

# Hannah Arendt — Aesthetics and Politics of Appearance

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ABSTRACT. Hannah Arendt's thought concentrates on the aesthetic-political character of appearance and judgement (both showing marked 'performative' features) and aims at defining the ontological and phenomenological premises of political stances and aggregations, in both action and judgment. In this paper I describe the meeting of politics and aesthetics in Hannah Arendt's thought, following three main guiding principles: 1) a foundation that is more bio-aesthetic than anthropological of birth-natality as the arrival and appearance of an individual on the world stage. 2) a nexus of doxa-judgment, giving rise to an ontological perspectivism: each 'opinion' reveals a 'portion of the world'. 3) a chiasma of action and judgment (following the *Denkungsart* of the faculty of judgment formulated by Kant in the *Third Critique*) as group-being performativity.

## I. Introduction

Hannah Arendt's thought on the world and its political dimension (on which I would like to dwell now) displays two central ideas: the world as spectacle ("phenomenal space created by men" (Arendt 1963, 115 ss), which regards the public sphere as existing only inasmuch as its reality can be witnessed and its value judged by a "plurality" of individuals who exchange the role of actor and spectator with each other (the spectator being the person who must see the action for it to become real). The second idea is that we need to promote a way of thinking, a *Denkungsart*, appropriate to the political, against one that is 'monistic' and all-absorbing.

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## 2. The Aesthetic-Political Character of the World

Hannah Arendt's view of the world as a space and public stage led her, first of all, to reflect on the "phenomenal nature of the world", tackling a subject with strong theoretical implications: the way "being and appearing" coincide. As early as *The Human Condition* the world – i.e. the real of which the human condition is a part – is described in terms of "space of appearance" (Arendt 1958, 199), but in *The Life of the Mind* her position is still clearer: what is real is what appears or is shown – "being and appearing coincide" (Arendt 1978).

One of the main aesthetic-political characteristics of Arendt's view of the world is her associating the aesthetic nature of perception in most immediate and literal sense of *aisthesis* – a principle of reversibility underlining its plurality. *Perceiving is always divided and shared* at the same time – it is the possibility of "seeing and being seen", of hearing and being heard. This means that the world as a "stage of appearance" consists of a plurality of viewpoints that, in becoming a "public space" (for the living person) also becomes a place for displaying and revealing the "who" (the actor) who makes himself visible individually with acts and words in real stories, and a theatre of public resonance for the events by means of the "who" (the spectator) who witnesses and judges from all sorts of different perspectives (Arendt 1958, 50-51, 170-172). The image is of the actor, the perspective of the spectator.

It is worth noting that on this subject Arendt in *The Life of the Mind* suggests a *performative* extension of what is included under the heading of 'world', and a redefinition of the interchanges that give visibility to sharing or having "in common". The novelty (compared with *The Human Condition*) concerns the extension of the idea of world-ness as a space of appearance-apparition to the earth as well, to the point that Arendt actually defines "plurality" as the "law of the earth" (Arendt 1978), and foregrounds a 'world-ness of the earth' as a stage of apparition for the living *tout court*: living, sentient beings appear on the earth, each species has its own world and all living creatures are actors and spectators in it, in response to an elementary instinct of "self-display". In this context real being becomes the "worldly property" of life in its simple appearance, as a body that gives itself to the perception of other living beings (*ivi*).

In this case, then, the coincidence between being and appearing is registered as the ‘emergence’ of life. Appearing now takes on a transversal role. The earth is the stage for appearance *tout court*, of the appearance and disappearance, birth and death of the living, while the world is an appearing-to, appearing insofar as it is offered to the bodies delegated to receive it. In this way each species has its own particular world, however rich or poor it might be. What matters here is the “world-ness of living things” – the vital-sensible certifying of the reversibility of subject and object (I see and I am seen).

The characteristics of public-ness, display and exhibition are not exclusive to human ‘political’ world-ness (the whole range of performative human activities, insofar as they are public exhibitions, words and gestures able to produce effects in shared praxis), but life itself as the scene of display and spectacle.

