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THE MONA LISA CURSE



by Miles Mathis

[*The Mona Lisa Curse*](#) is a film by Robert Hughes, created by him in 2008 and shown on British TV [channel 4]. Studying this film will allow me to continue my analysis of Hughes that I began in 1995 with [“On Robert Hughes”](#), expanded in 2005 with [“Hughes at the Guardian”](#), and updated most recently in a paper called [“Robert Hughes and the Royal Academy.”](#)

Before we get started, you may want to ask yourself why this film never made it to the US. Although it is mainly about New York, was shot in New York, and Hughes lives in New York (he was the art critic for TIME for more than 25 years), this film has never been picked up by a station in the US in the three years since it was released. The control of the media in the US has become so perfect—and this includes places like PBS—that contrary opinion simply cannot make it through, even when it comes from ranking people like Hughes. Since Hughes began questioning the direction of contemporary art in the mid to late 90's, he has seen his star fall dramatically. He should expect now to be the granddaddy of art criticism worldwide, but the only place that continues to give him a nod is England, and that a small nod. In the US he is mostly *persona non grata*. If you had to trust only in Wikipedia, for instance, you would have thought he died in about 2006. The US media was happy to promote Hughes' *The Shock of the New* back in the early 80's, since in it Hughes was selling Modernism like an old-time barker. But as soon as Hughes' cooled on the new art, the market pushed him aside as a nuisance.

The Mona Lisa Curse is a continuation of Hughes' critique of the art market which he began in earnest some time in the mid 90's (although he had presaged this full critique many times before that). In it we

see him exhausted from at least 15 years of growing disgust and an overwhelming sense of being outdated. Nonetheless, the film packs a powerful punch, doing what it was designed to do: convincing us to be disgusted with the artworld as well. Hughes achieves this by giving us an inside look at the insiders who have made art what it is now, from Thomas Hoving, the director of the Metropolitan Museum in the late 60's and early 70's, to Alberto Mugarini, a contemporary collector and speculator. Hughes verifies what we had already suspected and deduced: the people who make up the artworld are and have long been the shallowest set of people one can imagine. The vulgar rich have co-opted art and turned it into a hell even Duchamp—or Bosch—could not have dreamed up. To any sensitive soul, Odd Nerdrum's FutureHell looks like an idyll compared to the reality of the present art market.

Before I criticize Hughes, I will look at all the things he does right here. As usual with Hughes, we get some wonderful quotes, and this one is among the best in the film:

Some think that much of today's art mirrors and therefore criticizes decadence. Not so. It's just decadent. It has no critical function. It is part of the problem.

As is this one:

For me THE cultural artifact of the last 50 years has been the domination of the art market—far more striking than any individual painting or sculpture.

We aren't sure if he means to include his buddies Rauschenberg and Rosenquist in that dismissal, but it is true regardless.

In one of the most damning interviews, we see Thomas Hoving admit that he had “no regard, only contempt” for the Metropolitan when he entered it as director in 1967. This leaves us wondering if the board at the time was aware of that fact. We must assume they did, and that they had the same contempt for it he did. Hoving adds, “Why should a museum be any more aristocratic than a movie theater?” Hoving then gives the nod to Thomas Krens, the director at the Guggenheim who turned his museum into a circus, saying that he wished he had been Krens rather than himself. This comes off as so pathetic, it requires no commentary by Hughes, who lets it stand on its own. I will come back to it later.

Hughes begins his timeline in 1962, the year the *Mona Lisa* traveled to New York. It was then, Hughes tells us, that the curse began. This answers my question from the previous paper, where I wondered why Hughes chose to pin the fall of art to that time period. Now we know. Hughes argues that the **commoditization** of art began then, with the popularizing of that image first and then the ever increasing prices attached to other art objects as commodities. Certainly the price rise began then, as he shows with the Scull auction at Sothebys. And Hughes sticks to his thesis that we analyzed in his *Guardian* article from 2004: that the fall of art has been due mainly to this exponential **monetization**. But here he extends his critique just a bit, by dropping the assertion from 2004 that he “doesn't want to disparage dealers, collectors or museum directors, by the way.” Here he disparages them right and left, which is good to see. His revolt has made some progress in between 2004 and 2008. However, other big holes remain in his argument, and we must revisit them now. The first problem concerns the way he disparages them: he follows the outline of Peter Schjeldahl's complaint that I quoted in my [Balls in a Basket article](#) from 2010, where we are told the central problem is an

epoch-making collusion of mega-collectors and leading artists, which has overridden the former gatekeeping roles of critics and curators and sidelined the traditional gallerists who work with artists on a long-term basis of mutual

loyalty.

