

AESTHETICS, ART(THEORY) AND SOCIETY

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The Critical-Linguistic Critique of the Aesthetic Ideology in the Late Writing of Paul de Man

Abstract

The focus of this essay is Paul de Man's provocative antipathy towards the category of the aesthetic in his late writings on philosophical aesthetics. I introduce de Man's critique of what he terms aesthetic ideology – a form of ideological communication – which he considers manifest in the aesthetics of Schiller in particular but also in more scrupulously critical philosophers. I begin the essay with Benjamin's well known observation that twentieth century fascisms aestheticized political practice as part of a defence of existing property relations. I introduce de Man's critique of aesthetic ideology as a way of developing or elaborating on what are relatively sketchy comments on the relationship aesthetics and politics in Benjamin's earlier essay.

Keywords: Paul de Man, ideology, aesthetic, the aesthetics of politics, materialism

In his conclusion to his famous essay on technological reproduction, Walter Benjamin sketches the inhumanity of the aesthetic and its capacity for violence. He wrote his essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility" (1935-1936), to neutralise traditional aesthetic categories and to give nothing, therefore, usable to fascism – creativity, genius, "eternal value" and mystery – a contemporary and victorious fascism to which the aesthetic seemed to have too easily succumbed. According to Benjamin, when contemplation is transformed and distanced by reproductive technologies, human beings become able to contemplate their own annihilation with "supreme aesthetic pleasure" (Benjamin 2002, 122). If the aesthetic, mediated by new technologies – primarily the camera – which both mediates and distances human experience and an individual's relations to others, becomes entangled with the palpable experiences and sensations of actual human bodies, then it can turn

inwards against itself, it can manifest an indifferent cruelty and it can find a certain beauty, something like a sadomasochistic pleasure, in its own dehumanizing effects. The imposition of the aesthetic on the political in this sense – Benjamin's example from the history of art is the Italian Futurist glorification of trench warfare as beautiful – implies a politics where nonaesthetic criteria like bodily wellbeing become irrelevant or are considered worthless. To understand political practice under aesthetic or purely formal principles is not only to disregard considerations of bodily or sensuous expression and pleasure (that are found in the young Marx's understanding of the aesthetic, for example), but to raise art above such basic human interests as the preservation of life.

The violent inhumanity inhering in the aesthetic preoccupies the late writings of the literary theorist Paul de Man, who, in the early years of the Second World War was seduced by and collaborated with fascism in a series of articles written for the Belgian collaborationist press. These publications were sympathetic to fascism, occupation, and collaboration and the discourses and themes of de Man's articles were clearly engaged with the ideological positions of Belgian fascism. It is arguable that the trauma of collaboration with the enemy, which cannot be sufficiently abreacted, is remembered in de Man's writings in the theorisation of the aesthetic ideology and a suspicion of the aesthetic that signalled his incomplete theoretical encounter with Marxism. The focus of this essay is Paul de Man's provocative antipathy towards the category of the aesthetic: according to de Man, philosophical aesthetics has denied a certain linguistic or "material" factor inhering within its canonical works to ensure the continued stability of the category of the aesthetic as a principle of articulation: the aesthetic is defined as "a principle of articulation between various known faculties, activities, and modes of cognition" (De Man 1984, 265). De Man traces this linguistic factor or what he identifies as a radical activity of a materialism to the heart of the *Critique of Judgement* (1790).

An ideology is a particular kind of consciousness that thrives on contradictions and constraints that are social and historical. It is to contradiction and constraint that it replies or responds as an unravelling and convincing explanation, one that has the qualities of inevitability and indisputability, creating a narrative with all of the inconsistencies smoothed out. An aesthetic ideology as outlined by de Man consists in an approach to literary fiction which persists in confusing the "the materiality of the signifier with the materiality of what it signifies" and ideology is exactly this "confusion of linguistic with natural reality, of reference with phenomenalism" which is an inescapable by-product of any activity of reading (De Man, 1986, 11).

