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Distracted Aesthetics: Towards a Hermeneutics of Engagement with Distractive Works of Art

Abstract:

Western aesthetics has privileged contemplation as a necessary condition for authentic aesthetic experience. In contrast, I argue that the adequacy of aesthetic comportment must be measured by the self-presentation of the object in question, shaped by the place from which such presentations issue. Thus, the specific character of many forms of art, particularly in urban contexts, solicits a kind of “distracted” engagement rather than contemplative attention. Distraction is a positive mode of aesthetic engagement.

I begin with a critical account of the formalist theories of Kant and Bell as examples of this privileging of contemplative hermeneutics. I then consider Walter Benjamin’s theory of mimesis as a basis for a more fruitful account of aesthetic form, of which certain “distractive” artworks serve as examples. Distraction is an appropriate response to certain presentations, in the face of which absorption would be a kind of aesthetic failure.

Keywords:

hermeneutics, Walter Benjamin, distraction, aesthetics, street art

Introduction

In the twentieth century emerged a number of challenges to the museum culture's norms privileging contemplation, "disinterested" aesthetic awareness, and absorption. Through certain technological advancements and their engagement in the work of theorists like Walter Benjamin, Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida, and Gilles Deleuze, a shift occurred mitigating the pervasive tendency to see works of art as vertically unreachable, exceptional objects endowed with an "aura" that clearly distinguishes them from workaday tools and other mundane socio-cultural artifacts. Special items hitherto considered under the criterion of rarefied unity have now made incursions into the splintered multiplicity of daily life. As I write, for instance, a digital recording of Lee Morgan's classic, *Sidewinder*, plays softly in the background. This is quite a remarkable phenomenon in large part due to the fact that it is utterly unremarkable in our historical moment where digital media are integrated into virtually every facet of urban life. Morgan's powerful tone crescendos in a sputtering, staccato flourish; it suddenly (no, "suddenly" is not the right word) occurs to me that I have been listening to "Hocus Pocus" for at least a few minutes. Is this not an aesthetic "sin," a transgression of the artworld's long-ossified norms demanding absorption, immersion, and "disinterested" contemplation? Had I been "distracted" by my work? Am I now "distracted" by Lee Morgan away from my work? Walter Benjamin suggests that this formalist antithesis, perennially presupposed in prescriptive artworld practices, between "concentration" and "distraction" ["*Zerstreuung*"], warrants closer scrutiny.¹

Such scrutiny, I argue, does not endorse the outright rejection of formalism as such, but rather the idealistic formalism, in the Kantian and neo-Kantian traditions, according to which aesthetic taste, experience, and judgment are located in the subjective conditions of the mind instead of in the phenomena by which the mind is confronted and with which it is entangled. In this paper, drawing primarily on the theoretical work of Benjamin and using certain paradigmatic examples in contemporary public and street art practices, I argue that the adequacy of aesthetic and interpretive comportment must be measured *vis-à-vis* the self-presentation or style of the aesthetic object in question, which is inescapably enfolded in the place or context from which such presentations issue. What is needed, in short, and what Benjamin provides the rudiments for, is a realistic aesthetic formalism. This formalism forsakes the *a priori* demarcation of aesthetic from everyday comportment in favor of an ongoing and always unstable attunement to the peculiar *style* in which phenomena present themselves. Style is no mere exposition, but is always at once imposition: the self-showing of demands exercised by simultaneously shaping and decentering the "subject" on whom they place a claim.

The specific character of many artworks demands a kind of "distracted attention" rather than a robustly self-conscious and contemplative attention. But at stake in this debate is not only the aesthetic status of certain attitudes and concepts related to the interpretation and experience of works of art, but also the political and moral status of these attitudes and concepts with regard to the determination and regulation of norms governing human social life and action (including practices in the world of artistic production and enjoyment).

My argument proceeds as follows. I first give an account of two historical aesthetic theories that are representative of the privileging mentioned above, namely, Immanuel Kant's pre-critical reflections on the beautiful and the sublime, and Clive Bell's aesthetics of "significant form." I claim that these theories offer a normative injunction to disengage from the messy, heterogeneous vagaries of real, everyday, sensuous life in pursuit of a univocally conceived, extraordinary ideal.

This segues to a treatment of mimesis, largely via Benjamin's theory of "non-sensuous similarity" [*unsinnlicher Ähnlichkeit*], according to which material entities and assemblages call for certain responses on the part

1) Benjamin, "The Work of Art [Second Version]," 40–41.

of human interactants, who thus “mimic” or “imitate” the “original” in ways that are not reducible to empirically identifiable similarities.

Finally, this brings me to a discussion of Benjamin’s theory of distraction [*Zerstreuung*] as one such mode of mimetic comportment. Distraction, I argue, is a singularly appropriate response to certain presentations in the face of which rapt, attentive absorption would constitute an aesthetic failure. I then elucidate this theory through a critical account of different examples of urban street art, specifically contemporary violin virtuoso Joshua Bell’s unannounced public performance in a D.C. Metro station in 2007, and some instances of large-scale urban muraling. Bell’s experiment, as we will see, is symptomatic of the grip that certain Kantian attitudes and assumptions about art and aesthetic experience continue to have on the contemporary cultural psyche, the above-mentioned shift in aesthetic theory notwithstanding. These attitudes and assumptions suggest, in short, that the only proper manner of experiencing and interpreting art and the beauty of natural phenomena is that of “disinterested” and contemplative absorption. Benjamin, I argue, gives us reasons to reject this myopic aesthetic hermeneutic in favor of one that accommodates different aesthetic objects, particular those encountered in urban settings, for which correspondingly different interpretive postures are appropriate.

