

sense/non-sense; hierarchy/heterarchy...

What follows is an extract from an article posted by Eldritch Priest at www.neithernor.com. The article looks at sense, symbolism and meaning in music but includes the following discussion of hierarchy and heterarchy:

...But this process requires a leap into that slippery subject of aesthetics and judgements where we approach all the sticky issues of beauty and taste. And so there is no avoiding valuation completely. It might be worth quoting extensively from Ken Wilber¹ who comments on the post-modernist's fierce denial of hierarchy and belligerent insistence on heterarchy (the polemical nature of the writing, too, is also rather amusing as a parry to those who recoil at the thought of ranking and making decisions:

*The fact that **actualisation hierarchies**² involve a ranking of increasing holistic capacity - or even ranking of value - is deeply disturbing to believers of extreme heterarchy, who categorically reject any sort of actual ranking or judgements whatsoever. With very good and often noble reasons...they point out that value ranking is a hierarchical judgement that all too often translates into social oppression and inequality, and that in today's world the more compassionate and just response is a radically egalitarian or pluralistic system - a heterarchy of equal values. And while some of these critics are, as I said, quite nobly inspired, some of them have become quite rancorous, even vicious, in their vocal condemnation of any sort of value hierarchies. "Higher" has become their all purpose dirty word.*

What they don't seem to realise is that their valued embrace of heterarchy is itself a hierarchical judgement. They value heterarchy; they feel it embodies more justice, and compassion, and decency; they contrast it with hierarchical views, which they feel are dominating and denigrating. In other words, they rank these two views, and they feel one is definitely better than the other. That is, they have their own hierarchy, their own value ranking.

But since they consciously deny hierarchy altogether, they must obscure and hide their own. They must pretend their hierarchy is not a hierarchy. Their ranking becomes unacknowledged, hidden, covert. Further, not only is their hierarchy hidden, it is self-contradictory: it is a hierarchy that denies hierarchy. They are presupposing that which they deny; they are consciously disavowing what their actual stance assumes. By refusing even to look at hierarchy, even while making massive hierarchical judgements anyway, they are saddled with a very crude and very poorly thought out hierarchy of values. This all too often, and unfortunately, lends an unmistakable air of hypocrisy to their stance. With much righteous indignation, they hierarchically denounce hierarchy. With their left hand they are doing what their right hand despises in everybody else. By hating judgements, and by hiding their own, they convert self-loathing into righteous condemnation of others.

In essence, their stance amounts to: "I have my ranking, but you shall not have yours. And further, by pretending that my ranking is not a ranking" - that move is done unconsciously - "I will say that I am without ranking altogether; and I shall then, in the name of compassion and equality, despise and attack ranking wherever I find it, because ranking is very bad."

By making these hierarchical judgements in an unacknowledged fashion, they avoid the really difficult issues of just how we go about making our value judgements in the first place. They

are articulate on the lamentable hierarchical value judgements of others, but strangely inarticulate - totally silent, actually - as to how and why they arrived at their own. Their self-ethic of inarticulacy and their other-ethic of vocal condemnation combine to form a large club with which they simply bash others in the name of kindness. This does little to help articulate the nature of human value systems, the nature of how men and women go about choosing the good, and the true and the beautiful, choices that involve ranking, and choices that these critics make and then deny they have made.

Their heterarchy is a stealthy hierarchy. They bury their tracks, then claim they have no tracks, and thus avoid and repress the truly profound and difficult topic: why do human beings always leave tracks? Why is the finding of value in the world inherent in the human situation? And since, even if we decide to value everything equally, that involves rejecting systems that do not, why is some sort of ranking unavoidable? Why are qualitative distinctions built into the fabric of the human orientation? Why is trying to deny value itself a value? Why is denying ranking itself a ranking? And given that, how can we sanely and consciously choose our unavoidable hierarchies, and not merely fall into the ethics of unacknowledgement and suppression and inarticulacy?³ (Wilber's emphasis)

So we make decisions. That is unavoidable. It is a condition of being human. And when we experience art, for example, there is a tendency to rank what elements we think are important and significant, and thereby establish a 'sense' and coherence, even if subjectively, to the work. This does not exclude an experimental aesthetic; indeed, it encourages it. The experimental aesthetic is about eschewing or subverting a symbolically and historically mediated art experience by enticing us to identify new forces, and make choices and connections in a knowing way that traces a 'plane of immanence' and creates passing plateau sense. A complex experimental aesthetic understands that sedimentation is impossible because the actual nature of hierarchies is not rigid and oppressive but flexible and embracing. To understand this we shall again turn to Wilber who goes to great aims to clarify the confusion surrounding hierarchies.