De Man's late writings are oriented towards the aesthetic discourses of the most avowedly critical texts of philosophical aesthetics and their more straightforwardly

ideological reception that he understands as a recuperation or even domestication. This recuperation occurs in kinds of writing that construe the aesthetic as a panacea, as a desirable conclusion to the political, as a resolution to the determining and constitutive social contradictions and constraints of modernity. However, De Man finds in the category of the aesthetic a kind of coercion, not merely an acquiescence to but a drive towards violence against the body that has its justification in the achievement of an ideal, aesthetic society.

An important textual example is the letters Friedrich Schiller wrote to his friend Christian Gottfried Körner in 1793. Schiller (2003, 174) writes that he knows "no more fitting an image for the ideal of beautiful relations than the well danced arabesquely composed English dance". Schiller turns to the example of dance to express the principles of the gentility of social intercourse in an "ideal or beautiful society" cultivated by the "cosmopolitan man". The "countless movements" of dance, which criss-cross and change direction apparently arbitrarily and at will, creates a spectacle in which the dancers never collide or get in each other's way – Schiller imagines a spectator watching the spectacle from a gallery above. The dance, skilful and yet artless, presents "the most fitting picture of maintained personal freedom and the spared freedom of the other" (Schiller 2003, 174). As an expression of gentility, Schiller conceives dance to be intimately related to and a manifestation of freedom: when we dance, we respect the freedom of others and show our own. However, it is arguable that the movements of the dancers across the floor and the individual gestures bodies make to dance are an early, a first manifestation of mimesis, itself a primal form of artistic activity; as such, it is uncertain how dance could ever fully emancipate the body. The dance represents the so-called "tautology of art" because through bodily movement different dancers express formalized and repeated movements that offer little leeway for individuality. In other words, the dancer learns and enacts rigidly formulated rules that he or she must necessarily follow, and it is through the repeated and formalized movements that dancers can supposedly express their individuality. A "well executed English dance" becomes a perfect image of individual freedom in Schiller's text and, according to de Man, it is the "privileged spectacle of the dance" found there that "condenses the complex ideology of the aesthetic" (De Man, 1984, 264). De Man appropriates Schiller's metaphor to demonstrate the roles of imitation and formalization in the formation of sociability in the ideal state: its creation depends on "formalisation" represented by the dance.

This image appears in Schiller's letters on beauty to Körner and in a short and "enigmatic" story by Heinrich von Kleist published in December 1810 in the *Berliner Abendblätter*. The development of Schiller's aesthetic state depends on mimesis and

Kleist too engages with themes of mimetic imitation but more critically and subversively. The juxtaposition of Schiller's aesthetic texts to Kleist's "On the Marionette Theatre" reveals or recovers the actual threat to the aesthetic as a principle of articulation that had emerged in Kant's third *Critique*; it is this threat Schiller's valorisation of art and beauty seeks to overcome or at least obscure. In contrast to Schiller's statements on beauty, Kleist's text, anomalous in the Romantic corpus because of its emphasis on the mechanical and inhuman, is much harder to assimilate within the ideology of the aesthetic.

"On the Marionette Theatre" is concerned with aesthetic education – learning to be a better artist or "perfect" one's art – and imitation as the means to achieve this and like Schiller's letter to Körner is about dance. The story's narrative is framed as a dialogue of shared anecdotes. Two old friends meet in the public gardens of an unnamed city in the Winter of 1801. One of the men, a successful dancer with the opera or ballet had been watching a show with much pleasure a show of marionette theatre and tries to convince his friend that these inanimate and mechanical puppets can be more graceful than a living human body dancing. The narrator expresses his astonishment that such an acclaimed dancer could enjoy such a low or vulgar form of entertainment only intended for the amusement of "the masses". The narrator does not deny that the dance movements of the puppets were or at least appeared graceful, but nevertheless he finds his friend's obvious pleasure in their mute gestures remarkable, unbelievable, and his astonishment grows on hearing the claim, made very seriously, that the marionettes, because they move mechanically and are entirely free of self-consciousness, are more graceful than human dancers. The narrator wants to know how the puppets work and how they can move as gracefully as they do – marionettes are usually jointed and are operated by strings, rods, or wires, but Kleist's narrator cannot see any obvious strings linking puppets and puppeteer. His friend explains that the puppeteer does not control or directly manipulate the individual limbs of the puppets; the limbs are like pendulums and move mechanically on their own accord but are dependent on the centre of gravity of each puppet, that is where their weight is concentrated and most balanced. The limbs of the puppets move rhythmically in the imitation of dance in accordance with the puppeteer shifting the centre of gravity. The dancer denies that the puppeteer is without sensitivity even through his operation is without much skill. What the puppeteer does is nothing like the turning of the handle of the hurdy-gurdy or barrel organ, the dancer insists. Kleist introduces a terminology or imagery of geometry and mathematics to describe the relationship between the graceful movements of the attached puppets and the fingers of the puppeteer. The relationship is something like the relationship between numbers and their logarithms or between asymptote and hyper-