Kant’s Pre-Critical Reflections

Daniel Chodowiecki, an eighteenth-century German-Polish artist and engraver, published a series of illustrations in 1778 under the title “*Natürliche und affektierte Handlungen des Lebens.*” One pair of etchings from the series depicts two opposed ways of experiencing a beautiful landscape. On the left, an aristocratic couple stands upright and regal, hands clasped before them, calmly taking in a deep valley, replete with blossoming trees and dominated by the rays of an impressive sunset. On the right, a plebian couple – so distinguished by their garish behavior – gawks at the same scene, bending backwards and dramatically reaching out as if trying to physically grasp it. This picture strikes twenty-first century viewers as curiously prescriptive: there is a “natural” (right) way and an “affected” (wrong) way to experience aesthetically an object or scene. The plebian couple’s mode of comportment is deficient; they are too caught up in their own emotions, too distracted by the multiplicity of things before them at the expense of coolly apprehending an “authentic” unity, which alone is worthy of the appellation, “aesthetic.”

Twelve years later marks the publication of Immanuel Kant’s seminal *Critique of Judgment* [*Kritik der Urteilskraft*], one of whose lasting contributions to the field of philosophical aesthetics has been the notion of “disinterested” [“*uninteressierten*”] aesthetic judgment as the appropriate interpretive posture to take in response to concretions of “the beautiful” [“*Das Schöne*”]. To engage the beautiful from a position of disinterest means to “judge it on the basis of mere contemplation”² (i.e. without “an added element of *charm* or *emotion* for its delight”),³ the latter signaling a taste that “has not yet emerged from barbarism.”⁴ In fact, although we must be careful not to overlook the non-conceptual character of Kant’s notion of aesthetic judgment, it is clear that he understands the latter to “have no bearing on the object.”⁵ The form in which aesthetic experience unfolds is given in the *a priori* structure of subjectivity independently of the demands – or style – with which objects manifest.

Presaging both the more influential *Critique* of 1790 and Chodowiecki’s aforementioned series of engravings, Immanuel Kant’s *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (1764) sketches a number of *ad hoc*

2) Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 36.

3) Ibid., 54.

4) Ibid.

5) Ibid., 46.

remarks about the “finer feeling” of which nevertheless even “ordinary souls” (in other words, non-geniuses) are capable.⁶ This “finer feeling” is divided into two subcategories: the beautiful and the sublime, the latter being of much greater import.

Edmund Burke’s *Philosophical Enquiry* (1757) was certainly in the air at the time Kant was making his *Observations*. To be sure, Kant derived much from Burke during this pre-critical period, especially concerning the nature of the sublime. For Burke, the sublime is linked to the feeling of admiration, the beautiful to the feeling of love:

There is a wide difference between admiration and love. The sublime, which is the cause of the former, always dwells on great objects, and terrible; the latter on small ones, and pleasing; we submit to what we admire, but we love what submits to us; in one case we are forced, in the other we are flattered into compliance.⁷

That which evokes one’s esteem and admiration is sublime. In other words, we “look up” to what strikes us as sublime, while merely beautiful or charming objects endear themselves to us through a needling process of attention arresting from angles abiding below and around. The geometry of love makes its claims from a position of inferiority: while we submit to what we admire, we love what submits to us.

The sublime proclivity for the upward gaze is subtly normative. Latitudinal⁸ engagement cuts us off from the more basic horizontality of everyday living among others and things, and does so in the form of a self-concealing moral injunction: to respond to the call of the sublime is to look up to that which defies the satisfaction of our gaze, but demands it nonetheless. Appropriating this Burkean emphasis on admiration, Kant’s *Observations* are perhaps of greater moral import than aesthetic. There is much at stake here. The basic ability to even hear the call of the sublime requires a heightened faculty of reason, one that operates in the ambit of abstract principles, rather than concrete contingencies. This, for Kant, is why women are incapable of sublime feeling. They are too much in the world, too concerned with the unpredictable vagaries of everyday, mundane experience: “Her philosophy is not to reason, but to sense. . . . One will seek to broaden their total moral feeling and not their memory, and that of course *not by universal rules but by some judgment upon the conduct that they see about them.*”⁹ Sublime feeling, as a vehicle for principled moral probity, is a disengagement from the world in favor of static generalities, a pursuit of higher principles interminably at odds with the messy exigencies of everyday life. While the experience of both the sublime and the beautiful requires a kind of contemplative absorption, the former is higher on the hierarchy of aesthetic moods precisely to the extent that it is freer of material and emotional distractions.

There is a distinction, Kant insists, between “beautiful understanding” on the one hand, and “deep understanding” on the other, the latter signifying “identity with the sublime.”¹⁰ “Beautiful understanding” is easy, superficial, and charming. It provides the sort of quaint and delightful – but still appropriately substantive – insights that one would expect to hear at a cocktail party. “Deep understanding,” in contrast is difficult, super-natural, and invocative of “cold admiration.” In the language of Kant’s later critical project, “deep” (that

6) Kant, *Observations*, 46.

7) Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry*, 103.

8) In addition to the direct signification of “verticality,” the notion of a space freed for a peculiar range of movement should also be read into the term “latitude” as I am using it.

