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Benjamin's Artwork Essay from a Kantian Perspective

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ABSTRACT. I read Benjamin's theory of aura and modern art through Kant's two types of judgment, reflective and determinative. This reading will allow us to understand Benjamin's reconceptualization of aura, generally understood to express a loss or original unity as politically productive hope. In the third *Critique* Kant argues that there are two types of judgment, reflective judgments. Determinative judgments, in their theoretical use, subsume particulars which are given by the faculty of sensibility under rules of the faculty of the understanding, generating knowledge. In their practical use, determinative moral judgments subsume particular maxims under the categories of freedom, generating action. Determinative judgments in this way divide all of nature between them.

My suggestion is that we read the distinction between determinative and reflective judgment as historical in the sense that reflective judgment lies at the core, as Kant himself says, of an original *sensus communis* in which the particular and the universal were in harmony with one another. This prehistory, however, lacked conceptual differentiation and thus contained rules neither for knowledge nor action. The afterlife of this original state of unity is expressed in the artwork's aura and the ritual significance of art.

Benjamin's artwork essay in an attempt to show that the process of mechanical production which underlies capitalism as well as communism, has a politically emancipatory core, namely the ability to reconstitute the dialectical unity between unreflective aura and autonomy as reflective political emancipation and community. The idea is to show that humanity's erstwhile unity with, and later domination over, nature can be productive of a unification of humanity and nature.

This paper is an effort to come to terms with at least some of the question posed to aesthetics by Benjamin's two claims in the final section of "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility", namely

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that “the logical outcome of fascism is an aestheticization of political life” (SW 3:121) and that “communism replies to this [aestheticization] by politicizing art”. (SW 3:122)¹ I’d like to investigate these two claims against the background of the German aesthetic tradition, in particular as it is laid down in Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*. The main issue that arises in the context of Benjamin’s proposal is that, from the perspective of Kant’s aesthetics, neither an aestheticization of politics nor a politicization of art should be possible given the stark division between judgments of taste, which are reflective and therefore disinterested, and judgments of practical reason which are determinative and therefore constitute us as moral or political beings.

I propose to investigate Benjamin’s two claims by sketching the way in which Benjamin reconstitutes Kant’s conception of judgments of taste. I will suggest that because Benjamin historicizes the categories of the understanding it is now open to him that judgments of taste take place in a political context, a context, moreover, which can be acknowledged, as communism does, or disavowed, as fascism does. In order to develop this point I’d like first to sketch Kant’s conception of judgments of taste. I will then argue that Benjamin’s notion of aura constitutes a historicization of aesthetic pleasure and that pleasure thereby becomes tinged with the feeling of loss. Finally I will suggest that fascism denies the historical character of aesthetic pleasure while communism affirms pleasure as loss, seeking in the feeling of loss also an overcoming of the alienation which has produced loss. Put in Kantian terms, communism reflect the difference between judgments of practical reason and judgments of taste into itself in a way what looks forward to a reflected political community rather than one that is only justified through aestheticized politics, as fascism does.

1. Kant’s Theory of Judgments of Taste

Kant inaugurates modern aesthetics, by which I mean aesthetics conceived of as a separate field of inquiry from theoretical or practical reason, by offering us a transcendental account of aesthetic experience of pleasure

¹ Benjamin’s works will be cited in text using volume:page number according to Benjamin, 1999.

as unsubsumable under either theoretical nor practical reason. The key point for Kant is to show that the pleasure felt in experiences of beauty and the sublime is the result of a particular constellation of our faculties: in the case of beauty these are the faculties of imagination and the understanding and in the case of the sublime there are the faculties of the imagination and reason.

Of course, the first and the second *Critiques* have already detailed the ways in which these two sets of faculties interact in the vast majority of instances, namely to produce knowledge and to produce action. In the case of knowledge, the understanding subsumes the intuition presented to it by the imagination under a concept. In the case of action, reason amplifies a particular into a universal, giving itself the task of setting a particular situation into a harmonious whole.

