

Aisthesis and the Myth of Representation

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Abstract

Stemming from the term *aisthesis* (sense-perception), Aesthetics is born. As Heidegger notes at the beginning of *Being and Time* (1929) *aisthesis*, for the pre-Socratic Greeks was related to the process of revealing and concealing (*alethia*). Physical sensory perception was trusted as knowledge. However, the history of Aesthetics has covered over this sense of the term. From Antiquity on, a history of philosophy and Aesthetic Theory alike begin a grand metaphysical project to separate sense perception from reason and *logos*. This project culminates in the Age of Reason, with the final subordination of all aesthetics to the categories of representation.

Post-Kantian philosophy and Aesthetic Theory has attempted to invert this hierarchy, forcing representation into a subset of aesthetics. These efforts take the form of re-partition, re-integration, and re-turn. In this article I will trace these two trajectories and then conclude by arguing that Deleuze's aesthetic theory ultimately undermines both of these projects, rejecting the "re" as the re- investment in abstract thought. By overturning metaphysical binaries, Deleuze presents us with a practice of art and philosophy that is grounded in radical difference, not the re-production of the same.

Representation has only a single center, a unique and receding perspective, and in consequence a false depth. It mediates everything, but mobilizes and moves nothing (Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*).

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Part I Aesthetics & Representation:

When Heidegger notes that physical sense perception for the pre-Socratic Greeks was trusted, he means that it was truth; "indeed more primordial than *logos*." But this integrated relationship is hardly recognizable from the theories posited in classical Aesthetics. The process of this de-familiarization and separation of physical sense from abstract form and thought begins in classical Greece. The best example of this attempt is in Plato's *Republic*.

The supposed instruction of *The Republic* is to cast out all arts (*poesis*) as they are mimetic (that is, representational), and not pure or true to reason. Art as representation

can never be an Ideal Platonic form. *But at the same time, art as representation also supports and reinforces the concept of Ideal Form.*

The Republic sorts out three hierarchical levels for representation: the Ideal Form of chair, the chair that a carpenter makes based on use (*techne*). And the painter who paints only what appears as a chair (*poesis*). This third lower level is not even a chair actually, it is only simulacra (Plato 1968). Painters are the third generation from truth (*alethia*), and they should be banished because they present a danger to truth. “[T]he poetic man ... uses names and phrases to color each of the arts. He himself doesn't understand; but he imitates in such a way as to seem, to men whose condition is like his own and observe only speeches, to speak very well.” (Plato 1968, 601a-b). The job of the poet is to deceive, thus their very nature is contamination and danger, threatening to weaken the strength of rationality (Plato 1968, 607c). This is especially dangerous for “those who do not know” (children, the uneducated). Ideas on the other hand (while immaterial Form) always “are” they do not come into being, and thus they cannot be deceptive, they are immortal truth.

However, whether intentionally or not, the text actually teaches the opposite of these suppositions. That is, the literal and logical arguments of the text stated above are articulated *only* through metaphor and myth; poetic devices. For instance the myth of *lethe*¹ at the end of *The Republic* teaches that each must remember the freedom of choice and be responsible for oneself. These choices are not, cannot, be measured or judged externally, by law or reason. If one does not drink too much water from the

river of forgetfulness (*lethe*), one will remember the next morning, that one's choices are what grants new life. Those who forget (*lethe*), forget they have chosen for themselves (Plato 1968, 621c). Only those who remember (what the glimpse of light looks like above the cave) can teach the others when they return to the cave. Education (as desire, because education can only be a process that imagines what is not already, but could come to be) is not a matter of censoring or regulating, but of *paideia*²: an ethics of training and discipline in the exercising of creative choice.

The reason this discussion is important for aesthetics and representation is because it ultimately undermines all theories of aesthetic "judgment" and the prioritizing of Reason to come. But nonetheless, classical aesthetics and theories of representation cling to this superficial reading of *The Republic* which orders through fettering out the authentic and true from the material and false, "Now, again, we refer them to one Idea of each as though the Idea were one; and we address it as that which really is" (Plato 1968, 507B5-8). Art as multiple, copies, and simulacra, are false appearances, imitative and dangerous. Thus the status of the visual in terms of this order of representation is not even neutral, but fiercely corrosive. The color of this *desire* for "pure" knowledge and truth is white: the light of the sun is "too bright" to "see" (i.e. knowledge and truth transcend appearance and sense perception). Reality is the color "given" to the multiple and deceptive colors of the artist's palette. Yet ironically, artists who take advantage of the fact that "vision is deceptive" are actually *presenting* accurately the "kind of confusion that is plainly in our soul." The problem for Plato then is not the cool, clear, and lucid "white light" that he creates in the concept of the

Idea. Rather, the problem is that the Idea is a picture of desire; it is a myth, not knowledge.

