reasons of the kind conveyed through metaphor, analogy or prior example.

⁴ Eliot [1919] (1982).

⁵ An example of the New Criticism is reader-response theory developed by Fish (1980). His theory can be considered formalist in Eliot's sense of anti-intentionalism. In Fish's version, tradition is replaced by community norms.

The idea of art as a public system of meaning involves understanding the range of choices available to an artist at the time and place in which she works. The more one knows about this system of choices, the more one engages with what the artist creates.⁶ And each new discovery in art, changes the way we engage with prior work.⁷ Cavell drew our attention to the way each new discovery in art changed the terms of reference for art, even retrospectively, and consequently, what we noticed and found significant in all art.⁸ In other words, our construal of an artwork, and consequently its meaning and significance, changes by what comes after it. This means that the way we perceive, what we foreground, notice and the significance we ascribe to what we see, changes over time depending on our conceptual framework.⁹ Consequently, engaging subjectively with art, is not disappearing into one's own experiential bubble so to speak, but on the contrary, entering a network of shared terms of reference where feeling and value are concerned. For this reason, we refer to what art engages as our inter-subjectivity.

You can see just how important this kind of engagement is but to achieve it requires a rethink of standard contemporary exhibition design. Rather than isolated individuals absorbing information from experts, inter-subjectivity requires the facilitation of inter-perspectival exchanges. This involves engaging with responses to art which vary from one's own including those which one may feel inclined to reject. The right context is one in which there is a giving and asking for reasons among the audience. One cannot use reasons which prove the point in a conclusive way. A work conducive to this kind of conclusiveness would be a very weak work indeed. Instead there is an *indeterminacy* about the meaning and significance of art, yet it exhibits the marks of intention. Even when one is unsuccessful in

⁶ Adorno (1970).

⁷ Danto (1992).

⁸ Cavell (2002c).

⁹ Ranciere (2004).

showing another person what one perceives, the communicative process between different perspectives can be illuminating. If one perceives the point the other is making even when one ultimately rejects it, the familiarity with a new perspective adds to those comparisons one makes when one interprets. Interpretation is always comparative. The more interpretations one has to consider, the better the understanding of one's own interpretation and the commitments involved will be.

This is partly to do with the indeterminate – yet principled nature – of artistic interpretations. The process can be understood as an appropriate model for communication between those who hold varying cultural beliefs. That is, the kind of model of communication for which a plurality of perspectives is an invitation to reflect rather than a threat, is a model for our time. Being able to countenance a plurality of perspectives is a starting point for reason as it operates in the public realm rather than within a set of private concerns and axioms. Artistic interpretation, given that it is grounded in feeling but acculturated through communication, is the kind of experience of alternative viewpoints that facilitates empathy and communication.¹⁰

The nature of *inter-subjectivity*, *indeterminacy* and judgment are not well understood by the artworld if exhibition design policy is anything to go by. There are some notable exceptions however. Compare the response of the *Corning Museum of Glass* and *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, New York to the September 11th 2001 attacks with the *Tate Britain* response to the 7th July 2005 bombings in London. The *Corning Museum of Glass* in conjunction with *The Metropolitan Museum of Art* in New York had an exhibition of Islamic glass, *Glass of the Sultans*, slated to open at the MET in October 2001. After the 9/11 attack they decided to go ahead with the show realising it could be an important step in the

¹⁰ See Kneller (2011).

healing of the city. In contrast, at the *Tate Britain*, an artwork called “God is Great No. 2” (1991) by artist John Latham was pulled from display in an exhibition opening September 5, 2005, due to concerns that it might incite the wrong kind of responses only two months after 7/7.¹¹

Tate Britain may well have been right as presumably they know their typical audiences. But nonetheless it is an indictment on their audiences. It suggests a lack of practice in engaging various perspectives when engaging with art. *Tate Britain* with the power they exercise in shaping responses to art would need to take some responsibility for their audiences’ seeming intolerance.¹²

Many galleries misunderstand the nature of subjective responses. They assume they fulfil a serious educative role by providing facts, and seek to engage subjectivities as a pleasurable bonus. However, unless *inter-subjectivity* is facilitated, as explained above, galleries will be forced into a position reflected in the *Tate Britain’s* approach to avoiding topics and approaches that might touch upon sensitive contemporary issues. This can only be seen as a neo-conservatism coming into gallery practice; and this can be blamed on the way audiences have been educated by exhibition design to engage in art as though its meaning was prescribed by authority rather than ascribed by a community shared with the artist either actually or hypothetically.