9) Kant, *Observations*, 79–80. Emphasis added.

10) *Ibid.*, 78.

is, “sublime”), understanding indicates ascension to a supersensible realm in which the fleeting phenomenality of everyday life has no dominion. The sublime in morality always impels one to look beyond the superficialities of mundane social engagement in favor of universal, *supersensible* principles. Kant’s privileged aesthetic states of mind – cold admiration, disinterested judgment, mere contemplation– indicate a concomitant privileging of certain moral norms and forms of socio-cultural organization: absorbed concentration over distraction, unity over multiplicity, reason over emotion, and so forth.

Bell and Significant Form

For Clive Bell, art is art only insofar as it exhibits “significant form.” But what, exactly, is “significant form?” As Noël Carroll observes, any response to this question – which Bell never explicitly provides – is bound to be circular.¹¹ We know an object is a work of art insofar as it exhibits significant form. We determine the exhibition of significant form when we find ourselves in the presence of a work of art. To be sure, Bell can assert that significant form inhabits all objects that “move” one “aesthetically,” but what this amounts to is unclear.¹² Formalists like Bell can give us “examples” of works that “move,” but “not principles” of such movement.¹³

On Bell’s view of aesthetic experience, “to appreciate a work of art we need bring with us nothing from life, no knowledge of its ideas or affairs, no familiarity with its emotions.”¹⁴ “Aesthetic” emotions (in which we are “moved”), then, are not the emotions of mundane life experience, but come about only in the disengagement of the everyday in pursuit of “higher” feelings. Only form is purposive in itself and for uniquely “aesthetic” experience. Engagement with the significant form of a work or natural scene necessarily means disengagement from the content at hand, and this means disengagement from any “contingent” human interest. For Bell, then, (as with Kant), the “significant form” of aesthetic judgment is “purposive without purpose,” divorced from place, context, and the exigencies of everyday reality.

Only in deficient aesthetic experience do we smuggle in the emotions, ideas, and concerns of daily life, all of which, in the context of such experience, count as distractions. Although he admits to being less competent in experiencing music than he is in the domain of the pictorial arts, Bell has “at moments” appreciated “music as pure musical form.”¹⁵ In such moments, one is transported “far into the world of pure aesthetic ecstasy,” into that “infinitely sublime state of mind” which characterizes aesthetic experience. It is not difficult, Bell points out, to fall from such a lofty state of mind back into the mire of the mundane: “Tired or perplexed, I let slip my sense of form, my aesthetic emotion collapses, and I begin weaving into the harmonies, that I cannot grasp, the ideas of life.”¹⁶ At such moments, the supersensible faculty within one – that which makes one human and free – fails to sustain the heavy gesture of vertical transcendence. At such moments, one tumbles back down to the lamentable sphere of “time and place” of which the “kingdom” of great art is independent, as it is “not of this world.”¹⁷

For the aesthetics of significant form, aesthetic experience in general entails an austere tarrying among the “cold white peaks of art.”¹⁸ Bell has modified Kant’s formalism by collapsing together the sublime and the

11) Carroll, *Theories of Art Today*, 101.

12) Bell, *Art*, 19.

13) Carroll, *Theories of Art Today*, 94.

14) Bell, *Art*, 28.

15) *Ibid.*, 30.

16) *Ibid.*

17) *Ibid.*, 34.

18) *Ibid.*, 31.

beautiful, both of which, in the context of “aesthetic experience,” are now presented as demanding a uniformly disinterested, emotionless, and contemplatively absorbed attention. In the following section we will challenge this received view by examining the role of mimesis, especially as understood by Benjamin, in aesthetic experience and interpretation.

Mimetic Adequacy

Although I will focus here on Benjamin’s mimetic theory, the history of the concept “mimesis,” beginning with Plato, furnishes a number of helpful cues for our present purpose. Plato’s famous banishing of the poets from the kallipolis in the *Republic* is grounded in the nature of mimesis and its role in shaping the soul in general, that is, even outside of the specific influence of the poetic arts. The soul’s education over the course of a life is a function of the mimetic relation, a kind of “imitation” of others, which will “settle down into habits and second nature in the body [*soma*], the speech [*logos*], and the thought [*nous*].”¹⁹ At the level of the body, the nurturing of specific habits manifests problematically in the character of those whom Socrates refers to as “lovers of sights and sounds.” This (deficient) character does not develop as an inevitable consequence of *aisthesis*, but as the result of an ultimately superficial mimetic relation to perceived entities, whereby their origin, their being, their *idea* remains concealed. The problem, then, at the risk of speaking anachronistically, is a kind of “aestheticism” according to which one takes ephemeral *eidoi*, superficial looks, to be most real. At the level of the polis, mimetic habituation can solidify into deeply ruinous social types, such as the “*timocratic* man,” who, presaging Rousseau’s account of the violence wrought by *amour propre*,²⁰ is driven – out of fear of reenacting the miserable life of his father – towards war in the relentless pursuit of wealth and status.²¹

In any case, Plato understands the mimetic relation as one in which the image (the imitative product), shows its dependency on the original in the manner of a specular reflection. Both the *timocratic* man and the lover of sights and sounds, for this reason, can be likened to someone who is lost in an impossibly vast hall of mirrors, confused not only about the relation of contingency between original and copy, but about there even being such a relation at all. Such is the notion of mimesis I want to push for the present discussion: the manifest relation of non-mutual dependency, where however, the being of either thing involved is not simply reduced to the relation between “authentic” original and “artificial” copy.

