

Heidi Salaverría  
*The Beauty of Doubting*

*Without exception, men have yet to become themselves.* <sup>1</sup>  
(Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*)

*All human misfortune comes from one thing, which is not knowing how to remain quietly in one room.* <sup>2</sup>  
(Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*)

In an interview from 2013, the comedian Louis CK explains why he doesn't want his daughters to have cell phones. "You need to build an ability to just be yourself and not be doing something. That's what the phones are taking away—the ability to just sit there. That's being a person."<sup>3</sup>

I agree. But, what is so crucial about being able to "just sit there" for being a person? It means being able and willing to listen to the impulses inside and outside of oneself. There are all kinds of impulses, which can be vague, sometimes contradictory, promising or frightening—a lot of different things. However, what those impulses have in common is that you have to *make something out of them* in order to understand them. They are not ready-made, not the consumerist *end* of the production road, but on the contrary, the *beginning* of a train of thought or of an action. So, "to remain quietly in one room" (as Pascal puts it) stands for quite the opposite of passivity and indifference. Instead, it is the starting point of responsibility, critique, and, as Louis CK underlines, of empathy. It is the precondition for developing the courage to stand up for your rights, and for those of others, even if everybody else remains seated.

In other words, *to sit through quiet moments with oneself means to be able to doubt*: To initiate thinking and acting by making something out of those undefined impulses, to answer them as if they were questions—which they are. Only that those questions aren't distinct and defined, like being asked what time it is, or how to get to the train station.

Specific questions seek specific answers, so that you can pursue a defined end and then close the case, for example, getting to the right train

station in time. Instead, the unspecific questions of doubting open up new cases and reveal something unpredicted—for example, if you attend an art exhibition and start wondering about the political implications of time. In order to answer doubts, you need to understand what they ask in the first place. And in order to understand them, you need to be able to endure uncertainty: Not knowing what's next without giving up right away, because you are not yet sure what it means. Losing the ability to "just sit there" means losing the ability to doubt.

In the mentioned interview, Louis CK describes a situation in which he is sitting in his car and suddenly the radio plays an old song, which stirs up all kinds of feelings. His first impulse is:

*... Gotta get the phone and write "hi" to like fifty people. [...] Then I said, you know what, don't. Just be sad. Just let the sadness, stand in the way of it, and let it hit you like a truck. And I let it come, and I just started to feel "oh my God," and I pulled over and I just cried [...]. I cried so much. And it was beautiful. Sadness is poetic. You're lucky to live sad moments. And then I had happy feelings. Because when you let yourself feel sad, your body has antibodies, it has happiness that comes rushing in to meet the sadness. So I was grateful to feel sad, and then I met it with true, profound happiness. It was such a trip.* <sup>4</sup>

For a moment, Louis CK didn't really know what was happening to him, and he could have avoided it by writing messages on his phone. Instead, he endured the unsettling situation, which turned out to be beautiful. Or, to be more precise, this uncertain moment already contained beauty, the beauty of doubting.

In this essay I am going to explore some aspects of the beauty of doubting, which form part of what I call the *Aesthetic of Doubts*.<sup>5</sup> (If you are not interested in the academic placement of the theory and a short summary, skip the following part to *Certainty-Pressure*.) As far as I can see, an Aesthetic

<sup>1</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (London/New York: Routledge, 1966), 278.

<sup>2</sup> Blaise Pascal, *Pascal's Pensées; or, Thoughts on Religion*, ed. and trans. Gertrude Burford Rawlings (Mt. Vernon, NY: Peter Pauper Press, 1900), 65.

<sup>3</sup> Louis CK, interview with Conan O'Brien, *Conan*, TBS, September 20, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5HbYScltflc> (accessed January 15, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> For a detailed critique, see: Heidi Salaverría, "Enjoying the Doubtful. On Transformative Suspensions in Pragmatist Aesthetics," in: *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy* 4, no. 1 (2012), <http://lnx.journalofpragmatism.eu/?p=571> (accessed January 15, 2017).

of Doubts—surprisingly—hasn’t been written yet. There is a lot of writing more broadly on doubt and uncertainty, including the long tradition of philosophical skepticism and the philosophical tradition of pragmatism, with which I strongly sympathize. Nevertheless, neither skepticism nor pragmatism deals explicitly with the aesthetics of doubting. The core idea of pragmatism, founded by Charles S. Peirce and William James, later extended by John Dewey and others, is the *ongoing tension between doubts and beliefs*.<sup>6</sup> While many of these fascinating analyses encompass fundamental questions of epistemological, moral, and political nature, it was Dewey who first, and most explicitly, articulated the field of pragmatist aesthetics. Richard Rorty and Richard Shusterman expand the pragmatist aesthetic field both by inquiring into Dewey’s insights more deeply while at the same time overcoming some of his limitations.<sup>7</sup> While Dewey prioritizes the holistic *aesthetic experience as art*, Rorty carries out the (much contested) linguistic turn of pragmatist aesthetics and at the same time stresses the more conflictive side of aesthetic experiences (I’ll get back to that). Shusterman in turn diagnoses the limitations and contradictions of a purely linguistic concept of aesthetics and, for that matter, of philosophy as a whole, while showing the crucial role the body plays in aesthetic experiences.<sup>8</sup> Although I feel close to Shusterman’s theory in a lot of aspects—particularly to his emphasis on pleasure, especially in political terms, implying his critique of the *anaesthetization of aesthetics*—I don’t see an explicit treatment of aesthetic doubts, meaning the aesthetic range of doubting, including the pleasure it brings. And although pragmatists always and rightly criticize the artificial dualism in many Western traditions, strangely enough they maintain the dualism of beliefs and doubts, in which doubts are identified with the unpleasant, even with suffering.

In art theory it’s a little different: Art historian Richard Shiff explores doubts at length in a recent

book, and he specifically examines pragmatist philosophy, questioning its presumed opposition of doubts and beliefs. In contrast, he proposes that there is a fluid transition between the two, with which I agree.<sup>8</sup> In a related article, Shiff wonders: “If all thoughts and visions amount to beliefs, doubt becomes a very weak form of belief. In other words, we experience our doubt as a nuance of the same cognitive emotion we know as belief. So if doubt and belief have a share in the same emotion, what is this feeling?”<sup>10</sup> I have a similar question.

Having laid out this backdrop, I am going to propose some answers to the question of what the feeling of aesthetic doubts consists of and argue for the importance of doubting. Given the complexity of this terrain, it is worth taking a moment to outline the progression of ideas that will appear in the pages to follow. To begin, I will start off from the opposite side, namely by turning to the problem of certainty-pressure with its underlying *will to certainty*. In doing so, I will discuss Rorty’s pragmatist thinking, as well as other insights by Pierre Bourdieu, Theodor Adorno, Judith Shklar, Emmanuel Levinas, and Judith Butler. In this context, I am going to analyze two works by the artist Martha Wilson that formed part of the exhibition *Between the Ticks of the Watch*. These works dealt with the problem of identity, which, from my point of view, has a lot to do with the conflict between doubts and the will to certainty. Against a dominant tendency in poststructuralist approaches, it is indispensable to hold on to an idea of the self (or subject) that does not merely act or undergo transformations out of *lack* and *deficiency*<sup>11</sup> but instead, I argue, out of the *fullness of enjoyable doubts*. These kinds of doubts fill the space between uncritical identitarian affirmations inculcated by society, on one hand, and desperation, on the other. In contrast to what could be called *negative aesthetics*, I will unfold aspects of a *rebellious beauty*, indebted to Plato’s concept of Eros, which can be interpreted in political terms that defy the current

6 See pivotal texts such as Charles S. Peirce, “The Fixation of Belief,” *Popular Science Monthly* (November 1877), 1–15; William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (1907, repr. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1981); and John Dewey, “The Quest for Certainty,” in: *Later Works, 1925–1953*, vol. 4, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984). More contemporary developments by Hilary Putnam, Stanley Cavell, and James Conant shift focus to the tension between the metaphysical and the ordinary, while thinkers like Richard Bernstein and Cornel West explore the political dimensions of pragmatism.

7 For a discussion of the pragmatist tension between doubt and belief with respect to the agency of the self in the works of Peirce, James, Dewey, Putnam, Cavell, Conant, Rorty, and Shusterman, see: Heidi Salaverria, *Spielräume des Selbst. Pragmatismus und kreatives Handeln* (Locating the Self: Pragmatism and Creative Agency) (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2007).

“certainty climate” of Western thinking.<sup>12</sup> As you’ll see, this resonates in the idea of a doubtful self, traced by Augustine, especially in his uncertain love affair with his God, but contrasts with Descartes’ influential, but problematic approach to doubts and certainty. More specifically, Descartes’ idea of a god’s eye view and the notion of a dualist universe are two foundation stones of our current monstrous phantasm of certainty (sorry René). Looking elsewhere, I will propose that we should try to fall in love, time and again, with *the other* of certainty—which means other people (who will always remain partly ungraspable), as well as otherness in the sense of the not-yet-understood. Hegel, Simone de Beauvoir, and William James are valuable touchstones for this line of thinking.

Kant claims that every experience of the beautiful needs to be free of any striving, that is, completely disinterested, a claim that, in different ways, has been contested by Dewey, Hannah Arendt, and Jacques Rancière. I will suggest that there is in fact some kind of *aesthetic striving* that consists in judging aesthetically by doubting, and more precisely in the *transformative pleasure of doubting*. In this context, I am going to discuss the political implications of aesthetic doubts, a set of concerns that might be more pressing than ever.

### Certainty-Pressure

Doubting is always ambivalent: between suffering and pleasure, between undefined impulses and defined thoughts. Nonetheless, a widespread misunderstanding of our times is to equate doubts with suffering, which is why doubts often are being avoided. And one of the reasons why doubting is conceived as painful, almost as offensive, is this: it is being mistaken for a specific one-dimensional question (should I leave my husband? Should I buy the larger SUV model?). But when you expect a defined answer to be im-

mediately at hand for your doubt (as if it was there all along, waiting to be picked up) and it doesn’t show up, when, on top of that, there is nobody but yourself to answer it, then in fact doubting leads to suffering. This mistake is being made because of a tragically misguided idea of the self.

Conceptually, as well as in everyday practices, nowadays the general expectation is to display a self-certain, determined posture and to act correspondingly. Doubt is considered mainly an obstacle to avoid (or to be rapidly overcome) in order to maintain a strong position in the world, towards oneself and towards others. The position of the doubter is seen as a position of weakness, accompanied by suffering, exclusion of recognition, and the inhibition to act decisively. The mainstream climate in politics and in public debates, as well as in private life, is one of a vague, but nevertheless powerful pressure—pressure to be sure of one’s own position, to know what one wants, to come up, at best instantly, with solutions to given problems, to have an opinion on any topic at stake. In short, it is the fantasy of inhabiting a god’s eye view.

Of course, as we aren’t gods, and this climate of certainty-pressure does not resolve any doubts or make them disappear, it only *suppresses* them. Suppressed doubts suppress judgment-formation as well. As a result, common sense and the public media are marked by an alarming lack of a thoughtful and responsible formation of judgment, one of the most precious capacities of human beings. With the increasing velocity of digital communication and information flow, we are even more in need of cultivating our opinion-formation; instead the increase of information is accompanied by a decrease of adequate coping. The consequence is the prevalence of a posture which could be called the *pro-con-whatever posture*: either being instantly in favor of or instantly against something, or, if neither one of those options seems fit, not to care at all—which, in the end, amounts to the contra position,

8 Shusterman even coins a new term for the body’s role in aesthetics—“somaesthetics.” See “Somaesthetics: A Disciplinary Proposal,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 57, no. 3 (Summer, 1999): 299–313.

9 Richard Shiff, *Doubt. Theories of Modernism and Postmodernism in the Visual Arts* (New York: Routledge, 2007); Theodore Prescott, “An Aesthetic of Doubt?,” *American Arts Quarterly* 27, no. 3 (Summer 2010): NP.

10 Richard Shiff, “As It Feels,” *Chinati Newsletter* 19 (2014): 58, <https://www.chinati.org/pdf/newsletter19.pdf> (accessed January 15, 2017).

11 The notions of lack and deficiency run through the writing of, for instance, Jacques Lacan, Jean-François Lyotard, and Jacques Derrida, all drawing on Heidegger.

12 I would describe those approaches as negative aesthetics, which focus on aesthetic experiences of something unattainable (and therefore negative), as for example the sublime in Lyotard’s writing. In the chapter “The other way around: Negative Aesthetics” of this paper, I will show why and in which sense negative aesthetics are problematic.

except for the fact that the manifested indifference doesn't even bother saying "no" and saves the effort of taking responsibility. The *pro-con-whatever posture* seems to suppose that being impermeable and self-satisfied leads to success and happiness. And, at first sight, it in fact does seem to lead to success, as this posture makes people functional within most of the given globalized economic and political systems. However, it represents a functionality in the sense of the functional alcoholic who, viewed from the outside, succeeds in behaving as expected, while, viewed from the inside, fights a war against all kinds of desires and doubts which, having been cut off from conscious reflection, become less and less controllable, until one day the system collapses.

