
Rube Replies

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What makes metaculture so difficult to grasp? Perhaps it is the ease with which our attention drifts from the representation (in this case, metaculture) to that which is represented (in this case, culture). Michael Fischer's image of the Rube Goldberg machine makes for a particularly apt illustration of the point. Goldberg, an early-twentieth-century American cartoonist, achieved recognition for his drawings of complicated and preposterous machines designed to solve relatively simple problems. As representations, Goldberg's cartoons commented upon machinery, American ingenuity, and early-twentieth-century American culture in general. They are part of metaculture, and Michael Fischer is right to allude to them in discussing my article. However, Fischer mistakes the image for the reality, as if my interest were in the machines themselves—the content of debates over culture. In fact, my consistent and single-minded purpose, which I have pursued, if anything, perhaps too relentlessly, is the form of the cartoon image—the pen strokes, the lines and curves that delight the eye, the visual symmetries and balance—along with the effects of the image on those who behold it. Fischer's attention drifts from the cartoon to the thing represented by the cartoon, from my often parodic descriptions of the omega and alpha cultural positions to the positions themselves.

However, I must confess to a certain mischief, well-intentioned though it may have been. I wanted not only to describe the cartoon, but also, in some small measure, to draw one myself. Marilyn Ivy and Michael Fischer both note the clash of discordant metaphors in the article. Why should I have concocted this

riot of images in the first place? If my attempt was not only to describe two clashing positions but to draw readers into the fray, I thought I should not only adopt the positions and criticize them, but also encode the clash at the level of metaphors. Since the two positions I describe seem to be inextricably opposed, the question was how to convey the feel of being between them—that is, in the jarring fray on contestation, rather than the safety and serenity of one's home turf. The clash of metaphors struck me as one way of pulling readers into this no man's land. Even for intelligent critics such as Fischer and Ivy, however, prior commitments to one side or the other of the debate are so powerful that it becomes, apparently, impossible for them to adopt the view of their own positions as part of cultural processes.

What about, finally, the transportability of the cartoon to Japan, the Middle East, and other cultures? Contra Ivy, the only strong assertions I am making about "culture" here¹ concern the centrality of metaculture with respect to cultural processes. The characterizations of lateral and vertical, culture with a capital C versus culture with a small c, and so forth are only caricatures of metacultural positions adopted by others in the western tradition. My own assertions have to do with the importance of metacultural formulations such as those to cultural processes. But this does not mean that metaculture is going to take the same shape in Japan or the Middle East or elsewhere, contra Fischer. On the contrary, my suspicion—and it is really more than a suspicion—is that metacultural processes differ greatly. Indeed, this is the starting point for the essay: formulation of the Western public sphere traditions as a specific refraction of the metaculture problematic.

Metaculture stands in the relationship to culture—whatever the latter is—that the Rube Goldberg drawings do to the machinery and broader culture of early-twentieth-century America. They comment upon that culture, but, of course, they are also part of it. The question for comparative analysis is: Do we find representations that stand in an analogous relationship in Japan or the Middle East or elsewhere? If so, how do they work? And when we talk about representations, I think we need to be very open-minded about just what those are, as we are likely, if my guess is correct, to find a great deal of variability in this regard.

1. Elsewhere I have developed extended arguments about culture. *A Discourse-centered Approach to Culture* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991) begins with the assertion that "culture is localized in concrete, publicly accessible signs, the most important of which are actually occurring instances of discourse." There I go on to develop the problematic of metadiscourse, which gave rise, in my own thinking, to the idea of metaculture.