Following Gadamer, Roberto Diodato thematizes this relation in his account of the essence of a picture, which “as image, does not consist in being a copy, in functioning as reference to something else, but rather in the composition of a certain bond with what is represented that respects at the same time both similarity and difference.”²² It is a specifically aesthetic *differentiating bond*.²³ Interpretation is mimetic because the interpreter is subjected to the real cues of the Original much like a specular image is ontologically dependent on that of which it is a reflection. *Mimesis* is “good,” for Plato, when it is a *mimesis* of *logos*. The sophist, in contrast, is a merchant of cheap simulacra, of prepackaged answers that forego the question, even while squatting in interrogative space. For Plato, then, the task – at once “aesthetic,” “moral,” and “political” – is not to transcend

19) 395d1-3.

20) Presaging also the rise of Donald Trump.

21) 550b.

22) The context of this quote is Diodato’s discussion of Gadamer’s treatment of mimesis in *Truth and Method*, where he writes: “This kind of picture is not a copy, for it presents something which, without it, would not present itself in this way. It says something about the original.” Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 135.

23) Diodato, *Aesthetics of the Virtual*, 37. Emphasis added.

our mimetic relating to things, but rather to ensure that our mimetic relating to things is adequate to the real phenomenality and ideality of the things themselves.

In two essays written in 1933, “Doctrine of the Similar,” and “On The Mimetic Faculty,” Walter Benjamin explicitly argues that mimesis is a primordial human mode of relating to objects in the world. Through the “mimetic faculty,” humans – especially children and members of “primitive” societies – are able to perceptually lock onto what he calls “non-sensuous similarities” between things. This ability allows one to reach and abide in an object’s space of meaning by opening up an economy of similarity and difference. Children, for instance, learn to situate themselves in this economy through the development of new habits and habituated responses to received phenomena.

In his celebrated but unfinished work *Berlin Childhood Around 1900*,²⁴ Benjamin describes the normal state in which children experience the world as semi-conscious and dreamlike; impressions flow through and past them according to no pre-conceived, structured regimen. It is only in virtue of this loose, impressionable posture that children can remain so impressively creative and imaginative, in contrast to the stodgy uniformity of behavior expected from most adults. In a reverie called “Butterfly Hunt,” Benjamin writes: “The more I strove to conform ... to the animal, the more butterfly-like I became in my heart and soul – the more this butterfly itself, in everything it did, took on the color of human volition.”²⁵ By engaging with the butterfly in an open, childlike way, one begins to apprehend – in the manner of a series of habituating responses – certain “non-sensuous” similarities between the butterfly and oneself, similarities which also serve to illuminate crucial differences.

At play here is a dialectic between habit [*Gewohnheit*], the process of being shaped by the objects of one’s environment, and a kind of “presence of mind” [*Geistesgegenwart*], that by which one is “semi-consciously” alerted to specific environmental cues or directives: “While presence of mind seems at odds with the model of *Gewohnheit*, the two in fact complement each other; by shielding the subject from excessive exposure to surrounding stimuli, habitual perception frees up mental energy for the perception of significant details.”²⁶ Indeed, for Benjamin, the typically “distracted” state in which the child experiences the world is a necessary condition for the possibility of recovering memories later in life. These moments of recollection, (or in the language of Proust, “involuntary memories”), only appear in moments of self-conscious attention because of their antecedent and ongoing work at the level below self-reflective awareness. Focusing on the modern urban landscape for his analysis, Benjamin presents the city as both “a temporal domain and a repository of past associations, so that its streets hold the promise of mnemonic aid.”²⁷

The mimetic faculty makes possible many practices, such as inter-linguistic translation, precisely insofar as it sustains this economy of difference as a field that captures markedly dissimilar sensuous figures in a relation of non-mutual determinacy. It is in the practical repetition of this relation that similarity and concomitant difference unfold. Hence, we can affirm without difficulty that the Greek word “σῶμα” means “body” in English, despite a lack of immediately intuitive sensuous similarity between them: “For if words meaning the same thing in different languages are arranged about that signified as their center, we have to inquire how they all – while often possessing not the slightest similarity to one another – are similar to the signified at their center.”²⁸

24) Posthumously published in 1950.

25) Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood*, 51.

26) Duttlinger, “Between Contemplation and Distraction,” 42.

27) Katz, “Rendezvous in Berlin,” 4.

28) Benjamin, “Doctrine of the Similar,” 696.

In contrast with consciously perceived similarities, whose basis in sensuously identifiable properties, such as facial features, can be readily accounted for; one tracks these mimetic, non-sensuous similarities unconsciously. Moreover, the similarities uncovered in mimesis compare to those we perceive consciously “like the enormous underwater mass of an iceberg” compares to “the small tip one sees rising out of the water.”²⁹ What arrests our attention at the level of overt, self-conscious contemplation tends to obscure a vast ocean of unseen but nonetheless operative suggestions and points of affect and influence. Of decisive importance for Benjamin is the ephemeral character of mimetic perception, a kind of slipperiness that resists formulation in any semiotic or otherwise rule-based system. It is “in every case bound to a flashing up. It flits past, can possibly be won again, but cannot really be held fast as can other perceptions. It offers itself to the eye as fleetingly and transitorily as a constellation of stars.”³⁰ The ancient origin of astrology, according to Benjamin, has its basis in a – perhaps no longer possible – perceived similarity between star constellations and human beings. If one focuses on the sensuously given and determinately present parts of a structure, in the manner of, say, Humean empiricism, at the expense of tracking a perceptible style or rhythm, one is bound to miss how it all hangs together, that is, how a particular sense or directionality emerges from the whole.

