

“A Useless Exile”: The Promise of Aesthetics (Winter 2016)

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The modern abstraction of art and aesthetics from the contexts of their production has been read both as a necessary stratagem of their survival against reification or commodification, and as a betrayal of the ethical and political motivations that shape their development. The constant pressure to make art and aesthetics take on a kind of utility has, in turn, produced different spaces—of nothingness, of loss, of danger, even of mystery—that Blanchot calls “the empty place where impersonal affirmation emerges” (Space of Literature 55)—as if art and its theory were, in a sense, condemned to wander in the ruins of the sacred spaces of excess, profanation, and sacrifice. As Adorno puts it in his final work *Aesthetic Theory*, the artist embodies a kind of paradox, in which the sharpest sense of reality was joined with an estrangement from reality (9). For Benjamin, the aesthete takes on the role of an allegorist, as one who does a kind of melancholic violence to the art object, silencing it in order to project his/her own ontological significance onto its contours. In effect, the artist or aesthete is engaged in the construction of allegory; the objects of allegory are not mere clutter, mere things, but, in their transformation, become dead things—indices of that excess of life, of a decay very much in progress. As the course proceeds, we will discover that it is not that the metaphors of the sacred and profane have been transferred to aesthetic description, but that their concepts have instead shaped how we think about the ethical and political implications of their production, and how we narrate the “architecture” of the spaces they invoke. Art and aesthetics, in order to maintain their status as sites of resistance, of critique, of questioning, persistently turn against themselves, betraying not just the uncertainty of what art’s purpose(s) might be, but also how history itself erodes the heterogeneity of artworks. With Rancière, we will consider how aesthetics (or, in his terms, the “distribution of the sensible”) is a necessary feature of developing a aesthetic consciousness that does not simply replicate the status quo. Instead, it explores the promise that despite being a product of a particular distribution of the sensible, that is, of a particular geopolitical and historical period, of a particular set of religious beliefs, the artwork is now nevertheless free of the conditions of its production, free to be art, and in this respect, makes another promise: the possibility of a community that is truly free, “that...no longer experiences art as a separate sphere” (of *Aesthetics and Its Discontent* 35). implicates the subject in the production of an aesthetics of agency and dissent.

Course texts:

On the Origin of German Tragic Drama (Verso) Walter Benjamin

The Space of Literature (Nebraska) Maurice Blanchot

Visions of Excess (Minnesota) The Accursed Share (Zone)(selections) – Georges Bataille

Aesthetic Theory (Minnesota) Theodor Adorno

Politics of Aesthetics (Continuum) Jacques Rancière

Aesthetics and Its Discontent (Polity) - Jacques Rancière

Aisthesis (Verso) - Jacques Rancière

Distribution of Grades:

Essay- 35%

Seminar -35%

Response Paper -

Week IV: Adorno, Aesthetic Theory (~~1100~~)

February:

Week V: Adorno, Aesthetic Theory (~~1200~~)

Week VI: Bataille, Visions of Excess (~~se~~selections)

Week VII: NO CLASS!

Week VIII: Bataille, The Accursed Share (~~se~~selections) (RESPONSE DUE)