

## AESTHETIC SENSIBILITY IN THE WORLD OF POLITICS

CECILIA SJÖHOLM: ATT SE SAKER MED ARENDT: KONST, ESTETIK, POLITIK

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What is the role of art and aesthetic sensibility in an era of political, cultural, and human destruction? And on the other end of the political spectrum: to what extent is art necessary for upholding plurality, participation, freedom? These are questions that Hannah Arendt never posed, but to which her probing of modern life and politics can contribute radical perspectives, as shown by Cecilia Sjöholm in the illuminative *Att se saker med Arendt: Konst, estetik, politik* (2020) [*Doing Aesthetics with Arendt: How to See Things* (2015)].

Hannah Arendt is mostly known for her contribution to our understanding of political action and the ethics of thinking. Little—almost nothing—has been said of her work in relation to aesthetics. Sjöholm's book is therefore a welcome exploration of the aesthetic implications of Arendt's writing on publicity, the common world, and the sensibility of the real, with larger implications for how to understand capitalism, colonialism, modernity, human life, and if there is ever a space where freedom can manifest. As such, the book has a dual readership: anyone familiar with Arendt's work who might be somewhat surprised to see the question of aesthetics even come up, and the scholar of aesthetics who might need a little convincing that Arendt can provide something relevant to aesthetic theory.

In response to the Arendt scholar who might interject, Sjöholm readily agrees that Arendt did not write a theory of aesthetics and that her reflections on the subject are scattered. Nonetheless, Sjöholm suggests, Arendt's writing on art and aesthetics is conceptually coherent. By extracting arguments from Arendt's rare discussions of artworks, her private notebooks, and her scattered writings on historical narrative, culture, fabrication, and mass-production, Sjöholm synthesises Arendt's thinking on aesthetics into a coherent conceptual map. This is a large task in itself, and no doubt Arendt scholars from a variety of disciplines will find the book helpful in its extracting of the interstitial

and transgressive role between thinking and political action that Arendt granted to aesthetics. But the most important contribution is what the book provides to the second reader. Sjöholm argues that Arendt gives radical perspectives on the role of art and aesthetic sensibility (1) in public life, (2) in resisting the temporal elements of consumption and capitalist reproduction, (3) in the creation of a sense of the real and thus resisting totalitarianism, and (4) in its agency and performativity in destabilising racism and Anti-Semitism.

More on this presently, but let us begin with the curious reifications that echo through this book. In her unfinished final book project, *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt goes into dialogue with Western philosophy to explore the activities of thinking, willing, and judging. While her dialogue partners are established points of references in her discussion of thinking (e.g., Socrates) and willing (e.g., Augustine), Arendt pursues a more original path in her discussion of judging. Knowing full-well that Kant's own assessment of judgment had little to do with politics, Arendt interpreted and re-conceptualised his writing into a deeply original theory of *political judgment*. In an echo of this curious move, Sjöholm admits that Arendt did not write extensively on aesthetics, but that she now interprets and re-conceptualises Arendt's thoughts into an aesthetics (9).

The echoing continues. In a similar way as Arendt wrote her most important works in English, and only later translated them into her first language German, Sjöholm wrote this book in English, and later translated it into Swedish. But here, the similarities end. If Arendt was notorious for editing later translations, changing arguments, emphasis, and important concepts, Sjöholm's translation is like the English original. That invites the question: why a Swedish translation of this book? Of course, we can say that it is for the Swedish readership who might not be comfortable with English. That, I think, is not enough. Instead, the role of translation becomes forefronted. Arendt translated key German philosophical concepts into original and controversial English variations. Now, Sjöholm dives into the German-infused English idiom of Arendt's style, but then translates it into the more Germanic Swedish. Indeed, the threads of meaning become tangled. In defense of the Swedish translation, they become tangled in a way that sparks the activity of thinking.