bola – a hyperbola is a kind of curve (which is how Kleist describes the movements of the puppets' limbs) produced by a cut made by a plane in a circular cone; it is the result of a plane intersecting with a cone and an asymptote is a line that corresponds to or follows the curve, but never touches it.

Their conversation moves on to the advantages a marionette has over a living human dancer. The first advantage of the marionette, why it dances much more gracefully than the human dancer, is that its movement is unaffected and unselfconscious; it has a kind of bodily harmony to the extent that its limbs follow the movement of the body mechanically because they are like or work like pendulums that seem immune to the force of gravity and the inertia of matter; as de Man comments, the puppets are described as "antigrav, [anti-gravity] that they can rise and leap, like Nijinsky, as if no such thing as gravity existed for them" (De Man 1984, 286). The esteemed and successful dancer is convinced that puppets moving unconsciously and mechanically according to the pull of gravity move more beautifully and gracefully than human dancers. Puppets also never get tired. He then suggests that a human dancer might dance more gracefully with the aid of a prosthesis or artificial limbs made by a skilled English craftsman and therefore connotes the link between the demands of the aesthetic and violence, that is, Kleist's story at least insinuates the necessity of bodily mutilation to ensure gracefulness: Kleist's text reveals the possibility of violence inherent in the aesthetic that Schiller conceals in his vision of wholeness and harmony defining of the aesthetic state.

De Man's writing on Kleist moves from a quotation taken from Schiller concerned with "the ideal of the beautiful" expressed by an "English dance" to the mechanical and therefore artistically superior dance of the puppets of Kleist's short story and the implicit threat of violence coincident with unselfconscious grace. Although in the same literary tradition as Schiller and concerned with similar themes, Kleist tells a different tale and treats the same themes in such a way that he reveals "some of what is hidden behind Schiller's ideology of the aesthetic" (De Man 1984, 265). What is concealed in Schiller's aesthetic education that will prepare us for the sociability of the perfect state, particularly in the figure of the dance that begins de Man's essay, is the violence that makes it possible, a violence which is revealed in extravagant and unbelievable ways in Kleist's short story.

De Man finds in Schiller a fundamental misreading of Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, a philosophical text which is the precursor to Schiller's own aesthetics and a whole philosophical tradition that followed in their wake. Schiller's literary and non-philosophical reading of philosophical aesthetics involves a regression from the critical incisiveness of Kant's original text. The reception of the third *Critique* involves the