### **3. Doxa**

Arendt’s first theoretical move is to demolish the trick that leads to separating being from appearance, *aletheia* from *doxa* (Arendt 1978). A necessary stage in this is the exposure of the “metaphysical fallacy” by which being is separated from non-being, and, so, from appearance too. Arendt’s second move is the suggestion that the political being is a being-of-appearance: in politics “being and appearance are the same thing” (Arendt 1963).

For Arendt, exposing the metaphysical fallacy of separating being and appearing has two implications of immediate interest for a theory of politics. First of all, a neutralization: it cancels any allusion to an “invisible hand” behind the scenes that guides the events of history, and so it also puts a brake on the flight from politics that would follow: if we admit an active “logic of history” behind us, we deprive the “political nature of history” of any power, turning it into a theatre of forces or ideas, rather than of actions and initiatives (Arendt 1958, 188-192). The second implication is the idea that an absolute truth (the *aletheia* of the ancient Greeks) has no relation with human existences, and, so, still less with politics. Hence the need, for Arendt, to discover the premises and assert the truth of opinion, seizing the truth that is in each *doxa* and “speaking in such a way” that the

truth contained in each person's opinion "is revealed to him and to others" (Arendt 1986, 78 ss).

Most important, then, is the opinion that displays, by voicing it, the difference in position that marks each person's being in the world and makes it not only real but operative as a point of view on the world, given that, as the ancients already knew, decision (*boule*) and opinion gravitate around the same ambit of being – that is to say, on "what can be otherwise".

#### **4. A Perspective Ontology — Doxa Containing a 'Portion of the World'**

The "position" is what is really at stake in the enquiry. It is the angle of vision from which the spectacle of the world departs, perspectively, but only insofar as opinion reveals something that can only *be* if it is displayed.

What needs emphasizing is that, in Arendt, the ontological mix of plurality and perspectivism starts from here too: not a plurality of interpretations, but of positions and situations, since the doxa is the natural place for displaying and, therefore, identifying positions, whether initial or acquired (by an individual or a group), on the basis of which we can start to act and judge (Arendt 1958, 56-58).

For the reasons given, according to Arendt, the mutual distinction and differentiation of the places of the doxa – which, as we have seen, were thought of not as ordinary places, but as places that were, each time, appropriated as 'one's own', able to generate individual points of view – contain not only the positive sense of relativism, but the ontological depth of opinion.

In fact, if the spectator who gives an opinion and judges is distinct from the self that thinks it is because the activity of the former has to move from one particular place and the activity of the latter does not, as it can be anywhere (Arendt 1978). It is this ubiquity that can deprive the 'who' that thinks of any specific weight in the world of appearances. Therefore, rather than asking "where are we when we think?" to explain the nature of a 'political' thought, we should ask "where are we when we judge?"

Arendt claims that, to be able to open a perspective, anyone expressing an opinion also needs to reveal a "portion of the world", to be in a place

that can be described on the basis of specific conditions of existence and experience.

The etymological link between ‘opinion’ and ‘to open’ (Arendt 2002, XIX, 38.) allows her to translate “opinion” in terms of “what opens”, what, of the world, discloses itself “to me” in particular (*dokei moi*). Not, then, supposed or arbitrary truth, or undifferentiated and undistinguished openness, both to positions and stances, but an openness that is situated and concerned. This, I believe, is the decisive passage that leads Arendt’s perspectivism to define a plan of political ontology. The *doxa* is not just opinion, but a portion of the world that opens.

The basis in the *doxa* of appearing and acting described by Arendt explains how conflict, which is the cause and effect of difference of positions, is at the origin of the fundamental need to express oneself alongside the need for individualization and exhibition – as long as opinion retrieves its noble aspect as an attitude that is formed “in a process of open discussion and public debate” (Arendt 1963, 318-320). Arendt is deliberately challenging here - well aware of the fact that discussion and debate are more and more conditioned by the manipulative tendencies of the media, with pre-packaged or spectacular ‘openness’ to discussion and a system of political representation that struggles to maintain its promise as a participatory democracy.

