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Leonard Diepveen. Modernist Fraud: Hoax, Parody, Deception

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Rev. of *Modernist Fraud: Hoax, Parody, Deception*, by Leonard Diepeveen.

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In September of 2019, Leonard Diepeveen gave the Memorial Lecture for the International T. S. Eliot Society, which met that year in St. Louis. Since I was introducing him, I had asked him in our correspondence how to pronounce his name. He helpfully spelled it out for me (DEEP uh VAIN), adding that his name is Dutch for “large peat bog.” Familiar from his writing with his sly sense of humor, I assumed he was pulling my leg. An hour or so later, however, I reconsidered my assumption. If Google Translate is to be trusted, I was able to confirm that he was not joking, or that he was both joking and sincere.

That I misread the signs of his intention, that I was momentarily caught between a serious explanation and a jest, would please the author of *Modernist Fraud*. Diepeveen has spent a considerable part of his career chasing after the tricky concept of intent, how authors or works signal it, and how interpretive communities respond to it. With his most recent book, he has brought a systematician’s rigor to the question of how modernism addresses, offends, or accounts for its various audiences. One of the most engaging elements of *Modernist Fraud* is how Diepeveen rescues authorial intention from the New Critical and Barthesian dustbins, revealing its centrality in the evaluation and understanding of art, in spite of its unpindownable nature. The paradox of intent is that its “evidentiary weakness” coexists with its “stubbornly large presence” (98). Since we

cannot extricate ourselves from the philosophical and aesthetic muddiness of intent, Diepeveen suggests, we might as well get comfortable with it.

The second chapter of the book offers a thorough explanation of what Diepeveen calls the default aesthetic—namely, the critical agreement, arrived at in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, regarding what constituted art and what were its acceptable canons. The critics functioning under the aegis of this default aesthetic wrote in ways that were “highly crafted, metaphoric, and relentlessly general” (45). Such critics understood art as a “conduit of emotional expression,” arguing that

art’s chief task was to be beautiful and consequently to provide pleasure, by which they meant an affect of quietness, poignancy, and a wisdom which was at least as much about an emotional relationship to knowledge as it was about knowledge itself (46).

Barely recognizable as criticism by today’s standards, the late-century genteel and belletristic traditions were not analytical or evaluative. Instead, they were more like well-mannered tour guides, finding a thousand ways to point and say: isn’t this lovely?

Diepeveen shows how the default aesthetic, when its ideology is disrupted, provokes the fraud response. Audiences accuse the artist of deceit, and resisters create parodies and hoaxes in order to expose what they see as the fraudulence of artists such as Marcel Duchamp and Gertrude Stein. By focusing on the *category* of fraud response—rather than tediously “proving” that modernists were indeed serious, or relating hilarious anecdotes in which critics hurl brickbats at now-canonical works—Diepeveen shows how

fraud is more than a practice, but a discourse that reveals central elements of social practice (vi). Modernist artists themselves expected the fraud response, called it forth, toyed with it, and obscured their own intentions. Unclear intent, oddly enough, was intentional, rather than a regrettable consequence of an ill-informed audience: modern artists “both participate in and trigger fraud discourse by making unclear intent central to their aesthetic practice” (vii). For audiences, then, unease came to be “a central affect of modernism” (91). “By masking traditional functions of intent,” Diepeveen argues, “modernist works didn’t remove intent from aesthetic consideration; for good or for ill, these works are *about* intent” (94). Even the critical practice that followed in early modernism’s wake—the rise of formalism, the aesthetic of impersonality, New Criticism’s intentional fallacy—cannot be understood without taking into account fraud discourse, since the goal of these theories was largely to suffocate intention so that its breath did not contaminate interpretation.

