

OLD SUBJECT–NEW RELATIONS?

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BEAUTY AND TASTE

Rather than make aesthetics a possible tool of political brutalism, as Achille Mbembe suggests,¹ or as weak with regard to its critical potentiality, as thinkers such as Peter Osborne would suggest,² today, aesthetics should be seen as a field of new formations, constellations, possibilities, conceptualities, and feelings. Fit to our times, aesthetics is a theoretico-philosophical field of studies that is sensitive to the multiple forms of experience that are being formed in and through relations between histories, things, peoples and forms of life. However, as is addressed in this issue of *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics*, there is reason to inquire into the relation between the philosophical tradition and the expanded field that we see today. This text sketches the problems with aesthetic subjectivity. How has it been conceived, how do we need to rethink it and why?

A widely held doctrine is that the modern aesthetic subject is born with the discovery of taste. As a field largely defined by 18th-century philosophy, aesthetics has often been expressed in the Kantian tradition as an experience of the beautiful, offered by subjective sensibilities directed at a non-conceptual experience of commonality, *sensus communis*. *Sensus communis* refers to the possibility of an experience that is differentiated, but still shared. A subjective experience that connects beauty and pleasure lies at its core, undoing older ideas of beauty as the property of an object. All the way from Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment* to contemporary neuro-aesthetics, the experience of the aesthetic subject is considered in terms of pleasure, enjoyment, and gratification.³

Other powers of the human mind, such as reason's infinity, are also at work in the aesthetic subject, as in the encounter with the sublime. Rather than awakening pleasure, it causes shivering and fears. Although the phenomena that may awaken such experiences are contingent, their effect is repeated. The doctrine of taste, in this way, claims aesthetic subjectivity to be universal and ahistorical.⁴ To Kant, disinterestedness guides the basic definition of aesthetic judgment. At the same time, there is a normative feature to Kant's aesthetics, although they were not expressed so clearly in *Critique of Judgment*. Aesthetic qualities bear witness to the fact that humans,

as Kant puts it, “fit” into the world.⁵ The subjective means of apprehending the world are to a certain degree expected to harmonize with it, to experience it as a “fit,” which may occur in the reflective aesthetic judgment.

There are many untimely aspects of these presuppositions. The most interesting critique of aesthetics today, however, lies not in discarding Kant’s transcendental subject of reflective judgment—the Ur-subject of aesthetic subjectivity—as being inherently universalist. The most interesting critique is instead directed at the idea of taste as inherently intertwined with aesthetics as such. Taste, to Kant, is both a distinguishing feature among subjects and a feature of commonality. But we may well, as Hannah Arendt did, conceive of *sensus communis* in a vein distinct from taste. *Sensus communis* is also a sense of commonality, a sense of being part of a community, and yet particular to one’s subjectivity. *Sensus communis* is, therefore, a feature of experiencing the world, which to Arendt is a concept that suggests not an objective totality, but an in-between. The world is also a place in which we may see things in and through the perspective of others—Kant’s idea of *sensus communis* is not so much a conceptual idea as it is an attempt to capture the experience of living and experiencing in a community.⁶ In this way, aesthetics is not so much about judging things as beautiful or ugly, it is about relationality as such.

The challenge to aesthetics, today, is to reconceive aesthetic subjectivity, and approach the question of aesthetics through the many forms of relationality that have been theoretically and philosophically formulated—and given aesthetic form—in the last few decades. This means keeping the possibility of a *sensus communis*—of a sense of community. But it also means that aesthetics as a field of academic inquiry, must counter the critique directed against aesthetics as a hierarchical form of judgment of cultural phenomena. Appealing to things as “beautiful,” “sublime,” “ugly” and so on means applying a form of judgment that, to thinkers such as Terry Eagleton, is steeped in ideology from the start, and not in a flattering way; it is steeped in the undoing of risk, resistance, and challenge: “The bliss of the aesthetic subject is the felicity of the small child playing in the bosom of the mother.”⁷ As that bliss falls apart under the pressure of the sublime, the subject “exchanges the fetish of the mother’s body for the fetish of the phallic law.”⁸ Rather than accept the subject of taste as a natural point of departure for any philosophy of aesthetics, relational aesthetics is rather open to

alternative descriptions of the kind of field aesthetics is attempting to be, or could be.