Of course Hughes is too clever to use Schjeldahl's sloppy language, where critics are “gatekeepers,” but the idea is the same. Hughes puts it this way in the film:

What happens when they [rich collectors] start making choices for everyone else, by bringing the influence of their own taste into the museum?

Hughes gives us the collector Alberto Mugarabi to fill out this quote with an actual bogeyman and frighten us with the ignorance of these gentlemen, but even so this quote literally leapt out of the film at me with its unintended irony. Substituting “critic” for “rich collector,” isn't this what happened in the period 1920 to 1960, the period before Hughes starts filming? Didn't art critics like Clement Greenberg begin making choices for everyone else? Was this influence beneficial to art history while the influence of collectors is now a detriment? Yes, Hughes looks magisterial sitting next to Mugarabi, which is his whole point: we should prefer the educated critic to the twit Mugarabi. However, as I have argued over the years, the critic has been as bad for art as any collector, and the age of the critic was a fatal step in the fall of art, a fall that began almost a hundred years before Hughes tells us it did.

Let us return to the Hughes' timeline, which he starts in 1962. He starts it there because this is the beginning of the popularization of the art image. But is it? Not even close. We only need to return again to Whistler, who said in his *Ten O'clock Lecture*,

Art is upon the Town!—to be chucked under the chin by the passing gallant—to be enticed within the gates of the householder—to be coaxed into company as a proof of culture and refinement. If familiarity can breed contempt, certainly Art—or what is currently taken for it—has been brought to its lowest stage of intimacy.

That was 1885, 75 years before the *Mona Lisa* hit New York, and Whistler is saying precisely the same thing about art that Hughes is saying.

So it can't be as Hughes asserts. No change of direction happened in the 60's, there was only an *acceleration* and a change of *leaders*. Instead of critics we would have galleries and collectors leading the way. In fact, Greenberg noticed this as it was happening in the 60's and complained of it then. You can see why this would be of concern to critics like Schjeldahl and Hughes, and why they would start their complaints there, but to artists like me, it is meaningless. What matters is that artists were out of the loop then and they are even more out of the loop now, except insofar as they bow to those running the show. Although Hughes doesn't choose to highlight this, it is as clear in his film as his own thesis. He shows that Rauschenberg's prices were first driven up by scum like Scull, and Koons now exists only as an indulgence of Dakis Joannou, Victor Pinchuk, and Larry Gagosian. Since Koons' work could be manufactured by any schlemiel, he is totally created by the marketers and the buyers, and is replaceable in a heartbeat.

Although Hughes agrees with this, at least concerning Koons, Schnabel, Hirst, and most other contemporary artists, he would not agree with it concerning Rauschenberg. And it is here that his choice of positive examples blows a conspicuous hole in his thesis. Very few people watching his film will see a great difference in Rauschenberg and Rosenquist, whom he extols, and the fakes and phonies at the new Armory show, which he trashes. He tells us there is a lot in a Rauschenberg, but as with Mugarabi telling us there is a lot in a Warhol, we don't really believe it. Warhol silkscreens a bunch of shit onto a large canvas and Hughes scoffs. Rauschenberg does the same thing, with a bit more variation, and Hughes swoons.



