

with the justification of belief—with how we know what we know, and how well belief matches up with the evidence for it—is epistemology. After the shocks of the 16th and 17th centuries, “worries about the possibility and reliability of scientific knowledge” inspired philosophers “from Descartes to Kant to Husserl and beyond” to plunge into epistemology. And being on guard against errors took on a moral as well as an intellectual dimension, in that the will was to have no less a role than reason in granting “assent only to those claims that, after thorough epistemological vetting, deserve to be credited.”

Daston posits three models of scientific error that arose within the distinctive historical circumstances of the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries, but that persist to this day as “a repertoire of epistemological diagnoses”: “idolatry,” “seduction,” and “projection.” All three are, in effect, errors of substitution, which

allow false beliefs to take the place of true knowledge. Idolaters, for example, so worship fallacious theories that they abandon the search for genuine enlightenment. Seduction, the second model of error, is a disease of the imagination, “the good-time girl of the mind.” The imagination can cause the mind to seal itself off from the real world and indulge in fantasy, “replacing real impressions derived from memory and sensation with fanciful but alluring systems.” These imaginary systems become “a refuge from the hard work of empiricism.”

Projection, the third category of error, is, in fact, an ancient human foible, but it became especially troublesome for scientists in the middle of the 19th century with the formulation of new philosophical conceptions of the objective and the subjective. The fear was that researchers might project too much of themselves and their preconceived ideas onto the evidence of nature rather

than simply absorb the evidence passively, objectively. “Only a heroic act of self-discipline and self-denial can rein in these projections,” Daston says.

Criticism of these three models of error came to take on an insistent moral tone, making it “a matter of rectitude as well as prudence to withhold credence from suspect propositions.” We withhold belief, then, not just because we’re fearful of making a mistake but because we’ve been told it’s our duty to do so. And we take refuge in the safe haven of skepticism, trusting nothing “until shown the evidence, bushels of it.”

Still, notes Daston, “minatory epistemology” has not gained the upper hand over science, which “has historically been risk-seeking with respect to belief”: “Successful science has historically erred on the side of maximizing knowledge, rather than on that of minimizing error—even at the cost of believing too much.”

ARTS & LETTERS

Chelsea Mourning

THE SOURCE: “Formalism and Its Discontents” by Jed Perl, in *The New Republic*, Sept. 12, 2005.

EVERYONE WHO THINKS THAT the art world has been, for decades, about as toxic and debased a locale as the fashion world can take a certain measure of satisfaction in recent developments: “Knocking the art world has become the latest art world

fashion,” says *New Republic* art critic Jed Perl. In other words, the very folks who’ve corrupted the scene have now come to recognize the corruption, and that has put a pall on their celebratory parties and dinners and receptions.

What especially troubles Perl is how little the general distress has to do with the quality of the art. The concern is mostly with “the social mechanisms of art: fairs, auctions, prices,

publicity. Art itself hardly enters into the discussion; and when it does, the works of art are interchangeable, impersonal, of as little value in and of themselves as a pile of plastic poker chips. Everything is merely product; the art is in the deal.”

Perl contends that what has occurred is a failure of aesthetic judgment so profound that people are afraid to confront it. “How does taste go so bad? *That* is the real question.” For him, the problem begins with the collapse of formalism, “a belief in the primacy of line and color and shape” that was “one of the greatest of all artistic faiths.” Formalism, which

reached its peak of influence in the decades after World War II, taught people to trust the evidence of their eyes when viewing a work of art, to see in the lines and colors and shapes and the relationships among them the whole of the work's achievement.

Yet even as Perl concedes the great glory of formalism, he acknowledges its shortcomings: "It failed to account for art's psychological dimensions, for how all kinds of meanings and metaphors become lodged in a work of art." If the primary impulse in making art were formal rather than emotional, and a painting were about no more than how it was made, formalism's rigorous quest for purity would inevitably meet a dead end—as it did, with the exhibition of blank canvases.

Formalism was always a partial response that professed to be the only response needed. Form is surely one of the things that make a painting work, but "what provokes or compels form or makes it convincing is multifaceted, ambiguous."

Perl believes that "for the artist, formal values play a vital part in a richer, far larger, and infinitely more complex equation." He argues that the most complex artistic expressions of our own time are those that acknowledge both "formalism and its discontents"—its shortcomings, its troubles—and seek to encompass the two. Such art will join, for example, an impulse for formal resolution with a narrative or metaphorical impulse. But Perl is dismayed that artists with the skill and imagination to produce art of that sort—among them, R. J. Kitaj and Jean Hélion—demanding a complex response from audiences, often fail to gain wide acceptance. "The hard fact is that the truly liberal

artistic spirit—the artist who embraces the many facets of creation, who seeks some private balance between authority and freedom—is anathema. With the end of the Age of Formalism, there has grown up a generation of curators, dealers, and collectors who, while they may find it unnerving to live without any concept of artistic authority, are unwilling to let an artist ever again lead the way."

ARTS & LETTERS

What Price Independence?

THE SOURCE: "What Independent Film?" by Andrew Bujalski, in *n+1*, Fall 2005.

HERE'S ANOTHER VERSION OF that old if-a-tree-falls-in-the-forest question: If an independent film is made but no one watches it, does its artistic integrity matter?

The meaning of that epithet "independent"—attached to films as various as *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), Robert Rodriguez's *El Mariachi* (1992), and the oeuvre of John Cassavetes (*Faces* [1968], and *A Woman Under the Influence* [1974])—is difficult to pin down these days, suggests Andrew Bujalski, who has made two independent films himself.

Money seems to be the defining factor. The Independent Feature Project, which bestows the Independent Spirit Awards, has arrived at the vague formula that a film is independent until its budget reaches between \$15 million and \$20 million. After that, the bean counters, whoever they are, presumably have too much artistic control.

To the uninitiated, today's myriad film festivals indicate a golden age for independent film. Not so, says Bujalski. The roving bands of movie industry types who travel from one marquee film festival to the next generally want



It cost independent filmmaker Jonathan Caouette only \$218 to make his acclaimed autobiographical film *Tarnation* (2003). But distribution, along with rights to the film snippets and other material he incorporated, cost hundreds of thousands more. This scene from the film shows him with his mentally ill mother.