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Beauty: Machinic Repetition in the Age of Art

Le fond qui remonte n'est plus au fond, mais acquiert une existence autonome; la forme qui se réfléchit dans ce fond n'est plus une forme, mais une ligne abstraite agissant directement sur l'âme. Quand le fond monte à la surface, le visage humain se décompose dans ce miroir où l'indéterminé comme les déterminations viennent se confondre dans une seule détermination qui "fait" la différence.

Gilles Deleuze (1968, 44)¹

PROLOGUE

I wait for the "best" moment.² Yes, I say to myself, there will come a moment when I will be able to gather my forces, have a vision of the Whole, and from this place and this time will emerge The Act. Everyday I wait. I try to egg it on with cigarettes and coffee, or by not smoking and not drinking coffee. I'm waiting for my freedom, waiting for all the conditions to come together that will make possible what I want to do. Time passes. A lot of time passes. I'm waiting for it to stop, for it to gather itself into an image, of myself, of my life, of the world. I'm waiting for the movement to stop and reflect itself back to itself — reflection is the condition of action, isn't it? But it turns its face away, dissolves into a hundred tiny details on a cruelly indifferent time-line, dissolves me into a hundred tiny details, pure moving mass. It is true that in trying all of these

1 "The rising ground is no longer below, it acquires autonomous existence; the form reflected in this ground is no longer form, but an abstract line acting directly upon the soul. When the ground rises to the surface, the human face decomposes in this mirror in which both determinations and the indeterminate combine in a single determination which 'makes' the difference" (Deleuze 1994, 28).

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different postures, I might just crack the code, it might all "come together." But it is undeniable that this moment will not have been one of discovery but of invention.

INTRODUCTION

If Kant had had any sense of marketing, he might have called his *Critique of Judgement* "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." This book and Benjamin's canonical essay of the same name share a specifically modern problem that does not seem to go away: faced with a seemingly boundless homogeneity, how do you *make a difference*? The recent comeback of Kant's sublime would be in part because it seems to capture, redeem, and even glamourize this pathos of individual impotence in the face of a formless modernity. Beauty, smaller in scale and of course happier in affect, does not seem to sit so well with either a modernity that is nothing if not "big," or the seriousness that seems called for in response.

Both the *Critique of Judgement* and Benjamin's essay deal with the tensions between a dominant mechanical paradigm and an organic model of cohesion. But while Benjamin finds no viable reconciliation between a fragmented modernity (carried by mechanization), and a lost pre-modern idyll of holistic coherence (home of the traditional work of art), Kant creates a third term between the organic and the mechanical which is precisely the aesthetic.

Or indeed the "machinic." Kant's beauty is too easily reduced to a languid reflection on natural forms. It seems that Benjamin has this in mind when he uses as a model of pre-modern aesthetic contemplation, a "man, who, one summer afternoon, abandons himself to following with his gaze the profile of the mountainous horizon or the line of a branch which casts its shadow upon him" (224-25). But what is "form"? And by what power does it distinguish itself, demand and grip attention? To say: "because it is beautiful" just begs the question. Kant's beauty is much better "dramatized" by Deleuze's "spiritual automaton," whose encounter with a chance singularity suspends the world and sets off a chain reaction in which a new power of thought is engendered. The problem of modernity itself is dramatized through these competing figures of the "individual" and what it means for them to think.

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What the modern (non-) artwork seems most to lack, in Benjamin's eyes, is the ability to provide an *image*. The artwork as "image" is not about it being imitative or "realist," but about the role of the aesthetic as a synthesizer of values, relations and forces. To provide an image is to provide a point of reflection, identification and orientation for the subject in relation to its community and to the world. It gives *form* to the latter, and is inseparable from their backdrop.

In this model is a portrait of what it means to think; an "image of thought." The term Benjamin uses for "contemplation" in the original French publication is *recueillement*: "gathering together." The subject has the distance and the freedom to appraise the whole and assign the parts, including itself, to their proper place. The "here and now" of the aesthetic experience is not just an isolated moment but the repository of a history and a culture. It is an "organic" logic, to borrow Kant's term, where the particular is embraced by the principle of the whole that precedes it (1987, §77).

By contrast, the mechanism displays an impeccable but "dumb" rationality, insensitive and unresponsive to its context, unreflective of itself or anything around it, proceeding indefinitely by identical fragments, too small and too large to be synthesized into a meaningful whole. Its correlate, for Benjamin, is the stupefied spectator or "mass," caught up in the movement for better or worse, but unable to assign a place of arrest, a beginning or end, from which it could orient and reflect itself.

