CRITICA / REVIEW

George Yúdice, *The Expediency of Culture: Uses of Culture in the Global Era*. Durham: Duke UP, 2003. 480 pp.

Against Expediency

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Examining the cover of George Yúdice's book *The Expediency of Culture: Uses of Culture in the Global Era* (2003 Duke University Press) I felt a little giddy. Not with anticipation for what I was about to read, for I had been at an informal presentation of the book by Yúdice here in Bogotá a few months earlier, and I already knew more or less what to expect. Rather, it had to do with the cover, a photograph taken by Yúdice of a moment in the unfolding of Alfredo Jaar's contribution to *in*SITE, a triennial art event which takes place in the Tijuana/San Diego border region. Jaar's work for the 2000 version, "La nube/The Cloud", consisted of unleashing a thousand white balloons just south of the US/Mexico border in Baja California. And there, along the base of the photo on the cover of the book, among the countable onlookers, am I. Sure, no one else would recognize me. All of us in the photograph are facing away from the camera watching the balloons and the wind do their thing. But the back of my head, the way the hair thins, the posture, particularly the way my arms are held, the T-shirt, are all unmistakable: it's me. Looking at the photograph I was transported back to the event and the question that perplexed me at the time, a question coeval with the very emergence of art itself from the realm of ritualized objectivity, namely, "what on earth does this mean?"

Given its prominence as the cover jacket for the book, I was confident I would find out, and indeed, in an endnote on page 382 of *Expediency*, there it is: "Alfredo Jaar's one thousand cloud-like elastic white globes floated over the border to commemorate the thousands who died crossing it." Not balloons but cloud-like elastic globes; and more than an aesthetic act, a commemoration of those who have died crossing the US/Mexico border. A noble intention, no doubt, but as a memorial I can't help but think: fleeting, ephemeral and probably not that effective. You had not only to be there, but also to already *know* what was intended for it to work; after all, I was there and I didn't know. What better cover, then —even if unintentionally ironic— for this book that, as its subtitle states, seeks to interrogate the uses of culture in the global era, than this photograph, which seems to problematize the very notion that culture—in this case an art work—can be used to do anything at all.

Ironic because the rhetorical thread of this book, with which Yúdice attempts —not with great success— to suture together a number of discrete researches, is that in our once-contemporary social and economic, post-1989 conjuncture (the "Conclusion" probes the validity of the argument post-September 11, 2001), culture is being used by both the global managers and the managed to solve the social problems produced by the new "economic or ecological rationality" of which culture is the "lynchpin" (1). Culture, in other words, now functions as an expedient means of facilitating development, it has become a nodal point of articulation between the dominant institutions of globalization (e.g., governments, NGOs, funding agencies, cultural institutions, corporations, etc.), and the needs of regions, spaces, peoples. As people have realized that their culture can get them things, whether it be some level of representation, or grants for local arts projects or

community development, culture has become expedient. As the agencies that might "concede" this representation or award the grants have realized that such cultural claims are in fact legitimate bases for enfranchisement or development, again, culture has become expedient. As such, it requires "management [. . .] coordinated both locally and supranationally, by corporations and the international nongovernmental sector" (4). It is this conjuncture that the book purports to explicate.

In what follows I reconstruct Yúdice's main argument insofar as it is discernable. Yúdice takes a catholic approach to the concept of culture, employing it in a haphazard way such that it refers to everything from contained practices like dances to discrete productions such as crafts or narratives or songs, from whole ways of life to characteristic approaches to nature, architecture and so on: all this is culture and all this, it is argued, is now expedient, an efficient means to an end. A first chapter explains the emergence of culture as expedient as a result of the end of the Cold War, the conclusion of which "pulled the legitimizing rug out from under a belief in artistic freedom, and with it unconditional support for the arts, as a major marker of difference with respect to the Soviet Union" (11). During the Cold War, against the Soviet subjugation of the cultural to the needs of the proletarian state, the West generally promoted the idea of culture for culture's, or art for art's sake. But in the 1990s, in one of those ironic historical inversions, the West, the U.S. in particular, would ask of art and culture that it do its part in the reconstruction of society, much like the Soviets asked of it in their attempt to build a workers' paradise. This then leads to the development of something called "cultural power," which Yúdice immodestly claims as his "term for the extension of biopower in the age of globalization" (25). I take him to be suggesting that if once biological life