An artist who has spoken at various times in various contexts about this, is the Icelandic-Danish artist Olafur Eliasson. Consider his work *Little Sun* which is a collaboration between Eliasson and the engineer Frederik Ottesen.¹³ It is a lamp designed in the shape of a flower or sun in a size that fits comfortably in the palm of an adult’s hand. It has a light

¹¹ Dewdney, Dibosa and Walsh (2013, 69-71).

¹² The power of museums and galleries in shaping the consciousness of an age is well documented. See Janes (2009).

¹³ See <http://littlesun.com/>

sensor on the back that, when exposed to the sun for five hours, stores enough energy to provide light bright enough for an entire evening of reading. It is designed for communities that are not attached to energy grids, and as such, *Little Sun* is an artwork that impacts upon people's lives in a functional way.¹⁴ *Little Sun* is distinguished from other non-profit enterprises as it is intended as art. As such, it invites interpretation. However, the contemporary gallery is inclined to present a wealth of information about the artist, and opportunities to photograph the work or buy it. No context is provided for discussing how or whether this object pushes the boundaries of art. Consider Eliasson's response to whether *Little Sun* blurs the boundaries of art:¹⁵

I primarily work within traditional art institutions, such as museums, galleries, etc. In these institutions, I often encounter a lack of confidence in the significance of the museological muscle within society. I've increasingly observed exhibition venues seeking advice from commercial parts of society that the museum is generally thought to be critical of. More and more, there is a conflict between the aims you have as an artist and the way the museum has chosen to work in terms of communication and ideology. Museums are becoming neo-conservative.¹⁶

It is the *indeterminacy* of art that Eliasson suggests is being over-written by contemporary museum practices. The contemporary gallery and museum are required to meet economic targets, reach audience thresholds and satisfy various commercially based mission statements. They are pushed toward using more determinate strategies such as providing easily digestible information to gallery audiences and avoiding anything that might

¹⁴ *Little Sun* is based on a social business model, and this is an integral part of the artwork. See <http://littlesun.com/about/>

¹⁵ This is a truncated version of the question McMahon asked Eliasson in an email interview on the 1st of November 2012.

¹⁶ Email interview with Olafur Eliasson by Jennifer A. McMahon, 1st November 2012.

challenge the status quo. The physical space for objects of art is provided but little or no space for the kind of exchanges without which the objects remain unrealised as art.

III Art as Brand: the rise of Populism

In contemporary galleries and museums, a misunderstanding of subjectivity seems to underpin a considerable amount of exhibition design aimed to promote audience experience. In the 19th century, galleries and museums put greater confidence in the educative effects of simply looking. This can be explained in part due to the assumed homogeneity of the cultural stock of gallery visitors as discussed above. The prevalent viewing platform was a standard formalist one, according to which the forms of art were understood to train the perceiver into a love of the harmony and balance which was thought to transfer from visual elements to the components of a life well lived.¹⁷ While it was supposed that the audience would have been educated in the appropriate cultural heritage, the experience at the gallery was very much generated by the viewer.¹⁸

When tradition and convention are well established and endorsed, we might hardly notice that our value judgments have different conditions to matters of fact. That is, when traditions are well established and relevant to the case in hand, we do not notice the degree to which our responses and interpretations are steeped in cultural norms internalized by way of our community based exchanges. In the normal course of events, within an established and entrenched tradition, we make sense of cultural artefacts and activities by inadvertently improvising. That is, we inadvertently draw upon culturally based generative

¹⁷ See Roger Fry's version of formalism (1920); and McMahon (forthcoming 2017).

¹⁸ The way the purpose of the gallery and museum was conceived irrespective of the exhibition strategies within, was to establish and consolidate a sense of sovereignty. See Preziosi (2007).

forms or heuristics through which we experience what seems like recognition of an object's meaning.