aestheticization of a critical category: in Schiller the aesthetic becomes a normative value and source of authority and which leads to a series of political imperatives. As an explicitly critical category, the aesthetic is "directly threatening" to the possibility of the aesthetic functioning politically or ideologically. Schiller's misreading concludes that the aesthetic is a political value and the political investment in the aesthetic determines its domestication. What is threatening to the ideal of the aesthetic as a political value is a certain and counterintuitive form of materialism which emerges in the *Critique of Judgement*. It is this materialism that represents a contradiction in the ideology of the aesthetic that Schiller elaborates, and which is essential to the "aesthetic state" or a realised beautiful society. *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* describes the aesthetic as a release from the constraints normally experienced in the natural and political spheres: in the aesthetic state, Schiller argues, the relations between individuals are governed by beauty and one individual confronts another "as form" or "as an object of free play". It is only the aesthetic state which can realise society or make it possible because "consummates the will of the whole through the nature of the individual". It is through the "aesthetic mode of perception" that unifies or harmonises rather than divides the individual, it "makes of him a whole" and what Schiller calls "the aesthetic mode of communication" can unite society because beauty is something enjoyed by individuals collectively, as a "genus", (which, in the words of Marx (1992, 423), is a ahistorical and "dumb" category "which *naturally* unites the many individuals"). "Beauty alone", Schiller (1992, 217) writes, "makes the whole world happy, and each and every being forgets its limitations under its spell". De Man identifies and draws out the radical implications of Schiller's conception of "aesthetic state" realised by a kind of mutual recognition of beauty and the reduction of the individual to form and social relations reconfigured as "play". Although Schiller considers form as a "principle of freedom" he elaborates it in terms of domination over mass, over the gross and palpable bodies of horses, crabs, and ducks. Form takes possession of the human body and transforms it: "Uncoordinated leaps of joy turn into dance, the unformed movements of the body into the graceful and harmonious language of gesture" (Schiller 1992, 213). To construe human beings as forms or possessed by form is to recognise and foreground their beauty: form is fundamentally beautiful for Schiller because it needs no explanation though recourse to any external or heteronomous concept. This suggests that if social relations are beautiful then they are unmediated and are self-explanatory.

The aesthetic, as the only proper means to realise the possibility of society, is explicitly political in Schiller's text with the presumed authority to limit and shape human freedom: he describes "the aesthetic modulation of the psyche" (Schiller 2005,

161). The category of the aesthetic, de Man insists, would not be interesting, it would not continue to preoccupy us intellectually, if this was not the case. This definition is not unique to de Man: Frederic Jameson (1974, 90) also reminds us of the fundamentally political nature of Schiller's ideal of the aesthetic: "the importance of beauty consists for [Schiller] in the possibility the aesthetic experience affords of a practical apprenticeship for the real political and social freedom to come". Schiller would obviously concur that the aesthetic is political or functions politically, but he would deny that it circumscribes human freedom. "Taste", Schiller argues, legislates against privilege and autocracy, and under its rule, equality is realised or fulfilled. "In the aesthetic state, everything – even the tool which serves – is a free citizen, having equal rights with the noblest; and the mind, which would force the patient mass beneath the yolk of its purposes must here first obtain its assent" (Schiller 1992, 219).

In de Man's late writings, the critique of aesthetic ideology happens through, by the way of, the juxtaposition of texts and through these juxtapositions de Man demonstrates an irreversible progression from knowledge or cognition to what he names as "material occurrence". The event or occurrence is empty, nothing happens apart from a regression from the incisiveness of earlier, critical intervention or model. In linguistic terms, this progression or transition is from trope to a different kind of language which is performative.

"Kant's Materialism", a lecture de Man delivered in 1981, reveals a "radical formalism" in Kant's aesthetics and a concomitant loss of the symbolic. This essay and de Man's late writings on philosophical aesthetics is concerned with the *reception* of the *Critique of Judgement* as a text that disrupts the aesthetic as a unifying or synthesising category. This reception, which retreats from Kant's materialism, has tried to recover the symbolic and has often denied the aesthetic any political consequence. De Man's response to this tradition is that the aesthetic cannot be reduced to aestheticism and our interest in the aesthetic remains fundamentally and necessarily political, as the examples of Schiller's appropriation of the aesthetic as a model for the ideal state and Benjamin's critique of aesthetic politics can demonstrate. De Man criticises the tendency to situate the third *Critique* in a lineage of decadent aestheticism that denies the centrality of the aesthetic to politics. For example, in his remarks on the third *Critique* in his *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (1953), M. H. Abrams describes Kant's separation of the knowledge from beauty and emphasises Kant's conception of the aesthetic as indifference. Abrams suggests this theme is continued in Schiller's writings in which the aesthetic renounces all claims to reality. The theme of indifference and the autonomy of the aesthetic, its retreat from the hostility of a utilitarian and commercial world is taken up in the writing of Flaubert and

then Oscar Wilde in the formula or slogan *l'art pour l'art* – a declaration of aesthetic indifference or aestheticism condemned by Benjamin. For de Man, Abrams exemplifies a tendency to underestimate the political character of the aesthetic and read the third *Critique* superficially.