became the expedient for what Foucault deemed racial, but what I would prefer to call national, life, then now the cultural has become the expedient for the form of life, call it corporate social, or, if you like, neo-fascist, that we presently inhabit. Culture, in other words, has become the articulatory mode of social development/organization/control, but this interesting hypothesis is never really elaborated in all its baneful promise.

If the global managers have discovered the expediency of culture, so have the managed, who have learned the value of the proper deployment of their culture and cultural capital. In his second chapter Yúdice problematizes what might be called this liberation of difference, the valorization of the multi-cultural, its expediency for political ends. The articulation of one's culture in an attempt to advance one's interests is not an uncomplicated expression of who and what one really is. Yúdice draws on theories of performativity to argue that such articulations are in fact performances, each uniquely structured by "differently arranged relations among the institutions of the state and civil society, the judiciary, the police, schools and universities, the media, consumer markets, and so on" (43), with each such arrangement constituting what Yúdice calls a "field of force" (43). Communities that assert their cultural difference, then, are not asserting their repressed, transhistorical truth. Rather, at least to some degree, they are performing their own constructedness according to the field of force in which they find themselves. One can only be who one is in a context that allows one to be, and more cynically, insists that one be, *that*. What this means in terms of politics is that opposition has been and continues to be caught up in the performance of identities that are only enabled within the conjuncture of fields of force in which oppositionality arises. In other words, opposition

is spontaneous, and can only expect to be, co-opted; referencing Wallis, Yúdice argues that "'alternativity' is part of the system" (59).

Indeed, Yúdice also points out that the cooptation of "alternativity" is but one possible response by the authorities to resistance. Another is of course "police repression" (54). It's a shame, then, that the cultural politics of that response is not given much space, and while the book makes no claims to be about the cultural approbation of systemic violence its emphasis on the always already compromised tactics of the cultural left tacitly confirms the belief that left-wing activity is, well, always already compromised, and that ironic distance must remain the *sine qua non* of resistance. Non-ironic resistance, however, has its own long history, and to give short shrift to the fact that that history is one of its unceasing violent repression leaves the reader to understand that the system is at once anodyne and almost infinitely capacious. Such an understanding is wrong.

If I can get ahead of myself here in order to bring up a related point which does not surface until the book's conclusion, Yúdice argues that in Latin America "throughout the dictatorship years the state was the terrorist, as well as those who *collaborated* with it" (353 my emphasis). In this use of the emphasized word the root does not receive the italicization it receives in the rest of the book: col*labor*ation. Yúdice makes a fetish of inscribing the word and its variations this way to emphasize the shared work which it designates, as he explains in a long endnote (380-381). In the quotation, however, the root is not emphasized. It's as if, somehow, the notion that many people worked together to produce the dictatorship, made it less of an imposition and more of a phenomenon rooted in the social and the cultural spheres. Although a dictatorship is a collective

project, it must somehow be avoided. Avoiding it, of course, allows us to point to perpetrators, to those responsible, and allows us to thus imagine that justice will be done when those evil men are put on trial —under, as it just so happens, neoliberal regimes. "Finding and bringing to justice those who are guilty of disappearing others is part of the process of political healing" writes Yúdice (352). But, I would argue, it is rather part of the ongoing process of obfuscation about the sort of world in which we live, and that, on the contrary, justice will not be done until society itself is reconfigured not in terms of the modern half-baked democracies that expiate their own complicity in an ongoing holocaust against the poor by bringing to trial a few bad people, but in terms of the socialist ideals to which the disappeared aspired. This oversight, for me at least, mars the book's potential as a critical intervention.