The true nature of hierarchies is "a ranking of orders of events according to their holistic capacity."⁴ A key term for Wilber is 'holon'. Coined by Arthur Koestler to "refer to that which being a whole in one context, is simultaneously a part in another"⁵, the holon is taken by Wilber to be a token for how everything in the Kosmos is. He continues:

*With reference to the phrase 'the bark of a dog,' for example, the word bark is a whole with reference to its individual letters, but a part with reference to the phrase itself. And the whole (or the context) can determine the meaning and function of a part - the meaning of bark is different in the phrases 'the bark of a dog' and 'the bark of a tree'. The whole, in other words, is more than the sum of its parts, and that whole can influence and determine, in many cases, the function of its parts (and that whole itself is, of course, simultaneously a part of some other whole...).*⁶

and continues still:

*A normal hierarchy then is simply an order of increasing holons, representing an increase in wholeness and integrative capacity...Hierarchy then converts heaps into wholes, disjointed fragments into networks of mutual interaction.*⁷

The accusation that hierarchy is linear and dominating is also misinformed. Wilber states that 'the linear' is a metaphorical application to the stages of growth in a hierarchical reality. The charge of linearity comes from the habit of cause and effect thinking. But the stages of growth in a system are not necessarily linear in the manner charged, they are "interdependent and complexly interactive."⁸

The final instruction of hierarchology is asymmetry. "There are first letters, then words, then sentences, then paragraphs, but not vice-versa."⁹ And this statement is crucial. At no point is this a privileging of levels. To say that paragraphs are more valuable is absurd. One has to realise the distinction between fundamental and significant. Letters are more fundamental than paragraphs but

paragraphs convey deeper (an increase in integrative capacity for) meaning than words and are thus more significant.

We need also to address hierarchy's complimentary: heterarchy. Heterarchy can be described as a regime established by the interplay and egalitarian communion of forces and entities. This is the desired post-modern paradigm, but what it lacks is the integrative, holistic capacity that is an observable fact of the world. And that it misses this renders it shallow, hence the post-modernist's blighted insistence on reality as 'surface'. Heterarchy is thus the level of differential values at play while hierarchy is the integrative principle that makes complex connections between these values.

When we consider this in relation to the experimental aesthetic, we do not find the supposed "hegemonic domination that marginalises differential values"¹⁰ implied by hierarchy. In fact we find it remarkably similar to Deleuze's 'traced' planes of immanence (hierarchy) and a multiplicity of plateaux of thought (heterarchy)¹¹. An experimental aesthetic invigorates an art to be beyond itself by promoting an activity of thought that identifies new forces, makes new connections, and whorls them into a reality of emergent and novel immanence.

Eldritch Priest, 2005

This article first appeared, and can be read in full, at <http://neithenor.com/wonderful/sense,non,hier,heter.htm>
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Endnotes

¹ Wilber, Ken. *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality: The Spirit of Evolution*. 2nd ed. Boston: Shambhala Books, 2000

² An actualisation hierarchy is Wilber's conceptual model of increasing complexity and wholeness

³ Wilber, Ken op. cit. pp. 32-34

⁴ Wilber, Ken op. cit. p. 25

⁵ Wilber, Ken op. cit. p. 26

⁶ Wilber, Ken op. cit. p. 26

⁷ Wilber, Ken op. cit. p. 26

⁸ Wilber, Ken op. cit. p. 27

⁹ Wilber, Ken op. cit. p. 27

¹⁰ Wilber, Ken op. cit. p. 23

¹¹ Deleuze, Gilles. *The Logic of Sense* London: Athlone Press 1990 (originally published as *Logique de Sens* 1969)