The book sets out four arguments structured around five chapters. The first addresses art as appearance in public spaces. The work of art, Sjöholm convincingly argues, is not a solely

private creation in the mind of the artist, but always exists in an interstitial space between that private creation and the way the artwork enters the public space (p. 17). Plurality is the radical challenge that the world is not composed of Being, but of beings. It is occupied by multiple people—not Das Man—who move and relate to each other, the world of things, and other living creatures. All of these impinge upon us, creating a public space in which we appear in front of others:

The actions, gestures, words, and movements of other people underlie our sensible experience. The differentiation that protrudes from other bodies and the vision of others that affect my vision generate the sensible qualities that I perceive in the space that surrounds me (23).

Diverse sense-experiences appear in front of us, thus calling us into beings in a variety of ways. Arendt's notion of plurality is usually discussed as the ontological foundation to political action and freedom, but Sjöholm suggests that art is a key element of creating and upholding plural appearances. More than a move of persuasion or excellence or manifestation of power, the political act is an act of appearing in front of plural others and thus calling forth a space of appearance. To the extent that such a space is upheld by continuous political action, freedom becomes manifest. Sjöholm follows this line of thinking, but the emphasis is on the things: the public space is not an abstract idea, Sjöholm argues, but is made of the human artifact—the fabrication of things that make up our common world. This can be the fabrication of the square in which a political action can take place, but it can also be an art piece or performance that invites the viewer to see the world in a new or differentiated way. Art is never contained by the artist or the spectator—it creates sensual experiences with unintended consequences that thus enable something new (48). Sjöholm suggests that art makes plurality its main task: art is not about use-value, nor is it a political act, but it is calling on the viewer *to sense the world in its plurality*. When it is destroyed, it is an act of dedifferentiation and thus de-humanisation (50). Art, therefore, is a condition for plurality and the performance of freedom.

The second chapter addresses the role of the durability of the artwork. The artwork's temporality is different—it even resists—the temporality of consumerism and capitalism. If the latter requires that we consume objects, thus destroying them, in an endless repetition of ever-increasing speed, then art is made to

last. It has a lifetime longer than an individual human life, and it thus spans the experiences of generations (63). This also holds true for artworks that are not material because they leave an imprint that is longer than the momentous consumption. This temporal dimension of durability is not to be equated with conservatism—it is not a longing for a lost paradise—because it is both backward and forward looking. As such, it is connected to the ontology of plurality: only by establishing a lasting human artifact can we enter the space of appearances in which the political act brings forth freedom. Art, therefore, resists the late-modern encroachment of privatisation of public life by calling its publicness into being (20). Art also resists capitalism's repetitive consumption by calling forth a longer time-perspective (69). Or, in short, it resists the destruction of freedom. In my opinion, this is the most important contribution of the book: art brings forth a long-lasting public world, by inviting us to share the sensibility of plurality. Perhaps, to make this brilliant argument, Sjöholm is a bit too kind to Arendt. Reading Arendt's discussion of kitsch and mass-culture in "The Crises in Culture," for example, means being confronted with a tonality that at best is dismissive and at worst elitist. I believe Sjöholm makes an important interpretation of these passages when she suggests that Arendt was not so much worried about the new expressions developed in popular culture, but by the fact that the durability of art objects was destroyed in a consumerist framing of these artforms (76). However, I do not think Arendt's style can be ignored in a discussion of her aesthetics, and I just wish that Arendt had expressed the dangers of mass-culture in a way that better matched Sjöholm's interpretation.

Unfortunately, Sjöholm does not develop the argument what it can mean for artworks to resist consumerism through their durability. Instead, the second chapter continues a discussion on the self and the agency of the artist. Here, Sjöholm clearly articulates why Arendt was skeptical of psychoanalysis: in its search for an inner self, psychoanalysis risks reducing the plurality of the surfaces of the world to a set of 'drives' or 'affects,' similar for all humans. Even if I find this reading on point, it seems a shame to leave the most daring argument of the chapter—the role of durability—to enter the more well-travelled paths of Arendt's (unwilling) contribution to theories of selfhood, agency, and inner life. The chapter ends with a discussion on the role of narrative in Arendt's political world and, again, the role of durability is left out of the discussion. Sjöholm argues that the role of narrative is to break free from the past and the future and enmesh oneself in