Repressed doubts and desires turn into aggression and exponentially increase the violence that originally caused them. This mechanism not only applies to the psychological microstructure of the individual, it applies even more to the macrostructure of societies and nations. The more impermeable a nation claims to be—the stronger the fictitious "we," set in opposition to the "others," whether by white supremacists, Islamic fundamentalists, or seemingly civilized nationalists, like the German party AFD—the more likely a collapse of civilization is to be expected.

Underneath it all, this posture is nurtured by a profound fear. Fear that anything but certainty amounts to nothing and renders one's existence worthless. If you are not determined in your own position, fear seems to ask, isn't everything just random? If there is no absolute evidence, isn't everything just a joke? This either-or claustrophobia is partly a remnant of Christianity, and partly it reflects our deeply ingrained Cartesianism—namely to feel and to think in a binary logic: body/soul, male/female, black/white, nature/culture, good/bad, yes/no, everything/nothing.

The translation of Christianity's fear of God into our own times is this: if one does not partake in infinite certainty, one ends up living in the

hell of insignificance. One's own being, seen from this perspective, will then effectively amount to nothing. In a strange way, the *pro-con-whatever posture* holds the self captive in some kind of purgatory, trying to avoid the role of the doubting lost soul at any price by adopting the position of a god's eye view (instantly knowing what is certain) while simultaneously being the devoted believer desperately trying to know what God would want without daring to ask. As these two roles are completely irreconcilable, an inner war (of course not acknowledged) is inevitable and unsolvable.

Denying doubts and denying the value of doubts is disastrous, because unchanging and indubitable identity is a fiction that can only be established and maintained through structural, indirect, or direct violence. Instead, it seems less violent, more realistic, and more fruitful to acknowledge that persons are living organisms, as much as political systems, science, language, and relations are. These living organisms constantly alter. Trying to fix them into static positions is like cutting off every branch a tree grows. If not shaped in a friendly and very skillful manner—as in the art of bonsai—the result will be a crippled plant with very low life expectancy. Also the question would remain: Who should be the bonsai artist cutting our tree?<sup>13</sup>

However, we aren't bonsai trees; the thirst of doubt is never going to be quenched by the finalized conclusions of others. Simply because the answer to your doubt does not yet exist, that answer awaits being originated, being owned by you. This is why by avoiding doubts, beauty is being avoided as well. To experience beauty means to feel and understand new ways of locating myself in the world. It makes aspects of my connection to the world—beforehand unknown or vague—graspable. Or as Kant puts it: "Beautiful things indicate that human beings find the world to be a place suited to them."<sup>14</sup> Again, not to *conform* to the given (cutting the branches of one's own tree), but to imagine the world as a more livable place. In this sense, the beauty of

13 Part of this paper has been previously published in: Heidi Salaverría, "The Eros of Doubting," *Women in Philosophical Counseling*, eds. Luisa de Paula, et al. (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2015).

14 Immanuel Kant, XVI, 127, no. 1820a, in: Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, ed. Ronald Beiner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 30, trans. modified.

doubting would be, in the words of Marilyn Frye, “a sort of flirtation with meaninglessness—[...] trying to plumb abysses which are generally agreed not to exist.”<sup>15</sup> That could be an important first step to taking political action. And while at least the illusion of certainty can be maintained by buying insurance policies, beauty (as well as happiness) is not a purchasable commodity. In order to get there, you need to endure doubting, because this is how *you get to know who you are and how the world could be a place suited to you.*

“The thing is,” Louis CK concludes, “because we don’t want that first bit of sad, we push it away with a little phone or a jack-off or food. You never feel *completely* sad or *completely* happy, you just feel *kinda satisfied* with your product, and then you die. So that’s why I don’t want to get a phone for my kids.”<sup>16</sup> For the sake of avoiding that “first bit of sad,” a whole market segment of advice literature has been established, creating the illusion that there is a solution to every problem, that there are experts who know with certainty how to resolve every individual doubt. Advice is fine (one could call philosophy advice literature), as long as it doesn’t treat loneliness, love, or death like train stations or car models—just a quick stop along the way or something to be replaced with an easy upgrade.

### **Aesthetic Cruelty, Dirty Doubts**

The brutality of the *pro-con-whatever posture* has led to a compensatory movement that could be called the *all-in-one posture* (as in all-in-one shampoo and conditioner), which has been mistakenly assigned to the idea of beauty. When *pro-con-whatever* fails, even after consulting advice literature on how to decrease weight while increasing income, happiness, and eternal love, beauty comes into play. Or better said, a caricature of beauty. The *all-in-one posture* likes to say things like: “There is a time for everything” and “everything happens for a reason,” generally speaking, statements that use a lot of “always,” “everything,” “energy,” “cosmic,”

and “presence.” The beautiful is being transmuted into an ugly mixture of false metaphysics and decoration, wiping away every doubt and, with it, all that’s left of human freedom, which potentially was to be found in the experience of beauty. As Randy Cohen once put it: “Incidentally, when you hear a voice that says it’s the universe speaking, a bit of skepticism is appropriate: it may well be a crank call from your self-interest.”<sup>17</sup>

The *all-in-one posture* in the end measures up to self-interested self-assertion, which may display even more brutality than the *pro-con-whatever posture*, because superstitious belief is being used to create false certainty, to create the fiction of inhabiting a god-like position. The position of the individual—always doubtful—is being traded for the position of a psychic receiving messages from the cosmic force of fate, which of course is always right. You don’t even have to worry anymore if you’re pro or con; the universe will tell you. John Dewey was right when in 1929 he claimed that a “quest for certainty that is universal, applying to everything, is a compensatory perversion.”<sup>18</sup> The anxious ambition of a quest nowadays has transformed into a steely *will to certainty*. People act as if they *deserve* certainty, as if somebody else has taken it away from them, as if it is their property. The well-known territorial attitude—which has already brought so much devastation to the outer world—has colonized, in yet another dialectical twist, the inner life.

From that perspective, what could be more beautiful than certainty? And what could grant more certainty than an *all-in-one-experience* of the beautiful? Beauty then, as well as pleasure and happiness, is considered inseparable from certainty. If you assume that losing certainty (and with it, the certainty of happiness and beauty) means somebody has stolen it from you, the inverted argument is: People have to give it back to me, because they owe me!

15 Marilyn Frye, *Politics of Reality* (New York: Trumansburg/New York, 1983), 154.

16 Louis CK, interview with Conan O’Brien, 2013.

17 Randy Cohen, “Impersonating a Reviewer,” *New York Times Magazine*, July 30, 2010, [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/01/magazine/01FOB-Ethicist-t.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/01/magazine/01FOB-Ethicist-t.html?_r=0) (accessed January 16, 2017). I am grateful to Dr. Laura Odom for pointing me toward this article, and also for lots of productive discussions and advice.

18 John Dewey, “The Quest for Certainty,” 182. “Against the Will to Certainty,” [www.theorieblog.de](http://www.theorieblog.de), articles on the centenary of the publication of John Dewey’s *Democracy and Education*, Berlin 2016. (“Im Zweifel unfertig denken: Einspruch gegen den Willen zur Gewissheit” in Zum hundertjährigen Erscheinen von John Dewey’s *Demokratie und Erziehung*.)

And this is exactly what is taking place in the *all-in-one* universe. Beauty and pleasure have become some sort of *retribution*. Others have to pay for it. Imagine for a moment a science fiction scenario in which everyone partakes in absolute certain knowledge. It would be completely useless—not the knowledge part, but the certainty part. Certainty is a feature of social distinction. It thrives on exclusivity. Democratic certainty or even mass-certainty is unthinkable. Exclusive groups with elitist leaders would rapidly form to challenge the deceiving certainty and claim the new certainty, the only real one, likely starting wars and killing each other. Tragically, the second part of this science fiction scenario is not far away from what is happening today.

Since certainty is linked to social distinction, this applies to a misguided idea of beauty as well: the dangerous tendency to conflate beauty and aesthetic experiences with gratifications (acknowledgment, applause) for oneself or for those one identifies with, which simultaneously and indirectly implies the humiliation of others (veiled to varying degrees). Globally standardized television formats like *The Voice* thrive on the lust for watching people expose themselves in front of an audience, and especially in front of a jury of acclaimed experts, who decide if their voice is any good. By the way, it is no coincidence that singing contests have proven to be the most popular “reality” show format: This is because singing is considered to reveal the soul, the innermost life of a person. No format has become more popular than exposing that supposed innermost life to a situation in which humiliation can tip over into praise, from one second to another, and vice versa. It’s the postmodern version of a Roman gladiator fight, in which people were publicly slaughtered like animals, or devoured by them. Civilized as we are nowadays, it suffices to see someone’s inner life being disemboweled publicly. (Although that’s not completely true: a lot of Roman-style violence has

never stopped, especially in the certainty-wars we are witnessing today in, for example, Syria).

Cruelty is only one step away, and in the end it comes down to forcing someone to surrender this innermost life to the torturer, who—somehow—feels entitled to own it, as if the other had stolen it from him. But, even taken to that extreme, what is it the torturer wants from his victim? The nutritional value of sadism is the *uncertainty of the victim*. Sadism consists in appropriating, for one’s own pleasure, the outcry, the humiliation, and the fear of death of somebody else. And the pleasure is even more pronounced if the despair has been *caused by the perpetrator*. A big part of that infernal joy consists in being able to bring into being all kinds of horrendous uncertainties in another person—to *control with certainty the uncertainty of the other*.

But the real motive behind sadism is, as strange as it seems and in a very distorted way, to receive empathy from the victim. Something like: “I want you to feel what I once felt, and I force you to do so, since I don’t believe anymore in the possibility of feeling that way myself on voluntary terms (because I fear the uncertainty of that bargain more than anything)”. Of course, this isn’t a justification, it is an explanation. Justification and indictment, reward and punishment, guilt and sadistic *Schadenfreude* form part of this violent world of fictitious certainty. And whereas the cruelty of a sadist is applied to others, the cruelty of guilt is applied to oneself. In the end, the deepest root of this violent will to certainty is the repressed fear of death—the never-answered doubt in the question of how long one’s own life is going to continue. So, it seems quite clear that there is an element of sadism in the will to certainty, always needing to feed on the proof of the doubtfulness of someone else’s existence in order to banish its own.

Some tribes in Papua New Guinea believe that every death is a killing. If someone dies, it is because someone else, from another nearby tribe, has put an evil spell on that person. To atone for that death,

the allegedly guilty person has to be killed and partly eaten, which is considered a way to reconcile and to bring back parts of that stolen life (although now it's the turn for the neighbor tribe to atone for its victim, etc.). The mechanism behind the will to certainty is the same.

Beauty doesn't fit into that mechanism. Nevertheless it reappears (in a perverted way) in the *all-in-one* posture, though with specific class differences. The sadistic ingredient is evident in the vulgar taste that finds satisfaction in TV gladiator-fight-like formats. The upper classes may claim to savor a more refined taste for rather opaque and—for the uninitiated—even incomprehensible art, but this isn't less sadistic, it simply displays the ingredient differently. As Pierre Bourdieu powerfully demonstrated in his sociological field studies in the nineteen sixties and seventies, the purportedly free and refined aesthetic judgment turns out to be strongly influenced by the historical and economic situation, and hence by social class. Exquisite taste, from this point of view, becomes a tool of distinction, used to signal superiority towards lower classes.

*This affirmation of power over a dominated necessity always implies a claim to a legitimate superiority over those who, because they cannot assert the same contempt for contingencies in gratuitous luxury and conspicuous consumption, remain dominated by ordinary interests and urgencies.*<sup>19</sup>

The freedom of the elitist aesthetic consists in having distanced itself from the earthly worries for the necessity of water, food, and shelter, and, as Bourdieu puts it, in showing contempt for these contingencies. Psychologically speaking, this contempt is a projection of the abject and therefore disintegrated parts of the self: In order to keep the “vulgar” and “needy” outside of oneself (and avoid guilt over the fact that the lower classes are forced to provide for the freedom of the upper classes),

one needs them to represent “neediness” to make it contemptible.<sup>20</sup> But at the same time, since that contempt would dismantle their own need for projection, another justification has to be found for that process. Like the *divine right of kings* before the French revolution, the aristocratic taste for pure beauty has been elevated to a transcendental level. It is not augmenting its grandeur by depriving other classes, it simply owns it by the *transcendental right of the free mind*, which functions like a secular translation of royalty's *divine right* into the minds of the upper classes. (By the way, this is how patriarchy works as well). As Bourdieu outlines, those who have access to the sphere of the purely aesthetic realm, then, purportedly simply possess more freedom, they possess more humanity and less animality than others.

Hence, it is not the “lower and dirty” part of identity that endangers the aspired-to “higher and purer” aesthetic experience, it is the other way around: the “pure” experience of beauty is a tool to keep the “dirty” part of identity artificially outside. And, of course, the “pure” part of this formulation represents the security of certainty, whereas the “dirty” part represents doubts. The triumph of pure certainty requires keeping the dirty doubt at a distance, but *not at too much of a distance*. As the tribes in Papua New Guinea need the *nearby tribes* to be guilty for people dying in their own tribe, in order to keep their innocence and cosmological certainty clean, aristocratic taste needs *nearby vulgarity* to distinguish itself from. The logic of distinction works the same way everywhere: someone from a lower class won't envy the Kardashians, but instead eyes the neighbor's new TV-set. Thus, in accordance with that logic, satisfaction lies in having a car model one or two steps up from the one the neighbor has—because if the car is better than that, one will probably move to another neighborhood, and start having new distinction problems.