However, other readers of Kant, de Man refers to Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things* (1966), have recognised the "critical power" of the third *Critique*. Foucault reflects on the coexistence of two simultaneous and yet exterior modes of thought emergent at the end of the eighteenth century: "Ideology", understood as the science of ideas, and critical philosophy. Foucault is concerned with a *separation* in thought and the conception of "Ideology" as the sole rational and scientific form of knowledge. According to Foucault, "Ideology" does not question the foundation and limits of representation but situates knowledge in the *space* of representation. The "Ideology" of Destutt de Tracy, a systematic science of the origin of ideas, shares with Kantian critical philosophy a concern with the relation of representations to each other. However, Kant asks what makes this relation possible at all; Kant avoids representation itself to consider the basis on which all representation can be posited. Judgements that are universally valid have their foundation beyond all empirical observations or experience in the *a priori* conditions of existence of representation. For Foucault, (2002, 263) "the Kantian critique ... marks the threshold of our modernity; it questions representation ... on the basis of its rightful limits". Kantian critique sanctions the "event" in European culture, "the withdrawal of knowledge or thought outside the space of representation". It brings into question the foundation, origin, and limits of the space of representation; its critique transforms this space into as a dogmatic metaphysics.

For de Man (1996, 120), the critique of representation engenders a tension between "the transcendental order of negative cognition" and empiricism: de Man points out Kant's criticisms of merely empirical explanations of aesthetic judgements and his recommendation of a "higher investigation" based on "a transcendental discussion". For Kant (1987, 140) a judgement of taste cannot be egotistic, it "must be based on some a priori principle ... and we can never arrive as such a principle by scouting about for empirical laws about mental changes". However, Kant's critique of representation and his criticisms of existing empirical expositions of aesthetic judgements, (he refers to Edmund Burke's discussion of the sublime as originating in empirical experiences of pain and terror) does not entirely deny an empirical moment. The higher, transcendental discussion of aesthetic judgements that Kant recommends over and above Burke's theorisation would at least *begin* with the empirical or experiential as the raw material for this discussion.

There is a kind of materialism that inheres in Kant, which in its radicalism, exceeds what is conveyed by 'empiricism' or 'realism', concepts which still imply a phenomenality of experience. De Man's "critical-linguistic analysis" of Kantian aesthetics is focused on the section in the third *Critique* on the sublime, which is also the starting point for Hegel's own reflections on sublimity. De Man directs us to Hegel's observation that in the third *Critique* the experience and the discourse of the sublime are no longer properly symbolic: it expresses something that cannot be configured externally or adequately represented through natural phenomena. It follows that the symbolical character of art will vanish. The symbolic, as a linguistic model to which the *Aesthetics* is firmly committed, implies "a degree of congruence between formal structure and intellectual content" (De Man 1996, 111). In Hegel, the symbol appears as "the mediation between the mind and the physical world of which art manifestly partakes, be it as stone, as colour, as sound, or as language" (De Man 1996, 93). The loss of the symbolic and from there of art engenders a sustained and significant effort of recuperation, demonstrated in the constitutive themes of Schillerian aesthetics that followed. De Man, then, is concerned with the loss of the symbolic in the Kantian sublime that already recognised by Hegel and subject to a kind of recuperation that he associates with the aesthetic ideology.

According to de Man, the sublime for Hegel is iconoclastic, rejecting all plastic representation that could be perceived or imagined, establishing therefore the notion that the sublime represents the loss of the symbolic. For Kant (1987, 226) the symbol is a way of exhibiting a concept to the senses, of making it sensible through a physical or visible sign, of bringing something absent before us. But the section on the mathematical sublime in the third *Critique* describes a "failure to represent, by sensory means, the infinite powers of inventive articulation of which the mind is capable" (De Man 1996, 122). To the extent that Kant's aesthetics are unconcerned with the symbolic or sensuous embodiment, de Man's writings appear to *affirm* them. However, the symbolic is re-established or reinstated in the section on the dynamic sublime in the third *Critique* that examines nature in terms of fear and domination. De Man highlights Hegel's recognition that Kant's discourse on the sublime is not uncomplicatedly symbolic and represents a departure from a linguistic model of the symbol which pervades Hegel's aesthetics. De Man remarks on how different Hegel's theory of the sublime is from the critical tradition primarily because the distinction between the sublime and the beautiful disappears. Hegel is committed to a concept of language derived from the symbol, and the category of the aesthetic itself is dependent on this trope; it is this commitment to symbolism which forces him to isolate the sublime, differentiating it from the order of the symbol. Hegel is committed to the phenomenality of the