the present (110). This is a reading for which there are some fragmented textual proofs in Arendt's writing, but it is also one that is not grounded in the same way as Sjöholm's other—sensible, exact, and creative—interpretations of Arendt. For Arendt, durability is created through various forms of engagement with the past that can point to the future in different ways, and it is crafted by the fabricator of history or by the judging spectator of a political event. There are many ways to interpret Arendt's discussion on narration: one is that historical narratives provide a type of cultural heritage that demands a response or a decision in the present, either to continue the narration—what Arendt calls *tradere*—or to challenge it with a better story—what Arendt calls the heroic. Both forms of narration emphasise durability by refusing to cut the present and future free from the past, in contrast to Sjöholm's reading. As a reader, it would have been valuable to learn more of Sjöholm's view on the temporality of these forms of narration.

Another dimension of durability and relations with the past is Arendt's intriguing contribution to Messianism. In short, Arendt suggested that the Messianic lay in the past: in the modern, post-Holocaust break with tradition, when an entire cultural narrative has been destroyed (*vernichtet*), some traces or lost treasures of that history and culture remain intact. When such artifacts are found, the Messianic—the break, the new dawn, the radical other—can appear through the strangeness of the artifact. Given that Arendt articulated her Messianism in relation to Walter Benjamin's 'poetic thinking' and Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, it would have been intriguing to read an aesthetic interpretation of Arendt's reading. Especially because Arendt emphasises the material transformation of a grain of sand to a pearl and the sensual experience of the pearl-as-treasure for a pearl diver. These sensual reifications of lost times would have, perhaps, been productive passages from which to articulate a post-colonial aesthetics.

The third chapter further extends the argument of the first, by discussing art as creating a sense of realness. Sjöholm focuses on how a realness can be accomplished through sharing a common judgment based on the five senses of sight, hearing, smell, touch, and taste. That is, sensibility is created through an interaction between sense (perception) that, with Kant, invites a sense-making (understanding and judging) in a communicative act. If art is one of the ways of creating alternative forms of sensing, then it follows that it also creates alternative forms of understanding and judging. The chapter begins by prodding the sense of the real and how it is

created through a *sensus communis*, a common sense. The word choice indicates both the possibilities and the dangers of creating a sense of the real: my sense-experience is not enough in itself to create a texture of reality, but I need the confirmation of others that they see, hear, touch, taste, and smell similar things like I do. For Arendt, this confirmation happens through communication, but Arendt emphasises that art can play the role of inviting to such a communication and negotiation of the realness. As such, confirmation from others is a necessary pre-condition for politics, but it also depends on prejudice that might delimit the possible plural forms of experiencing the senses. A shared sense of the real is the precondition both for freedom, but also for prejudice in all its forms. But if prejudice delimits plurality but nonetheless confirms a sense of the real for the majority, then totalitarianism works the other way around. For Arendt, one of the means of terror of totalitarianism is to isolate individuals from each other and bombard them with a constant flow of lies, miscommunication, and—yes—alternative facts, so as to utterly confuse and isolate everyone from everyone else. Therefore, totalitarianism works by denying people a sense of the real, making a common sense impossible. These are rather well-trodden paths in Arendtian scholarship, but Sjöholm lays them out with unusual clarity and expounds them toward the importance of the senses. The most enjoyable part of the chapter discusses the hierarchy of the senses, and how Arendt reconfigured taste and hearing.

The fourth and fifth chapters focus on Arendt's interpretations of individual artworks and the political implications of these. Through Arendt's reflections on Greek tragedy and Charlie Chaplin, Sjöholm discusses art in relation to the isolating effects of colonisation and anti-Semitism respectively. The chapter on tragedy focuses on *Oedipus at Colonus*, in which Sjöholm provides an original interpretation of Arendt's reflections. Sjöholm argues that the tragedy illuminates the role of the law in politics, suggesting that it is both a type of framing of the political—something that provides the walls around it and states the rules of the game—and is constituted as the outside the political. The law is thus part of *poiesis*, or the human culture of creating (180), in the sense that it actualises the tension between the inside and the outside of the public. As such, the chapter paves the way for the question in the next chapter, on the possible political and aesthetic forms of expression in the outside, by the expelled, by the refugees. Perhaps the expelled, posited as the outside, invites the coming of a new form of room (194). This outside and violent

establishment of a new law, Sjöholm indicates, might be the point of postcolonial resistance.