19 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinctions. A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984), 56.

20 For more on that topic, see: Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York/London: Routledge, 1966).



## Art as Retribution? Martha Wilson

The artist Martha Wilson captured this problem ironically in a video performance from 1972, named *Art sucks*, which shows her eating a photograph of her partner.<sup>21</sup> She describes it the following way:

*Art-making is a process which sucks identity from individuals who are close to it, but not participating themselves. The only way to recover identity is to make art yourself. In early June, 1972, I captured the soul of Richards Jarden in a color photograph. As soon as I ingest the photograph I will recover the identity that was drained from me in the past, and we will be of equal power.*<sup>22</sup>

The art historian Jayne Wark comments: “Wilson’s methodical, piece by piece, ingesting of the photograph is not without a certain ironic violence, for she metaphorically cannibalizes her partner’s soul, now “captured” in the photograph. This is art-making as retribution, since the outcome involves reappropriating what Jarden had previously depleted from Wilson, thus equalizing their artistic powers.”<sup>23</sup>

Although the *phantasm* of the self-certain, autonomous and impermeable ego has been proven to be dangerous and fictitious long ago, it still persists. And it persists most powerfully in its distinctive function—of class, race, and sex. This idea of masculine identity as self-certain, autonomous, and impermeable has always been dependent on, “draining” the complementary, equally fictitious idea of feminine identity as uncertain, heteronomous, and permeable, thereby proving the ostensibly exclusive male autonomy wrong from the beginning. Although this mechanism isn’t identical to the discriminations of class and race, it works in a similar way, by setting up oppositions based on implicit superiority. By symbolically cannibalizing the soul of her partner, Wilson reverses this described process, with which she struggled in a double way—as a

woman *and* as a female artist, who didn’t count as equal to her male colleagues. Looking at the world today, her critique hasn’t lost its force. There hasn’t really been a fundamental paradigm change since then, and this applies not only to the art world, but also to the world generally (including the academic world of philosophy). However, as Wilson represents a hybrid figure in between both worlds (in her words: the draining and the drained part), she needs to perform a *double movement*: *Criticizing the society*, and in particular the art world, of which she forms a part (and yet does not), *while at the same time seeking recognition within that world* (because otherwise it would lose sense for her to make art for the public). Furthermore, the criteria brought to bear on whether or not her art is “good art” are (at least partly) a reflection of the unjust and arbitrary society she is criticizing.

So how do we know, generally, which of the criteria applied to judge a work of art are or are not partial or tainted by some distorted worldview? How does *she* know? How do *we* even know today looking at her art, if our view isn’t still biased (taking into account, that we are living, as Adorno pessimistically phrased it, in a historical context of “total delusion”)?<sup>24</sup> One could say, history in the long run will tell—but then again, how do we know that? For example, a particular artwork may be destroyed in a war having never gotten noticed by the public; or we may simply overlook works, because we lack the sensitivity to “get” them.

We witness examples, tragic enough, of artists misjudged by their time, or who caused scandals at the beginning, but were later acclaimed by posterity, so much so that sometimes the pendulum swings back, and one starts to wonder if too much praise isn’t misleading as well. I wonder sometimes how an impressionist painting by Monet could have caused such a tumult at his first exhibition, whereas nowadays you will find prints of Monets (if it isn’t Van Goghs) hanging in almost every waiting room of a dentist. (As a result, Monet paintings,

21 *Art Sucks* was not included in the *Between the Ticks of the Watch* exhibition.

22 Martha Wilson, *Art Sucks*, 1972, performance in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada, <http://www.marthawilson.com/videos.php?video=art-sucks>.

23 Jayne Wark, “Martha Wilson: Not Taking It at Face Value,” *Camera Obscura* 15, no. 3 (2000): 15.

24 Which is one possible way to translate Adorno’s “totalen Verblendungszusammenhang”: Richard Wolin, “Utopia, Mimesis, and Reconciliation: A Redemptive Critique of Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory,” *Representations*, no. 32 (Autumn, 1990), 33–49.

nowadays, can cause phantom tooth pains, a tumult slightly different than the one caused originally.)

What we don't know is about those artists we missed. An extreme way to put it, following Richard Rorty, would be to say: "Socialization ... goes all the way down, and who gets to do the socializing is often a matter of who manages to kill whom first."<sup>25</sup> Socialization surely has led generations to ignore the works of some artists, and more generally, the potential of certain persons: what an incredible loss of potential, let alone the immeasurable suffering of those who, if not killed right away, are, as Judith Butler puts it, derealized by society! She asks: "Those who are unreal have, in a sense, already suffered the violence of derealization. What, then, is the relation between violence and those lives considered 'unreal'? Does violence effect that unreality?"<sup>26</sup>

Of course Rorty was exaggerating, because he knew that socialization might go all the way down, but it doesn't *determine* everything. And he was trying to provoke doubt, as Wilson does. A good provocation, however, is always simultaneously an invitation as well. The door needs to remain open. If it is closed, you end up in some alternative certainty—a rival dogmatism. Surely, not everybody hears the invitation, and Rorty himself for a while became a scapegoat in academia, but that's a different story. So maybe it's better to argue in terms of questions, as Butler often does, leaving the answer, and, thus, the responsibility to us.

Notwithstanding its fictitious character, the binary certainty model has been very powerful and continues to be so. It seems very difficult to think, to feel, and to act outside of this frame, as on a deeper level, our western philosophy and everyday thinking is pervaded by this violent dualist paradigm. The only way to overcome it is by trying to get in between those dualisms, as the title of this exhibition—*Between the Ticks of the Watch*—poetically says. Or, as Dewey once said: "Thinking is secreted in the interstices of habits."<sup>27</sup>

This applies as well to Wilson's art: change is initiated in the "hidden power" that lays "in the gap between the ease with which the authorial status of artist was granted to her male peers, while her own status as such remained dubious. In other words, Wilson's own tautological declaration of herself as 'confident artist' was in response to her realization that the ostensibly neutral identity of the artist in fact concealed the alignment of that identity with the prerogatives of masculinity."<sup>28</sup>

When I see a car approach, I automatically presume a man is driving the car and not a woman. It's not a very transcendental insight, but it shows how powerfully the binary and patriarchal structures still work. Neutral is male. If I listen to a band and the drummer is a woman, I will notice (I will even hope that she plays well, as if to restore or save or establish the dignity of women in music, but then again, that is pretty sexist, too; why wouldn't she play well? To get there, to be sure, she needed to be at least as good as her male competitors or be extremely good looking, from the point of view of Western beauty standards.) I have been thinking about these structures probably since I was a teenager, and I am trying to be very aware of my automatic reactions and their underlying sexism and racism. And still, there they are. If I attend a philosophical conference, and the keynote speaker is a woman, I will be surprised—and glad. If there is an artist and he is black, I will be surprised—and glad—but what does that say about me and about our societies? Everywhere I go, whether to a business, a museum, a conference, an airplane, or even a political group, I expect (without consciously thinking about it, let alone agreeing with it) to find white males in the leading positions. And the problem is, I am mostly right.

In her work, Wilson exposes these problems. So, as neutral is still implicitly considered to be male and white, every woman is being marked and categorized, as in Wilson's work *A Portfolio of Models: The Earth-Mother, The Goddess, The Housewife*,

25 Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 185.

26 Judith Butler, *Precarious Life. The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York/London: Verso, 2004), 33.

27 John Dewey, "The Public and its Problems," in: *Later Works, 1925-1953*, vol. 2, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), 335.

28 Jayne Wark, "Martha Wilson," 10.

*The Lesbian, The Professional, The Working Girl* (1974). When Angela Merkel became chancellor in Germany, for at least one year people didn't stop talking about her hair and about her figure. Even educated people who should know better added their voice to that gloating choir, instead of simply stating their disagreement with her political positions. This never happened with previous chancellors like Helmut Kohl, although he was significantly more overweight. I don't even want to know what people have said and written about Barack Obama.

So, on one hand, the world of art can become an important space in between dualisms, and therefore act as a forum to address problems, especially those which have to do with our entrenched habits of watching and not seeing, not noticing, and automatically judging, etc. On the other hand, the art world is part of our world and its structures. As Bourdieu has argued, in some ways it is *particularly* the distinguished taste of the upper classes that is instrumentalized to reinforce existing hierarchies, and more perfidiously so, since the aesthetic, authentic, and free judgment can serve as a disguise for self-interested social positioning, by veiling its self-assertion behind a seemingly transcendental freedom, detached from worldly affairs. From Bourdieu's point of view, the homeopathic dose of sadism (which I described earlier) consists in exclusivity, administered with the champagne served at distinguished vernissages, which exclude those who seemingly don't have it in them to participate.

*The tastes of freedom can only assert themselves as such in relation to the tastes of necessity, which are thereby brought to the level of the aesthetic and so defined as vulgar. This claim to aristocracy is less likely to be contested, because the relation of the 'pure,' 'disinterested' disposition to the conditions which make it possible, i.e., the material conditions of existence which are rarest because most freed from economic*

*necessity, has every chance of passing unnoticed. The most 'classifying' privilege thus has the privilege of appearing to be the most natural one.* 29

Of course, this is a caricature as well, because neither does this entail a determination through social classes, nor does it signal the nonexistence of genuine aesthetic experiences of beauty *altogether*. The argument seems overstretched, if one supposes that class, economy, society, etc., *determine* one's own judgment, that therefore no subjective judgment is possible. It seems likewise overstretched to reduce every artwork to a reflection of a social status. The cultivation of rather intellectual aesthetic works, labeled as high art, and their reception is not inherently problematic, but it is because of its implications: namely the exclusions, and the consolidation of those exclusions, of social classes and of parts of one's own self. This is why the notion of *aesthetic doubts* seems so fundamental to me, as "*cruel beauty*" *only works on the basis of fictitious certainty*. Sadism and aesthetic doubts simply are incompatible.

### **The Other Way Around: Negative Aesthetics**

Contemporary art more and more addresses political problems of exclusion, class differences, and discrimination. One could even argue, against Bourdieu (in that respect) and with Rorty, that art can "help us attend to the springs of cruelty in ourselves, as well as to the fact of its occurrence in areas where we had not noticed it." 30

Still, what I find remarkable in the observations of some thinkers of the middle of the twentieth century is how they point out the danger inherent in our search for autonomy. The modern and so promising idea of freedom and autonomy, which enabled the formation of democracies, can so easily turn against itself. This insight has been most strongly diagnosed by Judith Shklar (who influenced Rorty), Emmanuel Levinas, and Theodor W. Adorno—and nowadays by Judith

29 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinctions: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984), 56.

30 Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 95.

Butler. Shklar got to the heart of it by saying that the most important criterion of a liberal is this: someone who believes that cruelty is the worst thing we do.<sup>31</sup> And Levinas, who had been the only survivor of the Holocaust in his family, incessantly stressed that real autonomy needs to put the other before the self.

*The relationship with the other precedes the auto-affection of certainty, to which one always tries to reduce communication. But communication would be impossible if it should have to begin within the ego, a free subject, to whom every other would be only a limitation that invites war, domination, precaution, and information. To communicate is indeed to open oneself, but the openness is not complete if it is on the watch for recognition.*<sup>32</sup>

It is, then, uncertainty or doubtfulness that forms the basis of a real connection and communication with others—and with oneself! The precondition of empathic communication is to leave out the ego. This doesn't mean to violently repress and prohibit one's own needs. On the contrary, the real needs below pride, eagerness of recognition, and envy, work in a different key and yearn for something else. The idea that beauty and happiness are linked to the ego is a fatal misunderstanding. It confuses certainty with beauty, happiness, and connection.

And this applies not only to the relationship with others, but also to the relationship with oneself, simply because we are inhabited by others (although Levinas probably wouldn't agree to that). The self doesn't think and feel in unison. Sometimes it is a duet, sometimes a choir, many times out of tune. Aesthetic experiences enable the self to get its choir *in tune*, by learning a new piece nobody of the choir is yet sure of. If it were for the self-certain ego to conduct that inner choir, nobody would even start singing. In aesthetic experiences, we can feel the certainty-confusion of the ego (which seeks recognition, triumph over others, etc.) and then let

go of it and see what the choir does.

Viewed from this perspective, art plays an important role in “warning us against the tendencies to cruelty inherent in searches for autonomy ... helping us see the way in which the private pursuit of aesthetic bliss produces cruelty,” helping us to “get *inside* cruelty, and thereby” to “articulate the dimly felt connection between art and torture.”<sup>33</sup>

Now, because of that inherent danger of misguided autonomy, a whole tradition of aesthetic theory developed after the Second World War and started to explore the possibilities of *negative aesthetics* as a critique, maybe most prominently articulated in Adorno's much-cited (and often misunderstood) dictum that “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.”<sup>34</sup> To write about aesthetics in an affirmative way, even more so about pleasure, simply seemed cynical. And it was, and is, important to stress that, in a specific way and context. At the same time—and I think that diagnosis applies less to Adorno and more to Jean-François Lyotard and Jacques Derrida and the theories they inspired—one runs the danger of reproducing some structural violence, *by claiming the certainty of the negativity!*

We need to keep alert against all forms of necessitarian thinking—that is, a thinking outlining structures that necessarily dominate the self (be it the Lacanian lack, Lyotard's incommensurability and the idea of the sublime necessarily exceeding us, or Derrida's *différance*). One main reason is that necessitarian approaches tend to describe the subject in terms of an *irreducible deficiency*. This tendency towards an ever evanescent, and always somehow violently subjected subject reflects and partly reproduces the societal violence of the dualism of certainty. Not only that, it also makes the problem of agency seem increasingly unsolvable, other than to be content (in a very sad way) with the anonymous iterations and post-structural ruptures of language,

31 Judith Shklar, *Ordinary Vices* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1984), 43f., Chapter I, *passim*.

32 Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht and Boston, MA: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1978), 119.