Take for example a landscape in traditional 19th century British Romantic style like John Constable or J. M. W. Turner. We might simply respond in a stereotypical way, such as finding mild appreciation in the calm serenity of a scene, regardless of whether the historical context of its making and references within the painting are conducive to this or not. Once a painting of landscape triggers entrenched schemas (improvisations, as Cavell might say), we take ourselves to be responding to the objective standard represented by the object.

However, this confidence in the audience's ability to perceive and interpret has been somewhat eroded by new art forms. We no longer have clear norms with which to ascertain or to judge artistic intentions, and as such we become aware of trying to find the basis for distinguishing between sincerity and fraudulence. In this process, we feel the insecurity of cultural isolation.

It is assumed that all a museum or gallery can do in this time of cultural diversity (see section II above) and new art forms is either provide facts about a work or provide the context to engage in subjective reverie. However, as discussed above, subjectivity when hooked appropriately is the platform from which an experience of art is more than fact-gathering on the one hand or entertainment on the other. In Cavell we find an implicit concept of community which grounds interpretation in a way that reverses the popular romantic privileging of the individual psyche over and above the norms of a society. For Cavell, implicitly the community is the primary unit in understanding the grounds of each individual's interpretations.

Galleries often succumb to creating the context for the individual to use the gallery experience to help create a personal brand for their social media presence. This diminishes the power of art-as-art and encourages galleries inadvertently into a very conservative agenda regarding their works just as surely as does the provision of facts alone. Even politically charged work is tamed by the sense that the audience need only engage with the portions they find entertaining: the sculptures, videos, podcasts, drawings, paintings, installations and so on, that lend themselves to their own brand. The array in many exhibitions is often varied, numerous, sprawling and overwhelming as if to mirror the frenetic editing techniques of contemporary cinema and ensure the audience is never bored. But in addition, the anxiety to avoid demanding effort from the viewer seems to drive many contemporary exhibition designs, where “challenging” is treated as satisfied by “shock” or “evoking offence” rather than engaging the audience’s critical faculties.

In 2016, the *National Gallery of Victoria* asked patrons who were uploading photographs they had taken of their exhibits, to use the gallery hash-tag. Based on programs which automatically recognise the hash-tag and generate patterns of preference, they sent individuals updates of upcoming exhibitions that might interest them. The *Cleveland Museum of Art’s Gallery One* provides visitors with an individualised tour of the displays based on their preferences by downloading an app or renting a museum iPad.¹⁹ Both of these examples reflect another practice found online where gallery visitors make collages of artworks or sections thereof, which they have photographed on their gallery visits. A gallery of appropriated images is created which is meant to establish or contribute to the person’s online persona. Such approaches do not facilitate a critical approach to art in

¹⁹ Gelb (2014, 53); Loesser (2016, 18, 20-21, 35).

the sense explained above. Instead art is turned into an occasion for personal branding. As there is no critical or objective framework, subjectivity remains solipsistic.

To create branding opportunities, is to treat subjectivity as personal and egocentric. In contrast, an understanding of *inter-subjectivity* would ground a very different kind of engagement strategy. The aim would be to bring subjectivities into critical contact with each other.

IV Art and Pluralism

In spite of some very encouraging exceptions, art galleries and museums are not, by and large, creating a community of reflective judges in their emphasis on information or egocentric branding.²⁰ This is in spite of the contemporary scene offering a unique context in which the space of engagement can be re-imagined due to new art forms allegedly changing audience participation.²¹ Instead, galleries often engage concepts to justify exhibition strategies which are poorly articulated or understood. For example, it is not clear what is meant by the now well established buzz words “co-creation” and “performativity”. For example, Nanna Holdgaard and Lisbeth Klasturp discuss a number of museologists such as Vines et al. who point to the fact that in the so-called participatory design literature, it is rarely discussed how gallery visitors become participators, let alone co-creators.²²

Holdgaard and Klasturp argue that more research needs to be done to ascertain whether the introduction of social media and various audience centred activities in museums is inherently positive. They point out that the current practice simply assumes that such methods “emancipate, engage and involve the public and democratise the cultural

²⁰ See Janes (2009).

²¹ Graham and Cook (2010) discuss the changing conditions of contemporary art.