For Kant aesthetic judgment is subjugated to categories of representation organized by Reason. That is, aesthetics (formerly *aisthesis*) is subservient to the a priori laws, laws that cannot be shown to be otherwise. This is his endeavor to update the aesthetic theory inaugurated by Alexander Baumgarten (1750) which attempted to turn aesthetics into a science by treating the Beautiful with rational principles. But, Kant explains, to raise “its rules to the rank of a science” is impossible, because aesthetics is empirical and therefore, cannot be determined by a priori laws. This is deceiving. While Kant acknowledges the empirical nature of aesthetics, he does so only under the rubric of Reason. Thus “judgment” is called forth to complete the endeavor.

Judgment validates and corrects aesthetic practice. In the “Analytic of the Sublime,” a rational account brings a nonrational occurrence into resolve. Kant determines the sublime establishes an indeterminate relation between imagination and Reason. This move marks what is known as the “Copernican turn” in aesthetic philosophy where, instead of a somewhat symbiotic or co-extensive relation with the material world, objects in the world conform to our knowledge of them (via their representation in the categories).

So while Kant reserves a place, and an importance, for the sublime as that which is “not” reason, it is nonetheless, in the end, only in the service of reason. Its ultimate

unreasonability is justified because, Kant claims, it is there to “enforce moral character.” In other words, with Kant *paideia* becomes a transcendental religiosity. (Religion is, to note briefly, as Lewis Mumford points out, a primary predecessor to rationalized and industrial thought).³ Reason and cognition will always come to the rescue where the Imagination stops.⁴

The color of such an analytic project also posits itself as a “carte blanche” for the abstract mind: pure, objective and disembodied. In this way aesthetic interpretation and judgment is visual to the extent of “picturing” an idea in the mind. Representation is the visual. However, from Kant on, no single color or vision can be ascribed to “knowledge” as such, for the very concept becomes problematized in a post-Kantian spectrum.

Part II: Post-Kantian Re-versals

The cost aesthetic philosophy pays for severing its connection to the concrete and material world is immeasurable. We could say the cost has been that of color itself. Post-Kantian and Post-Enlightenment thought thus attempts to reverse this hierarchy set forth in western metaphysics from Plato through Kant. This reversal is the project of making representation subordinate to the primacy of aesthetics. The myth of white reveals the truth of the deception of color. Falsity lies not within deception, but rather within the claims to the immediacy of objective representation and truth.

The nineteenth century begins, Jonathan Crary notes, with the stable observer who represents the world with “pure visibility,” that is, without a body. However, Goethe in 1810 challenges this hegemony with his color experiments. Conducted in explicit contrast to Newton who observed color in isolated, “objective” conditions, Goethe focuses on the edges, the fringes of color as an embodied, physiological, and subjective experience. Crary notes that Goethe’s observations finally disrupt the Cartesian scopic regime that dominated visibility in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries with abstract representation.

Nietzsche claims all representation is falsity. This is the truth of what aesthetics has become. The sublime has become the “taming of horror through art,” the rationalization that occurs *before* art, i.e., Kant’s a priori. Reason produces aesthetics. Contemporary aesthetics is disillusioned, thinking they see “truth” under the banner of Reason and representation, they have only forgotten (*lethe*) that language is metaphor (*poesis*) and myth. Language and *logos* are naturalized as “truth” and thus constitute the a priori of aesthetic “creation” as Re-presentation.” The modern intellect holds “the arrogance inherent in cognition” that “casts a blinding fog over the eyes and sense...it deceives them about the value of their existence” and thus we now deceive in order to exist, but the true crime is that we forget that we are deceiving. We have become blind to our own self-deceptions (Nietzsche 1999, 142).

Heidegger continues Nietzsche’s project. Also returning to the Greeks, he establishes that *aesthesis*, the process of unconcealing (*alethia*), suggests we must understand the

phrase “*zoon logon exon*,” usually translated as “man is the rational animal,” as man “with” *logos*. Heidegger’s re-reading of Aristotle returns us to a time before “being” becomes an entity because this metaphysical split is ultimately what produces the “thingliness” of being; the “Metaphysics of Substance” which reifies both man and Reason.