33 Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 34.

34 Theodor W. Adorno, “Cultural Criticism and Society,” *Prisms* (Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press 1983), 34.

the unpredictability of discourses and the mishaps speech-acts might offer as the only source for renewal and change. A Catholic might say: “God moves in mysterious ways,” and I won’t discuss that, because it’s a matter of faith. The Poststructuralist says: “Language moves in mysterious ways,” but this time it shouldn’t be a matter of faith (or you have to label it differently), which is why theory needs to be open to doubts.

A big problem of the poststructuralist line of thinking (although of course there are many differences within it) goes back, at least partly, to Heidegger’s so influential ontology. It’s influence is unfortunate because his ontology conveys an authoritarian thinking while claiming the opposite, namely to overcome the false metaphysics of the subject and thereby, implicitly, the authority of the human (which will always be inferior to the mysterious ways of being, disclosed in language). Heidegger’s thinking is most convincing when it opens new doors, when it poses questions, when it invites doubting. But too many times, for example in *Being and Time*, it is delivered in a pastoral voice, declaiming in a heroic “jargon of authenticity” (Adorno) how things *really are*, and in which ways *the being rules anonymously*, and that is a dangerous way of thinking. “For the sake of its own dignity, authenticity transforms once more theoretical lack, indeterminability, into the dictate of something that must be accepted without question. But what ought to be more than mere Dasein, sucks its blood out of the merely existent, out of just that weakness, which cannot be reduced to its pure concept, but which rather cleaves to the nonconceptual substratum.”<sup>35</sup>

A good way to test the dogmatism of a theory is by checking two things (whether in the author or in his disciples): 1) What is their response to the question: How do you know that? And 2) Do they have any sense of humor? If both answers are frustrating, the probability is high that there is some serious dogmatism going on. Try it out with

Heideggerians. Authority is worse when it is veiled behind some supra-human certainty, which would allegedly be vulgarized by trying to put it on its feet. We don’t need more heroism. Enough of positions making their own privileged stand invisible.

There is, however, an important difference to be drawn between the *critical diagnosis* of structures, and a *vision or therapy based on those structures*. A critical diagnosis is necessary to make visible the structural roots of exclusion and violence exerted in societies, for instance, in Derrida’s word, the *phallogocentrism*, which reverberates even in the most abstract (and seemingly neutral) philosophical concepts. The problem consists mainly in three assumptions: 1) The assumption that there is always something driving the subject, and that this ‘something’ or ‘someone’ always surpasses it by escaping it, be it the incommensurability, the *différance*, or the other; 2) All these theories have in common the assumption that the subject is characterized by a fundamental lack being filled by those structures; 3) Those structures are mostly considered as linguistic or discursive structures and therefore lead to a linguistic reduction of the self. Like any other philosophical ground, these assumptions are, in the end, a question of belief.

If they don’t remain doubtful diagnoses, poststructuralist thinking, which is considered a critique against fundamental paradigms of modernity (one of which is the will to certainty), ironically falls back into a thinking in which certainty plays a major role—the certainty that the subject is *always* driven by the linguistic structures of lack, or that meaning *always* is only the trace of the *différance*, etcetera.<sup>36</sup>

Again, the critical diagnosis (e.g. of Bourdieu) is powerful and convincing as long as it does not commit the error of applying the diagnosis to a vision or therapy, in which the vision of change is being reduced to the same mechanism. A philosophical vision or therapy of those diagnoses needs, instead, to stress the worth of the subjective

<sup>35</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity*, trans. Knut Tarnowski and Frederic Will (New York/London: Routledge, 1973), 109.

<sup>36</sup> I discuss this problem more extensively in: Salaverria, “Critical Common Sense, Exemplary Doubts, and Reflective Judgment,” *Confines of Democracy. The Social Philosophy of Richard Bernstein: Essays on the Philosophy of Richard Bernstein*, eds. Ramón de Castillo, Ángel M. Faerna, Larry A. Hickman (New York: BRILL, 2015), 157–169. See also the reply by Richard Bernstein, accessible at: [http://www.salaverria.de/images/pdf/Salaverria\\_Bernstein.pdf](http://www.salaverria.de/images/pdf/Salaverria_Bernstein.pdf)

capacity to initiate and to (re)position through aesthetic pleasure—not the pleasure of certainty, but the pleasure of doubts. If this positive, even if uncertain, assumption is being dismissed by poststructuralists as illusory or as a blindness (e.g. to the bourgeois ideology of subjectivity that pretends to unfold the singular self when it in fact reproduces an ideology of putative freedom or creativity that not only reflects but even reinforces societal hierarchies, a cultural industry and, ultimately, the domination and exclusion of others), transformation will remain in the hands of language structures.

There is a huge difference between an account of subjectivity based on lack and one based on fullness. The former will always, at least partly, reproduce the implicit or explicit violence of its subjection, whereas the latter involves the idea of a self being capable of experiencing and judging possibly and momentarily in a nonviolent, and thus unconstrained manner and, through this, to initiate change.

The poststructuralist rejection of a thinking that allows the idea of change through aesthetic pleasure or aesthetic doubts, on the basis that it seemingly affirms bourgeois privileges in an uncritical manner, overlooks the crucial political and ethical impact of these judgments: namely, their potential to foster and cultivate the enabling dimensions of uncertainty. These dimensions not only ward off a fallback into authoritarian thinking or anonymous post-structural processes of presumed certainty, but also open the space for the new—for things never felt or thought before. And an important part of that might be feeling and noticing exactly those violent structures post-structuralism diagnoses, but from the “inside.”

### **Rebellious Beauty**

The experience of the beauty of doubts is rebellious in that its liberating potential is immune to authorities. This is why it is so important to stress

*the transformative pleasure of aesthetic doubting.* If aesthetics is being reduced to negativity, as in some poststructuralist tendencies, which were understandable after the Second World War and the Holocaust, the transformative and liberating potential of aesthetics is being abolished as well.

Looking back at the beginning of Western philosophy, the first one who wrote a complex theory on beauty was Plato. He distinguishes two kinds of beauty. The first kind distracts people by its sensual impact, making them cling to the illusions of the world. Plato believes that the real world isn't real, it is only an imitation of the eternal and *truly real* ideas of the good, true, and beautiful. So, if someone draws a tree, for Plato that's a double imitation—the imitation of an imitation of the idea of the tree—each imitation diluting it more and, thus, making it less real, true, and beautiful. The more people hold on to those illusionary imitations with certainty, the worse.

Then there is the other kind of beauty. The idea is that the highest beauty merges with the good and the true (that's the *all-in-one* part), *but*, as an idea, and not as a linguistic concept, it is never fully and completely graspable for humans—and this is where doubt comes into play. (The highest platonic beauty sounds a bit like the *all-in-one* posture, and that part is in fact a little questionable.) From that perspective, the certainty-error lies with the ones clinging to the illusion of certainty. Meanwhile, the protagonist of real beauty is Eros. In his famous Symposium (a drinking session of friends), Plato describes friends one after another declaiming a eulogy in praise of Eros, the most famous of which is, of course, the one of Socrates, who in turn doesn't say what's on his mind, but reports a dialogue he had with Diotima.

In her story, as relayed by Socrates, Eros represents some kind of aristocratic underdog, being the child of Poros (plenty) and Penia (poverty), conceived at the birthday party of Aphrodite. He is neither god nor human, but something in between,

a good *daimon*. Now, Eros yearns for beauty. As he is half god, he has good chances of getting closer to it, however, as he is half human, he never really gets there. “But—who then, Diotima,” Socrates asked, “are the lovers of wisdom, if they are neither the wise nor the foolish?” “A child may answer that question,” she replied; “they are those who are in a mean between the two; Eros is one of them.”<sup>37</sup> So Eros doesn’t really know what beauty is, he doesn’t possess any certainty, but he isn’t desperate, either, because he has a glimpse of it.

Once asked what he thought of psychoanalysis, Levinas responded: “Isn’t that some kind of pornography?” Although a great way of exaggerating, there is an important point made by it. When you assume that every action is caused by a (sexual) desire which in turn is caused by lack, then the conclusion is: when the desire is satisfied, no more activity is needed. When sexual desire is satiated, passivity follows. Translated into the terms of the Western economy, which in a way follows the logic of pornography, this entails that every action needs rewarding incentives and the complementary danger of not achieving it by competition—the whole genre of psychological management literature is based on this assumption. From this point of view, somebody who, say, wins a television show like *The Voice* and has accumulated sufficient fortune and fame, wouldn’t have to lift a finger anymore. This is the Western idea of a secular paradise, which of course doesn’t work, because, in the end, it remains empty. Once all those goals are achieved, the question remains: now what? The only experience that does not produce weariness or surfeit is beauty. And the figure of Eros is crucial because he represents *lack as well as fullness*. And that is important for the understanding of doubting. Doubting isn’t (merely) lack: it is always at the same time a promise.

Hegel much later describes beauty as the “sensuous appearance of the idea.” Of course, he refers to Plato, who compares ideas to the

sun. However, in this context it is interesting to think of how the implications of the “sensuous appearance,” as beauty, thereby consist in the *singular and embodied experience* from a particular perspective. As Kant once wrote, the experience of beauty is reserved exclusively for humans. Neither a god, nor an animal (although that might be contested nowadays), nor a robot can experience it. The prerequisite of beauty is the fallible and doubtful position of humans, in between fullness and lack. And it is not only an issue of passively receiving information or consuming products, but on the contrary, of actively making sense of it, by generating something new. This uncertain space—between the old and the not-yet-known new—is the space of beautiful doubts. This is why Plato writes that beauty

*is only to be attained by generation, because generation always leaves behind a new existence in the place of the old. Nay even in the life of the same individual there is succession and not absolute unity: a man is called the same, and yet in the short interval which elapses between youth and age, and in which every animal is said to have life and identity, he is undergoing a perpetual process of loss and reparation [...]. Which is true not only of the body, but also of the soul, whose habits, tempers, opinions, desires, pleasures, pains, fears, never remain the same in any one of us, but are always coming and going; and equally true of knowledge.*<sup>38</sup>

### Eros On a Diving Board

One could imagine the figure of Eros standing on a diving board: this is a delicate situation, in which it is necessary to sharpen one’s own perception and to develop the right amount of momentum in order to dare to jump into the unknown. On a diving board, one easily gets the feeling of losing a grip on the ground, because the board gives way quickly. And in fact, one does not stand on firm ground, but is instead only held by a thin elastic plank in the air, about to move from one element into another,

<sup>37</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (The Internet Classics Archive), <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/symposium.html> (accessed June 18, 2016).

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

leaving behind one unstable standpoint for an even more unstable one: plunging into the water, hoping—in the moment of *jumping-falling*—that the transition will be smooth and painless. The same holds true of doubts. Suddenly you find yourself on precarious and questionable grounds, vacillating between returning to the old and turning to the new. Something says “no” to the old but also fears the new; something says “yes” to the new but fears to let go of the old. You are about to change, or, better said, something already has started to change, which led to the doubt. (You already stand on the diving board, and something brought you here).

But what is it that leads to the situation of doubt? Never knowing exactly what caused the situation of doubt seems to have to do with this transitory blurring between the self and the outer world. Of course, there are harbingers, like a repeatedly felt tension or nervousness in the face of particular occurrences or persons. But these harbingers can go on unnoticed for quite a while. Afterwards, it seems puzzling how long one could endure a political or a personal situation, a situation in a company (or any other constellation), not only without changing or saying anything, but also without even being aware of the doubt. In retrospect, the taken action seems so clear. However, this clearness only becomes discernible after the undergone change of elements, when a new contour between the self and the world becomes tangible after having lived through a new experience. There is an existential dimension about doubts that always remains partly opaque. What becomes clear transitorily (until the next doubt shows up) is the outcome, not the process itself.

Once you took the first step to do something you have been intending to do for a while, you need to overcome the long-guarded doubt, and before that, you need to carefully nurse those uncertain impulses in a process of finding out

what you want and don't want. Or, put more precisely, it is a process of finding out, again and again, who you are. Practicing this finding-out is indispensable, since it signals how and in which direction to jump. The point is: *we don't really know us*. Since the idea of a defined and self-contained identity is completely fictitious, doubts do not function as an indicator of something distinct and definable that had been there all along (say, like a stone in the water) and simply needed to be retrieved, but rather as the opposite—doubts *generate something new* about us, about our relation to the world and thus, generate something new in the world itself.

