

AGNOTOLOGY

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Reason is positioned in Western epistemologies as the path to Truth – but what of aesthetic truth? The editors of this volume have posed aesthetics in particular as “reason without (rational) reason: an epistemic regime that renders the criteria of ‘pure reason’ inoperable, or rather, a different way of knowing through sensing.” *Rational* is the key parenthetical that modifies “reason.” The alternative on offer is an unreasoning aesthetics based on sensory knowing. Familiar from Romantic era uptakes of *natural experience* (Jean-Jacques Rousseau on education), such sensual apprehension has an enduring history in confrontation with logic, mathematics, and other claims to the “ratio” in rational.¹ In aesthetics, doubt is not reduced by calculation, but conviction. This essay will query those relations between knowing and doubt (eventually explaining the new discipline of Agnotology, which might be styled as a rational study of produced unreason and ignorance).

Let us begin with the profound unreason that is insanity—the loss of reason, according to all societal definitions. Art historian Aby Warburg offers an important instance of how aesthetics may build conviction from a state of confusion. When Warburg encountered both professional expectations and anti-Semitism at the turn-of-the-20th century, he descended into diagnosed “paranoid psychosis.”² His return to reason paradoxically involved an aesthetic encounter with unreason. He attended the communal rituals of the Puebloan peoples in the American Southwest, in his search for pure, curative unreason among Hopi Indians. Ultimately, Warburg had to admit that his dream of finding an unsullied Other (a foil to his own madness—*doppelgänger* of the West) was doomed to fail. Confronting the Hopi “serpent ritual,” redolent of Freudian overtones, he was disappointed: “The material is contaminated: it has been layered over twice”—once by Spanish colonial religious indoctrination, and then again by North American secular “de-indigenizing” education.³ As I described in collaboration with exemplary historian of early modern art, Joseph Leo Koerner:

it was this hybridity – the indigenous with the foreign, unreason with reason, Athens with Alexandria, Athens with Oraibi – that fascinated Warburg most, as it offered him a way to recover the

primitive origins of the Renaissance and Antiquity. Unlike Jacob Burckhardt's, and unlike most art historians before him and since, Warburg's Renaissance was at once Apollonian and Dionysian, at once purifying and contaminating. The material is *always* contaminated.⁴

For an Agnotology of aesthetics, the point of this story is that cultural systems constantly blur the boundaries between reason and unreason, knowing and unknowing. Aesthetics (as *aisthesis* in the first instance of the Greek: simple perception) harbors both human systems of ordering (ratio, formalisms, purificatory rituals) and the complete incapacity of rational order to tame human experience (color, for example, which evokes discourses of emotions that confound the rational physics of electromagnetic energies bouncing off material surfaces). Aesthetic experience is omnivorous, touching on the cultural and symbolic meanings and affects (*Einführung*/empathy, "beauty," disgust) that emerge immediately between a sensory stimulus in an individual human body, and collective cultures of response.

We take the heuristics of Agnotology to put emotions briefly on hold, to conduct a historical analysis of *what* may be known and rational(ized), and what remains shadowed. Agnotology refuses the classic division between the rational and the non-rational, giving the one to the digital, the artificial, the synthetic, and reserving the radically non-rational for aesthetics and sensory response. Agnotology holds each side of the "two cultures" to be cultural, all the way down.

When "the Golden ratio" is taken to be hard-wired in human senses of fitness, when geometries are seen to grow from collective cultural labor that shows up across cultures, and when the power of symmetry, edges, incantations, song-cycles, balanced arrangements, and scents are universal modes of being among species of all kinds, we must embrace larger patterns of life, rather than allow a binary of reason and unreason to stand. The "contamination" Warburg admitted (a Christian rationalization overlaid onto the fantasized Dionysian rituals of the Hopi) lurks under a new binary between the "logic" of computation and our messy human lives. Matteo Pasquinelli, in his incendiary 2023 *Eye of the Master*, rejects this retread of the Cold War's two-culture debate. No, mathematical (divine) rationality is not the purview of pure Platonic reason, and is not "invented" in a lopsided European history of progress-in-science. Instead, computational certainties are generated pre-numerically *by collective*

human gesture and labor, in cultures that span time and continents. Polemically, “before numbers were used to measure the proportions of rhythm, the rhythm of work contributed to the invention of number. [...] *algorithmic practices are even older than the concept of number itself.*”⁵ [emphasis added] The ritual dances of the Hopi, like the stochastic accumulations in generative machine learning, are communally-reinforced and intuitive cultural moves, not “reason” holed up in its cranial castle.