## **5. Aesthetic Judgement and Political Judgement**

Insofar as it produces a *doxa*, a point of view is not the ascetic, ontological point of a constellation of bodies, but, rather, participates in the diversity and plurality of positions, *setting itself in motion* in discussion and in the conflict of positions: hence the mercurial character that Arendt attributes to the *doxa*. To take form, it makes use of the dynamic contribution of the imagination. It is in the laboratory of the imagination that there is an expansion of the initial position that can further aggregations and competitions of points of view (Arendt 2002, XVII, 20.) For Arendt, the alternative thus becomes one between perverse, obtuse and “unimaginative” opinions, which voice only private interests, and opinions that draw on the faculty of judgment (Arendt 1967).

On this basis, it is clear that the procedure that leads to the formation of an opinion is in accordance with the second “maxim” of Kantian aesthetic judgment: if the opinion must not merely reflect my immediate condition, my initial situation and prejudices, if taking a position must be able to be a decision taken on the particular merits of a case or event in the world, this already presupposes a movement of mind that does not gloss over other possible points of view, but “visits” them – a broadening of mentality. This is the mercurial factor that activates the perspectives, compares them, and sets them talking to each other – that gives them, ultimately, political weight. The political activation of the point of view passes via the doxa, but not without its aesthetic activation – not without the activity of a “representative” imagination that can compare and, to a certain extent, imitate other people’s positions and opinions.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that Arendt does not also underline that a strong element of differentiation between opinion and judgment – doxa is “partiality” and desire to appear, judgment “impartiality”, “universal position” of the judging spectator (Arendt 1982, 7.; 9.) – becomes necessary if judgment is then to proceed to action; but their co-belonging is equally undeniable in that judgment ‘educates’ opinion to form itself partly by looking at other people’s positions, and a doxa educates judgment to judge without forgetting its initial position (without seeking an Archimedean point outside the spectacle). In the course of achieving some degree of impartiality of judgment a close tie is maintained with “the particular conditions of points of view through which it becomes possible to reach ‘one’s general point of view’ instead of ruling a simple widespread ‘empathy’ (Arendt 1982, 7.).

Before outlining the principle of a political “common sense” or a “community sense”, everything in the suggested transition from aesthetic judgment to political judgment revolves around the imagination, in its “new role” in the dynamics of the faculties – that is to say, its freedom from any determining idea – and in its being embodied in experience itself in its “most common” form, so that everything cannot be reduced disparagingly to an “aesthetic problem” but raises the question of a renewal of the very way of doing philosophy.

For Arendt, therefore, Kant’s attempt in the *Critique of Judgement* to find a principle that must be potentially valid not only for experience in

general, but for “the most common experience” (Kant 1974, § 39) describes precisely that experience of ‘deciding’ between what we like and what we dislike, which “is to be found in every experience we have of the world” (Arendt 1982, 12.). In other words, the ordinariness of the experience in which pleasure and displeasure are involved, provides a shared belonging to the world, and in the *gemein* we can glimpse the sharing, the impossible isolation, the *Gemeinschaft* that is set up in the communicability of judgments.

It is therefore fundamentally important that the “exemplary validity” of the Kantian judgment of taste presents itself as a generalization that, unlike the “in general” of the law and of abstraction, can be accomplished contingently and particularly, and even though, as Arendt observes, it “advances claims of validity”, this validity cannot be “coercive”, (Arendt 2002, XXII, 21.): judgment, a faculty that is, for Kant, “both innate and still to be acquired”, cannot be isolated from the community of those judging.

Hannah Arendt undoubtedly deserves credit for bringing out the two political ‘resources’ that Kantian aesthetic judgment makes available: suggesting that judgment is always occasioned by a particular experience and is itself “singular” *and* that its necessity and universality can be grasped on the basis of a law that is not given but is “to be found”.

In Arendt’s version of it, political judgment is thus revealed as – to remain with Kantian terminology – reflective, not determining, judgment, and so historical-critical and not prejudicial as it is constantly seeking un-prescribable rules of co-existence once and for all. But it also discovers that, like Kantian aesthetic judgment, it can find agreement by using an *expansive* power unknown to logical, deductive judgment. This power concerns both the aesthetic anticipation proper to representing and imagining other perspectives, and so extending a vision that would otherwise be too partial or selfish, and the possibility that an event may acquire an ‘exemplary’ role, thanks to judgment – with the effect of giving theoretical-political breadth and justifying a possible extended validity of gestures and words exhibited and pronounced in and for their contingency (because they must inevitably be a response to some specific urgency or event). They are situations that are circumscribed in their character as events, and yet felt and, so, judged by many as being, for better or worse, exemplary.