To rejoin the main argument about the inherent difficulties of cultural politics, Yúdice next elaborates the idea that resistance to neoliberalism will necessarily draw on and owe much of its effectiveness to neoliberalism itself, since the latter has to be reckoned with as the current structuring structure. One sees this most acutely in the turn to civil society both by the managers of neoliberalism, who seek to relieve the state of its responsibility to the citizenry, and by those resisting neoliberalism, for whom the state is less regarded as the locus of analysis and (potential) activity; rather —mirroring neoliberal apologists— there is a growing emphasis on civil society by oppositional movements and a fascination with the same by academics interested in progressive change. However, given that civil society will always be structured differently according to local fields of force, responses to the inequalities it continues to generate will assume different contours. Along these lines, this chapter questions the Zapatistas' masterful

wielding of the new global realities—the dominance of neoliberal discourse and the trade agreements that go with it, for example, NAFTA, the new post-1989 celebration and promotion of democracy, as well as media technologies, principally the internet—in their attempt to promote a new Mexican nation which includes "everything for everyone" (EZLN 1995; qtd. in Yúdice 106). Nonetheless, Yúdice advises cultural studies practitioners that rather than celebrate uncritically the achievements of the Zapatistas and await their reproduction in other contexts, they ought instead to examine the fields of force that enabled the Zapatistas to do what they did. Yúdice, as an example, contrasts their case with Brazil's. There landless peasants have not had their January 1, 1994, the day on which NAFTA went into effect and the Zapatistas made themselves known to the world. Additionally, the state's relation to the "national" culture is different in Mexico and Brazil. In the former, since the revolution, the state has "situat[ed] national culture in centralized, pyramidal institutions" which, in the course of seven decades, has "resulted in numerous protests against that centrality" (108), whereas in the latter "cultural institutions are not similarly centralized" (108) making rebellion against them, Zapatista style, less appropriate.

Yúdice's fourth chapter "The Funkification of Rio" offers a perspective on the challenges, mainly coming from "subaltern youth," to Brazil's experience with neoliberal development. The main challenge to emerge from this sector is to the idea of Brazil as first and foremost a nation in which Brazilian-ness somehow sublates economic and racial difference. Against the idea of racial democracy and the insistence that economic differences aside, there is something essentially universal to all Brazilians, the new youth cultures "seek to establish new forms of identity, but not those premised on Brazil's

much heralded self-understanding as a nation of nonconflictual diversity" (113-114). Yúdice argues that one of the ways Brazilian youth he has worked with in Rio de Janeiro opt out of this sanguine but ultimately mistaken national idea is in their choice of music: funk, which in Rio is comprised of "several black U.S. genres such as soul, rhythm and blues, Motown, and hip-hop" (123). Sung in English, it is thus beyond comprehension in a linguistic sense by the majority of its adherents. Moreover, it does not receive radio airplay or find shelf space in stores (120-121). To choose funk, then, as the *funkeiros* do, is to *not* choose the musical forms associated with the idea of an infinitely capacious and inclusive Brazil, such as *samba*. Yúdice argues, however, that those expecting that this negative choice might have a constructive positive side, that it might found a new, truly inclusive political program, will be disappointed. The *funkeiros*, if I can borrow an old *Who* line, won't be fooled again. While their presence and activities impinge on the civil society of a whiter and more upwardly mobile Brazil and thus to some extent structure public discourse, they appear to want no part in reconstituting the pubic sphere in any progressive sense. All they really want, Yúdice writes, is "to clear a space of their own" (132).