What is new in the third *Critique* is the idea that there are instances in which this subsumption or amplification does not occur, not as a failure of judgment but rather as a quickening or play of the interaction between the two respective faculties. The result is, perhaps surprisingly, pleasure which result from the general cognition which is produced by this free play. Because the cognition is general and does not conform to the categories of the understanding, it cannot be communicated as knowledge. But because it is a cognition in general, it expresses a universal claim on others. Thus, the pleasure resulting from the play of imagination and the understanding, which we call beauty, is universal but without a determinate content. Or, in Kant's language: "*Beautiful* is what, without a concept, is liked universally." (§9; 5:219)²

A further feature of Kant's theory of taste is central to the considerations here, namely the, some would say fateful, decision by Kant to assimilate judgments of taste to theoretical judgments rather than to leave them unaligned, as the theory of reflective judgment might suggest, also given in the third *Critique*. Kant says that the judgment of taste has "a causality in it, namely, to *keep* us in the state of having the [re]presentation itself, and to keep the cognitive power engaged in their occupation without any further aim". (§12; 5:222) By this I understand Kant to be saying that ex-

² Kant's work will be cited in text, using academy volume:pagination and paragraph numbers, according to Kant, 1987.

periences of beauty entrance us in such a way that they can disrupt our practical concerns and projects.

The treat posed by this conception of the aesthetic to the moral is immediately obvious if we connect it to Benjamin's worry about fascism aestheticizing politics. The problem is simply that if the aesthetic experience is capable of pulling us out of our practical concerns, then the aesthetic will exist in tension to the moral and could, as in Benjamin's conception of fascism, actually become antithetical to it in the relatively simple sense that aesthetic experiences, if they could be engineered to be experienced widely enough, could disrupt our moral projects, just as they do in fascism.³

2. Historicizing Kant's Categories

Whether or not the problem just discussed became evident to Kant's early readers, the division Kant drew between the aesthetic and the practical as well as that between the theoretical and the practical was intolerable to many. The problem appeared to be Kant's strict conception of the categories of the understanding as existing *sui generis*. The response to Kant was to make the categories dynamic, as in Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*, and a few years later, to make them dynamic and historical as in Hegel.

The project of historicizing Kant's categories was an attempt to escape the formalism of the Kantian categories evident, for instance, in the tension between moral judgment and judgment of taste. Benjamin's thought, I'd like to suggest, follows just such a strategy in its attempt to turn the relation between the aesthetic and the practical productive.

The project of historicizing the categories, in Hegel for instance, consists in arguing that the categories develop out of the historical conditions which make them necessary. That is, each concept arises as an answer to a concrete historical problem in the way in which, the figure of the lord of the world (the Roman emperor) arises in response to the Greek world's inability to mediate the opposition between the authority of the family and the authority of the state.⁴ While Hegel, of course, saw the working out of the categories as the activity of spirit, which takes place behind our

³ I have worked out this issue in greater depth in Bird-Pollan, 2013.

⁴ As in Hegel, 1977 chapter VI, section A, b and c.

backs, Benjamin followed Marx's call not only to understand the world but to change it, that is, to construct the categories of modern social life. The possibilities that we might ourselves, as a society, construct the categories according to which we see the world has been the call to arms of politics, both left and right, ever since the Jacobins invented the .

3. Aura as Mourning and Promise

In taking up at least a certain sense of the concept of aura, I'd like to show that even while historicizing the Kantian categories, Benjamin still remains fundamentally committed to the Kantian conception of experiences of taste as the expressions of a fundamental harmony. Indeed, it is only in the dialectical relation to this harmony produced by the experience of modern art that the notion of politicizing art becomes possible, as to be sure, does it opposite.

Let me say what I mean by this in Kantian terms before constructing a parallel to Benjamin's notion of aura. Briefly this argument, which has been made in somewhat different ways both by Stanley Cavell and Jay Bernstein, goes as follows.⁵ If, as I have claimed, the categories of the understanding are read as historical and further, if, as I have also claimed, the experience of judgment is the experience of a primal harmony, then this harmony depends on a de-historicization of the categories of the understanding. That is, in judgments of taste, the harmony that is created depends on suspending the historical nature of the categories through which we understand our world. The second step in the argument is to say that such a suspension of the burden of history is experienced by us both as a liberation which brings us pleasure, and simultaneously as reminder that we do live in a historical world, one which is essentially excluded from the immediate unity which reveals itself in the judgment of taste. The experience of pleasure at the suspension of the categories of the understanding thus serves to highlight both our putatively harmonious origins and the fact that we are now expelled from that original unity. The work of art expresses our mourning or loss.⁶ What Kant seems to miss, and what has

⁵ Jay M. Bernstein, 1992; Cavell, 2002.