The upshot here is that “non-sensuous similarity” cannot be perceived in the manner of empirically discrete perceptual properties, but it also does not exclude them. It is there but not there, in the manner not of a caricaturized Platonic, formal transcendence, but of a material immanence. In perceptually apprehending the multiplicity of phenomena that constitutes a given environment or scene, one is habitually guided by these non-sensuous similarities. However, the efficacy of this guidance itself depends on the fact that one cannot readily pinpoint the similarities in the way that one can self-consciously recognize and describe sensible properties, such as the rough, reddish-brown texture of a brick façade, or the snubness of Socrates’ nose. The reason for this difference is that the non-sensuous similarities at work in mimesis are not distinct other properties locatable alongside the sensuous ones; on the contrary, they are embedded together, incapable of existing independently. Non-sensuous similarity emerges from objects through their properties as an affective confluence of forces.

Thus, Susan Sontag’s critique of the mimetic basis of the “hermeneutics of suspicion,” found in Nietzsche, Freud, and Marx, for example, as an outgrowth of transcendental thought, whereby “the manifest content must be probed and pushed aside to find the true meaning,”³¹ does not accurately apply to Benjamin. Rather, the surfaces of phenomenal objects betray an inexhaustible depth that extends to and from the surfaces in a rhythm in which one is caught up, and to which one is called to respond. This rhythm emerges in the presentation of a style that orders the sensorium in ways appropriate to it: absorbed or distracted, contemplative or carefree, spectatorial or interactive, and so forth. Thus, most importantly, the peculiar miming at work in non-sensuous similarity manifests in acts of comportment that bear non-empirical similarity to the entities or events that solicit them, extending the being of the “original” in ways that go beyond the standard original/copy structure. In the following section I will connect Benjamin’s mimetic theory to his account of distracted attention. Benjamin’s theory of “non-sensuous similarity,” I argue, entails that different phenomena call for different hermeneutic postures. Distraction, despite its unfair maligning throughout the history of modern aesthetics, is precisely the appropriate hermeneutic posture to take when interpreting dispersed phenomena. Such phenomena include, I will later show, at least certain instances of public art and street art.

29) *Ibid.*, 695.

30) *Ibid.*

31) Sontag, “Against Interpretation,” 7.

Distracted Attention

It is crucial to make clear that Benjamin's embrace of distraction [*Zerstreuung*] over absorption [*Versunkenheit*] is not a privileging of thoughtlessness or disengagement. He is not embracing as a virtue the typical distract- edness with which teenagers, for example, turn to their smart phones away from challenging or otherwise "boring" tasks. In its common usage, the term "distraction" bears a kind of normative force; things we characterize as "distractions" are implicitly recognized as inferior to whatever they are distracting us from. Yet, as Ben Highmore observes, "such distractions must also be attractions or they would not be able to function as something that could divert and redirect attention."³² Distraction is not straightforwardly opposed to atten- tion, but rather constitutes a different mode of attention – one that harbors a radical potency. This potency is underwritten by the kind of freedom that attends a perception whose focus "comes and goes, that is attentive one moment but is inattentive and unfocused another."³³

In "The Author as Producer" (1934), Benjamin criticizes the *Neue Sachlichkeit* [New Objectivity] movement in Germany for its "transformation of the political struggle from a call-to-decision into an object of contempla- tive enjoyment, from a means of production into a consumer article."³⁴ The so-called "realistic" photographs capturing the crushing poverty of 1920s Germany effectively converted "revolutionary impulses ... into objects of distraction"³⁵ to the extent that they adorned bourgeois gallery walls as objects to be contemplated. Ironically, then, Benjamin insists that aesthetic objects presented as contemplative foci for a homogeneous, disinterested attunement are "distractions" in the common, pejorative sense of the term. Such objects function by cutting one off from the exigencies of a wildly heterogeneous world, and they do so precisely in a formal sense: the objects' formal mode of presentation makes affective claims on the responding sensorium, which in this case, demand and authenticate a socially irresponsible hermeneutic of subjective absorption. The style or self-presentation of a given work is more decisive than any determinate content for how the work will work, that is, orient, direct, and demand a particular interpretive response.

Benjamin's point here is subtly dialectical. No matter how efficacious, in any given instance, the formal reinforcement of a detached interiority turns out to be, every "inward-looking state of attentive concentra- tion is invariably shaped by its opposites,"³⁶ that is, either a relatively more dispersed "presence of mind" [*Geistesgegenwort*] on the one hand, or a corresponding state of habituation on the other. Distractive media are themselves productive of – and not merely the products of – more socially conscientious modes of relating, insofar as they help "to maintain a form of attentiveness whose openness towards the marginal, the overlooked, and the forgotten collapses neither into solipsistic absorption, nor into endless dispersal."³⁷

In "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936), Benjamin argues that the new mode of being for art – now, in principle infinitely *reproducible* – ruptures the traditional metaphysical definition of the work as a place of harmony, of reconciliation between mind and world. In a word, it shatters the untouch- able "aura" of the "original" work by bringing the work back down to the level of objects.³⁸ While Heidegger's well known characterization of artworks as revealing the ineluctable tension between earth and world is still

32) Highmore, *Ordinary Lives: Studies in the Everyday*, 117.