Doubting is a deeply ambivalent state, somehow painful and a reminder of our finitude (gods and angels don't doubt), yet simultaneously revealing, and in that sense a reminder of our singularity (stones and robots don't doubt either). In doubts, something new is being experienced that does not fit within our own commonsense conglomeration of belief-habits. Something makes us question the ground on which we stand, beforehand taken for granted. Because doubts reveal something new, they are not completely controllable or foreseeable (like pretty much everything in life, though doubts remind us of that fact). However, this perceived lack of control often leads to the conclusion that doubts are not only unpleasant, as they are accompanied by feelings of insecurity and uncertainty, but that they also are dangerous, as they seem to weaken the self's position. And indeed, doubting *is* a manifestation of uncertainty, and it is, in that respect, a relative of fear and pain. Yet, at the same time, doubting is exciting, and this is where *Eros* comes into play. Doubts are as much related to fear, as they are to desire: an inner conflict takes place between something wanted and something unwanted, both sides not quite graspable, yet nevertheless pressing. It is fear of uncertainty, however, that many times inhibits us from enjoying the doubting, thereby restraining the creative potential of the process.



It is not simply that doubts *unsettle* the self, signaling a problem or an error committed by the self or experienced in the environment (e.g. the structures of society). They also *resettle* the self by signaling an emerging new contour of the self's positioning. Some part of the self, allegedly known, is being weakened, and simultaneously some part of the self, yet unknown, is being encouraged through the enjoyment of the uncertain. The *Eros of doubting* enables the self to experience the seeming "lack" of temporarily being uncertain in an abundant way, inviting a diving into unknown terrains, which might bring up something helpful. Doubting invites the self to (re-)position, its singularity being at stake by connecting to something new. It opens up new possibilities.

Therefore, to face doubts does not mean to be overwhelmed by them as if they were a violent force of nature (or a societal, linguistic structure), too strong to counter, leading to paralysis and despair. It means instead to ally with them. If one tries, however, to maintain absolute control over situations and thereby to push aside every hesitation, one will end up repeating stiff routine patterns of behavior, which simply do not match the given circumstances, and will bring about more stiffening of one's own identity. Being controlled by fear of the unknown will, moreover, result in inflicting aggression upon oneself, upon the situation, and upon everybody involved, by trying to squeeze a new situation into an old inflexible template. It is as if someone forces her-/himself to wear shoes grown too small for them long ago.

In political terms, doubting of course appears scary to authorities when expressed by groups of people claiming their rights. And from the point of view of persons or institutions which prefer to let other people wear their pinching, worn out shoes for them, doubts definitely represent a danger that needs to be repressed. However, as history has shown, doubts won't go away through repression. Here again, the solution consists in allying with

doubts, because every other alternative, in the long run, will turn out worse. The longer that doubts are repressed, the more rage accumulates, causing all the more violence, which then is much more difficult to resolve.

The fear of being weakened by doubt is caused essentially by the erroneous premise of a fixed, self-satisfied ego and the objective of strengthening this ego. But the real danger does not lie in the doubting. It lies in this premise of a strong indubitable self (and, for that matter, a strong, indubitable state or corporation), which not only is false, but causes even more fear, not less, and which, in the end, results in nothing but violence, war, and cruelty.

Not only does this posture produce violence, it also gives away the possibility to cope with problems in a new and potentially better way. It gives away the opportunity to enjoy experiences in ways previously unknown, which could extend the scope of action. Adhering to control and stiff routine undermines the option of making acquaintance with the new and of experiencing profound joy. Profound joy always has to do with an element of surprise, with an unconstrained modification of our criteria. Warding off doubts means warding off key experiences and paradigm changes of any sort. Put the other way around, the more we cultivate fertile doubts, the more we allow the emergence of new perspectives on ourselves, on others, and the world. We seem to have lost sight of the fact that doubts not only broaden the range of problem solving, but also the range of experiences, thereby enabling deeper fulfillment. And the serious seeking of joy and fulfillment is far from a luxury theme. Taking the uncertain joy of Eros seriously means, on the contrary, finding the courage of attending the diffuse presentiment of one's own (re-)orientation and judgments—and those of others—which are the basis of any responsible posture, and which represent the core of Kant's political philosophy of enlightenment. "*Dare to know!* Have the courage to use your own understanding." <sup>39</sup>

39 Immanuel Kant, "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?," *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays*, trans. Ted Humphrey (1784, repr. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983), 41.

## Metaphysical Heartaches

Another important aspect of doubting is its inherent social character. Each of us is responsible for her/his doubts alone, and loneliness and doubting are close relatives. But at the same time, doubting is the basic condition of intersubjectivity, of connection. One can see that beautifully in Augustine.

The bad reputation of doubting has a long tradition in Western philosophy. The prevailing thread of Christianity over centuries regarded doubt as a sin, since doubting meant questioning God's will. Therefore, unshaken belief was demanded. The impact of that powerful tradition still resonates in our own times. However, with the dawn of the idea of modern subjectivity, doubt appeared as well, and has ever since been inseparable from its formation, although philosophers put a lot of effort in trying to get rid of it. With Augustine's *Confessions*, synthesizing Christian theology and Platonism, for the first time a subject-position had been articulated by way of a self, which starts to internalize divinity through the desired love of God.

Exercising its belief made the finite individual partake in God's infinite realm, thereby, evolving its own status as a subject, its subjective point of view in the world. By loving God back, the believer established a connection between her- or himself and the divine. The inner life of the believer emerged, became graspable and, by this, started taking shape as the *mind*, a secularized version of the immortal soul. In that way, the internalization of God's love led to the first rising of the idea of freedom of thought or autonomy, an introjection of a spark of eternity, which liberated the human being from its supposedly sinful absorption in carnal desires and limited self-interests.

In the famous eleventh book of his *Confessions*, Augustine testifies before God his struggle with the question of what time is, particularly with the problem of understanding the difference between

finite human time and divine eternity. The only solution he can think of is that there "was no time, therefore, when thou hadst not made anything, because thou hadst made time itself."<sup>40</sup> It turns out—as he convincingly analyzes in a detailed survey of the impossibility of measuring time—that the concept of time is incomprehensible without *somebody* perceiving it. He concludes, therefore, that there are

*neither times future nor times past. Thus it is not properly said that there are three times, past, present, and future. Perhaps it might be said rightly that there are three times: a time present of things past; a time present of things present; and a time present of things future. For these three do coexist somehow in the soul, for otherwise I could not see them. The time present of things past is memory; the time present of things present is direct experience; the time present of things future is expectation.*<sup>41</sup>

But what is perceived when one perceives time? Time does not represent anything distinct, and therefore no object. The point Augustine makes is that time is not to be found in an object, but in the subject! He puts it in the following way: "From this it appears to me that time is nothing other than extendedness [*distentionem*, spread-out-ness]; but extendedness of what I do not know. This is a marvel to me. The extendedness may be of the mind itself."<sup>42</sup> What does this have to do with doubting? The extendedness of time Augustine speaks of is not something to be known, for if it were known, it would be some kind of epistemological object (and note that Augustine himself seems to be unsure of his conclusion). *Time is the way in which the mind thinks*, and it is a way of relating the presence of the past (memory) with the presence of the presence (direct experience) and with the presence of the future (expectation). Now, this relating does never know in advance what is going to occur. It's a process of processing and connecting. This process is never completable, never consummated, and therefore

40 Augustine of Hippo, "Confessions," *Confessions and Enchiridion*, ed. and trans. Albert C. Outler (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1955), XIV, 17, hereafter referred to as C and E.

41 Ibid. C, XX, 26.

42 Ibid., C, XXVI, 33.

never certain. In other words, the activity of the mind or of the subject is impregnated with doubts. If we knew everything from all times, we wouldn't be subjects, but gods. The core of subjectivity is, as well formally as with regard to any content, uncertainty or doubtfulness: Formally, because the effort of connecting memory, experience, and expectation is an effort of holding the ends together, of stretching the "now" of the "I," which can always be disrupted and therefore never is guaranteed. Kant later transformed this idea into the "I think" that "must be able to accompany all my representations."<sup>43</sup> Content-wise, we don't know indubitably what we are going to think next. If we knew, then we wouldn't be thinking.

An example of this is seen with persons who suffer from severe Alzheimer's dementia and lose their short-term memory. They are unable to connect the recently experienced past with the present, and because they do not remember what they just said or thought, they are unable to anticipate what could come next. Philosophically speaking, they lose the company of their "I think." The experience of an interruption in the mental expansion between past and future is very common, but these momentary slips are usually overcome quickly. However, the extent of the mental stretching or spreading varies a lot, depending, for instance, on how relaxed, tired, or nervous one is. Doubting does not consist of the interruption of the mental flow. In contrast, it entails *experiencing the tentative movement of the mind stretching itself*. Doubting is the conscious art of extending and relating time. In that sense, thinking always means doubting, as we can never be sure of what will come to mind next.

Doubting isn't far away from beauty, but also not far away from thinking. In fact, doubting and thinking could be conceived as almost synonymous, if it weren't for the significant difference that doubting consists, as Hannah Arendt once beautifully put it, in "thinking without a banister."<sup>44</sup> While a lot of

thinking follows given banisters in that it takes place within the frames of already established rules and criteria, doubting takes place *on the verge* of these frames. Something is being announced by an impulse, yet unknown, not quite understood, which is why doubting also takes place on the verge of language, as a consequence of which you have a clue, but a clue that is rather felt, rather experienced than thought. Thinking *with* banisters can be entertained without mobilizing too many feelings. It is the kind of thinking we usually classify as rational, but which, at the same time, can be dangerous in its taken-for-granted entitlement by given banisters, which in the end amount to tautologies, whose false certainty, as Adorno never ceased to warn, is violent. "The pure tautology, which propagates the concept while at the same time refusing to define that concept—and which instead mechanically repeats that concept—is intelligence in the form of violence."<sup>45</sup> The barbarism of rationality turning dialectically into myth follows out of this tautological fear of doubting: "Humans believe themselves free of fear when there is no longer anything unknown. This has determined the path of demythologization ... Enlightenment is mythical fear radicalized."<sup>46</sup>

Doubting, like thinking without banisters, takes place in between the seemingly clearly defined regions of the aesthetic and the rational, as it comprises unresolved, unspoken, and often intense, however, not necessarily unpleasant feelings of uncertainty. More precisely, doubting is aesthetic in the sense that it constitutes a partly nonverbal task, experienced in the body, to be resolved. (I'll get back to that with Kant and Dewey.) The uncertain and aesthetic nature of those feelings accompanying doubts often leads to drawing back from them. Fear of uncertain feelings is a barrier to doubts, but it is also a barrier to the pleasure of doubts.

The fear of uncertainty has to do with the fact that one has to leave the banister behind. Every genuine thought, every genuine experience has an

43 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B131–32.

44 Hannah Arendt, "On Hannah Arendt," in *Hannah Arendt and the Recovery of the Public World*, ed. Melvyn A. Hill (New York: St. Martin's, 1979), 336.

45 Theodor W. Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity*, 109.

46 Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (1947), ed. G. S. Noerr, trans. E. Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 11.

element of improvisation, which means being alive. This is the longing of Eros to generate, which takes place all the time. It implies questioning the given normative frames, or, as Jacques Rancière puts it, a new “distribution of the sensible.”<sup>47</sup>

It also has to do with time, as Plato already knew, because no moment is identical with the one before. The experienced time of the subject always continues and the continuation of that time is beyond our control. An image to describe this process could be the movement of a flying plane. There is the momentary stance of the subject (that would be the plane), there is the presence of the past (that would be the vapor trail) and there is the presence of the future (the course the plane takes).<sup>48</sup>

A musician or someone who has developed a sense for music will be able, by playing or listening to music, to stretch her memory and anticipation of a musical piece very far. While playing or listening she will constantly connect the just heard with the notes just about to arrive. The metaphorical vapor trail of the plane will then be very long. The Alzheimer’s patient, at worst, does not have a vapor trail of memory at all. It seems that music is particularly suitable to bind memory and anticipation. Studies have shown that listening to music, particularly to familiar pieces of music, can help dementia patients who already had lost contact with the world (and with themselves) to reconnect.<sup>49</sup> By remembering the course of a song, they remember its progression and thereby the stretching and binding of subjectivity. Through the song, their “I think” temporarily awakens; they are, so to speak, able to take a short trip and fly their plane again.

Yet, this capacity to reconnect through music is not cognitively reducible. The transitory awakening of the patients also has to do with another factor: music awakens their Eros, and so do doubts. By listening to music, not only is the formal capacity to bind memory and anticipation coming into play, but also the content of their beloved memories is

being revived. One person might recall a sunny spring afternoon when he fell in love with his wife; another one might remember turning on the new radio-receiver she had bought for the living room and the delight of hearing music at her home with friends for the first time. And doubts awaken things, too: a new wish, a new possibility.