That is one of the images Hughes finds compelling. Do you find it compelling? I don't. I have seen the original in Hartford, and it doesn't gain anything by size. It is just some newspaper clippings and a few smudges, like any schoolchild could have cut out of the paper in the early 60's. I suppose that because Hughes lived through that time, it gains something from nostalgia for him, but as a work of art it is a big nothing. Although I am a progressive and a "liberal", Kennedy means nothing to me. I also lived through that time (as a child) and I know all the propaganda (I mean history) of that decade, and yet I feel nothing. And even if Kennedy *were* a hero, even if the Moon Landing meant something to me, that collage would not impress me any more than a photo in the paper.

Seeing Rauschenberg actually create it in the film doesn't add to its prestige, either, I must say, since we can see him silkscreen the main image onto the canvas in about two seconds, with a can of blue spraypaint. That is about as creative as painting your address onto your curb.

Hughes may put a pretty sentence together and may be able to quote art history, but when he begins gushing over Rauschenberg, we simply doubt his eye. He is perfect about what he hates, but a mystery about what he loves. We suspect it is Rauschenberg the person he liked, not the art. Which is fine and understandable, but as a judge of art it leaves Hughes extremely vulnerable.



Here's another Rauschenberg that Hughes uses in the film. It shows that his *oeuvre* doesn't improve with acquaintance. That's just an ugly mess, with a couple of recognizable clippings mashed in. What lover of art could be impressed by that? What does Hughes see in it? Hughes, who is usually so demanding of art, gives Rauschenberg a big pass. Why?

In the same way we may counter-critique the dealer Richard Feigen, whom Hughes treats in the film as an educated colleague. They sit at table and scoff at Alberto Mugarbi. Hughes shows Feigen looking knowingly at a lovely little old master painting, so we are led to believe Feigen has taste where these newer dealers do not. Unfortunately, I have run across Feigen before. He was involved in the dust-up at the Barnes collection along with Walter Annenberg. Both Feigen and Annenberg called the trustees idiots, which they were, but I commented at the time that neither Feigen nor Annenberg were in any position to talk, being two more idiots of art. I will not get into all that again: all I need to do here is send my readers to [Feigen's website](#), where he brags that he was an early champion of Francis Bacon and Claes Oldenburg. In the film we catch him praising Jasper Johns. So although Feigen may look like cultured and erudite person, he is actually just one more blind man inhabiting the field of art. Like Hughes, he is convincing only when he is trashing other people. It is only when he is promoting them that we see his true depth.

But let us return to Thomas Hoving, to close this paper. Remember that Hoving had asked why a museum should be any more aristocratic than a movie theater. I am not sure that "aristocratic" is the right word, but I have an answer for him. The reason is so that all buildings are not turned into movie theaters. We use some buildings for some things, and some buildings for other things. If we don't differentiate buildings, then we will end up doing the same thing in all buildings. I made the same point in a recent paper on the [Boochever Prize](#), where I slammed Peter Frank for turning the Riverside Museum into a rave. I have nothing against movie theaters or raves. I don't even have anything against brothels or minimarts, but that doesn't mean I want to see museums turned into minimarts. We used to have places for high art, for low art, and for no art, and I have never been the kind of goody-goody that wanted to get rid of the last two. But if we put the low art and no art in the building for high art, where do we put the high art? That is the question, isn't it? Hoving wants to get rid of high art, but he wants to hide that fact behind some misdirection about buildings. At least the Futurists were honest: they came right out and said they wanted to burn all the old art. Hoving, as the director of the museum,

can't be that honest, but that is what he is talking about. If the museum is not “aristocratic”—which simply means the best—then what building is? If the museum is now for low art or no art, for raves or circuses or movies or public hangings, then no place is for high art. It has been defined out of existence. And this is precisely what we see. The leaders of art have not expressly forbidden high art, they have simply denied it a building. That is like saying that you are free to swim, but we are going to use the pools as power generators. Your freedom to swim doesn't mean much at that point, does it? Where are you going to swim, down Fifth Avenue?