33) *Ibid.*, 116.

34) Benjamin, "The Author as Producer," 776.

35) *Ibid.*

36) Duttlinger, "Between Contemplation and Distraction," 38.

37) *Ibid.*, 51.

38) Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 221.

mired in Hegel's historico-teleological aesthetic – wherein “great works” are privileged as those which found an age and define its spirit – Benjamin, by contrast, takes the de-auralized effect down to the level of everyday life: likening cinema, for example, to the anxious experience of traffic in a bustling city,³⁹ one is overwhelmed, like Georg Simmel's metropolitan dweller,⁴⁰ by a disorienting barrage of stimuli. Still, both Benjamin and Heidegger emphasize art's discomfiting “uncanny” effect; for these thinkers, in the words of Gianni Vattimo, “aesthetic experience is directed towards keeping the disorientation alive.” Art as disorienting is “constitutive, not provisional.”⁴¹

Nevertheless, within the confines of the entrenched museum culture of the contemporary artworld, works of art continue to present themselves as vertically orienting, auratic images seeking a contemplative consumer. For Benjamin, the top-down, normative regulation of our sensuous engagement with objects and places is deeply suspect, both aesthetically and politically. If the aesthetic, according to one prominent way of understanding it, is supposed to train the human sensorium, to attune it to the particular demands of objects, then the uniform advocacy of a detached, contemplative, optical fixing of a thing's *eidōs* as univocally “available” [“*vorhanden*”], is inadequate. This was certainly true in Benjamin's time of bustling streets lined with cars, trams, busses, cyclists, neon signs, and radios buzzing with stories and advertisements; it is even truer today in our age of so-called media-saturation. Our violently precipitate landscapes of public commercial spaces and private spaces locked into manifolds of global networks demand nothing short of a total, frenetic, and *synaesthetic* deployment of the faculties. In a fragmented program – titled “Theory of Distraction” – associated with his second art essay, Benjamin writes: “The values of distraction should be defined with regard to film, just as the values of catharsis are defined with regard to tragedy... . Distraction, like catharsis, should be conceived as a physiological phenomenon.”⁴² The “shock” suffered by our bodily sensibilia on an hourly basis is staggering. We typically perceive things distractedly because that is how they are given. The task of art is to manifest this normative feature of reality, not to obscure it.

More than film, Benjamin holds architecture to be paradigmatic of essentially distractive media. To rightly take up an object distractedly requires that the tactile be elevated over the visual. We negotiate architectural spaces first and foremost by way of haptic feel and proprioceptive awareness, through which we develop habitual responses to the environment.⁴³ Far from blinding the perceiver to encountered sights, this process of habituation enables an individual to take in a stream of impressions more openly and with greater flexibility. The visual has always been associated with the contemplative. In cases of distracted attention, however, the visual is usually derivative.⁴⁴ Thus, an adequate distractive hermeneutic would be one that deprivileges “reading” as its overarching model. The weakness of the model by which we understand all interpreters as readers “lies in its assuming a contemplative individual when it should instead assume a distracted collective reading ... with a tactile eye.”⁴⁵

In the final section to follow, I offer an aesthetico-hermeneutic account of street art and the peculiar demands that this style imposes. The norms dictating adequate responsiveness to phenomena in aesthetic experience are not univocal. Sometimes, as in the case of street art specifically and public art more generally, “distracted awareness” is more appropriate – in terms of the style of the work's appropriation of the interpreter

39) Ibid., 236.

40) Simmel, “Bridge and Door,” 174–76.

41) Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, 51–52.

42) Benjamin, “Theory of Distraction,” 56.

43) Taussig, “Tactility and Distraction,” 149.

44) Benjamin, “Theory of Distraction,” 39–40.

45) Taussig, “Tactility and Distraction,” 52.

– than robustly self-aware concentration. Distractive media, then, call for a mode of comportment that functions, as Taussig explains, “like peripheral vision, not studied contemplation, a knowledge that is imageric and sensate rather than ideational ... a knowledge that lies as much in the objects and spaces of observation as in the body and mind of the observer.”⁴⁶

Distraction and the Arts

On January 12, 2007, Joshua Bell, a world-renowned violin virtuoso, performed incognito as a street musician in a Washington D.C. subway during morning rush hour. The Washington Post arranged the event, without fanfare, as a social experiment “in context, perception, and priorities – as well as an unblinking assessment of public taste: *In a banal setting at an inconvenient time, would beauty transcend?*”⁴⁷ Gene Weingarten, the writer of the piece, won a Pulitzer Prize for it. This is a fascinating experiment for the present discussion, not least because of the theoretical assumptions underpinning the questions asked and the possible answers anticipated:

Each passerby had a quick choice to make, one familiar to commuters in any urban area where the occasional street performer is part of the cityscape: Do you stop and listen? Do you hurry past with a blend of guilt and irritation, aware of your cupidity but annoyed by the unbidden demand on your time and your wallet? Do you throw in a buck, just to be polite? Does your decision change if he’s really bad? What if he’s really good? Do you have time for beauty? Shouldn’t you? What’s the moral mathematics of the moment?⁴⁸

The moral and aesthetic stakes of these questions are here ratcheted up in virtue of the fact that (1) Bell is among the finest soloists in the world, (2) he began his performance that morning with Bach’s “Chaconne,” widely recognized as one of the most difficult to master pieces composed for violin, and (3) the instrument used, a Stradivarius, is worth an estimated \$3.5 million. Expectations on the part of those involved with the experiment were high. There was some concern that larger and larger crowds would amass, resulting in total gridlock and pandemonium – in short, a complete logistical and safety nightmare for city and transit authorities.