⁶ Horowitz, 2001.

seemed an intolerable omission, is the constructive aspect which this idea of mourning opens up.

With this in mind, I'd like to turn to Benjamin's notion of aura which—I suggest—is the expression of just this dual aspect already found in Kant. Like the concept itself, Benjamin's relation to the aura is ambiguous. As is generally recognized, Benjamin's notion of aura in the writings on Proust and Baudelaire is mournful while in the Artwork essay he sees the liberatory possibility of the aura's decline.⁷ I'd like to suggest that these two sides derive from the historical nature of the concept of harmony which underlies the aura itself.

Let me propose that the aura's authenticity as it attaches to the work of art is a reflection of the Kantian play of the faculty which constitutes a cognition in general, something we find pleasurable but to which we cannot give a name other than beauty. This experience is understood by Kant to be ahistorical and transcendental, but in being so, it is also essentially out of the control of the human. Humans are gripped by aesthetic experience, they cannot produce it at will. This is what Benjamin means when he writes, in the "Some Motifs in Baudelaire":

The experience of the [denaturing of the [missing in English]] aura [...] arises from the fact that a response characteristic of human relationships is transposed to the relationship between humans and inanimate or natural objects. [...] To experience the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look back at us. This ability corresponds to the data of *mémoire involontaire*. ("On Some Motifs in Baudelaire", SW 4:338)

[Die Entartung der Aura beruht also auf der Übertragung einer in der menschlichen Gesellschaft geläufigen Reaktionsform auf das Verhältnis des Unbelebten oder der Natur zum Menschen. [...] Die Aura einer Erscheinung erfahren, heißt, sie mit dem Vermögen belehnen, den Blick aufzuschlagen*. Die Funde der *memoire involontaire* entsprechen dem. ("Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire", GS I:646-46)]

This sense of aura is then the experience of being referred to the original unity which exists outside of the historical character of our understanding.

⁷ See, for instance, Hansen, 2012 See also J. M. Bernstein, 1997.

But in the Artwork essay Benjamin seems to countenance a more constructive notion of aura, one which opens up the possibility of responding to the loss of the original unity by working toward its recreation. Benjamin writes:

As soon as the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applied to artistic production, the whole social function of art is revolutionized. Instead of being founded on ritual, it is based on a different practice: politics. ("The Artwork in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility", SW 3:106)

[In dem Augenblick aber, da der Maßstab der Echtheit an der Kunstproduktion versagt, hat sich auch die gesamte soziale Funktion der Kunst umgewälzt. An die Stelle ihrer Fundierung aufs Ritual tritt ihre Fundierung auf eine andere Praxis: nämlich ihre Fundierung auf Politik. ("Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technologischen Reproduzierbarkeit", GS I:482)]

Here Benjamin countenances a decoupling or at least a reorientation of the aura from its origin in the mournful process of the ritual which serves to reassure the community that the unity which everywhere seems to be crumbling still exists, to the idea that the community must form its own polis if it is to have a chance at escaping its alienation.

The important point here for my purposes is that Benjamin understands the advent of mass production as carrying with it the liberatory potential which Marx too attributed to it. The point is for the masses to *become conscious* of this potential rather than being stifled by the emergence of capitalist forms of production. As I've suggested, the actual phenomenon of aesthetic experience is neutral on this count. It arrests us, but to what effect? The arrestation can, as I've just suggested, be understood as a plunging into mourning which is proper to the ritual sense of aura. But the arrestation can also be understood as a productive alienation, one which, as Kant already argued in the claim that beauty is the symbol of the morally good, and Adorno as most consistently argued, allows us to see our world in a different light, as able to be altered.⁸

⁸ Kant's says in the Anthropology that "Taste contains a tendency toward external advancement of morality." Kant, 2007 7:244. And, of course, Kant says that "beauty is the symbol of the morally good" in the important §59 of Kant, 1987.