Ideas of taste are still at work in contemporary neuro-aesthetics. Here, the experience of beauty is shown to be associated with certain features of the brain, and assumes that beauty arouses a feeling of pleasure that is independent of its source. It may connect to cognitive functions and to the intellect.⁹ But aesthetic experience is explained in this vein as a free and playful state of consciousness which is still universally valid.

Such a viewpoint fails to question, however, the place of taste in today's world, which was indeed Arendt's quest, as she raised the idea of relationality inherent to *sensus communis* in her reading of Kant. Moreover, such a viewpoint detaches aesthetic experience from the works of art that are actually being produced on the contemporary scene, works that tend to produce mixed kinds of experience. But the fact that there is a gap between the inherently conservative view of taste in neuro-aesthetics, and the critical mass of contemporary art that is being produced, does not necessarily constitute a crisis for the philosophical and theoretical discipline of aesthetics. The question is instead how aesthetics itself is capable of keeping up to date, and to critically reflect on its history and doctrines.

A relational idea of aesthetics (not to be conflated with Nicolas Bourriaud's idea of relational aesthetics) means sharing certain experiences, a *sensus communis* of sorts. But it may also be articulated in terms of non-sharing, non-understanding, cannibalism, opacity, and brutalism. Since the 20th century, a new sense of the importance of terminology has emerged in the expanded field of aesthetics. This terminology derives from decolonial aesthetics, environmental aesthetics, feminist aesthetics and other forms: what they have in common is that relationality is central to them. The expanded field of aesthetics that we see today, in theory and in philosophy, does not derive from a subject of taste. It instead puts forth a relational subject whose sensibility is coloured by histories, viewpoints, and forms of power. The concept of aesthetics has been reworked through new ideas of relationality, which must also affect ideas of aesthetic subjectivity. Two of the liveliest fields that may be seen in the expanded field of aesthetics are decolonial theory and practice, and environmental aesthetics, each of which will be discussed next.

AESTHETIC SUBJECTIVITY/DECOLONIAL RELATIONALITY

Thinking aesthetics through historically emergent forms of relations is by no means a new endeavour: in early 20th-century modernism, an alternate form of aesthetic subjectivity was evoked by the Brazilian movement of anthropophagy. Anthropophagic subjectivity was a response to the European fantasy of what constitutes its other: here, the aesthetic subject is no longer one of taste or judgment, but one of desire and/or repulsion. Colonial history may then be seen as a producer of a new aesthetics. Together with contemporary authors arriving from a critical viewpoint based broadly in critical race studies, such as Kandice Chuh and Fred Moten, or a post-colonial viewpoint, such as Edouard Glissant and Sylvia Wynter, anthropophagic modernism may arguably be seen as the starting point of a new formation in aesthetics.

Replacing an idea of aesthetic subjectivity from the point of universality, Edouard Glissant's aesthetics entails recreation, rethinking, and redistribution of experience that has its roots in the era of colonization. With Glissant, a new aesthetics emerges not so much through a critique of the transcendental categories that determine the transcendental subject experience. His recreation of aesthetics instead emerges through a return to pre-Kantian times, to early modern times and the onslaught of colonization. The era of colonization construed a new world, a globe, a *tout-monde*, a new conception of totality. In Glissant's metaphorical language, aesthetics is to be thought of in conjunction with the new region that was formed: in the wake of colonization, new relations grew out of encounters between people, filiations, and languages. More significant than colonization as such, however, was the slave trade. It brought with it journeys over the oceans, which created not only new relations, but also new forms of relations. These journeys, and the slave plantations of the American South, were sites of secret resistance in and through the creolization of language, culture and aesthetic expression that followed in their wake. Glissant's aesthetics is not conceived of in terms of taste, but as an ongoing production of new relations. Such an aesthetics of a new region of the world is closely related to what Glissant calls archipelagic thinking: it is one of new encounters, new finds, and new entanglements.¹⁰