## 6. The Appearance of the World as Performance — Action

Arendt therefore chooses to focus on the “realm of acting and speaking” – the “political realm in terms of activities” (Arendt 1993, 223).

Inasmuch as it depends on *action*, the world “appears” as individual or group *performance*, in the aggregations that are produced on the strength of and in vista di shared acts and words: this is what Arendt calls *Macht*, power. “The space of appearance,” she writes, “*is formed* wherever men share modes of discourse and action” in a “temporary agreement of many wills and intentions”, and, in this, it “anticipates and precedes any formal constitution of the public sphere” – that is to say, it precedes any form of government and any political morphology. What the actor “who” offers in the game of real-appearances is consigned to the “who” of actor-spectators and to their reactions and judgments. It is only in this exchange that, for Arendt, the political space or “in-between” takes form. Significantly, “power” and “judgment” share – but we might also say, they compete for – the origin or, rather, the *matrix* of the political: power, “a phenomenon originating in plurality” and judgment “a phenomenon originating in politics” (Arendt 2002, VII, 9.).

For this reason, if it is true that the identity of the “who” who shows himself can be grasped only as a narrative identity (Ricoeur 1985), we also need, however, to give an account of the actor’s present reality, and this is performativity, which cannot set aside the act of displaying intentions and opinions, through acts and words.

*Acting* as a start, a particular beginning of a political initiative by aggregations of individuals *and judgment* (aesthetic and otherwise) as the particular-singular place for an evacuative stance to what happens, define, in Arendt’s thinking, a tie that should be interpreted as a genuine ‘chiasma’ of the aesthetic and the political, oriented towards contingency, performativity and exemplarity<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup>An interesting subject for debate, which we can here only give a hint of, could be a comparison of Arendt’s view on aesthetic dimension of politics as an endorsement of its ‘worldly’ property, respectively with Jacques Rancière’s theory of the ‘aesthetic regime’ of politics and Martin Seel’s ‘aesthetics of appearing’. I’ll offer some basic points about these topics, quite summarily.

Jacques Rancière is one of the main thinkers who have strongly considered the dimension of appearance as a political-aesthetic dimension. He underlines in particular the

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similarity between art and politics, in that both “construct fictions”, or material modifications of signs and images, and so also construct “relations” between what is done and what can be done. In addition, political or literary “utterances” “have an effect on reality”, as they not only define “models of language and action”, but also “regimes of sensible intensity” (Rancière 2000, 62).

On the other side, Martin Seel suggests that aesthetic experience is a special “attentiveness” to presence, i.e. a kind of perception “attending to the simultaneity and momentariness of sensuous presences” (Seel 2005, 28). In this way ‘aesthetic’ can be called a genuine way to encounter the world as a ‘form’ (a totality), described by Seel in temporal terms: as a faculty to apprehend things and events with respect to how they appear momentarily and simultaneously, and subsequently to apprehend, reflectively, oneself as an “unreduced presence” (Seel 2005, 25), in terms of aesthetic appearing. Aesthetic experience as self-knowledge: attentiveness to what is *appearing* is therefore at the same time attentiveness to ourselves.

Therefore, objects are ‘aesthetic’ insofar they appear: *appearing* plays its part as perceived presence, creating everywhere an aesthetic realm, producing aesthetic activities. This is also the case when works of art bring about a special presence. Here however the presence-appearing doesn’t match together with politics: on the contrary, it makes aesthetics to flow into ethics. The main difference emerging between the two positions is that Rancière (like Arendt) looks for *aesthetic singularization* – What he calls ‘politics of aesthetics’ are in fact ‘regimes’ or strategies or “styles” of identification for political positions (Rancière 2004), while Seel aims to conquer, through aesthetic disclosure of presence, *ethic subjectivation*.

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