Thus *logos* belongs in life. It is a part of life, not an instrument, a thing or entity, but is folded into the soul, in *psyche* (soul). Not only then can we not explain life through *logos* (reason, and thus; representation) as *logos* is *in* life, but also, we construct our life-worlds, our being-in-the-world, aesthetically (*aisthesis*). While *Being and Time* does not lend itself to aesthetic theory, it is nonetheless a project in Phenomenology which by definition privileges life lived through sensory experience (*aisthesis*). Dasein must “nurture and cultivate” (*paideia*) life *and* reason with “care” (*sorge*). *Logos* does not automatically generate a priori laws, but rather, order springs from the ground of *aesthetic* life choices (Heidegger 1962, 225).⁵ “The truth of aisthesis and of seeing of ‘ideas’ is the primordial kind of uncovering” (Heidegger 1962, 269). As Nietzsche has said before him, the “only justification for existence is aesthetic.”

However, for Heidegger, the practical possibilities for the fulfillment of *paideia*, after the advent of modern technology, are glib. His concept of *Gestell* suggests an enframing and imprisonment that thwarts the impossibility of returning to the ground of aisthesis. At any rate, *Being and Time* lays the groundwork for Derrida who continues this project, showing the infinite play in the myth of representation. For

Derrida representation is always already haunted by “excess.” For instance, the inscription of writing is only ever a *pharmakon*: both cure and poison, both inscribing and erasing meaning in the same gesture. With Derrida, the possibility of gleaning any stable meaning or cognitive certainty is foreclosed. In part this is because simulacra for Derrida are only copies of copies. Thus, they are still reliant on a copy: model representational schema which does not allow for difference.⁶

Part III: Overturning and Undermining

Yet certainly life, on a practical level, is not constituted by pure affect, play, and sensation exclusively, but is equally accompanied by cognition, optical knowledge, and abstraction. Deleuze, following Nietzsche’s excavation, offers an account of aesthetics that includes the qualities of sensation, affect, play, and the production of meanings, cognition, and abstraction. Before giving a concrete example of this, Deleuze “clears the ground” of philosophical clichés.

Representation is only ever the re-production of the Same; static thought which cannot “capture the affirmed world of difference. Representation has only a single center, a unique and receding perspective, and in consequence a false depth. It mediates everything, but mobilizes and moves nothing....” (Deleuze 1994, 55-56). Thus aesthetic practice, as an essentially creative practice, must utilize difference, without subordination to representation. Yet the reality of our contemporary world is one of falsity and dead commodity forms. Thus the play of pure difference does not pander to these forms as a primary or organic model, but emerges from them, for-

itself, in-itself. Difference “demands its own Idea, its own singularity at the level of Ideas” (Deleuze 1994, 27). Unlike Derrida then, difference accrues meaning. Thus the task of allowing Difference for itself is also the task of liberating the Idea to its own thought. The singular Idea which is always already simulacra. This is the project of overturning metaphysics and the oppressive myth of the truth of representation.

Because representation for Deleuze is only ever a copy that replicates the model, thwarting the possibility that art or philosophy *could* be creative, it is simulacra that do not re-licate, and thus always generate the new. This problem is rooted, and solved, in Plato’s *Sophist*. “Plato proposes to isolate the false claimant par excellence, the one who lays claim to everything without right” (Deleuze 1994, 61). But the task of separating the authentic (model) from the counterfeit (copy) becomes the very problem of the text itself. By the end of *The Sophist*, the “Stranger can no longer be distinguished from Socrates.” The sophist, the “one who raises everything to the level of simulacra and maintains them in that state” reveals the truth of difference-- the confusion of authenticating, not of identifying (representation) (Deleuze 1994, 68). Thus Plato is actually the first to “overturn Platonism,” yet he also quickly retreats to the safety of judgment.

Deleuze’s aesthetic theory is not subordinate to representation, nor is representation subordinate to aesthetics. Because aesthetics is creative production from radical difference, aesthetics by definition excludes the hierarchy implied in theories of representation. In this view, *Theories* of Representation have no status for the visual

domain. Aesthetic practice is built from simulacra that expose the (Dionysian) ground of radical difference. This process is exemplified in Deleuze's concept of the Diagram.