The traditional notion of alienation is precisely this absence of an ability to grasp the whole, but perhaps more profoundly, the alienating character of the mechanism is its inability to give back an image, to serve as a reflective mirror. Unlike other "others," the mechanism is not just *not* me, but profoundly and essentially *indifferent* to me (no chance for a dialectic of recognition). Worse, this indifference overrides any sense of distance: I distinguish myself from the mechanism; "it," however does not return the favour. It is a portrait of cruelty, as Deleuze describes it: "Il y a du cruel, et même du monstrueux, de part et d'autre, dans cette lutte contre un adversaire insaisissable, où le distingué s'oppose à quelque chose qui ne peut pas s'en distinguer, et qui continue d'épouser ce qui divorce avec lui" ("There is cruelty, even monstrosity, on both sides of this struggle against an elusive adversary, in which the distinguished opposes something which cannot distinguish itself from it but continues to espouse that which divorces it") (1968, 43/1994, 28).³ Even in Nature the subject can "find" itself, under the auspices of an englobing notion such as God.⁴ The face of the mechanism, however, turns away, dissolves the human in its unreflective opacity. For Kant, for example, mechanism in nature is an obstacle to the difference human freedom could make not because it *excludes its possibility* (reducing all to determinism) but worse, because it *ignores its existence* (1987, Introduction).

And yet in this formula, where the human face is dissolved in a depthless indetermination, how can we not see, aside from the figure of an homogenizing mechanization, the typical traits of the modern artist and artwork which finds in

3 Where two pages numbers are given in the parenthetical references in the text, the first refers to the French original, the second to the English translation.

4 See Deleuze and Guattari's face-landscape formula (205-34/167-91).

conditions of a higher individuality. Benjamin is not ignorant of these forms, but because he makes economic and technological changes (the rise of Capital) the agent of modernity, he is incapable of seeing these as posing a properly artistic problem, except that of its own death or compromise.

The emergence of the modern "individual" is contemporaneous with the emergence of mechanistic paradigms: nowhere is this more apparent than in modernist art. It is an error to understand the notion of the individual by placing it alongside existing values, whether these be those of the "community" in a traditional sense, or the capitalistic-mechanistic ones of modernity, in such a way that the individual embodies the *negation* of these latter: the "avant-garde" formula of transgression and transcendence. We have learnt well that to negate something (history, society, modernity itself) is just another way of affirming it, a childish "denial." It is no doubt in this way that many representatives of the avant-garde themselves conceive individuality. The question remains as to whether it is in this relation that the problem of individuality is really posed: is anything really constituted or created through saying, or even *being*, a yes or no? *What difference does it make?*

Kant's beauty is nothing if not a discourse on individuality: an imperative that resonates from a contingent singularity (by contrast, the sublime still operates with a — doomed — imperative to reproduce the Whole). The condition for this experience is neither the backdrop of existing cultural values, nor their negation, but precisely a kind of indifference: "disinterestedness." This famous notion of Kant's is poorly understood as a disaffected or casual attitude; the "spectator" removed from the action. The "interest" that is lacking in the aesthetic experience is an investment in the object from a moral, utilitarian or a theoretical perspective: *what* the object is, or *what* it is *good* for (1987, §1-§5). And *who* has such concerns if not a spectator, or perhaps the careful customer? Such attitudes give a "perspective" on the object, a correct distance. They precisely enable us to *recognize* the object, situate it in a world and ourselves in relation to it. Such interests precede the object and attenuate its contingency by integrating it into a pre-existing material or cultural whole.

In this sense, Kant's notion of "disinterest" marks not a distance but its loss, an encounter which precisely strips the subject of its habits of thought. In fact it is no longer clear that in the absence of such interests the "what" that is operative in the aesthetic experience is an "object" at all: it is more a "sign," a trigger. The attribute of beauty attaches not to the object but to the "event" of the beautiful (1987, 30).

We can see already how this aesthetic contracts the twin destiny of the modern work of art. On the one hand, its entry into the machinery of capital and commercialization, negligent of tradition and original or destined context, losing its status as object to become commodity and abstract (market) "value." On the other hand, the imperative to disorientation and novelty in art (novelty being

another value that is shared by commerce and creativity) and the decline of object-based and representative art forms. It is as if Kant's aesthetic was itself a sign, enveloping two tendencies: "l'un par lequel, en tant que signe, il exprime la dissymétrie productrice, l'autre par lequel il tend à l'annuler" ("in one of these it expresses, *qua* sign, the productive dissymmetry; in the other it tends to cancel it") (Deleuze 1968, 31/1994, 20).

