

Introduction

Culture is extraordinary.

Let us begin from this statement. Culture, I shall argue here, is not a state of affairs, not a mode or manner of living; rather, 'culture' names an event in which the ordinary—a manner of living—discovers or reveals a foundation that is extraordinary, and whose extraordinariness makes possible a different manner of living. Culture can be defined as that event of perception—the root sense of 'aesthetic' (*aisthanomai*)—that calls a human subject to differ from itself, and to find or to constitute its very identity precisely through the specific mode of that differing. It therefore names the possibility of a transformation, a change in our ordinariness that is occasioned by aesthetics or art. The name that we give to that change is history: our historical becoming and our becoming historical.

Democracy is extraordinary.

By this second statement, I mean to suggest that democracy, like culture, is not a constant, not a state of affairs, not a political mode of being; rather, democracy—episodic and rare—names those moments in which the possibility of an ethical respect for selfhood, a selfhood that is marked by cultural change, discovers or reveals itself to be conditioned by alterity, or by our condition of being-with-otherness. The name that we give to this, usually, is 'becoming'. Democracy, we might say, is the condition of our becoming human; and a democracy that finds its episodic roots in the event that we call cultural is the condition of our becoming humanly and socially historical.



This book begins from these two statements and explores the logic of taking them seriously. The argument is that democracy depends on a prior aesthetic event; or, to phrase it differently, democracy is impossible in a polity that degrades the arts. We might call this a 'new aestheticism', and there are many who would support such a position, from diverse political perspectives. I prefer here to call it 'aesthetic democracy'.

Democracy is confused in our commonplace speech today with the idea of a so-called free market, in which consumers, not citizens, celebrate themselves and their freedom in the choices that they allegedly make in an unregulated marketplace or *agora*. It is important to note that in this state of affairs, the subject as *consumer* has usurped the subject as *citizen*. Freedom is thereby reduced to a matter of 'choice', the entire content of freedom being evacuated and replaced by an activity that supposedly demonstrates a 'freedom of choice'. This debased version of freedom is demonstrated through the enactments of choice in a supposedly 'free' or unregulated market. Although we may not quite be 'nations of shopkeepers' (Napoleon's famous scornful description of England), we are nations of shoppers.

In such a polity, there is no possibility of substantive change, no possibility of history; and such a society is therefore precisely anathema to the very democracy that it vaunts as its allegedly founding condition. Baudrillard's early work is useful here. In his analyses of consumer culture, made especially in his 1970 study of *La Société de consommation*, Baudrillard was able to demonstrate that the logic and structures of consumer society have an effect that goes well beyond the merely mercantile economy. It is in this work that Baudrillard begins the trajectory in his thought that leads him towards what appears as an ostensible pessimism and nihilism. In consumer society, there is established a particular condition in which human subjects start to define themselves not in terms of their relations with other subjects, but rather in terms of their relations with objects. Those objects thus start to exert a dramatic force over human subjects: we start off thinking we are empowering ourselves through our objects, enhancing our identity through them; but little by little, the relation is subverted and we become the victims of our objects, such that we feel ourselves to be not fully ourselves unless and until we possess the specific objects in which we have invested the image of our identity.

A new logic of *seduction* operates here, in which humans lose the very subjectivity that would enable them to become free and autonomous. Se-

duction works as a play of forces in which seducers gain power by ostensibly giving up their subjective power: they pretend, in fact, to be an object in order to exert a force of attraction that will force the other into taking the first step in the seduction. Crudely put, and in an analogy with erotic seduction, I seduce you precisely by making myself into an object for your desires, such that you initiate the action that will bring us together; and at that moment, precisely when you believe yourself to be acting freely in what you imagine to be your seduction of me, you are in fact already in my power. As in erotic relations, so also in consumer relations. The logic here is clear: consumer society is one in which we believe ourselves to be free subjects precisely at the moment when we have lost all subjective autonomy and have instead become simply those objects that are the instruments of the desires of others.¹ In this state of affairs, any 'change' that we might feel that we initiate as a demonstration or enactment of our 'autonomy' turns out to have been already programmed and decided for us in advance by others who hold a firm power over us. Further, such a condition precludes the possibility of our acting as citizens in any meaningful sense of the word.

