

Undoing the aesthetic image

The displacement of critical energies from politics into aesthetics has a history as long as that of aesthetics itself. Indeed, a case can be made that in its immediately post-Kantian formation 'aesthetics' simply *is* the name for the displacement of political desire into a philosophical discourse about the structure of production of feelings through form. That this is a displacement, rather than an expansion or an overflow, has traditionally been attributed to the political 'underdevelopment' of Germany in the late eighteenth century, and what was effectively a kind of censorship of politics by history. Famously, in the analysis of the young Marx, the proximity of the historical underdevelopment of Germany to the political modernity of France had as its cultural consequence the compensatory hypertrophy of German philosophy. Aesthetics, in its proto-Romantic determination, was at once an internal reaction against, and a medium for the reflective continuation of, this hypertrophy of ideas. As an attempt to bridge the gap between ideality and the actual, it was simultaneously a representative of the will to politics within idealist philosophy, and of idealist philosophy within discourse on the arts. It thereby became the representative of the displaced presence of the desire for politics within the arts themselves.

But what of that 'displacement of politics which is aesthetics' in France? For Marx, France was the geopolitical signifier of modernity (democratic revolution). Yet, in the course of the nineteenth century, the failure of revolution became the functional correlate in French culture of political underdevelopment in Germany. Thus was the ground laid in France for the establishment of the problematic of aesthetics as the displacement of political desire. Its result, the intensification of aesthetics into aestheticism, usurped the cultural space of (post-revolutionary) classicism, while providing a new terrain on which to reformulate old problems. That what Rancière thinks as the transition from a 'representational' to an 'aesthetic regime' of art (poetics to aesthetics) might be argued to have taken place, emblematically, in France (Baudelaire) some eighty years after Germany (Lessing) perhaps

goes some way towards accounting for what appears from the outside as a residual classicism in French philosophical aesthetics.

In the anglophone context, *post*-aesthetic uses of semiotics, psychoanalysis and cultural theory have dominated discourse on contemporary art since the 1970s. In France, it is the *image* that remains the central articulating concept of aesthetics, art history and art criticism. The classical problem of the relationship between image and word continues to delineate the parameters of debate. And with regard to contemporary art, discussion thus focuses on the *aesthetic image*, the image in its aesthetic determination as (conceptually) *underdetermined*, a disarticulation or undoing of meanings. (Ultimately, this is as true of Bourriaud's 'relational aesthetics' as Rancière's 'pensive image'.)

But does some contemporary art not *undo* or *remake* the aesthetic image itself? Is the conception of art as a political redistribution of the sensible constrained by or liberated from the aesthetic? What is the effect of photography and film on the indetermination of the image? Can the aesthetic image escape the symbolic determinations of sex? Can the aesthetic image distinguish itself from or within the spectacle? And might an art of forces not disengage itself from the very notions of image and form?

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