



Foster, Hal. "The Artist as Ethnographer," in *The Return of the Real*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1996
 annotation by Brandon Hopkins (Theories of Media, Winter 2003)

Brandon Hopkins
 bhopkins@uchicago.edu
 University of Chicago

Dub = to give something or someone a particular name, especially describing what you think of it, him or her

In *The Return of the Real*, Hal Foster investigates the goals and practices neo-avant-garde art movements and their relation to modernist movements such as dada, surrealism, and constructivism. Chapter 6 of his book, "The Artist as Ethnographer," deals specifically with what Foster **dubs** the "ethnographic turn" in art of since the 1960s.

Foster's argument is in part guided by his opening reference to Walter Benjamin's "The Artist as Producer." Favoring the aesthetics of constructivism over that of *proletkult*, Benjamin argues that the *proletkult* artist's identification alienates the proletariat by putting the author in a position of ideological patronage, and that **the artist should instead commit himself to solidarity with the worker in his or her material practice**. Foster compares the aestheticization of politics in fascism to the capitalization of culture during the **Reagan era** 1981–1991 and argues that the neo-avant-garde's reinscription of institutionalized representations resulted in a new paradigm structurally similar to that presented in Benjamin: the artist as ethnographer.

Alterity =

1. In postmodern, poststructuralist cultural theory, otherness or a radical sense of difference. See also other.
2. In existentialist discourse, a sense of alienation or separation from other people.

<https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oj/authority.20110803095405951>
 [Accessed 30-09-2020]

The focal points of Foster's investigation are the politics of **alterity** and institutions of art, especially those of the bourgeois-capitalist tradition tending to favor exclusionary definitions of art, artist, community, and identity. He posits that the site of political transformation is always perceived as being elsewhere, in the repressed other—for the modern artist in the proletariat, for the post-modern artist in the post-colonial, the subaltern, the subcultural—and that **perception of this elsewhere is distorted by a realist assumption** (that the other has an authenticity lacking in the self) and a **primitivist assumption** (wherein there is a mapping over of the other, such that the here-and-now self is superior to the there-and-then other). The artist must resist the tendency to project political truth onto this constructed other. Yet though the practice of self-othering is important to the critical practice of art, Foster warns it can lead to self-absorption, ethnographic self-fashioning, and narcissistic self-refurbishing.

Foster claims that anthropology, the science of alterity, has become the lingua franca of artistic practice and critical discourse: culture is read as text and texts as microcosmic cultures. Though this model is intended to undermine the authority of the anthropologist, it may actually reinforce it by positioning the anthropologist as the expert reader of culture-as-text. Foster shows how the model operates in the art world—both in art's critique of its own institutions (the studio, the museum, the gallery) and in its ethnographic investigations of the cultural other. He concentrates especially on site-specific art (noting that a site may be special or temporal, a community or an institution, etc.), and examines a variety of problems that arise when art tries to follow the ethnographic principles of participant-observer. Foster's coverage of these issues is exhaustive, but the main thrust of his argument is that **reflexivity is essential for the artist, lest he over-identify with the other in a way that alienates and compromises it.**

Lest

conjunction
 in order to prevent any possibility that something will happen:

PER TIMORE (lest) che si identifichi eccessivamente con l'altro in un modo che lo aliena e lo compromette.

parallaxic | adj

Pronunciation /ˌpɛrəˈlæktɪk/ /ˌpɛrəˈlæktɪk/

see = **parallax**

Pronunciation /ˌpɛrəˈlæks/ /ˌpɛrəˈlæks/

Translate parallax into Spanish

NOUN

The effect whereby the position or direction of an object appears to differ when viewed from different positions. e.g. through the viewfinder and the lens of a camera.

Origin

Late 16th century (also in the general sense 'fact of seeing wrongly'): from French *parallaxe*, from Greek *parallaxis* 'a change', from *parallassein* 'to alternate', based on *allasssein* 'to exchange' (from *allos* 'other').

Parallasse

Spostamento angolare apparente di un oggetto rispetto a un punto di riferimento, allorché lo si osserva da due punti di vista diversi || errore di p., errore di lettura di una scala graduata, che si verifica quando l'indice non si proietta ortogonalmente su di essa

In simple terms he means: look at things from a different perspective. Different point of view.

I think this is not the correct use of the word. Which brought me to a 30 min discussion with my cameraman partner of the actual usage of the word parallax.

The University of Chicago • The Chicago School of Media Theory