If the fourth chapter struggles a bit to make the interpretation clear, the fifth chapter on Chaplin is clear to the point that it is almost comical that no one has written it before. Sjöholm discusses Arendt's view of humour as an artistic rendering of suffering. She suggests that Chaplin, in *Modern Times*, came to embody a critique of capitalist reproduction (210) and in many of his other films created an aesthetics that pointed beyond assimilation, to the political stakes of rightlessness (224). Arendt repeatedly warned that assimilation strategies by way of escape into culture and art could not save the Jewish people from the dangers of politics. Being excluded from public space means that one is exiled to oneself, a refugee in a state of rightlessness. In Sjöholm's interpretation, Chaplin comes to embody this space but turns it into an aesthetics of laughter rather than fear (220). Chaplin makes visible the gap between the modern state and the individual and between the surveilled and privatised citizen and the expelled refugee outside the law's protection. The fact that Chaplin's characters always succeed invites a joyful identification—a type of split vision between the repressor and the repressed. As such, Chaplin turned his anti-political humour into a political critique, Sjöholm argues in dialogue with Arendt. None of Chaplin's positions can be said to represent Arendt's ideal, but they are an outcome in aesthetic form of a flawed political system of political repression of plurality (by racism and anti-Semitism) and of the common world (by capitalism) that has destroyed the possibility of shared experiences.

In all these chapters, Sjöholm also discusses artworks and performances that were contemporary with Arendt. She therefore contextualises and historicises Arendt's aesthetics. This is no small feat, given the complexity of the task: creating a comprehensive conceptual argument on aesthetics based on Arendt's scattered writing, and then contextualising this argument in relation to the complex and radical shifts in the art scene from the 30s to the 70s. As this summary demonstrates, Sjöholm's book is a welcome and original interpretation of one of the most important thinkers of the twentieth century. It also shows that Arendt's thinking—or at least Sjöholm's interpretation of her thinking—provides a radical contribution to aesthetics.

For the Arendtian scholar, a question on the use of concepts is left unanswered. Sjöholm uses Arendt's private notetakings and correspondences, and this is clearly a strength of the book. But it

also means a few concepts are included that Arendt chose not to use in her published writings, such as melancholia (she preferred memory or historical consciousness). How are these concepts to be understood? Arendt clearly distinguished between the forms of communication that take place in private and the ones that happen in the face of the public eye, and her conceptual topography in the public writing is clearly republican, shunning away from anything that might indicate inner drives or sentiments. If we include the concepts she used in her private notebooks and letters, do we not risk losing some of that public world that Arendt fought so hard to uphold? Or do these concepts—brought forth from a different sense of the real—function in a similar way as art, by transgressing these boundaries, inviting the reader to see something new?

Some concepts also seem to be Sjöholm's own preference, such as negativity. Sjöholm's conceptual mixture does not merit criticism for the sake of its disruption of Arendt's conceptual topography, but perhaps something is lost in precision when concepts are borrowed from various schools of thought without the pedagogic work of translating them? Sjöholm provides her readership with less of an introduction to Arendt's thinking on aesthetics and more of an original argument on aesthetics. Sometimes, introducing Arendt's thinking to a non-expert readership would have helped, as for example in her discussion of the role of *homo faber*, the fabricator. Only after a few pages of discussion does the reader learn that this form of life, for Arendt, was a way to capture fabrication as an activity aimed at creating the human artifact. However, these remarks constitute a minor criticism of a book that provides an illuminating discussion of the role of art in a rapidly changing economised society incapable of comprehending value outside of monetary accumulation.

*How to See Things with Arendt* provides insights on the importance of art in creating a common world, of providing permanence across time, of inviting a dialogue on how we sense things, and on how we can shape the world anew in the face of destructive forces. Arendt is known for struggling with the distinction between the plural appearances of the public world of politics—*the public life of politics*—and the inner active dialogue of thinking—*the life of the mind*. I would ask if Sjöholm, with this book, has not managed to find a middle sibling—*the transgressive life of art*—that might be able to begin a dialogue between the unruly two?

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