A counter-example is offered in chapter 5, "Parlaying Culture into Social Justice," in which Yúdice provides an analysis of Rio Funk, a project undertaken by NGOs and the municipal government of Rio which attempted "to use funk music and dance as a means to develop creativity and notions of citizenship among favela youth" (134). Through this project, "it was hoped that the fragmented constituencies [of Rio de Janeiro] might come together" (134). Yúdice moves on to report on the *Grupo Cultural Afro Reggae* (GCAR) which uses music as a "platform on which favela youth would be able to dialogue with

their own community and the rest of society" (149). The GCAR self-consciously uses culture to improve the lives of favela youth while insisting that the state itself not shirk its responsibilities to citizens of all socio-economic levels, thus distinguishing itself from the *funkeiros* of the previous chapter. These chapters appear to be quite old, one of them first published over eight years ago, and insofar as they together are something of a couplet, they might appear to be the intellectual anchor of the book. But while the latter chapter emphasizes an activist relation between culture and politics, the two together do not count as "illustrations [. . .] of how culture as an expedient gained legitimacy and displaced or absorbed other understandings of culture" (1). Music has long been a focal point of cultural political activity, and disaffected youth like the Brazilian *funkeiros* are quite integral to the history of most modern societies. Neither chapter, then, supports the idea that we have entered a "new epistemic framework" in which culture "take[s] [priority", leaving the reader searching still for substantiation of the book's thesis, clarification of its *raison d'etre* (1).

Shifting direction in his sixth chapter, "Consumption and Citizenship?" Yúdice attempts to "think through a [. . .] politics of culture premised on the convergence of consumption and citizenship" (167). In it he examines the politics of corporations such as Working Assets, Ben and Jerry's, and Benetton, and finds them generally wanting (167-174), while corporate diversity management is criticized for being mostly an effort to shield business from charges of racism which does nothing to actually confront entrenched racist and socio-economic inequality (174-181). Turning to Latin America, thinkers like Jorge Castañeda and Nestor García Canclini are given sympathetic consideration. Their different but complementary attempts to theorize global social

justice given an international economic system that promotes consumerism must, however, "confront the pressures of the global economy on labor and the exploitation of resources" (188), a caveat which is not really explained.

Chapter 7 focuses on the emergence and growth of Miami as the capital of the Latin American culture industry. It is descriptive and free of theoretical substance, while chapter 8 is a long discourse on the relation between "free" trade and culture. It is here that Yúdice finally gets to what he promised in the opening pages: the turn by public and private institutions to culture as a way to somehow redress the ravages caused precisely by what is disingenuously called "free" trade. The main critical point made here, through the analysis of a variety of such initiatives, is that this cultural activity, with its producers, commissioners, distributors, enablers, funders, and so on, is for the most part caught in a contradiction. This "critical" cultural practice against, as it were, the machine, is only possible *because* of the machine, because, in other words, of the technologies, contacts, possibilities that are the fruit of "free" trade. This idea was covered in chapter 3, but here Yúdice adds that at best most of these efforts produce a liberal diversity, extending representation to different nationalities, ethnicities, genders, sexualities, and so forth. Without underestimating the importance of such diversity, he makes it clear that what is left uncommented is that most fundamental diversity, which "free" trade has profoundly exacerbated, between the all-too rich and the all-too poor (and in documenting this, drawing on a variety of sources, Yúdice provides excellent grounding for his argument). To conclude and to suggest that not all is lost, Yúdice gives a couple of examples of art/culture politics that can illuminate and resist these cleavages in their present, globalized form.

The penultimate chapter on *in*SITE, the San Diego/Tijuana triennial art event that dates back to 1992, is an intricate dissection of the event's various iterations, a revelation of the multiple processes and practices, of the literally innumerable efforts of numerous people who make it a reality. It is this chapter especially in which Yúdice deploys the notion of col*labor*ation with an unseemly abandon. The point is that while one would generally not lose sight of the fact that it is a human being who makes art, one is, given the way art events are presented, apt to avoid comprehending the many, many people that make them possible. Yúdice uses the analogy of the *maquiladora*, suggesting that the art event is in many ways the result of a similar mode of production. Arguing that the avant-garde vocation for art, allowing the viewer to demystify and to somehow experience life more immediately, has been superseded by the emergence of neoliberal organization of society which exposes everything. Yúdice details how the *in*SITE project is in fact the best representation of the new art vocation: its "organization makes visible and palpable how the cultural economy functions" (337), how culture, that is, relies on the very thing —the global economy—it is called upon to denounce. In a concluding flourish he goes on to ask the all important question: "But what do we do once we see how [the cultural economy] functions?" –a question not at all rhetorical:

> Critique of this venue will not produce the disalienating effects believed to ensue from the ideological structures and processes characteristic of ideology critique. Nor will we get in touch with our phenomenological body or have a limit experience [as with avant-garde art]. What *in*SITE calls for, in my view, is to become a user, a col*labor*ator who intervenes in order to have the labor expended recognized and compensated. Venues like *in*SITE become important sites for the

> reformulation of cultural policy in a post-Fordist, globalizing world, not from the vantage point of a government agency, foundation or university office, but by engaging as an archaeologist-practitioner in the process (337).

This is what Yúdice seems to have been doing in this chapter (he was one of the participants in *in*SITE2000 and this chapter serves as something of an archaeology of the event), and arguably, throughout the book.

The result of his performance of the archaeologist-practitioner role—this book—is hardly inspiring. To elaborate, I'll begin with the notion of the expediency of culture. Towards the end of the book we arrive finally at what is perhaps Yúdice's clearest statement of what might be meant by the book's title:

> Culture, [. . .] following Gramscian theory, was understood as a 'terrain of struggle.' But the content of culture receded in importance when the instrumental usefulness of the claim to difference as a warrant gained legitimacy. It *might be said* that previous understandings of culture —canons of artistic excellence, symbolic patterns that give coherence to and thus endow a group of people or society with human worth, or culture as discipline— give way to the expediency of culture. In our era, *claims* to difference and culture are expedient in so far as they presumably lead to the empowerment of a community (334, first italics mine, second in original).

I differ. The assertion would have us understand daily life as devoid of culture insofar as the latter is now nothing but expedient. But culture, whatever else it might be, is simply the realm in which we live, it is the matrix according to which we make sense of the things we experience; it is, one might say, the mode in which we *experience* our life.

That it is the lynchpin of the present, the key to understanding social reproduction, is the founding insight of cultural studies. In this sense it cannot be anything *other than* a terrain of struggle. Were things otherwise, we would exist in a state of sublime lack of self-consciousness, truly at the mercy of our instincts. One problem then, is that the basic argument is weak and that in any event, appeals to culture as a means to an end are at least as old as colonialism. As for Yúdice's renovation of the claim, I am tempted to say that it doesn't really make sense; after all, what does the assertion that "previous understandings of culture [. . .] give way to the expediency of culture" really mean? While Yúdice has explored some uses of culture in an expedient sense, it is hardly the case that culture has, *tout court*, become expedient. Such claim strikes me as one of those calculated exaggerations which seem to be the currency of the high-stakes business known as the humanities and social sciences. But I don't think Yúdice believes it for a second. In the citation above, I emphasize the "might be said" because it strikes me as an incredibly tentative formulation of what amounts to the book's thesis precisely in the place—towards the conclusion—where one would imagine the author making his point most forcefully. But having read the book, I understand this tentativeness now as quite literal, quite honest. There is, to put it bluntly, no real sustained and convincing elaboration of this thesis.

Over the course of the last 15 years or so Yúdice has produced an admirable and, enviable number of articles. This book seems to represent an attempt to synthesize much of that work and its length suggests that for the author it is a labor of love. It would, however, take a very sympathetic and inattentive reader to suggest that the book hangs together, that it sustains itself along the breadth of its 389 pages of text. My own sense is

that the book would have been better as a straightforward collection of interventions and researches, that no doubt have a connection, but that do not necessarily comprise something greater than the sum of the parts. In its actual form, coherence loses out to confusion, and an overall inattentiveness to the reader makes it not only impossible to love, but all too much of a labor too.