Sylvia Wynter, also, returns to early modern times to find the key to decolonial thought processes and aesthetics. She starts from the birth of a new field of knowledge which construed, as she puts it, a new kind of non-adaptive knowledge, which was that of modern

science. To Wynter, the invention of this nonadaptive knowledge contrasts with the looser and more lenient adaptive knowledge, which is that of humanism. Renaissance humanism sought a new definition of humanity under the influence of the harder, less lenient non-adaptive knowledge. This is, to Wynter, is what ultimately led to the failure of Renaissance humanism. It produced a universal idea of humanity being defined by by certain ideals. These ideals migrated into the non-adaptive knowledge of science. As a result, science, in conjunction with economic colonialism, produced not a universal human being, but one that is divided into hierarchical categories, between, for instance, human and native, master and slave. The natural sciences, combined with humanism, rationalized a colonial order in scientific terms.

The West would therefore remain unable, from then on, to conceive of an Other that it called human—an Other, therefore, relative to its correlated postulates of power, truth, and freedom. All other modes of being human would instead have to be seen not as the alternative modes of being human that they are “out there,” but adaptively, as the lack of the West’s ontologically absolute self-description.¹¹ To this self-description belongs, as Wynter puts it, a mode of being “ratio-centric”; science’s reasoning takes biological man as its object: reason forces all other modes of being, and all other expressions, to “adapt.”

Sylvia Wynter goes back to Renaissance philosophy and theatre to find the traces of a subject that is not, as she puts it, adaptive. Here she finds Shakespeare. She does not read Shakespeare as someone critical of the colonial order that was emerging. Reading *The Tempest*, however, she discerns figures in the shadows that the play does not make appear. To Wynter, we see them through their very absence: the body of the black woman, the female Caliban that Shakespeare never depicted. What aesthetics does is allow for the horizon of the invisible, the space of alterity, to show itself.¹² In this way, aesthetics is not so much about the in-between of humans, or political relationality. It is about the relationality between fields of knowledge: between the adaptive humanism that revealed the emergence of an aesthetic subject, and the non-adaptive sciences that deeply influenced the idea of what a subject is.

ENVIRONMENTAL AESTHETICS

Aesthetic relationality is cast not only among humans, but also between humans and nature. This is seen in another viewpoint,

broadly called environmental aesthetics. Critical perspectives ranging from the Anthropocene to the posthuman, from writers such as Donna Haraway and Timothy Morton, have developed in this direction. From another perspective, which suggests the intertwining of ecocriticism and decolonial thought, we find T.J. Demos and his insistence on relationality, not as a theory of aesthetics, but as an expression of aesthetic experience.

Theodor Adorno was one of the first to develop a critique of Kant's aesthetics from this point of view. To Adorno, the problem with using 18th-century aesthetics as a model for aesthetic subjectivity is that aesthetic ideals of nature, such as those that appear in paintings and literature, are a feature of alienation. In the chapter, "Natural beauty," in *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno shows that there is no direct access to what is a model of beauty to Kant, nature.¹³ Nature may only be understood as a landscape of mediated ideals, through art works produced in various periods. Artworks belong to the sphere that Adorno calls a second nature: not to the natural world, but to a social world that appears natural to us. To Adorno, this makes aesthetics a field in which the human, or what he calls the autonomous subject, may find itself in awe of itself. What are mirrored in the adoration of natural beauty are the ideals of human accomplishments, not humanity's "other": nature. To Adorno, our conception of nature is wholly bound up with our use of it, and this use is a violent form of exploitation.

Aesthetics, to Adorno, is not a field in which the subject senses that, as Kant puts it, it fits into the world. It is a product of ideology: of education, and of many layers of social and cultural history. There is no "neutral" aesthetic ground through which art may relate to nature. "Aestheticized" art, for instance landscape paintings, may serve a fantasmatic idea of natural beauty. To escape this fate of aesthetics, a fate that comes with the definition of taste as a preference for the features of art that expresses alienation, we must find concepts and theories of aesthetic relationality. It is necessary also to rethink aesthetics as emerging out of a subject of taste, given the risk of irrelevance that may appear in the context of contemporary works. For all of these reasons, we need to resort to the idea that aesthetic subjectivity is inherently relational.