²² Cf. Vines, Clarke, Wright, McCarthy, and Olivier (2013, 433). Discussed in Holdgaard and Klasturp (2014, 193).

heritage”²³. They refer to the “experience economy” adopted by galleries and museums, and note that its adoption is variously referred to in the literature as a “paradigm shift”, “participatory turn” or “digital turn” according to which the gallery is “reinvented” or “re-imagined”.²⁴ However, they write that “much of the research literature as well as the co-creation projects in museums do not define or specify the co-creative processes”.²⁵ In response to a question regarding how art engages an audience, Eliasson notes that we:

have now moved into a phase where institutions clearly see the co-production of the art viewer’s experience as a part of museological responsibility. While I consider this development necessary, it does fail in one respect: the majority of art institutions do not have confidence in allowing for ruptures and unpredicted experiences, since the unpredictable might not be profitable. The experience management of museums has thus come very close to that of the experience economy. There is a strong degree of social control, social suppression, and hidden power structures when it comes to the definition of ‘normal’ behaviour. This condition, where the unpredictable is considered a threat, is creating a situation where museums essentially begin to reflect the lack of tolerance that we find in Western society in general; in my opinion, this is not at all healthy for the institution of the museum as such.²⁶

The exceptions are where a more philosophical or free ranging contemplation of ideas are promoted; or where competing perspectives are presented. Eliasson has held many conferences and symposia in his Studio where the context for just this kind of exchange is made possible involving people from various areas of expertise and from all walks of life.

²³ Holdgaard and Klastруп (2014, 191).

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 190.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 193.

²⁶ Email interview with Olafur Eliasson by Jennifer A. McMahon, 1st November 2012.

Contrasting perspectives on artwork can be considered without this undermining the objectivity or meaningfulness of the art object.

To achieve this kind of context within the gallery setting requires a re-thinking of the fact-entertainment/branding alternative. An earlier model for this was arguably an exhibition titled *Les Immatériaux*, 28 March – 15 July 1985, curated by French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard which was held at the Centre Pompidou, Paris.²⁷ The exhibition included interactive installations, early electronic communications and sound works aimed at demonstrating the effects of communication technology and information management on culture. Exhibits included artworks, everyday objects, scientific objects and electronic devices. The labyrinthine *parcours* exhibition design allowed multiple pathways through the exhibition, chosen by the viewer, and the loose leaf unpaginated catalogue could be arranged by the viewer as they wished. The viewer was provided with an audio guide that was triggered by their position within the exhibition space. A multiplicity of views was provided to stimulate thinking. For example, one exhibit, called the “Writing Tests” enabled the viewer to use computer screens to access dialogues between writers and thinkers including artists and philosophers on fifty topics related to the exhibition. This was revolutionary for its time not only in using technology but in the way it was used to engage alternative perspectives.

A more recent example which also avoids the fact-branding alternative involves an app that is available to the audiences at the *Fine Arts Museums in San Francisco* (de Young and Legion of Honour). The app provides the audience with a choice of ways of engaging with art from the curatorial, historical, philosophical and other visitor perspectives. The app

²⁷ See Graham and Cook, 2010, 19-21. See also Obrist, Hans Ulrich, with Raza, Asad, *Ways of Curating*, Penguin, London, 2014, 157-162

provides an immersive audio experience in which the visitor can also participate by adding their own recording to the discussion. Of the people surveyed who used the app, 92% indicated that the app prompted a much closer and more satisfying engagement with the work.²⁸ It is only when art is experienced as art that it engages critical perspectives. And only then does its power as a model for commitment-with-tolerance gain traction.

V Conclusion

The practices of galleries and museums suggest that the *indeterminacy* of art does not fit the new “experience economy”. Art is framed by the standard practices in ways that inadvertently coerce the perceiver into the passive position of a rule follower. On the other hand, when the aim is to engage the perceiver in memorable experiences, too often the strategies employed are evidence of a misunderstanding of the critical nature of art. A condition of engaging critically with art is the exercise of *inter-subjectivity*, rather than rule-following on the one hand or personal reverie on the other. Unless (i) *indeterminacy* is understood, (ii) the *critical* rather than *coercive* nature of art is facilitated, and (iii) the conditions for *inter-subjectivity* provided, galleries and museums undermine the power of art. Unless these three conditions are met, galleries and museums preside over an experience economy devoid of art.

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²⁸ Girardeau, Beaman, Pressley and Reinier (2015, February). This is discussed in Loesser (2016, 16).

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