The question is not, “What do people like me have against low art?” The question is, “What do people like you have against high art?” It is not that I am trying to forbid low art, it is that you are trying to forbid high art. I am the one that is endangered, not you. You have all the institutions and I have none. You have all the buildings and I have none. So how can I be the fascist here? And the question for Thomas Hoving is, “Why have contempt for the museum? Why would anyone want to popularize a museum, when people have more than enough popular pastimes to begin with? Are democratic, non-aristocratic people really lacking in popular buildings or popular entertainments to put in these buildings? Are they being oppressed by aristocrats, denied their ballgames and car races and prizefights and comedy hours and blockbuster movies? Are Americans forced to go only to operas and symphonies and lectures on Giotto?”

Of course not. Society is already saturated with entertainments for the masses, and this was as true in the 60's as it is now. So Hoving's question about museums is just absurd misdirection. It is like asking why pubs should sell beer or why grocery stores should sell food. The answer: so that people will have a place to buy beer and food. If pubs and grocery stores start showing movies, then where will people go for beer and food? The same question can be put to Hoving and Krens: if the museums all become permanent circuses, where will people go for real art? I guess Barnum and Bailey will have to raid the dumpsters behind the museums, and start their own art shows under the big top.

Yes, I had always assumed Hoving was a twit, but seeing him speak certainly confirmed it. He looks like a twit, he sounds like a twit, and everything he says screams “clueless jerk.” Of course this leads one to ask how he ever got appointed or hired to run the top museum in the country. We seem to have serious problems in not just his field, but in all fields, since the hierarchies always seemed to be inverted. Just where you finally expect to find someone with a clue, you find instead the *most* clueless.

Almost the same could be said of Thomas Krens, although Krens doesn't seem as blindingly stupid as Hoving. Krens knows something about economics, and about selling things. He has a certain savvy in his own narrow way, and there is no denying it. But, again, seeing him speak immediately tells us things we could never fully understand otherwise. His face, his tone, his mannerisms, as well as everything he says, confirm his narrowness, shallowness, and his complete unconcern for art. He comes off in less than a minute as a near perfect encapsulation of the ugly American—ambitious, sharp, hard-working, competent within confines, but completely blind to any and all depth. In a word, the exact opposite of the sort of person you would expect to be in the arts, and that you would want in the arts.

Philippe de Montebello, presented by Hughes as an exception to the Krens, Hoving rule of major museum directors, certainly comes off better than they do in the film, but we still aren't quite convinced. De Montebello has a wonderful mien, a nice French accent, and wears lovely suits. But since he runs in these circles and was hired by these people, how good could he be? He looks like royalty (he is in fact a count), but we remember that Obama looked good, too. The powers-that-be know to lead with their best coat and tie. To see a more extended critique of de Montebello, see [my](#)

[next paper](#); to say what I need to say here would be a digression.

In the last 30 seconds of the film, Hughes says, “If art can't tell us about the world we live in, then I don't believe there's much point in having it.” The music is swelling and Hughes is sort of talking in the right direction, so most people miss the importance of this, but I didn't. To see what I am getting at, you have to go back to [my previous paper](#), where I quote Hughes from 1994 talking about TV and press photos having more impact on the cultural psyche. I correct him and by 2004 he is admitting that art has taken a dive *because* people assume that TV and film “tell the most truth about the visual.” That seemed to imply he had learned his lesson, but we see that isn't so. In 2008 he is *still* expecting and requiring art to tell us about the world we live in. Of course he got that from Rauschenberg, as well as from the critical movement of art since Greenberg or before: the idea that art should be “relevant” and up-to-date and socially aware and politically progressive. But it isn't art that tells us about the world we live in, it is the nightly news that is supposed to do that. And if the news isn't doing that—because it has been taken over by government propaganda—it still isn't up to art to fill the void. It is up to independent journalists and reporters and researchers to fill the void, as we see on the web. I do a bit of this job researching and reporting, so I know firsthand the difference between being a journalist and being an artist. Personally, I know better than to go to art for journalism, just as I know better than to go to journalism for art.