Diepeveen identifies two large effects that fraud discourse had on the history of modernism. The positive effect is that aesthetic inquiry is expanded (the theorization of irony in particular) and art criticism becomes professionalized (close-reading, evidentiary argumentation). The negative effect is that criticism comes to be dominated by a search for a work’s meaning rather than its effects. One reaction to this new state of affairs is that skeptics betray a “corrosive distrust of theory’s place in art”—a distrust, Diepeveen argues, that is still with us (4). The social consequence of fraud discourse was to place artists and audiences in an adversarial position, with fraud understood as “a deliberate deception with the aim of gaining an advantage, the deception attempting to succeed by preying on a perceived social/personal weakness” (11). The response pattern that

Diepeveen distills from repeated examples amounts less to a description of aesthetic quibbling than to an account of moral panic:

On multiple occasions ... people early in the twentieth century looked at new forms of art and repeatedly did the same thing: suspecting insincerity of intent, they perceived a threat in an individual work or movement, generalized about it as a symptom, analyzed it and its larger situation in ethical terms, and proposed/enacted some kind of urgent solution. (21)

New technologies and mass culture only added to the problem of muddying authorial intent: photography, quick distribution, and technologies of mass production all involved “proliferation and distance” (92), which meant that the romantic artist could no longer communicate directly, seriously, and sincerely with her audience. Instead, intent became lost in a maze of technological mediation.

Diepeveen focuses on the huge, largely unread archive of negative criticism, admitting that it makes for boring reading. Critics who still believed in the default aesthetic were rarely aware that the ground was shifting under their feet, and so their befuddlement or condescension is rarely illuminative of the modernist work they were sneering at, though it is revealing of the power of the default aesthetic itself.

The book concerns itself with how the default aesthetic eventually gave way: once modernism was not so new, various formalisms and alternative ways of explaining modernist art took its place, becoming in a way the new default aesthetic. Within this well-told story, I would like to propose a refinement to Diepeveen’s thesis. What is

missing in Diepveeen's analysis I might sketch with a hypothesis: if an artist unknown to me placed a urinal in a museum and called it art, I would be much more likely to fear that I was the victim of a hoax than if a close friend wrote a baffling poem. In the latter case, I would be more attentive to signs of intent that are not readily available to a critic who does not know my friend the artist. I may not be able to detect signs of sincerity from the baffling poem, but I can access signs of intent from the artist herself.

Diepveeen's narrative sets the default aesthetic against the new formalisms, like the Titanic meeting an iceberg. Because he focuses on the critics aligned with the default aesthetic (the Titanic, as it were), he slights the ways in which modernism's earliest critics (the iceberg) were often admirers who had *personal* connections to the artists. Why this matters has to do with intent. When the critic is a friend of the avant-garde artist, the critic has much more evidence to call on, can make more inferences about the work's intent. Thus, Carl van Vechten's friendship with, and then early championing of Gertrude Stein; Gerald Duckworth's publication of the first novels of his half-sister Virginia Woolf; Conrad Aiken's advocacy of his Harvard friend T. S. Eliot; Eliot's advocacy of his friend Ezra Pound; and Pound's advocacy of all of his friends, who turned out to become the entire modernist canon: these were not the disinterested considerations of critics who happened upon art in journals and museums. On the contrary, their advocacy was often shameless logrolling whose argumentative logic was just as dubious as the brickbats hurled by critics defending the default aesthetic. These preliminary moves against the default aesthetic were underwritten by friends, some of whom had axes to grind, and most of whom had access to authorial intention outside of the works themselves. The small refinement to Diepveeen's thesis that I am proposing is

that before the iceberg of modernism could cut through the hull of the default aesthetic, a primary weapon at their disposal was one of intention. Only later, once modernism was more established, could intention be problematized or swept off the stage.

Although he focuses primarily on literary texts and visual arts, Diepeveen's thesis can be productively extended into the field of music. As powerful as mimesis is in literature and painting, it is neither representation nor its disruption that underlies accusations of fraudulence. The non-mimetic properties of music did not insulate composers from the same fraud discourse: jazz artists in the early twentieth century were accused of being fraudulent, and the same moral opprobrium was heaped on avant-garde composers of instrumental music with some regularity, particularly on Arnold Schoenberg. (Stravinsky received mostly good press, aside from the sniping of jealous colleagues left behind in Russia.)

Diepeveen's prose is sometimes repetitious, but his patience in the archives, his good-humored intelligence, and his philosophical brand of analysis more than compensate. Here is a wonder of a book: a new story about how modernism came to be. If you want such a story with some hilarious pictures and anecdotes of dim-witted critics raving against modernism, you'll find that here. More importantly, you find these details woven into a rich and complex narrative that reveals the mechanics of that remarkable cultural and aesthetic change we now call modernism.