



Antique roadshow

by Patrick Wright

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The Oxford Union's bust-ridden debating chamber is certainly the place to go if you want to see alabaster-brained twits practicing up to be prime minister. Last Thursday, however, there was an extra attraction, for the *Modern Review* was down to extract yet more publicity from the antiquated mid-century conundrum its editors have relaunched as the 'pop-posh' contest. They had come to contest the motion that 'This House believes that High Culture is Superior to Popular Culture'. And, of course, they had brought a fashion show with them: *Modern Review* tea shirts, Freudian slippers, and underpants fitted with 'ironic' quotation marks were briefly paraded in a freezing tent.

The warm up act was far from promising. An emergency motion calling that 'This house would go back to basics' was moved with curious grunts of support from the Tory backbenchers of the future. A young hanger and flogger demanded the public humiliation of criminals and their families, insisting incoherently that 'We have to attack the moral roots of society'. Others wanted to go back to the Garden of Eden 'where Men were Men and Women were Women'.

The opposition to this motion got off to a weak start, thanks to its first speaker - an exhibitionist who introduced himself as 'a sad old drunken fuckwit'. Other opponents did slightly better, recommending a return to basic rights or insisting that John Major's vision of basics pointed towards a benighted cave rather than anyone's idea of Paradise. The man from *Living Marxism* weakened his case by invoking the authority of a famous 19th century novelist named George Dickens. But the motion was really condemned by its final advocate: a caveman in a business suit who was introduced as the Chairman of the Conservative Association. This star of the future political firmament promised that John Major's return to basics would be carried off in the style of the film *Basic Instinct*. 'Mr. Major shagging women on live TV'; Norma Major 'shagging Cecil Parkinson' on the same medium: 'That is the vision we offer you for the Conservative Party'.



Any hopes that the culture debate would proceed at a higher level were soon dashed: indeed, the case for High culture really needed no opponents after it had been put by Gavin MacColl, a visiting undergraduate from Pembroke College, Cambridge. He delivered a pathetic diatribe of snobbery and prejudice, jeering at Australians, Cockney accents, and people who wear shell suits and watch satellite TV. Popular culture is anything that lacks 'intellectual rigour', said Gavin MacColl, and its consumers were beneath contempt. Mr. MacColl had seen them at the out of town supermarket: there was Mum and Dad and the children - Sharon, Tracey, Kevin and Darren. It was all the fault of Birmingham University's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, set up in the sixties by Richard Hoggart and committed, so the rigorous Mr McColl claimed, to the assertion that 'You can't make value judgements' any more.

Rod Clayton, of Brasenose College, was not impressed by MacColl or his windy proclamation that Euripides was better than Cilla Black. 'Soaps and Callimachus - that's what I jerk off too', he cried in opposition to the motion, before dismissing Jane Austen as 'a boring old cow' and stating his preference for Robo-Cop.

The already beleaguered cause of high culture found its next champion in Quentin Letts, a diarist on the *Daily Telegraph's* Peterborough column who claimed once to have been a dustman in the nearby town of Bicester. 'I'm not knocking *Modern Review*, Heaven forbid', he said cautiously, but high culture was to be valued because it provided its followers with impressive cocktail chat.

It was then the turn of Mr Toby Young, editor of the *Modern Review* and a stern judge of Martin Amis's domestic affairs, who is lauded by his shareholders as the cleverest young man in Britain and, in Julie Burchill's phrase, the 'F.R. Leavis of *Smash Hits*'. The man of the moment turned out to be a balding cherub who teetered nervously on the brink of his own black bow tie before diving into an arm-waving exhibition of intellectual superiority. 'I'm seeking to extend the categories, not abolish them', he pronounced with the gravity of a man who has come a long way since he was first televised networking his way through London with a Filofax stuffed with celebrity addresses. After declaring that the opposition had no argument, either aesthetic or moral, he started pulling things out of a shopping basket in his mind.