It is no coincidence that Augustine himself talks about music and verses in his reflections on time. (He also wrote a whole book on rhythm). The rhythmical and/or melodic structuring of music and poetry (and, for that matter, of any other art) itself already displays an aesthetic type of time binding. The aesthetic form, the aesthetic “how” of the distribution and modulation of the elements (e.g. notes, words) in time, coins the “what” of the artistic result. It presents a form of time-binding experienceable to us, while at the same time going beyond our clear understanding. And there is an important aesthetic element in doubts, too: They appeal to something, which we do not yet completely understand and thereby broaden and modify our understanding. For Augustine, aesthetic and religious experiences are inseparable. Indeed, beauty and the love of God seem to be the same. The Augustinian version of the subject is not a formalized structure (as Kant conceived of it much later, particularly in his *Critique of Pure Reason*), but it is the whole bodily self being tormented and simultaneously enchanted by the realm of possibilities opened up through God, and an experience that reminds him time and again of his uncertainty. Thinking for Augustine is longing, and longing is always doubtful.

*My soul burns ardently to understand this most intricate enigma. O Lord my God, O good Father, [...] do not close off these things, both the familiar and the obscure, from my desire. Do not bar it from entering into them [...]. Of whom shall I inquire about these things? And to whom shall I confess my ignorance of them with greater profit than to thee, to whom these*

<sup>47</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London and New York: Continuum, 2004).

<sup>48</sup> I already used the image of the plane in a previous paper and later regretted it, because, as we know, people can cynically use planes to do horrendous things and kill thousands by forcing a pilot to fly into a building. This cruelty represents the exact opposite of doubting. The only way to do that is by exerting violence, but uncertainty won't go away because of that. So I modified this passage and I hope it doesn't sound cynical anymore.

<sup>49</sup> There is an abundance of publications on that topic to be found. See e.g. Sharon Smith, “The Unique Power of Music Therapy Benefits Alzheimer’s Patients,” *Activities, Adaptation & Aging* 14, no. 4, 1990: 59–64.

*studies of mine (ardently longing to understand thy Scriptures) are not a bore? Give me what I love, for I do love it; and this thou hast given me.* 50

The misleading idea of the instrumental or identarian thinking, which Adorno so vehemently criticized, assumes that the subject could control objects (and subjects treated like objects!) by identifying them. But the “more relentlessly our identarian thinking besets its object, the farther will it take us from the identity of the object.” 51 The view Augustine develops questions instead its own “identarian position” and *thereby positions itself as a self*. He even claims, anticipating Descartes, that “if I am mistaken, I am.” 52

However, Augustine was not a skeptic. On the contrary, he criticized the antique skeptics for trying to immunize themselves against “the appearance of error in themselves ... by not positively affirming that they are alive.” 53 The strategy of stoic indifference denies its own permeability at the price of denying being alive, and thereby denying their Eros. It seems, to summarize, that the *Eros of doubting* for Augustine consists in the irresolvable tension between being alive and loving life (as a gift of God), while at the same time admitting the self’s own fallibility as the necessary core of existence. The certainty of human existence is felt *through uncertainty*, and this uncertainty is not static, but a relentless extending of the self’s own finitude into the infinite.

### Why, René?

1140 years later, still closely intertwined with religion, Descartes crystallized the core of the modern subject in his *Meditations* as the famous *ego cogito, ergo sum*: “I think, therefore I am,” a conclusion he developed with his method of doubt: Everything, Descartes assumed, can be doubted, but “we cannot doubt of our existence while we doubt.” 54 Doubting represents a necessary means to achieve certainty of the irreducible principle

of the thinking subject. But it was certainty and not doubts that became the focus of philosophical developments from Descartes on—a notion that in a way translates the faith in God’s infallibility into the human world and its quest for epistemological and moral truth. However, whereas Augustine is confident in being loved by the God of all things for his faithful uncertainty, Descartes changes the perspective. Somehow, he seems to have fallen out of love with God. Their relation transforms into some kind of marriage of convenience. Trying to find an unshakable principle of certainty to base knowledge on, Descartes in his *Meditations* carries out the mentioned thought experiment by doubting everything that is possible—the existence of the outer world, of his own body, of other minds, and of his own beliefs. And he feels compelled to do so by supposing the possibility of an *evil demon* “as clever and deceitful as he is powerful, who has directed his entire effort to misleading me.” 55 But it is a strange argument Descartes puts forward: He claims to *only theoretically* assume its possible existence, just in case his assumption of an *evil demon* might turn out to be true. Peirce, much later, criticizes Descartes’ line of thought as “paper doubts” and warns: “Let us not pretend to doubt in philosophy what we do not doubt in our hearts.” 56

Descartes, however, uses his evil-demon-assumption as some kind of doubt-insurance, like a pre-nuptial agreement. And as we know, that is not the best start for a marriage, because it is like saying: “I think I love you, but I don’t trust you, because you might use and deceive me. So let’s, just in case, make a divorce-contract before we get married.” In contrast to Augustine’s passionate stretching of doubts, Descartes’ argument seems like a slightly paranoid power game, led by mistrust to then, surprisingly, culminate in an alleged proof of God’s existence. Plato’s likeable *good daimon* Eros is being abandoned in favor of an instrumental doubt used to gain absolute certainty, guaranteed by God. The argument winds up finally in the

50 Augustine, C XXII, 28.

51 Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1990), 149.

52 Augustine of Hippo, *The City of Gods*, trans. Marcus Dods (Peabody Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2009), XI, 26.

53 *Ibid.*, E, 7, 20.

54 Rene Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, ed. and trans. John Cottingham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

55 *Ibid.*, First Meditation.

56 Charles S. Peirce, “Some Consequences of Four Incapacities,” *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, ed. Justus Buchler (New York: Dover, 1955), 229.

somehow possessive twist of capturing the idea of God inside of him.

And although Descartes admits that God remains ungraspable, his train of thought is rather colonizing and much different from Augustine's. While Augustine finds himself in a relation of permanent metaphysical heartache with God, Descartes secretly seems to wish to become God himself.

*I recognize that it would be impossible for me to exist with the kind of nature I have—that is, having within me the idea of God—were it not the case that God really existed. By 'God' I mean the very being the idea of whom is within me, that is, the possessor of all the perfections which I cannot grasp, but can somehow reach in my thought, who is subject to no defects whatsoever.* 57

The dream of unassailable autonomy has its roots in this line of thinking Descartes initiates. But it remains a dream because, paradoxically, autonomy only works as long as the other remains intact *as other from the self*, no matter if it is God or another person. As soon as one seeks to appropriate the other, the relation is dead, and, for that matter, Eros is, too.

### Identity and Otherness

This appropriative posture towards the other not only dominated Western philosophy and its particularly violent politics of colonization, slavery, and suppression over centuries, but it also became part of our common sense and still continues to be. One shouldn't forget that concepts such as culture, aesthetics, and freedom, as well as the concepts of enlightenment, identity, and nation, seem natural to us today despite the fact that they are relatively young. They all have been invented, more or less simultaneously, in the time of Western modernity and their impact unfolded in the course of the military and economic expansion of Europe. The idea of the artistic genius, the ideas of aesthetics

and culture are inextricably linked to Europe's violent colonial extension of trading routes by enslaving non-Europeans. The economic basis of Western liberty is, and has been, the bondage of others. Paradoxically, the ideas of liberty, equality, and fraternity of the French Revolution not only excluded women (which is why it is about brotherhood and not as well about sisterhood), but took place at the peak of colonialism and slavery.

One aspect of this development was that, with the growing secularization of modernity, the love for God progressively became replaced by the love for another person, who then, weirdly enough, was deified and disenchanting at once. With the rise of the bourgeoisie, the romantic fantasy of the two complementing sexes and their respective roles took hold. From that point on, women were considered "the other" of men. Women began being transformed into some kind of allegory (which was practical, because allegories don't talk) for whatever seemed fit—purity, beauty, life. At the same time, much like with Descartes, this process was accompanied by the invention of some kind of *female evil demon*, serving as a corrective threat and simultaneous insurance to the male phantasm: Femininity now also represented impurity, ugliness, death, etc. As Simone de Beauvoir once said, the function of representing the "Other" had become "so necessary to man's happiness and to his triumph that it can be said that if she did not exist, men would have invented her. They did invent her. But she exists also apart from their inventiveness. And hence she is not only the incarnation of their dream, but also its frustration." 58

It is a strategy, which tries to escape uncertainty by forcing every person into a binary template with predetermined features. The structural violence of patriarchy consists in that it objectifies Eros, ascribing it to one sex (female), thereby also ascribing powers to it, which then simultaneously are being desired and hated, because they cause doubts, as a result of which they lead to an

57 Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Third Meditation, NP.

58 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Vintage Books, 2009), 203.

irreconcilable split between a *good* and an *evil demon*.

Pornography is the parody-like exaggeration of this construction—trying to maximize *Eros* by minimizing doubts, punishing and depreciating women for being the incarnation of male sexual desires. Instead, the *Eros* of Plato-Socrates-Diotima is an *imperfect demon*, neither good nor bad, whose creativity is being kept alive by his unstable position between given identities and by his continuous striving towards “the other,” namely the unknown idea of the beautiful itself.

Objectifying the other as “other” makes recognition and love as impossible as the idea of the other as a “self-identical” mirror of one’s self. The problem with the mirror metaphor is that basically the same would have to be confirmed by the same, reflecting one’s self-identical ego in the other, thereby gaining self-affirmation. In fact, this metaphor is exemplified in the myth of Narcissus, which, as we know, didn’t turn out very well. He drowned in the attempt to unite with his mirror image, with which he had tragically fallen in love while looking into the pond. However, it isn’t self-identical affirmation we yearn for, but the other of our self *in its otherness*. Otherwise, it would be sufficient to activate the camera screen on the computer and listen to oneself while speaking. This narcissistic dream can turn out quite nightmarish, as was shown, for example, in the movie *Being John Malkovich*, in which the eponymous actor climbs into

his own head, only to find himself in a psychotic scenario where everyone is a duplication of him, shouting nothing but “Malkovich, Malkovich, Malkovich.” He is not very happy about it.

Hegel was the first philosopher to show why narcissism doesn’t work. He outlined convincingly that the identity of the self needs the recognition of the other to become self. The self *needs to become other than itself to become self!* The dynamic he describes could be named the *Hegel-Hollywood-Model*

Fig.1. Let’s call our protagonists *Left* and *Right*: When *Left* falls in love with *Right*, they start longing for *Right*, so much so that they turn kind of porous. They lose their self-certain position, in Hegel’s terminology: “Self-consciousness is faced by another self-consciousness; it has come out of itself.”<sup>59</sup> *Left* has lost their heart to *Right* (Panel 2). This is the *Eros of doubting par excellence*. The entire history of literature (especially romance literature) depends on that moment, and the Hollywood film industry wouldn’t exist without it either. As long as there is hope that *Right* will love *Left* back, it is a painful, yet profoundly joyful experience. And we are in luck: *Right* falls in love with *Left*, too. So *Right* loses their heart to *Left* as well and becomes porous, although without knowing if the love is mutual (Panel 3). Each one of them now is *out of themselves*, until finally, they confess their love to one another—or, in Hegel’s words, they “*recognize themselves as mutually recognizing one another*” (Panel 4).<sup>60</sup> The whole point, however, is that there is no shortcut to this process. It is necessary for the self to transitorily lose itself *in the other in order to become a recognized self*.

This applies not only to intersubjective dynamics; it applies to every relation between the self and the world. William James once described the situation of doubting as an “inward trouble,” which could be compared to the trouble of being *out of oneself*—in Hegel’s sense. One “meets a new experience,” which doesn’t fit within one’s own belief-system, be it a contradiction, a new desire, or something confusing.<sup>61</sup> What then happens is a tension



Fig.1 Heidi Salaverria, 2017

59 Georg W. G. Hegel, *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (1807, repr. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 111.

60 Ibid, 112.

61 William James, *Pragmatism. A New Name For Some Old Ways of Thinking*, ed. Bruce Kuklick (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett, 1981), 31, 33.

between old belief-habits and the uncertain new. This tension is not being resolved by eliminating violently either the old or the new, but by bringing them together in the best possible way. This bringing-together in the best possible way is what James's famous definition of truth consists of: "New truth is always a go-between, a smoother-over of transitions. It marries old opinion to new fact so as ever to show a minimum of jolt, a maximum of continuity. ... The reason why we call things true is the reason why they *are* true, for 'to be true' means only to perform this marriage function."<sup>62</sup>

Now, this idea is applicable to Hegel's description of recognition. Doubting consists in an erotic entanglement of "old" and "new." Accordingly, *Old* falls in love with *New*, hoping that *New* will love it back, and hoping that they will fit together well and that their relationship will last. But their relationship will only last if *Old* and *New* always continue to start over, thus establishing a lasting positive tension over time, which implies doubt with respect to the uncertain future and the question over how the matter will play out. The problem with the *Hegel-Hollywood-Model* consists in that it focuses too much on the Happy Ending, or in Hegel's words, the *reconciliation* of self and other. Once *Left* and *Right* finally find each other, the Hollywood story is over—"they got married and lived happily ever after." But where Hollywood ends, real life begins. Overcoming fixed images and ideas is only possible when *Old* and *New* fall in love with each other again and again. And this means never ceasing to fall in love with the uncertain, but instead stretching-out and extending from *Old* and *New* in Augustine's sense.

But let's have a closer look at the enigmatic renewal process of doubting within the self.