In order to build a diagram, like the Body without Organs, an artist must first clear the ground of "clichés." Everyone already possesses "psychic clichés"—conventions, rigidified thought, laws of representation which prevent becoming. This is why Deleuze claims that "every painter is already in the canvas" before he arrives. To this extent representation exists in art, but only insofar as it is the role of art to break with these "givens" (Deleuze 2002). We could say representation as such; dead forms and commodity objects, are the found format for this aesthetic practice.

As Daniel Smith notes, the concept of the diagram is borrowed from Charles Peirce's semiotics, where the diagram is "an icon of intelligible relations." While Deleuze follows this lead, for him a diagram is not a copy or an index to a prior reference, but rather "he assigns to the diagram a much stronger genetic role: the diagrammatic or abstract machine does not function to represent, even something real, but rather constructs a real that is yet to come, a new type of reality" (Smith in Deleuze 2002) The diagram must go through a catastrophe to break with clichés. Through "wiping, scrubbing, and brushing" the canvas, the diagram dismantles the optical world. The work reaches a blockage and stopping, but at the same time, it will re-inject itself into a new world.

While Deleuze's aesthetic theory is perhaps the antithesis of Kant's, he is still indebted to him. This stopping, the catastrophe, is Deleuze's version of the limit of thought reached in Kant's aesthetic sublime. However, Deleuze will invert the categories that ground the relationship between object and subject that ensure the safe status of knowledge, identity, and the repetition of the same. With Kant, the aesthetic sublime is the inability of Reason to rescue the Imagination; leaving the subject in a state of chaotic awe. The result is a chaos, a "dizzying and what strikes the senses is unrecognizable, it goes beyond any possibility of comprehension." But unlike Kant, for Deleuze, Reason does not ever come to the rescue. The "entire edifice and structure of perception is in the process of exploding. In the grips of the sublime, "I can no longer *apprehend* the successive parts, I cannot *reproduce* the preceding parts as the following one arrives, and finally, I can no longer *recognize* what the thing is. I can no longer qualify the object in general" (Smith in Deleuze and Deleuze 2002, xix). Thus the edifice for a priori of knowledge collapses, overturning the subjugation of aesthetic composition to epistemology, and instead placing knowledge in the service of the priority of aesthetic experience. We have cleared the ground of clichés and can see the Dionysian ground of new life and new thought. The diagram can only ever produce radical difference.

The limits of reason and cognition force us into an other kind of perceptual functioning; the eye is pushed towards a haptic perception. Haptic imagery does not have to report to higher faculty, schema, or model of representation (Deleuze 2002, 111-112).⁷ In other words, it is beyond metaphysical order, the hierarchy of thought,

or the privileging of intelligibility and reason. Haptic visuality is a perception that is grounded in *aisthesis*, opening the work to the “logic of sensation”: abstraction of affects and sensory perception that gives new laws and meaning to create concrete new thought—thought “without an Image.”

In order to do this successfully, a diagram demands balance between abstraction (laws) and chaos (Dionysian ground). It “must not eat away at a painting too violently, it must remain limited in space and time; it must remain operative and controlled.” The artist must “prevent the diagram from proliferating” (Deleuze 2002, 89). Like the “Body without Organs,” it cannot be built “with a sledgehammer” but one must use a “very fine file.” In this way a diagram is distinct from Derrida’s, and Plato’s, uncontrollable and infinitely aberrant *pharmakon*. A diagram is “indeed chaos, catastrophe, but it is also a germ of order or rhythm” (Deleuze 2002, 83), that which “produces a life for tomorrow” (Deleuze 1999, 1976). This new life and meaning is not organic—it springs from simulacra; a “synthesis” of inorganic life. This is also unlike Heidegger’s *Dasein* then, which is a hermeneutic representation, rooted in the anthropocentric “humanities.” Radical difference is already privy to the truth of the ground of falsity; the “Powers of the False.” Diagrams create from synthetic and mechanically re-produced color, not the abstract myth of white light.

Here is an example of a diagram that uses color, a long excerpt taken from Deleuze’s essay on the artist Gérard Fromanger and his piece, *Bayeux Violet*:

...[A] little fellow in the background is made green and cold, to give even more heat by contrast to the potentially hot violet. Yet this isn't enough to bring the painting to life. A yellow and hot man in the foreground will induce or re-induce the violet, bring it into action through the intermediary of the green and over the green. But the cold green is now alone, out of the circuit, as if it had exhausted its function in one go. This now has to be supported, reintroduced into the painting, reanimated or reactivated into the painting as a whole, by a third cold blue figure behind the yellow.... It also sometimes happens that there emerges in the photograph a point of resistance to its being transformed into a living painting. It leaves behind a residue as in *Bayeux Violet*, where a last figure in the foreground group remains indeterminate.... The residue finds itself reinjected into the painting, so much so that the painting works on the basis of the photographic residue just as much as the photograph comes to function on the basis of the constituent colours of the painting (Deleuze 1999, 66-68).