From a relational viewpoint, aesthetics is a form of experience that does not appeal to a specific kind of judgment or taste. This means that aesthetics may be used to describe immersion in sensual

phenomena of various kinds, rather than limit aesthetics to the encounter with a certain class of objects, such as artwork. Other than the judgment of an object, or a landscape, relational aesthetics speaks to the way in which living beings experience ways of living, traveling, dressing, cooking together, eating, walking, engaging in conversation, and so on. The scope of phenomena that may be understood in aesthetic terms has already been broadened to include urban spaces, public spaces, eating habits, and digital technologies, to mention a few. This is a development that follows the direction in which contemporary art has been moving: working with locations, spaces, practices, and collective forms of experience. In this way, relational aesthetics departs from the idea of *sensus communis* as a sensitivity to a life in a community. As we have seen in the last few years on the scene of contemporary art, this may apply to playing together, dancing together, cooking together: communal practices that are certainly open to improvisation.

But relational aesthetics may also be about the way in which the aesthetic sensibilities transgress the diremption between the living and the non-living, through sensibilities, rhythms, and flows. With this could come, for instance, an openness to experiences of what in posthuman philosophy is called the more-than-human. Posthuman philosophy talks about experience of immersions, intertwinements, interconnectivities, entanglements, and so on, to describe the sensibilities, affects, and affordances that are at stake. Through these new kinds of descriptions, aesthetic experience is understood as inherently relational.

Yuriko Saito has argued for an understanding of an aesthetics of nature that is not focused on the scenic, but instead open to the relational demand imposed by nature. If we consider the aesthetic appreciation of nature as an appreciation of the way in which nature tells its own story through its sensuous qualities, we may account for the asymmetry between art and nature in terms of their aesthetic values.”¹⁴ Saito reveals that environmental aesthetics passes beyond the taste that comes with the appreciation of objects: it is instead an attempt to sense the cycle of life, and the ecological system as such. In this way, aesthetic experience is not about freedom of thought or an expression of the beautiful, but about a new kind of bond: the entanglement between human life and nature. Aesthetic subjectivity today is about producing new forms of relations, perhaps even overcoming the distinction between art and nature, as Timothy Morton has suggested.¹⁵

In this way, there is reason for aesthetics to do away with taste, also in conjunction with ideals such as autonomy and freedom, to conceive of aesthetic subjects as inherently relational, between beings, histories, and regions; and forms of life. Through an aesthetics of relations we are given the opportunity to rethink the way in which we relate to the wide variety of aesthetic phenomena: not only as subjects of judgment, but also as subjects impinged upon by other human beings, and by other forms of life. From this point on we are invited to conceive of an aesthetic subject of relationality. The aesthetic subject of relationality need not fight against Kant, but aspires to a new way of understanding how we may, or may not, “fit” into this world.

- 1 Achille Mbembe, *Brutalism*, trans. Steven Corcoran (Durham: Duke University Press, 2024).
- 2 Peter Osborne, *The Postconceptual Condition* (London: Verso, 2018).
- 3 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluar (London: Hackeett, 1987).
- 4 Richard Shusterman, "The End of Aesthetic Experience," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 55, no. 1. (1997): 29–41; "Aesthetic Experience: From Analysis to Eros," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 64, no. 2 (2006): 217–229.
- 5 Cf. the analysis of Kant's concept of beauty in Fiona Hughes' *Kant's Aesthetic Epistemology: Form and World*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007).
- 6 Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982). See the discussion in Cecilia Sjöholm's *Doing Aesthetics with Arendt: How to See Things* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 68–105.
- 7 Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1990), 91.
- 8 Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, 92.
- 9 Tomohiro Ishizu and Semir Zeki, "Toward A Brain-Based Theory of Beauty," *PLoS ONE* 6, no. 7 (2011): e21852. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0021852.
- 10 Édouard Glissant, *Éthétique Tome 1. Une Nouvelle Région du Mond* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006).
- 11 Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument," *The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (Fall 2003): 282.
- 12 Sylvia Wynter, "Beyond Miranda's Meanings: Un/Silencing the 'Demonic Ground' of Caliban's 'Woman'" in *Out of the Kumbia: Caribbean Women and Literature*, eds. Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1990).
- 13 Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Continuum, 2002).
- 14 Yuriko Saito, "The Aesthetics of Unscenic Nature," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 56, no. 2 (Spring, 1998): 105.
- 15 Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2009).