The complicity of a mechanistic paradigm and the concept of creation is expressed well by Deleuze in his *Cinéma* books, and in a way that aligns itself with the dynamic of Kant's beauty (1983, 12-17/1986, 3-8). Deleuze, following Bergson, traces the genesis of modernity to the analysis of movement into equidistant points. This flattening of movement means that a moving body can be intercepted at "any-moment-whatever" in order to yield information, as opposed to the ancient synthesis of movement into *privileged* moments (Origin, Telos, Apex, etc.).

As a form of representation or reproduction of movement, the "modern" model holds little interest: it reduces movements to homogeneous and immobile points. And yet this indifference is the basis for the creation of an interesting body at any-moment-whatever. It is for this reason that Deleuze sees in this model a "total conversion of thought." Thought would no longer rely on a pre-existing determined order which it would stand back and "reflect," but remains indeterminate until an encounter at a contingent moment (an "interception") obliges it to *make* a difference.

In effect, Kant replaces Benjamin's loaded term of the "here and now" with the "any-moment-whatever" as emblem of artistic individuality and image of thought. For Benjamin, the "here and now" is the summit of a culture, "eternal and immobile," ineffable and untranslatable. It is a dead end, impotent to reproduce itself without rerouting through its conditions of possibility. The removal of the beautiful, in Kant's aesthetic, from any given cultural or intelligible context, by virtue of its lack of a determinate concept and hence an interest, seems also to isolate and immobilize the aesthetic in an affective ineffability. But on the contrary, it is this quality that produces the dynamism of the beautiful, and its capacity to provoke *thought*.

The beautiful obliges us to think (its singularity poses a *problem*), without there being any concept for thought to settle on. The thought of the beautiful is identical with the series of incomplete determinations it gives rise to, in which it creates and indefinitely recreates itself; it is identical with the repetition of its singularity in an open-ended movement. In his anthropological writings, Kant analyzes the affects of pleasure and displeasure entirely in terms of stimuli to change or not to change states. This is the formal "play" of Kant's aesthetic, which is not a static formalism devoid of "content," but the fusion of content with a process. The event of the beautiful marks a beginning rather than an end-point, without the pretension of being an Origin, as it happens just any time. The

principle of the "any-moment-whatever" enfolds both an indifference and an obligation to differentiate, an impersonality and total individuality.

In this way, the problem of artistic individuality escapes on the one hand the heroism and pathos of the avant-garde subject who affirms itself against an image of the whole, and on the other the autism that results from confining individuality to a purely affective and ineffable moment. Both notions in the end make of the individual the great "spectator," the visionary from which action naturally follows or else is not the point. Benjamin himself presents action and thought as dependent upon having access to "the big picture," and the "small picture" that is subjective self-reflection: the image being what mediates between the two. Against the "big picture," Kant's beautiful presents the individual as necessarily working from a fragment, a "cut," not exactly removed from the whole, but from which the whole is itself removed. Against the "small picture," the beautiful does not stop but starts with this moment. While it refers to no external goal or concept, neither is it an "end in itself." It is a vector, a "clue," inseparable from the action it unleashes; a "problem" which lances an imperative to change. Modern individuality constructs itself *au courant* in a heightened sensibility to the actual that is inseparable from a movement of actualisation.

CONCLUSION

It is not simply that Benjamin poses the problem of modernity in a way that prejudices the possibility of a "solution." It is more that he does not pose it as a "problem" at all, but as a "theorem": modernity (as also the pre-modern) is summed up as a given state of affairs, as *how things are*, and it remains for us to draw out the endless consequences. If modernity is "how things are," then there can ultimately be no modernity, no novelty, in thinking or art, except as a simply empirical/historical qualification, simply contemporary with and reflective of changes that happen elsewhere. This is the fate of an image of thought and of art based on contemplation.

But by what strange power is it that Capital and the machine, any of these "things" or "states of affairs" (History, Society, my parents...), effect change, in a way that is denied to thought, art, the individual? The indifference of "what is" is conceived along the lines of an objective necessity, an inevitability, a power of determination, in relation to which we are forced into a reactive position. What is properly "human" or "personal" can only be reactive then: what interprets, synthesizes, affirms or negates what "is."

In Kant's beauty this indifference is harnessed as a subjective principle, an indetermination "actualized" at a contingent point of encounter which creates a problem. Beyond what follows the lines of this event, which extend indefinitely, what "is" is of no interest. Of course, it still exists. Creation does not happen in a vacuum, it is simply the perspective in which the determining power of what "exists" is suspended, in order to plug into forces and arrangements of things

more interesting than that of "existence." This refusal to take "what is" as given in advance, and as the "ground" for thought, action, and art is the *critical* imperative that unites Kant and Deleuze as philosophers of modernity.

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