sign which simply describes the process of signification whereas sublimity cannot explicitly be configured in something external. The elaboration of a theory of the sublime threatens the category of the aesthetic as a principle of articulation and therefore a model for education and ultimately the ordering or formation of the political state. The point is that the aesthetic cannot come into being without a commitment to a concept of language as symbol.

Hegel criticises Kant for reducing sublimity to the purely subjective, for emphasising the particularity of its affects and therefore trivialising it, and for Kant (1987, 123), sublimity is not simply a quality of natural phenomenon: the sublime "is contained not in any thing of nature, but only in our mind". The sublime is the attempt to express what is an unutterable infinity through the things of the phenomenal world that is inadequate to this task of representation. So, the sublime is a kind of representation that retreats from cognition and knowledge of the phenomenal world. Natural objects cannot adequately or punctually represent the sublime and therefore the infinite because in its qualities, the sublime is shapeless. Kant does evoke the spectacle of nature to represent the sublime in the third *Critique* – "massive mountains climbing skyward, deep gorges with raging streams in them" – but it is a raw and formless nature without human ends or presence.

Hegel approaches Kant's theory of the sublime somewhat impatiently, he refers to Kant's treatment as interesting but reductive (and prolix) and overly subjective in its emphasis on the powers of the mind, but he thinks Kant is correct to argue that the sublime cannot be contained in the sensuous forms of the natural world. The sublime represents a decisive moment of separation – it separates the "absolute" or, more simply, meaning from the immediacy or "the empirical individuality of external things" (Hegel 1998, 362). Hegel describes how meaning is incapable of being truly or adequately expressed in finite phenomena. Hegel (1998, 363) writes that sublimity or the "content" of the sublime which is "pure thought" cannot "have its configuration in something external" and therefore it loses its character as symbol – the symbolical character of the sublime vanishes and the sublime and the symbolic become incompatibilities in Kant's text. He summarises the complexity of Kant's position: the sublime, "is the attempt to express the infinite, without finding in the sphere of phenomena an object which proves adequate for this representation" (Hegel 1998, 363). In distinction to Kant, Hegel does "not place [sublimity] in the pure subjectivity of the mind" and he writes that, "on the contrary, we must grasp it as grounded one the one absolute substance *qua* the content which is to be represented" (Hegel 1998, 363). Hegel conceives the sublime as an expression of the heteronomy of the mundane world in its dependent relationship to the sacred or the divine. However, de Man's reading of Hegel is di-

rected towards Hegel's apparent abandonment of the phenomenality of the sign as a consequence of his own theory of the sublime. For Hegel, the sublime is threatening because it signifies a break with a linguistic model of the symbol and a concept of language as symbolic to which his aesthetic theory is committed. For de Man, the loss of the symbolic – the loss of the "congruence between formal structure and intellectual content" or the loss of "the adequation of sign to meaning" – that happens in Kant's discussion of the sublime is a "negative moment" that threatens a tradition of philosophical aesthetics that follows. "The dynamics of the sublime", de Man writes, "mark the moment when the infinite is frozen into the materiality of stone, when no pathos, anxiety, or sympathy is conceivable; it is, indeed, the moment of a-pathos, or apathy, as the complete loss of the symbolic" (De Man, 1996, 127). This loss threatens the category of the aesthetic as the congruence of sign and referent and emerges from the critique of representation that the third *Critique* elaborates. The recuperation of the possibility of the symbolic and therefore the category of the aesthetic produces an imprecise or distorted reading of Kant.