Another contradiction is laid bare by this same statement of Hughes. Contemporary art, even the worst of it, IS telling us about the world we live in. Art has been expected to be a mirror of culture for decades: that is often one of the stated rules of Whitney Biennials and the like, and it has been one of the stated rules of art criticism since the 1930's. Well, Damien Hirst and the Chapman Bros. and the rest of the turkeys of contemporary art ARE mirroring culture. They are famous precisely because they are following the rules. Hughes says above that this decadent art doesn't have any critical function: it is just decadent. True, but it *does* mirror the culture, which also has no critical function or any function at all: it is just decadent. In fact, the artists are doing what the critics have been telling them to do, for decades. If Hughes no longer likes the art he is seeing, he needs to get beyond trashing the artists. The artists are just rule followers, puppets of their critical masters. If Hughes has discovered that the production of fabulously decadent art doesn't in fact act as a deterrent to decadence, as we have been taught in art history classes and in *ARTnews*, then he needs to address the underlying rule, not the products of the rule. In other words, he needs to be attacking the famous critics of the 20th century, as I have been doing. He needs to help me dismantle the rulebook created by Fry, Bell, Greenberg, Danto, Hickey, and thousands of other confused and meddling non-artists.

In 1994 Hughes was still parroting the old idea that if art couldn't maintain some critical or political function, it must fall dormant, swamped by the superior power of the modern media. But the truth is, art is *neither* a raw mirror of culture nor a mirror with a critical function. Supposing, for instance, that it could be proved that the Chapman Bros. served some real critical function, would Hughes then promote them? No. Why? Hughes knows that he hates the Chapmans, but I am not sure he knows why. It isn't because they are failing to serve a critical function, it is because even if they are, they are failing to serve an *artistic* function. In other words, they aren't artists. There is no artistic content. They may be grubby journalists of a sort, serving some vulgar critical function. But in no case are they artists. In no case should they be getting the kind of press and money they are getting.

There is something beyond the critical or political function that defines art, and Hughes sometimes seems to find a momentary handle on that idea. But it always slips away like a fish held too tightly in both hands. He can't pin it down finally with words, and since he is a man defined by words, the idea tends to come and go. It is too bad that it goes just as his film is trying to crescendo. What he needs is

a new summation, one that goes something like this:

What good does art do? What use is it? We have seen that its best use is neither critical nor political, and that mirroring society is beneath it. Some societies are hardly worth mirroring. To answer this question, we best look again at Leonardo, the star of this film after all. What good does his art do? What good does the *Mona Lisa* do? Are he or she political or critical? Do they mirror society? Not at all. They don't tell us much about the world we live in, or even much about the world Leonardo lived in. In fact, they don't *tell* us anything. If you are listening for some message while standing in front of a painting, you are using the wrong sense. Close your ears and open your eyes. A Leonardo painting is great because it is a thing of near-perfect beauty in an imperfect world. The subject, the lines, the colors, and the composition all fall together in a mysterious harmony that also somehow harmonizes the soul of the viewer. This is what a Leonardo painting does, and it may be that this definition of art is still more useful to us today. The more decadent a culture is, the more it is in need of such harmony.

To sum up *this* paper, I am pleased as punch to see Hughes' film getting awards and making waves. It is a step in the right direction, since it pulls back the curtain and shows the world what scum are now running art. However, returning power to critics will not solve the problem, as Hughes suggests it might. You see he has defined the problem as one of educated critics versus uneducated or crass collectors and museum heads. But that isn't the problem. The problem is that artists are not in control of their own field. When art collapses, as Hughes assures us it will, we should not return it to 1961, when critics were defining art. We should go back much further, before the 20th century at least, and maybe before the 19th century. But in this regard no time in the past is a perfect time. We need to create a new age, with some respect for the past but no necessity to repeat any part of it. In this new artworld, the *artist* should tell us what art is, since that is why he was chosen by the Muses. For the most part, the artworks should speak for themselves, since that is what art is. It doesn't normally require a text. But if we have questions, we should go to the artists, who are the ones that we should expect to have an answer.

In a better world than this one, artists would control art, the critics would be extinct, and the galleries and museums would exist only to serve artists and the public. As it is, this hierarchy is on its head, like everything else: the artists are extinct or enslaved, the public is prostrate, and the galleries and museums serve themselves and the ever-growing ranks of superrich twits.