### Enjoying the Doubtful

"The scientific attitude," Dewey once claimed, "may almost be defined as that which is capable of enjoying the doubtful."<sup>63</sup> A surprising statement,

at first sight, as everyone who is familiar with pragmatism knows that the continuous tension between doubts and beliefs is essential for pragmatist philosophy. In pragmatism this tension is considered the dynamic and productive motor for the formation of habits and—in a wider perspective—for almost every kind of development of self and society, be it in science or in art, in everyday life or in politics.<sup>64</sup> And this tension between doubts and beliefs—underlying all human processes—is considered productive, because doubts interrupt the flow of action guided by belief-habits. As this interruption needs to be overcome by resolving the doubt, and doubts only can be overcome by reevaluating the given but now problematic habits and beliefs, this leads to a modification of the old belief-habits and in that way stimulates progress and improvement. The doubt-interruption, moreover, is considered to be unpleasant, because the self is forced to face problems, which need to be resolved; otherwise the flow of embodied agency would remain paralyzed. To be able to enjoy the doubtful hence seems not only to challenge one of the founding principles of pragmatism, it sounds simply contradictory, which is probably why Dewey cautiously restrains his claim to an "almost."

Although describing this enigmatic enjoyment of the doubtful in conjunction with the scientific attitude, it is clear that it should also be applicable to aesthetic issues, as Dewey always advocated for the continuity of everyday life, art, science, and politics, warning against compartmentalizing philosophical systems. "Construction that is artistic," he claims, "is as much a case for genuine thought as that expressed in scientific and philosophical matters, and so in all genuine esthetic appreciation of art, since the latter must in some way, to be vital, retrace the course of the creative process."<sup>65</sup> So, following Dewey, the idea of enjoying doubts could be understood as part of an artistic construction that involves a creative

62 Ibid.

63 Dewey, "The Quest for Certainty: A Study of the Relation of Knowledge and Action," in *Later Works, 1925-1953*, vol. 4, 182.

64 William James even describes this process of the formation of habits in inanimate objects (e.g. the fold of a folded paper) and Peirce went so far as to regard this process as a cosmological law. "The one intelligible theory of the universe is that of objective idealism, that matter is effete mind, inveterate habits becoming physical laws." C.S. Peirce, "The Architecture of Theories," *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, 322.

65 Dewey, "Qualitative Thought," in *Later Works, 1925-1953*, vol. 5, 262.



process, which not only is applicable to genuine thought as part of the creative process in scientific, philosophical, or aesthetic enterprises, but also involves the evaluation of art, and here one could add, of any other doubtful situation. In other words, Dewey's idea of creativity is not merely confined to the *production* of (art)works; their *reception* and *appreciation* also imply artistic skills, just as the production of (art)works implies the receptive and appreciative capacities. Or, to put it differently, Dewey's aesthetic is a theory of creativity, which pervades all areas of philosophy, art, science, and everyday life. It opposes the fetishization of art objects reduced to prestigious trophies, because as "long as art is the beauty parlor of civilization, neither art nor civilization is secure."<sup>66</sup>

His pragmatist theory on creativity does not, however, commit the flaw of reproducing the illusory romantic fantasy of a genius inventing the absolutely new. The body-mind (as Dewey sometimes names the self) interacts with its environment, and in this ongoing interaction, improvement is attained neither through the invention of something absolutely new nor by violently defending the old, but rather by evaluating a given situation and integrating the new into the old. To create the radical new or original is as much a phantasm as is a mere end, because a "mere end," Dewey writes, "that is a dream. [...] vague, cloudy, impressionistic. We do not *know* what we are really after until a *course* of action is mentally worked out." Therefore, to "insist upon change and the new is to insist upon alteration of the old."<sup>67</sup> So, in that sense, you can see a connection from Plato's doubtful Eros of beauty to Dewey's enjoyment of the doubtful.

This idea of continuous and gradual development, structured and made rhythmic through the alteration of doubts and beliefs, culminates in his vision of *art as experience*. Dewey's aesthetic theory is, to a large extent, a philosophical analysis of the alienated character most of our everyday experiences in Western

civilizations display, which he critically diagnoses. This alienation is a result of the persistent dualisms, which continue to haunt Western societies. "Academic and unapplied learning" and "mechanical routine or sensuous excitation" are just two sides of the same coin belonging to a counterfeit currency.<sup>68</sup>

So, what does the philosophical and political impact of pleasure consist in? This question is closely connected to another one, namely, who doubts?

### Who doubts?

Someone in a powerful and privileged position experiences doubts very differently from someone in a discriminated-against or even subaltern position.<sup>69</sup> One might object, for example, that society already inculcates women with enough kinds of doubts (doubting whether they are too fat, too old, taking up too much space, talking too loudly, being too "bossy," and thereby are out of place and wrong as a whole) for one to lecture them about the importance and beauty of doubting.

Maybe this line of thinking is an exercise for the privileged ones in self-critical thinking, comparable to *Critical Whiteness Studies*, which make visible the still mostly invisible, privileged, seemingly neutral position of white people and our implicit racisms (explicitly racist people won't read those texts anyway). Then again, hasn't every political movement been initiated by people starting to doubt—and thereby to fight against their instilled sense of inferiority, their self-shame, sensing that something has to be wrong with being permanently abased? Of course one could argue with the survival-instinct and break it all down to economy. But I think that would be too biologicistic and/or too deterministic. If it's only a matter of survival and winning others over, everything amounts to war. The most revolutionary developments always implied economic redistribution, but they also implied paradigm changes in worldviews, for

<sup>66</sup> Dewey, "Art As Experience," *Later Works, 1925–1953*, vol. 10, 346.

<sup>67</sup> John Dewey, "Human Nature and Conduct," *Middle Works, 1899–1924*, vol. 14, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), 28f., 168.

<sup>68</sup> Dewey, "How We Think," *Middle Works, 1899–1924*, vol. 6, 286. This is also the reason why pragmatism tends to distance itself from Kantian philosophy, namely because of its transcendentalism and its resulting dualist worldview. However, pragmatists (particularly Peirce) base their rejection of Kant mainly on the discussion of the first and second critique (on epistemology and ethics), strangely enough overlooking the pragmatist potential of Kant's *third Critique* (on aesthetics), which in central aspects goes beyond the binary compartmentalization of the former. However, even in pragmatist writings that explicitly treat aesthetics and address Kant's third Critique, such as Dewey's and Shusterman's, Kant's substantial contribution is polemically dismissed, notwithstanding (or maybe because of) its puzzling proximity to their arguments in many respects. This proximity is not surprising, given that some of Peirce's ideas—essential for the development of pragmatist philosophy—indirectly stem from Kant via the strong

example women being allowed to vote and to vote for a black president.

One important empowering element in changing the paradigms of thinking is doubt. If doubting were simply suffering, however, one would avoid it and never get to the new, empowering view. As for the doubting of privileged people, if they witness the political movements of the non-privileged and hold on to certainty, every doubt will be perceived as a threat, leading to more fear and more hatred. Even guilt is destructive, because it follows the logic of punishment. So, if you tell someone he has acted in evil ways, or even, is evil, no change is going to be initiated, but simply more resentment.

That's why it would be trivial to make pleasure a philosophical key concept, if the point was to merely *compensate* for its neglect in our societies (without touching the societal structures which produced the problem in the first place). The same holds true for the compensatory ideology of a perverted sense of creativity, invoked by neoliberal economic discourses to justify precarious jobs. The significance of the recognition of the pleasure of doubt (and its implicit creativity) lies instead in its *transformative power*. And this power can be best activated when it is not separated from understanding. Hannah Arendt, who underscored the importance of the "silent inner dialogue," pointed this out very clearly:

*Whenever we are confronted with something frighteningly new, our first impulse is to recognize it in a blind and uncontrolled reaction strong enough to coin a new word; our second impulse seems to be to regain control by denying that we saw anything new at all, by pretending that something similar is already known to us; only a third impulse can lead us back to what we saw and knew in the beginning. It is here that true [political] understanding begins.* 70

And it was Hannah Arendt who first saw the political value of Kant's aesthetic theory of

judgment, precisely because it lays out how the process of developing a judgment without banisters works. Kant's third *Critique* (of the power of aesthetic judgment) begins right away by addressing the dubitable state one is in when dealing with aesthetics: "In order to decide whether or not something is beautiful ... ." Now one could say, every philosophical work stems from a question and therefore from a dubitable state, but the peculiarity of the Kantian aesthetic judgment consists in the fact that (in contrast to moral or epistemological judgments) it doesn't point at the questionable object at stake, but at the *subject!* So, "we do not relate the representations by means of understanding to the object for cognition, but rather relate it by means of the imagination (perhaps combined with the understanding) to the subject and its feelings of pleasure or displeasure."<sup>71</sup>

Hence, the surprising idea is this: When we find ourselves in an aesthetic situation not yet knowing what to make of it, we will not find out if we "like" it or not by asking others, even less by following the vote of a majority (or an exclusive minority of a peer group). If, for example, I attend a concert and the friends who came with me (and whose judgment I usually value and share) unanimously think it was horrible, but I thought it was great, I might not say so. However, I would betray my inner judgment if I forced myself not to like it because of them. It would be like lying to myself. And although I might try to force myself—while I'm with my friends—to find something horrible in the music I heard, in effect trying to feel what they feel, it would be completely absurd to do so later on when I am listening to the same concert on YouTube by myself. Why should I pretend to feel something I don't when I'm alone?

Now, the punch line doesn't consist in being *true* to myself, in the sense of an already established and fixed property-like entity inside of me, because such a thing doesn't exist. The punch line consists in finding out who I am and how I am connected to the world in a new way.

influence of Emerson and F. Schiller, who themselves drew upon the Kantian third Critique (the former indirectly and the latter directly). As I see it, they are very close, both in criticizing false certainty and in showing why pleasure is indispensable for overcoming that false certainty.

69 Spivak famously argued that the subaltern cannot speak. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Laura Chrisman and Patrick Williams (Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), 66–112.

70 Hannah Arendt, "Understanding and Politics," *Essays in Understanding, 1930–1954*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York, Harcourt Brace 1994), 325, n.7, and "Thinking and Moral Considerations," *Social Research* 38, no. 3 (Fall 1971).

71 Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of the Power of Judgment, The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*, ed. Paul Guyer, trans. P. Guyer and Eric Matthews (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), § 1.

So instead of pointing at the object as in epistemological questions Fig.I, the movement of the arrow bends back to the subject Fig.II. More than wondering about the object I wonder about myself. The experience of beauty consists of the process of noticing in which sense I am not sure about my experience. Even if I listen to a musical piece I love and have heard many times, the joy lies in hearing it every time a little differently, and by listening anew, becoming someone else.

This is why Kant distinguishes the beautiful from the agreeable. The agreeable is interest-led, one could say certainty-led: I want to eat that ice-cream, I want someone to admire me, etcetera. The agreeable is not free, and its pleasure is passive and consumerist. If there is judgment, it follows the pleasure. Watching a porno, I will not wonder about the beautiful doubts caused aesthetically, and then enjoy it. With the beautiful, it's the other way around. This is why "this merely subjective (aesthetic) judging of the object, or of the representation through which the object is given, precedes the pleasure in it."<sup>72</sup>

Now, what do we feel in this process of judging before the pleasure arrives? While we doubt in an unconstrained way, the pleasure lies in *feeling that pleasure is on its way*, halfway there. In that sense, Kant was right and he wasn't. The pleasure of beauty involves activity and isn't received passively as is the agreeable. But if I were completely indifferent until my aesthetic judgment is finished, what would make me want to undergo that process? Enjoying the doubtful, or saying that pleasure is on

its way, means that some *uncertain desire* is at work. But this is not the interest of a seemingly fixed self-identity, which already knows what it wants. It is rather the risky desire to enjoy letting go of that identity in hope for something different. Returning to Fig.II, while the arrow is moving, a free play of imagination and understanding takes place, and this free play has an anarchical illogical component.

To say that epistemological judgments point at the object Fig.I is only true, insofar as (for Kant) every object is always seen through human glasses. We cannot perceive the things in themselves, from a god's eye view.

Objectivity means making sense of an object in terms of human capacities. What Kant tried to find out in his three critiques is how those human glasses work. But to speak of glasses is an image too passive to explain what he had in mind. Every experience is an active process of our sensuous, nonverbal, and imaginative capacities on the one hand, and the verbal grasping of understanding. Independent of history, race, gender, and class, every human universally shares these formal capacities. At least that's what we universalists hope for. One could imagine these transcendental capacities Kant tried to describe as some kind of universal "human software," if it weren't for the fact that it is based in human freedom, which of course isn't the case with software.

When we judge epistemologically (or morally), we do it within the paradigm of our knowledge (within the lines drawn around the subject and the object in Fig.III). Kant speaks of *determinative judgments*, which are formed by subsuming given particulars under supposed generals already known (comparable to Arendt's banisters). But when we judge aesthetically, those *reflective judgments* do not subsume particulars under generals, but judge *the particular in its particularity* without a given rule. We then don't judge *with criteria*, but explore how our criteria-possibilities (the mechanisms of our free universal software) feel, and by that get in touch

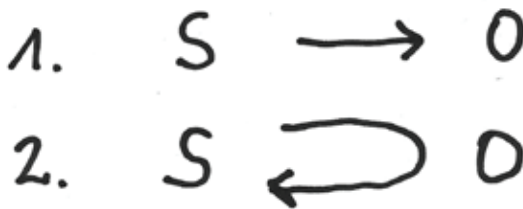


Fig.II Heidi Salaverría, 2017

72 Ibid., §9

with the borders of our horizon, even getting a glimpse of what might be beyond (illustrated in Fig.III: The arrow points outside of the dotted lines around the subject and the object, outside of our frame).