The play and circulation of elements opens the image as simulacra. Simulacra is like the “memoire involontaire” of Bergson (not the unconscious of representation), where virtual and actual oscillate and repeat. The two are essentially different, but their appearance is one of resemblance. Simulacra is thus the repetition of difference, repetition with a difference. Here the “re” of re-petition is inorganic and nonhierarchical, it not re-presentation but instead it is the indiscernability of a haptic perception that forces new thoughts and relations to emerge. Bringing out the colds and hots of the past, selected from the dead commodity world, Fromanger's diagram circulates colors and vitalizes dead commodities.

To restate, diagrams are not concerned with representation, because representation is precisely the myth and cliché they destroy. However, what we do see in a diagram is a negotiation between affect and meaning, a modulation that combines new meanings and sense from the ground of pure difference. A diagram must “choose for oneself”

(*paideia*), ultimately supporting an aesthetic practice that is beyond “beyond good and evil,” “beyond Judgment” and beyond the oppression of the myth of Representation (Deleuze 2001, 28).

Representation has been shown as the attempt to control aesthetic practice through reason (*logos*). Even up until Kant’s use of the term “Judgment,” aesthetics is treated under a priori categories of representation. Up to this point, knowledge is *desired* as white. The post-Kantian aesthetic philosophers expose this myth and invert the relationship between representation and aesthetics. They begin the process of clearing the ground of clichés by dirtying the myth of pristine truth. Left without this security, we find only simulacra and *aesthetic* knowledge, giving us nothing but color.

This story of aesthetics in the history of philosophy runs parallel to broader issues of art production, as with, for instance, the deployment of color in the history of western art. Certainly contemporary art embraces, if not celebrates, a color aesthetic that is synthetic and derogatory. For instance, the markedly artificial hues of pop art, Warhol, and even Duchamp’s poignant observation in 1910 that any painting made after the advent of mechanical reproduction is always already a “readymade.” This claim, Duchamp can make, because any color pigment produced after the industrial revolution, in order to be employed for common use, as well to be used *en plein air*, must necessarily be mass-produced by machines. The mass production of color pigments, and thus the standardization of the color palette in artistic production, marks the mechanization of color technology. After mechanical reproduction, neither

art nor cultural production can lay claim to the myth of the purity of the canvas, nor the “innocence” of the color palette that accompanies it. So it may seem then that the celebration of synthetic aesthetics and an impure palette in the contemporary art world, in the works of Warhol, Pop Art, or Contemporary painting, may return us to a new life in the synthetic and post-industrial world. Or, on the contrary, perhaps the now standardized contemporary and postmodern aesthetic of impurity and difference is, once again, like post-structuralism and representation, an infinite return of the same.

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NOTES

¹ A theme Heidegger will pick up on in his "Care as the Being of Dasein" in Book VI of *Being and Time*.

² The Greek word *paideia* is defined as schooling, character development, and training. Deleuze will pick up on this concept of *paideia* in his discussion of the training and "apprenticeship" needed to "clear the ground of clichés." In this way too, one decides for oneself, as creative act, not the re-production of externally imposed laws.

³ Mumford, Lewis. *Technics and Civilization*. Here Mumford gives the example of church bells organizing the time of the day, monks living in cells and ordering their life around highly calculated and rational schedules.

⁴ Deleuze will pick up on this theme of the limit of thought in the aesthetic sublime, but he will not allow Reason to recuperate it.

⁵ At the same time, for Heidegger, “Care” (*Sorge*) in German, is interpreted as also including “anxiety,” and thus explains the tendency for Dasein to “turn away” in the face of itself and “flee” from being-in-the-world, but this is rather the problem of modern world, not, Dasein as such.

⁶ See Paul Patton, “Anti-Platonism and Art,” for more on the distinction between Derrida and Deleuze on the simulacra.

⁷ The distinction is that haptic visuality forces the eye to function “like a hand,” that is, as a kind of touch. Whereas optical vision relies only on the eye as a cognitive, intellectual organ. These theories are advanced by Alois Riegl and Wilhelm Worringer.

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