So, Hegel recognises that sublimity is not a quality of the natural things that we might judge aesthetically and that for Kant (1987, 105, 123) the sublime is "is contained not in any thing of nature, but only in our mind" and is to be "sought solely in our ideas". De Man (1996, 74) remarks that the sublime, because it does not exist *in nature* "is something of a monster", or rather, because of its "entirely interconceptual" character, it is like a ghost. Natural objects cannot adequately represent the sublime and therefore the infinite as the quality of the sublime remains "devoid of shape". Sublimity is not configured in anything external and so cannot uncomplicatedly be understood as symbolic in the third *Critique*. Art and architecture are improper examples of the sublime because in their form and magnitude they are specifically determined by human purposes: sublimity exceeds the usually human scale of art. As Derrida (1987, 122) comments, art originates in the "mastery of the human artist [operating] with a view to an end, determining, defining, giving form" and is therefore incapable of "opening us up to the sublime" which "exists only by overflowing ... it is no longer proportioned according to man and his determinations".

The passage from the "General Remark upon the Exposition of the Aesthetical Reflective Judgement" that particularly interests de Man is concerned with the ways in which we should see nature as sublime. It is a reminder that "in a transcendental aesthetic of judgement" nature must be "considered in a radically nonteleological manner": our pleasure requires our indifference. The passage from the third *Critique* which occupies de Man is primarily concerned with the non-teleological and disinterested character of aesthetic judgements, their "absolute lack of interest for the existence of

the thing" (Derrida 1986, 44). So, to see nature as sublime, to perceive it in the same enigmatically *material* way as the poets apparently see it, we should not judge it conceptually, or in terms of purpose or end. Kant (1987, 130) writes that:

we must not take for our examples such beautiful or sublime objects of nature as presuppose the concept of a purpose. For then the purposiveness would be either teleological, and hence not aesthetic, or else be based on mere sensations of an object (gratification or pain) and hence not merely formal.

When we look at nature "as poets do" we see it "merely in terms of what manifests itself to the eye", disregarding any prior knowledge of its role in supporting human or animal life and therefore perceiving it merely as form. So, Kantian materialism involves seeing purely the form of nature understood as something devoid of all teleology or purpose, something that does not contain or correspond to human ends. The "vision of heaven and world entirely devoid of teleological interference" that Kant describes in the following passage, held up "as a purely sublime and aesthetic vision" contradicts the earlier definitions and analyses of the sublime given in the "Analytic of the Sublime". Kant writes:

Therefore, when we call the sight of the starry sky *sublime*, we must not base our judgement upon any concept of worlds that are inherited by rational beings, and then [conceive of] the bright spots that we see occupying the space above us as being these world's suns, moved in orbits prescribed for them with great purposiveness; but we must base our judgement regarding it merely on how we see it, as a vast vault encompassing everything, and merely under this presentation may we posit the sublimity that a pure aesthetic judgement attributes to this object. In the same way, when we judge the sight of the ocean we must not do so on the basis of how we *think* it, enriched with all sorts of knowledge we possess (but which is not contained within the direct intuition), e.g., as a vast realm of aquatic creatures, or as the great reservoir supplying the water for the vapours that impregnate the air with clouds ... Instead we must be able to view the ocean as poets do, merely in terms of what manifests itself to the eye – e.g., if we observe it while it is calm, as a clear mirror of water bounded only by the sky; or if it is turbulent, as being like an abyss threatening to engulf everything – and yet find it sublime. (Kant 1987, 130)

In arguing that we should follow the poets and see these natural landscapes *aesthetically*, Kant articulates an apparently impossible brute vision distinct from the actual visual experience of any individual inevitably and inescapably involved in a historical or natural world. For de Man (1996, 81), the "predominant perception, in the Kant passage, is that of the heavens and the ocean as an architectonic construct".