In *reflective judgments*, the self is confronted with a previously unknown situation and wonders: Do I like or dislike this? Is it to my taste? Do I appreciate this? One implication of reflective judgments is that they take place on the verge of the conceptual, a trait that they have in common with doubts. If the new situation was completely conceptual, the unique and innovative element, as well as the embodied experience, would vanish and be subsumed. If it was completely non-conceptual, we could not really make sense of it. In those kinds of situations, something escapes our familiar vocabulary, or, in Kantian terms, something escapes our clear understanding at the beginning of the process of judging, while our imagination brings up different associations.

Something intrinsically new for the agent-patient (to use a term from Dewey) happens in the situation they are undergoing, so that their previous belief-habits and their implicit criteria of judgment no longer apply. *The rules or criteria themselves have to be modified by something yet unknown*, which means the whole frame of meaning becomes temporarily questionable. Kant describes this modification in terms of the free play of the faculties, namely imagination and understanding: in the process of searching for

new criteria—and with it, for a new order, or maybe for a new proportion between criteria—the self “feels itself.” And it feels itself in a double sense, by noticing *how* it feels in the face of a new situation, (for example, being enthusiastic or unsettled), while simultaneously focusing *its attention on itself*. Its subjectivity becomes the object of its attention. So in the free play of faculties the aim is not only to “make sense” of a given situation, but also to “*make sense*” of the self in a given, unknown, uncertain situation. In this process of searching, the self allows its thinking to go loose; its status as a self with a firm identity is temporarily held in *suspense*.

The concrete instrumental interests of the self are transitorily suspended in favor of a *different kind of interest*. This disinterested “interest” does not aim at anything specific other than the repositioning of the self through the aesthetic exploratory movement. It is rather comparable to the pleasure in solving a riddle (and not to solve it to impress others, but just for the sake of solving it), only the riddle is the self.

That which escapes our clear understanding is not conceived as a lack, but on the contrary, as a *source of pleasure*. You could compare this experience to the vagueness at the beginning of an investigative process, which Peirce names *musement*. The situation of musement opens up our horizons to generating new ideas, to the famous Peircean *abduction*, be it scientific or political. But for Kant, the aesthetic situation is not just an overture to a new step in the community of investigators as it is for Peirce. Kant’s aesthetic/reflective judgment is not anticipatory; it has its worth in itself.

This worth in itself, or in Kant’s words, the *purposiveness without purpose*, has to do with getting in touch with the freedom of the human “software.” This is why, when the arrow bends back at the subject, it doesn’t find a firm identity. Instead, it is like consulting humanity as a whole, and thereby getting in touch with it (see Fig.III). We don’t know who we are, and beauty has to do a lot with the

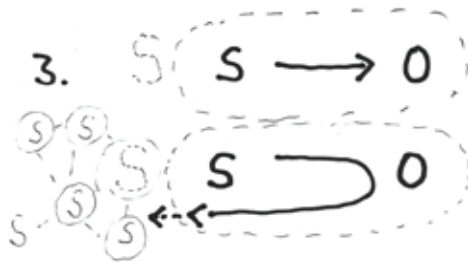


Fig.III Heidi Salaverría, 2017

fact that by enjoying the doubtful we potentially connect with everyone.

### The Political Impact of Aesthetic Doubts

The experience of beauty is something we want to share, or to put it the other way around, aesthetic experiences and judgments only make sense in a (potential) community of human beings. It is of course possible to have an aesthetic experience by myself, but it probably would not make sense if I knew I was (in some science fiction scenario) the only human being in the world. Be it as it may, even then one would probably communicate with an imaginary community. The experience of something beautiful is not only intrinsically linked to the urge to share this experience with others, but also, as Kant puts it, to “woo” the consent of them, or as Arendt puts it, “The judging person can only ‘woo the consent of everyone else’ in hope of coming to an agreement with him eventually,” which requires an “enlarged mentality” to think “in the place of everybody else.”<sup>73</sup>

Again, the enlarged mentality requires the suspension of the interest-led ego. That’s why Arendt claims: “To think with an enlarged mentality means that one trains one’s imagination to go visiting.”<sup>74</sup> The agreeable has no interest in being shared with others. But the beautiful solicits, in Kant’s words, “assent from everyone else, because one has a ground for it that is common to all.” That ground is the “human software,” our universal capacities as a formal potential, not yet realized and never fully realizable (therefore outside of the given frame, (see Fig.III)) One “could even,” Kant continues, “count on this assent if only one were always sure that the case were correctly subsumed under that ground as the rule of approval,” (§19) and, sounding almost like a chorus, Kant repeats a little later, “if only one were certain of having correctly subsumed under it” (§22). But we are not, and although Kant seems to be a little uncomfortable with this uncertain result (after all,

he was Prussian), it seems quite clear that beauty is inseparable from doubting, and that the process of aesthetic judgment needs doubt, because there is no rule to subsume under! (Kant writes as if there was a rule, but it remains in the suspense of the “as if”, necessarily so, because it needs to be developed by the singular self in the moment of experiencing it.) And this applies as well to the political.

The *aesthetic (reflective) judgment* is not just a replaceable and nameable example for a rule (as in regular scientific experiments), but *it is exemplary*. And the exemplarity is not merely that of the given object, but of the whole situation, including the self. This *exemplarity*, in my view, has a central function in creating an unsolvable, yet productive tension: in both real political action and in reflective contemplation, the self is accountable for its singular and irreplaceable positioning. Wooing the consent of others is a fragile undertaking, in that it does not operate with arguments or strategies, for the characteristic of the *reflective judgment* consists in its status of being in suspense, being a belief in the making, *not yet fixed*. The importance of the communicability, which for Arendt is so great, lies in this: to try to find words for a still uncertain, yet singular situation, which hints at something new, hopefully better. Interpreted that way, to communicate the *exemplarity of the self* exposes the revealing and enabling dimensions of uncertainty. Communicating it means exposing an *exemplary doubting* to others.

Paradoxically, in subtracting the firm identity from the self, it is not left with nothing, but rather is left with a subjective experience of fullness. It consists in the joy of being able to “match the world,” getting back to Kant’s quote: “Beautiful things indicate that human beings find the world to be a place suited to them.”<sup>75</sup>

The exemplarity of the self, experienced in aesthetic judgments, entails a responsibility towards others via the supposed community of the *sensus communis* or, pragmatically put, of the *critical common*

73 Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Six Exercises in Political Thought* (New York, Penguin Books, 1977), 222.

74 Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, ed. Ronald Beiner (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992), 43.

75 “Kant, XVI, 127, no. 1820a,” in: Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, 30, trans. modified.

sense one forms a part of. The formation of those judgments raises the question of what it means to be a singular self, every time. It also raises the question of what it means to be part of the given common sense and, thereby, what it means to implicitly accept violent frames that delimit perceptions and experiences. It makes the *dubiousness* of those frames (the dotted lines, image 3) perceptible, as those frames are at stake in the aesthetic enjoyment of the doubtful. In each exemplary judgment this question is answered to the extent that the subjectivity of the self, and along with it, its unconstrained freedom is being acted out and revived. This *subjectivation* implies, in Rancière's terms, a *disidentification* of the self with the given criteria (frames, banisters), by suspending them.

Suspending those criteria not only means to think differently, but also to experience and feel differently! Rational arguments only function within a given set of rules. Everything outside of those rules won't form part of the debate, but will be dismissed or ignored as irrational noise. To make those rules visible, experienceable, and thereby, questionable, it is necessary to take on a perspective that transcends those rules, and thereby makes it possible to think of a better set of rules. This is why, through aesthetic doubts, a disidentification with the given rules is necessary. In Rancière's words, the given and contingent "distribution of the sensible" needs to be redistributed. It "repartitions the field of experience that gave to each other their identity with their lot."<sup>76</sup> This *subjectivation* as *disidentification* means, as I understand it, to open up to the new on the verge of the understandable, or, in other words to experience aesthetic doubts. Which, we could say with James, not only enables us to put out feelers to the "fringe of consciousness," but also to put them out to the *fringe of the given common sense*.

Through them, the self becomes part of the active matching-process of the public realm, contesting the political criteria, which are being applied at that historical moment. As political

theorist Linda Zerilli puts it: "At stake is trying to be at home in a world composed of relations and events not of our own choosing, without succumbing to various forms of fatalism or determinism—whose other face is the idea of freedom as sovereignty."<sup>77</sup> Zerilli maintains, against critics of Arendt (like Jürgen Habermas and Seyla Benhabib), that the political weight of the *reflective judgment* does not consist in its validity, but in the *affirmation of human freedom*.<sup>78</sup> From this perspective, criticizing the lack of validity, or maybe the subjectivity, of judgments misses the point altogether. The question answered by aesthetic judgments is not, "How do we validate judgments?"; instead, the question is, "Are we able to *generate new judgments* (which later will have to be validated), and how does this work?"

After all, discursive argumentation does not suffice to modify deeply entrenched belief-habits that underlie postures sometimes leading, as Butler puts it, to the de-realization of others.<sup>79</sup> Rigid, hateful postures establish themselves through more or less violent societal structures and patterns of behavior, which become an intrinsic part of the common sense and of the self. To change rigid habits of hatred and resentment against "the other," or even to dissolve their rigidity, will not be possible at the level of rational exchange, as long as arguments or words outside the realm of our own identity are considered as irrational or, even less than that, as the mere "noise of aggravated bodies," as Rancière describes it.<sup>80</sup> Political change is always an aesthetic issue in the sense that the frames of the sensible, the experienceable, are at stake. To be able to acknowledge others is sometimes not even a question of moral decisions, when at a deeper level the distorted perception perceives others as unreal and inhuman, as Butler so poignantly describes it. At this deeper level, the political conflates with the aesthetic because the frame of the assumed rational common sense is put into question. The borders that separate the seemingly rational and

76 Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement. Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1999), 36.

77 Linda Zerilli, "'We Feel Our Freedom.' Imagination and Judgment in the Thought of Hannah Arendt," *Political Theory* 33, no. 2 (April 2005), 158–188.

78 Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1996), 188ff. Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, trans. William Rehg (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 20.

79 Butler, *Precarious Life*, 33. See also Judith Butler, *Frames of War. When is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009).

80 Rancière, *Disagreement. Politics and Philosophy*, 53.

normal from the seemingly irrational and unreal are being challenged.<sup>81</sup> And they will only be challenged when we learn to endure and enjoy the doubtful. The beauty of doubting is rebellious and empowering, because it shows the beauty of an unknown future, because it helps to perceive and overcome, in the words of novelist Chimamanda Adichie, the danger of a single story.<sup>82</sup>

Time has gone by, and when Louis CK appeared again on Conan O'Brien's Late Night show in 2016, he said that he was taking a break from the internet and his social media devices.<sup>83</sup> Whereas his daughters have smartphones by now, it didn't feel right to him any longer to be constantly online. He had noticed that sometimes, when one of his daughters was talking to him he got distracted, in the middle of the conversation, by a message he received on his phone: "My phone goes bling and I'll just look down like this. And my kids are nice people so they'll just wait." But, he said: "One thing that I realized in life is that you can't just go by how a person reacts to you. You can't just go: 'Well it's alright with her.' Cause she's my kid! But she *dies inside every time I do this* ... It's a horrible abandonment. And when it's your father ... but she sits it out ... *I have to think beyond what the look on her face is that she is soldiering on with*. I have to think what I am doing to my kid."

Now his older daughter has the restriction code for his phone (he asked her for it). His then ten-year-old daughter wrote him a letter, which he partly read at the talk show. She wrote:

*I am really proud of you for cutting yourself off from the Internet and reading an awesome book [he read Pride and Prejudice by Jane Austen] ... I want you to know that what you did means a lot to me, and I really enjoy seeing your pleasure in not constantly being on devices.*

81 Parts of this chapter have been previously published in: Salaverria, "Critical Common Sense, Exemplary Doubts, and Reflective Judgment," in: *Confines of Democracy. The Social Philosophy of Richard Bernstein: Essays on the Philosophy of Richard Bernstein*, ed. Ramón de Castillo, Ángel M. Faerna, Larry A. Hickman (New York: BRILL, 2015), 157–169, as well as the reply by Richard Bernstein, [http://www.salaverria.de/images/pdf/Salaverria\\_Bernstein.pdf](http://www.salaverria.de/images/pdf/Salaverria_Bernstein.pdf). For a more detailed account on recognizability, see Salaverria, "Anerkennbarkeit. Butler, Levinas, Rancière," *Anerkennung und Alterität*, eds. A. Hetzel, D. Quadflieg, H. Salaverria (Baden Baden: Nomos, 2011).

82 Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *The Danger of a Single Story*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9Ihs24Izeg> (accessed January 17, 2017).

83 Louis CK, interview with Conan O'Brien, *Conan*, TBS, November 2016, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2DF4xdr\\_5pk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2DF4xdr_5pk) (accessed January 17, 2017).