This essay, then, rejects the bait of the binary. Agnotology identifies how the irrationality of algorithmic ritual is sold as Truth. Correspondingly, we plump for the *raisonnable* essence of a common sense that needs to be *cultivated* (*culturally*) and protected by aesthetic practices. I stand with Pasquinelli in arguing that “rationality” is intimately related to the ordering of human societies and their collaborative labors—what is called “rationalization of operations” in modern economic and capital-driven discourse. What should concern us is not the manufactured rational-reason/irrational-unreason dyad, but *what is to be done* regarding the current ideological production of an “epistemic crisis” surrounding what may be known as True, in times of unprecedented access to so-called “information” and the extraction of human labor for capital.

The task is admittedly urgent, since there is nothing “open” about AI. To begin with, we should accept that we are the despised class of the intelligentsia, and insist on our capacity to join “organic intellectuals” in pursuit of labor-identified Truth.⁶ For better or worse, if we are academically empowered, we can state that ours is the study of past and present patterns, a rational, or intuitive, or empirical sifting that hopes to chart the past, so that, since we repeat it, we might at least redirect its current course.

Agnotology addresses a specific form of unreason in the calculational production of synthetic realities: the jiggling and loosening of memory, fact, and hard-earned facts that a produced “ignorance” wreaks. How did we let ourselves become a “post-Truth society?” We need to examine how the capital-saturated *laissez-faire* situation in which many of us live, addled by nationalism, haunted by totalitarianism, and dominated by the fictive persons (corporations) that nations have allowed to gain power in their midst, produces “truth effects.”

Whence Agnotology? The term was coined—as a systematic, academic study of how un-knowing, doubt, confusion, and ignorance are culturally made. Authorship lay with historians who plumbed the thousands of papers released by acts of “discovery,” in lawsuits against the tobacco industry. In this trove, historian Robert Proctor (among others) found internal memoranda from marketing executives confronting mounting evidence tobacco caused cancer. They shifted their marketing strategy, declaring “Doubt is our product.”⁷ Humans’ difficulty with assessing risk is converted to an irrational addiction abetted by the withdrawal of truth. Truly, as Deleuze and Guattari elucidated in two volumes, capitalism and schizophrenia are fatefully entangled in modernity. Aesthetics, partnered with history to rummage through the archives, has a role to play in elucidating how ignorance is produced.

Agnotology functions in my own work to examine the production of ignorance in regard to art historical interpretation. Broad, consensual research in my field agrees there are “whitening” procedures within art history. Far from dallying with Romantic Dionysian darkness, the tropism for White and Light are profound “rational” forces in Western aesthetics. Think only of the periodic moans and spasms over ancient Greek polychromy—enduring efforts to produce an elite discourse of (Northern hemispheric) White Antiquity around Greek bronzes, early pigmented sculptures, and later Roman marble copies. White Antiquity “segregates” alternative histories that might be pursued (Black Egyptian, Eastern Anatolian, Middle-Eastern Levant, or even Mycenaean versus Athenian, perhaps). In a forthcoming chapter for a second volume on *Agnotology*, I address an anodyne nineteenth-century marble sculpture, and its thousands of imitations and reproductions that circulate under the work’s original 1843 title, *The Greek Slave*. I call art history’s whitening discourse “segregation,” to invoke the *racialized* production of ignorance in an otherwise shared historical record. Useful here is a specific theoretical framework of the late Rawlsian philosopher, Charles Mills. Initially, in the first volume on *Agnotology*, and again in his later monograph, *Black Rights/ White Wrongs*, Mills provides a gloss on how “White Ignorance” works to protect itself from knowing the facts about systematic racialized oppression. Mills explains:

...white ignorance” [is] an example of a particular kind of systemic group-based miscognition that has been hugely influential over the past few hundred years. After a ten-point clarification of the concept, [this chapter] turns to an examination of white

ignorance as it plays itself out in the complex interaction of Eurocentric perception and categorization, white normativity, social memory and social amnesia, the derogation of non-white testimony, racial group interests, and motivated irrationality.⁸

This is a powerful tool for unwrapping the aesthetics around *The Greek Slave*, which was understood in its time as a crypto-analogue to the “Virginia Slave.” It explicitly surfaced as such, in a performance by freemen and freewomen of color in the Great Exhibition when the work was on display in 1851. The performance by self-emancipated Blacks was a pointed explication of rational choice: *No human chose to be enslaved*. No rationalization of the practice could be sustained in the face of those unjustly pressed into bondage. To echo Pasquinelli, a gestural and performative embodied aesthetic stood in dramatic contrast to the spreadsheets of bodies and tallies of insurance values. Aesthetic juxtaposition offered a reasoned rebuke to calculated capital.