According to Kant, the poets perceive the natural spaces the passage describes as a construction in which we could possibly dwell. The passage is not concerned with

the magnitude of raw or crude nature which could provide the basis for a "pure aesthetic judgement about the sublime". In fact, the passage does not see the landscapes it evokes as natural at all, erroneously transforming them into a building or construction. Kant's poets perceive the natural world in an architectonic rather than teleological way and is entirely unlike "the vision of heaven and world" of the romantic poets. De Man references a passage from book fourteen of Wordsworth's *The Prelude* which describes the ocean and the "starry heavens" as an "ethereal vault" that in its sublimity offers "the perfect image of a mighty mind". However, unlike the experience of actual romantic poets, the purely aesthetic vision evoked by Kant is non-teleological: the "link between seeing and dwelling", de Man (1996, 82) argues, "is teleological and therefore absent in pure aesthetic vision" that Kant describes. "Wordsworth's sublime", de Man (1996, 82) argues, "is an instance of the constant exchange between mind and nature, of the chiasmic transfer of properties between the sensory and the intellectual world that characterizes his diction" whereas no mind, however mighty, is involved in Kant's description of the natural world, a world seemingly without semantic depth. Kant is definitely not evoking "a vision 'into the life of things'" de Man insists. The Kantian vision of the natural landscapes the passage describes are mindless; it describes nature as it appears to the eye, if mind or judgement are involved in Kant's and the poet's glance then they are in error "it is false to think of the sky as a roof or of the ocean as bounded by the horizon of the sky" (De Man, 1996, 127).

The transformation Kant describes is not tropological in that it "is entirely devoid of any substitutive exchange, of any negotiated economy, between nature and mind; it is free of any facing or defacing of the natural world" (De Man 1996, 127). However, neither is Kant's description of the world merely literal because that would imply the possibility of a future or consequent symbolization. The "merely formal look" this passage substantiates "entertains no notion of reference or semiosis" and it evokes a radical formalism, which although inhuman in its emphases, that in Benjamin's terms would be entirely useless aesthetically for fascism. "The language of the poets", de Man (writes:

in no way partakes of mimesis, reflection, or even perception, in the sense which would allow a link between sense experience and understanding, between perception and apperception. Realism postulates a phenomenalism of experience which is here being denied or ignored. Kant's looking at the world just as one sees it ... is an absolute, radical formalism that entertains no notion of reference or semiosis. (De Man 1996, 128)

It is at only at this point in the reading, having emphasised its radically formalist character and what Kant's vision of an architectonic world is not like, that de Man

introduces the word 'material': the "only word that comes to mind is that of a *material* vision". However, because it is not "part of a trope or figuration" how "this materiality is then to be understood in linguistic terms is not, as yet, clearly intelligible" (De Man 1996, 82).

Benjamin is concerned with how the reality – the reality of war – is, in de Man's words, "neutralised by aesthetic distance" (De Man 1984, 280) and how fascist politics takes or is possessed by aesthetic form. This was always the difficulty with the aesthetic from the start, what made it so easily manipulable by fascism. Under the cover of aesthetic distance, the individual can enjoy a sadistic pleasure that has to do with the inflecting of wounds, in de Man's essay on Kleist, and self-annihilation in Benjamin's reflections on aestheticized politics. The pure aesthetic vision which emerges from Kant's exposition of the sublime evokes the imagery of bodily impairment and mutilation which characterises de Man's elaboration of a concept of materialism in his late writing and is beneath, implicit within, the valorisation of the aesthetic: it is blind and mute; it would seem to have little to do with a (Hegelian) concept of art as "the sensory manifestation of the idea". However, perhaps in failing to posit "a phenomenism of experience" (de Man 1996, 128) the Kantian aesthetic could avoid the force of Benjamin's censure. Benjamin criticizes the German photographer Albert Renger-Patzsch's *The World is Beautiful* (1928) because it transfigures the social conditions it documents into beautiful and therefore pleasurable images: in this "modish" practice, Benjamin (2005, 776) writes, poverty "is made an object of consumption and 'contemplative enjoyment'". The aesthetic model that is at the heart of Schiller's perfect sociability is always already flawed or impaired as Kleist's image of artificial limbs suggests and perhaps worse, it is ideological, in that it denies and conceals the streak of violence it carries. But as de Man (1984, 289) cautions in juxtaposing Kleist and Schiller, we "should avoid the pathos of an image of bodily mutilation and not forget we are dealing with textual models, and not with the historical and political systems that are their correlate".

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