'A hundred years, and look what we've got' he said, waving selected items at the opposition: 'Elmore Leonard, Duke Ellington, Neighbours, de Niro, the Rolling Stones . . . You've had 2,000 years, and all you've got is Shakespeare'.



This was winning stuff at the Oxford Union, but there was more to come. Who, he asked, wouldn't prefer to see *Terminator II* to 'some French subtitled film' approved by *Sight and Sound*? As for the so-called violence of Hollywood, 'nothing Arnold Schwarzenegger has done is worse than King Lear having his eyes poked out'. Those who criticise popular culture aren't just anti-American, they are anti-Semitic too.

This rubbish went down a treat. Indeed, the house was roaring for more, and the proposers of the motion, who were being ribbed for their goatee beards, their habitual drunkenness, and their monkey like expressions, were looking more and more uncomfortable in their commitment to the cause of High Culture. Perhaps Bryan Appleyard would save the day.

In that very morning's *Independent*, he had condemned the *Modern Review*'s spurious habit of denouncing every non-populist impulse as 'elitism'. But in the event, he didn't really deliver.

We all make judgements, he said, pointing out that the *Modern Review* is itself 'riddled with judgements'. The two positions are not exclusive, he added, and the opposite bench were motivated by a 'Boring adolescent impulse' to tear down everything. But he got little further than that, apparently altogether more concerned to establish that he himself was no trendy lefty. So he repeated his denunciation of those who would turn education into a 'dim-witted wallow in the dislocated mire of cultural studies', and taking a low kick at the body of Raymond Williams (citing 'technological determinism' as 'perhaps his only memorable phrase').

Indeed, by the time Appleyard had emerged from this defensive detour he too was conceding that 'The *Modern Review* is very good'. After this, Mariella Frostrup, billed as 'presenter of *Video View* and television celebrity', turned out to be more than a match for her opponents. The High Culture buffs were 'impossibly condescending', she said: snobs who were only trying to distinguish themselves from the masses. It was all down to 'the nobs and the slob', she said, winning the day with a soundbite reduction of John Carey's book *The Intellectuals and the Masses*. High culture is nowadays 'specifically designed to be incomprehensible to demonstrate its exclusivity'.

Norman Stone felt obliged to admit, in reply to the scurrilous accusations of Toby Young, that 'I am not always sober'. But then, after striking out along the



hopeless trail that Gavin MacColl had blazed with his reviled orange goatee, he too came to a groggy halt that had little really to do with alcohol. It is, as he said, propping himself up on a line from Dr. Johnson, 'impossible to criticise unresting stupidity'. But then again, he had to concede the 'excellent points' of Mariella Frostrup. Indeed, on reflection, 'the last thing he wanted to do' was to support 'what passes for High Culture these days'. Alban Berg, towerblocks, Martin Amis and trendy bureaucrats were indeed all part of the deplorable legacy of the avant-gardism that had usurped High Culture at the beginning of the century. But then he remembered pop music, which was responsible for so many modern ills, like 'litter, drugs, and disease'. 'We do live in a very, very peculiar world', he mused, milling about disconsolately and, indeed, coming to an indecisive halt somewhere between the devil and the deep blue sea.

It only remained for Rob Newman, billed as the 'star of the Mary Whitehouse Experience', to turn the case for High Culture into one huge joke, which he did in no time at all, knocking it into a ludicrous display of goatishness, blimpish snobbery and archaic right-wing reaction. So the house that had decided on balance not to go back to basics, and which had recently also declared itself Glad to be Gay, came out hugely in favour of the *Modern Review*.

There was scarcely any other way to leave that room, but then the whole event was framed that way. The serious charge against the *Modern Review* remained unanswered. It has nothing to do with the 'popularity' of its chosen culture, and everything to do with the realism of its approach. High versus low is just the smokescreen under which the *Modern Review* curtails the wider critical reach of the art under discussion, and confines it to the prevailing terms of the market.

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