To push Pasquinelli’s point further, we should not allow the pseudo-separation of labor from “rational algorithms,” but should see the rational as operating on and through the laboring body at all times. And so it is with the aesthetic; there is always a gesture and a rhythm presented either *as* the art, or *by* the art, as its offer to reasoning reception. As the free Blacks seized the attention of passers-by for pantomime and melodrama at the Great Exhibition, the agent of aesthetics, Ellen Craft, stood demure and silent, a living but theatricalized embodiment of the “tragic mulatta” whose very existence testified to the extractive economics and violence of a US economy that had evolved from an economy of enslaved labor to an economy of producing and selling slaves.⁹

Because of art history’s tethers to the market for objects of visual art, and its own historical reliance on (white) archives of photography and ekphrastic testimony before artworks encoded as already aesthetic, it has had almost nothing to say about the historical spectacle I have disinterred: that moment of astonishing live-but-still action that conjured up the “Virginia Slave” in confrontation with the white marble of the supposedly Greek one. Gestures of labor, emotional and otherwise, are routinely under-examined in “aesthetics” as such, although the parallel discourse of empathy (coined as *Einfühlung*, in the original German, by art historian Robert Vischer, in 1873) has much to say about body postures and visceral feelings as they accompany or produce aesthetic response.

Can Agnotology reclaim the receptive traces of empathy in the reception of aesthetic objects? We search the archives, and find both Elizabeth Barrett Browning's fulsome sonnet to the *Greek Slave* in art history, contrasted with abolitionist newspapers' thrilling accounts of the Crafts' pantomime. If both Saidiya Hartman and Bertolt Brecht question empathy as a "false" aesthetic of equivalence that masks ontological difference (Hartman) or blunts critical understanding (Brecht), it is nonetheless an important tool for unmasking the separations aesthetics might produce, finding instead rich diversities and multi-sensory paths of reception.¹⁰ Far from simply a type of unreason, sensory *aisthesis* (the Greek root, simply holding on to that which is perceived) and its fancier Latinized cousin, *aesthetics*, will always have access to multiplied perspectives and cultural uptakes – always "contaminated" by variable life experiences. Agnotology summons the remanent human capacity to untangle, in a history of reception and real aesthetics, the social facts of labor, gesture, and politics that art requires.

- 1 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile, or Education*, trans. Barbara Foxley (London and New York: M. Dent & Sons, Ltd. and E.P. Dutton & Co, 1914 [1762]).
- 2 See Peter Loewenberg, "Aby Warburg, the Hopi Serpent Ritual and Ludwig Binswanger," *Psychoanalysis and History* 19, no. 1 (2017): 77-98.
- 3 Aby Warburg, *Images from the Region of the Pueblo Indians in North America*, trans. Michael P. Steinberg. (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995): 2-3. See also Joseph Leo Koerner, "Writing Rituals: The Case of Aby Warburg," *Common Knowledge* 18, no. 1 (2012): 81-101.
- 4 Caroline A. Jones and Joseph Leo Koerner, "Contamination | Purification," *Contamination and Purity in Early Modern Art and Architecture*, eds. Lauren Jacobi and Daniel M. Zolli (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021): 315-360.
- 5 Matteo Pasquinelli, *Eye of the Master: A Social History of Artificial Intelligence* (London and New York: Verso, 2023): 33.
- 6 With this, I emphasize my speaking position as an empowered academic in the professoriate of a rich research university: MIT. Nonetheless, I celebrate Pasquinelli's revival of Gramscian tools, identifying as organic intellectuals the drivers whose "manual labor" is actually real-time visual intelligence and intellection. This may inform the rejection of "driverless vehicles" designed for transport and haulage fleets of the future, which are suddenly revealed as "Hard Problems" in the march of monetized AI.
- 7 Proctor preface, *Agnotology*, eds. Robert Proctor and Londa Schiebinger (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2008).
- 8 Charles Mills, describing the chapter "White Ignorance" in Mills, *Black Rights/White Wrongs: the Critique of Racial Liberalism* (Oxford UK: Oxford University Press, 2017). This chapter is a further development of the chapter of the same name in Proctor and Schiebinger's *Agnotology*.
- 9 Aspects of this argument are found in Caroline A. Jones, *The Global Work of Art: World's Fairs, Biennials, and the Aesthetics of Experience* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016). I have deliberately minimized the artist's name, Hiram Powers, to allow *The Greek Slave* to function as a prompt to aesthetic imagination, rather than a reified aesthetic object.
- 10 Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection* (New York: WW Norton, 1997). For an effective summary of Brecht's position on Empathy in the 1930s, see Darko Suvin, "Emotion, Brecht, Empathy vs. Sympathy," *Gestus-Musik-Text*, ed. Friedemann Weidauer, *The Brecht Yearbook I / Das Brecht-Jahrbuch* 33 (Storrs, CT: The International Brecht Society, 2008): 53-68.