As it turned out, however, only one person recognized Bell during his hours of performance, and she did not happen upon the scene until it was nearly over. For everyone else, it was just another faceless street musician offering a momentary distraction for morning commuters. That this ubiquitous distractedness was interpreted as a moral and aesthetic failure is quite telling. In the face of “beauty,” in this regard, following Bell’s adjustment of Kantian formalism, no different from the “sublime,” the only proper response is rapt absorption. The passers-by were called upon by beauty to suspend their everyday habits in favor of measured aesthetic comportment. They failed. Is this a fair assessment?

The video captured reveals throngs of commuters walking by at varying speeds and giving varying degrees of attention to Bell’s sophisticated musicianship. Very few of the passers-by could be said to have ignored him completely. But is this distracted mode of engagement not precisely what the work, conditioned by the specific context and style of its execution, demanded? To claim that “beauty” was lost on the commuters is to claim that beauty as such must be understood in esoteric contradistinction to the banal and the quotidian. It is to claim that distracted attention is tantamount to inattention, that the only plausible metric for successful aesthetic

46) Ibid., 147.

47) Weingarten, “Pearls Before Breakfast.” Emphasis added.

48) Ibid.

engagement is complete arrest. In contrast, as we have seen, the upshot of Benjamin's treatment of distraction is precisely that the momentary, the fragmented, and the discontinuous all exert a positive aesthetic allure that must be countenanced on its own terms.

Dissatisfied with the outcome of the experiment, Bell set out to repeat it in September 2014, albeit with some modifications intended to rectify the problems attending the first effort. In a piece anticipating the second experiment, also in the *Washington Post*, Jessica Contrera paraphrases Bell, who reportedly "performs best when all the pressure is on, when hundreds of people are paying hundreds of dollars to hear him play music that is hundreds of years old. It warrants perfection."⁴⁹ In other words, for the performance to be successful, it must not be what it is: a kind of street performance, which as such, is constrained by the terms of the style of the street, of the peculiar self-presentation of aesthetic objects embedded in transitional urban spaces where one is called to submit to the "monotonous, fascinating, constantly unrolling band of asphalt."⁵⁰ Trading "the baseball hat for a crisp black shirt, hidden cameras for media coverage and busy commuters for what he hope[d] [would] be a large and engaged audience there to hear a program of Mendelssohn and Bach," Bell transformed the main hall of Union Station into a proletarian surrogate for the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. It was a half-hearted and confused gesture offered to "introduce" beauty into the everyday by refashioning the ordinary in the exalted image of the extraordinary, to which, in the language of Clive Bell, "we need bring with us nothing from life, no knowledge of its ideas or affairs, no familiarity with its emotions." Contrera closes her article with a rhetorical question, articulating in advance the criterion by which the duplicated event would be deemed successful: "Hey, did you hear about the famous violinist who played in the Metro and everyone paid attention?"⁵¹ But the *exposition* of the Metro performance, gathering itself in a concrete place contributive of its own set of norms, is at the same time and ordering imposition of response; this imposition articulates itself, goes to work, actualizes, independently of Bell's desire for a rapt audience.

In *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, Jacques Rancière calls for a "new writing made up of sensory micro-events" that would make a space for "that new privilege of the minute, of the instantaneous and the discontinuous."⁵² Such literary efforts of social microscopy would amount to an adequate sensuous squaring with phenomena from inside urban contexts of fast-paced, media-glutted social intercourse. While Rancière's preferred example is the quintessentially realistic prose of Stendhal, the following passage from Fernando Pessoa's *Book of Disquiet* strikes me as appropriate:

I'm riding on a tram and, as usual, am closely observing all the details of the people around me. For these details are like things, voices, phrases. Taking the dress of the girl in front of me, I break it down into the fabric from which it's made and the work that went into making it (such that I see a dress and not just fabric), and the delicate embroidery that trims the collar decomposes under my scrutiny into the silk thread with which it was embroidered and the work it took to embroider it. And immediately, as in a textbook of basic economics, factories and jobs unfold before me: the factory where the cloth was made; the factory where the darker-colored silk was spun to trim with curlicues its place around the neck; the factories' various divisions, the machines, the workers, the seamstresses. My inwardly turned eyes penetrate into the offices, where I see the managers trying to stay calm, and I watch everything being recorded in the account books. But that's not all: I see

49) Contrera, "Joshua Bell Is Playing."

50) Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 519.

51) Contrera, "Joshua Bell Is Playing."

52) Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, 10.

beyond all this to the private lives of those who live their social existence in these factories and offices. The whole world opens up before my eyes merely because in front of me – on the nape of a dark-skinned neck whose other side has I don't know what face – I see a regularly irregular dark-green embroidery on a light-green dress.⁵³

The narrator provides a detailed, first-person account of his perceptual adventure in mundane, distracted awareness. What I describe as “distracted” here might appear to be focused attention. As intimated above, however, this possible discrepancy of interpretation ought to be attributed to the essentially ambiguous nature of distraction itself: strictly speaking, distraction is not opposed to attention, but is rather a special kind of attention. As we have seen, Benjamin suggests that we can distinguish distracted attention from focused or “absorbed” attention by examining their respective objects. Riding the tram enroute to work, the narrator is not presented with any singularly unified phenomenon that would serve as an object for rapt absorption. He is precisely distracted in the face of “distractive” – in other words, dispersed, multiplicitous – phenomena, each calling out from a liminal milieu as worthy of consideration. He is distracted by “a regularly irregular dark-green embroidery on a light-green dress,” an infinitesimal opening into a vast subterranean world of objects and their own peculiar histories, trajectories, and dark, earthy threads spreading out in myriad directions, giving shape and expression to demands long covered over and pushed beyond the margins of concern. Distraction, as an aesthetic mode of comportment, often functions in the manner of a Proustian reverie, an intertwining of the perceptible with the imagined, of what is there with what is not there.

Lexington, Kentucky is developing an international reputation for its street art, a reputation typically reserved for larger, more metropolitan cities. Perhaps the most famous work here is the massive mural depicting Abraham Lincoln, a native Kentuckian, on the back of the Kentucky Theater downtown. Brazilian artist Eduardo Kobra – commissioned for the job by local arts group PRHBTN in 2013 – painted the mural with the intention to “provoke and delight, with bright colors, showing once again that art and democracy remain fundamental to art and life as a whole.”⁵⁴ The photorealistic mural specifically depicts the statue at the Lincoln Memorial, but with a boldness and varied vibrancy of color that highlights the strangeness of its status as “copy” or “likeness.”

Owing to its remarkable attention to detail, the mural invites and rewards close viewing. But the work – *qua* street art, which, according to Nicholas Alden Riggle, requires that the work’s “material use of the street is internal to its meaning”⁵⁵ – has something to say that can only be experienced in transit, amidst one’s traversal of the cityscape. Now, this is not to suggest that the work was commissioned and installed for the purpose of simply adorning or decorating the street, rather than calling attention to the street itself. On the contrary, engaging the work *distractedly* means to consider it as dispersed among other phenomena on the street, a transitory space, thereby calling attention to the specific phenomenological character of the street itself. Applying the principle of contemplative hermeneutics to one’s enjoyment of the mural would annul the affective role of the street in the context of one’s interpretation.

Walking northwest on High Street, one block west of the Kentucky Theater on Vine, one sees the monochromatic gray head of the statesman emerge from behind the Downtown Transit Center, illuminated by a frenetic background of red and blue rays that subtly intersect the multicolored patchwork of the figure’s partially concealed torso, seated between the two imposing *fasci*, more vibrant still, that delimit the throne. The image is most adequately appreciated with a regard to how it presents itself as an integrated discontinuity, a subtle

53) Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet*, 253.

54) Urch, “Kobra Makes Mark with Lincoln Mural.”

55) Riggle, “The Transfiguration of the Common Place,” 243.

imposition unfolding from out of a rhythm that tenuously holds together heterogeneous elements – spatial and temporal rifts, memories and percepts, rural origins, and distant seats of power. This disclosive character of street art manifests in part as a concretion of Kierkegaard’s notion of repetition. The work works on the street as a momentary rupture, making the street the same, but new – a dynamic surface calling attention to the concealed form of everyday structures and their navigation. For Kierkegaard, repetition would come to play as decisive a role for the modern world as *anamnesis* did for the Platonic Greeks; indeed, “repetition” just is recollection, but as a movement forward – towards that which both is and has yet to be – rather than backwards.⁵⁶

According to Jacques Rancière, “art no longer tries to respond to an excess of commodities and signs but rather to a lack of bonds.”⁵⁷ Through their work, artists seek to develop a community of bonds between heterogeneous entities and events, not towards the ultimate goal of assimilating differences through the unifying lens of a subjective contemplation, but of sustaining them as such: “This art is not the founding of a common world through the absolute singularity of form; it is a way of redistributing the objects and images that comprise the common world as it is already given, or of creating situations apt to modify our gazes and our attitudes with respect to this collective environment.”⁵⁸ New forms of sensation, perception, and interpretation are

Constituted and transformed by welcoming images, objects, and performances that seemed most opposed to the idea of fine art: vulgar figures in genre painting, the exaltation of the most prosaic activities in verse freed from meter, music-hall stunts and gags, industrial buildings and machine rhythms, smoke from trains and ships reproduced mechanically, extravagant inventories of accessories from the lives of the poor.⁵⁹

These dispersed phenomena both call for and help to deepen the fluid posture of distracted awareness as a shared haptic receptiveness uniquely disposed to resist the top-down ordering programs of economic efficiency and instrumental rationality.

In this paper, I have tried to foreground ways of thinking aesthetically, grounded in difference, which challenge traditional historical approaches that have univocally prescribed “right” ways of taking up aesthetic objects. Benjamin’s notion of technologically reproducible aesthetic artifacts – de-auralized and lowered to the level of the banal – opens itself to a fruitful “aesthetics of distraction” by means of which new ways of coping in our media-saturated, blooming, buzzing world are made available. For Rancière, the stakes are high with regard to the transformative power of what he calls the contemporary “aesthetic regime” of art, insofar as it makes possible, perhaps for the first time, a non-communal community, a community in which heterogeneous material arrangements, persons, and cultural artifacts are permitted to show themselves as different, and to make singular demands on the human sensorium on this basis.

56) Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, 3.

57) Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, 57.

58) *Ibid.*, 21.

59) Rancière, *Aisthesis: Scenes From The Aesthetic Regime of Art*, x.

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