This alternative between political action and enslavement is put by Benjamin in the stark opposition between the aestheticization of the political proposed by fascism and capitalism in general on the one hand, and the politicization of the aesthetic which permits for genuine change on the other. This alternative, I will now suggest, depends on the reflection of the alienation or mourning which is experienced in the judgment of taste. While the aestheticization of the political seeks to silence our alienation, assimilating the categories of the understanding to the aesthetic experience of unity, the politicization of art seeks to make us conscious of the lack of fit between our current conception of how things are and the unity which, according to the experience of taste, necessarily underlies it. The politicization of art thus reflects the conflict between the imagination and the understanding in a way which thematizes their unsteady relation.

4. Aesthetizing Politics

Benjamin tells us little about his understanding of fascism in the Artwork essay. The general structure, however, must be something quite similar to the problem Marx diagnosed in his analysis of commodity fetishism. The main point for Marx in that seminal chapter on commodity fetishism of *Capital*, is that capitalism has driven a wedge between an object's determinate value, that is, its use value by elevating the object to the level of mere exchange value. This exchange value, of course, has its value precisely in the fact that it is exchangeable and nothing else.

Perhaps we can think of the effect of the exchange value on consciousness as somehow akin to the play between the understanding and the imagination in the judgment of taste. What I mean is this: in both experiences, that of judgments of taste and commodity fetishism, the working of the understanding which constitutes determinate objects for us, is suspended and is seen to be harmoniously related to a certain notion of harmony or play.

I don't want to go too far with this analogy since I don't want to suggest that the experience of beauty is fascist. What I do want to suggest is that the judgment of taste can be coopted by fascism if the aesthetic experience becomes the chief medium through which meaning is conveyed in a society.

That is, if aesthetics replaces the critical workings of the understanding. Precisely this attempt is famously evident in Leni Riefestahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1935).

The key issue is that fascist propaganda works precisely by making the play between the imagination and the understanding a permanent feature of social life, substituting it for the critical discourse of the polis. Fascism thus works by eradicating consciousness of the fact that the experience of beauty is merely a momentary event rather than a social reality. The aesthetic pleasure experienced by the audience watching *Triumph of the Will* is substituted for reflection about political and moral responsibility.

5. Politicizing Art

If the aestheticization of the political is the numbing of consciousness into a permanent state of play, then the politicization of art is the reflection of consciousness about its experience of pleasure leading also to a mournful experience, but also, somehow, manages to produce art which produces action.

What exactly Benjamin had in mind here is a little unclear, but if we take up some of what he had to say about film in the Artwork essay or what he says about shock in the pieces on Baudelaire, we can see that his idea is that the alienation produced by modern life must be reflected back into the idea of harmony which is the essential component of the aesthetic experience. That is, to put it programmatically, the idea is to show us that the alienation produced by capitalist modes of production and reproduction are themselves capable to being used to constitute a post-capitalist society; it is only by being driven to radical alienation through shock and the montage technique (for instance) that we can become sufficiently distant from what we understand as our essential modes of viewing the world (the categories of the understanding forged by capitalism) that we can begin to reflect on whether even these modes of understanding don't require a reflection, that is, an alteration.⁹

The reason aesthetics is so important here is that it is only from the

⁹ For a working out of the problematic of mourning in modern life, see Jackson, 2014 Ch. 1-2.

vantage point of the harmony between the imagination and the understanding in the sublated experience of shock that shock can be thematized *as* politically transformative rather than just another burdensome aspect of modernity. Benjamin's consistent thought is that this sort of coming to consciousness is only possible if the aesthetic functions as a viable foil to politics in the sense that politics alone will never achieve sufficient distance to itself to be able to reflect on its complete project.

6. Conclusion

Let me conclude by suggesting that while Benjamin's thought, as always, remains elusive also in the respect in which I've been trying to elucidate it in this paper, the double nature of the concept of aura remains an important resource for our understanding of the ways in which art can engage with social life. The key point I think Benjamin saw is that, while it is indeed intolerable for Kant to have divided art from politics in the strict way he did, this line is nevertheless worth upholding if only in the breach. That is, it is only if art can claim for itself a position outside of commodity fetishism or fascism that it can stand any chance of furnishing a critical perspective on society. But to the extent that it must remain outside of society, it is condemned to marginality.

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