It is not entirely surprising, then, to find, within such polities, that Lyotard's diagnosis of 1979 has some persistent validity. Knowledge itself, he wrote then, 'is and will be produced in order to be sold', in what is essentially the mercantilisation of the university as institution, and especially, within that institution, the mercantilisation of the aesthetic disciplines of the arts and humanities, where our practices are construed and legitimised in almost entirely instrumentalist terms. It is indeed the case that today, 'knowledge is a matter for TV games',² in that our social norms increasingly assume that knowledge—including humanistic knowledge—leads to monetary gain, and that that is its point.

The corollary of this is that knowledge no longer disrupts or disturbs the subject of learning, the student. Hans Blumenberg, in his magisterial study of *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, describes how, for the ancient world, knowledge was eudemonic. It was taken for granted that knowledge, being better than ignorance, made the subject happy. However, something happens to this notion in the eighteenth century, argued Blumenberg, and it becomes a measure of truth's absoluteness that, instead of giving pleasure, it gives pain: truth becomes 'harsh', unaccommodating, disturbing.³ The situation that I describe above is one where we have lost such austerity once more in relation to truth and knowledge, certainly;

yet we have not returned to the ancient condition either. Rather, we have tended first to relativise all knowledge such that it becomes 'situated'; and, second, we have thus replaced epistemological value with financial value, quality with quantity. 'Situated' knowledge (I borrow the term from David Simpson⁴) is that form of knowledge that eschews any possibility of 'absolute knowing' or of a truth that transcends the position from which the knowledge is claimed. However, the point of such situatedness is always to call into doubt the knowledge that is claimed from any position that is different from one's own: in this mode of thinking, 'my' knowledge remains absolute 'for me', whereas 'yours' is always dubious (also 'for me', and therefore dubious *tout court*). In short, dialogue and debate—and with these the very possibility of a social formulation of truth or of knowledge—disappears. Such a disappearance allows subjects to continue in the solace of their ignorance of a knowledge that might require subjects to think themselves differently.

Truth or knowledge cannot be evaluated in such a condition, for there are simply no grounds that can be shared between two or more 'situations': by its very definition, the situations are situated differently from each other, their respective 'knowledges' incommensurable. Instead, what gives value here is simply the (literal) *currency* of truth. At its meagre best, this means that what passes for truth is simply what used to be called ideology: the 'what is taken for granted' by a majority within a community; and at worst, it means that what passes for truth is what most people will buy in a populist market (again, often literally, as in the paid-for subscription to certain 'news' discourses that are but the medium for advertising).

For those condemned to live and work within such a polity, knowledge indeed becomes a celebration of the ordinary as such, a celebration of the preexisting identities of its students. Made financially richer by their knowledge, they can enact more choices, and thereby come more fully into themselves, actualise more fully their real identities, or realise themselves 'freely' ('I can choose what to do or buy') and 'democratically' ('if I can do it, so can anyone'; 'everyone's doing it'; *così fan tutti e tutte*). It follows that there can be no culture—no event such as I described it above, in my opening gambit—and, further, no one is ever called on to change, to extend or to expand the self into something different. Finally, it also follows from this that the very ethical demand of the cultural event—the requirement that we can be attentive to alterity and to otherness as such—is also threatened.

Against all this, I will contend that the university and its once central disciplines of humanistic criticism ought to be a site of fantasy, in the genuine sense of that term—not Disneyland, which would not know magic if it suddenly appeared in a puff of smoke; but fantasy, as in imagining the impossible, and in then establishing or actualising the impossible, the unforeseeable. The activity of criticism ought to be a site for the exploration of the unpredictable and of the unspoken. Such an engagement is only possible, I contend, within a formation that is ‘democratic’ in the sense that I have given to that term above: conditioned by a ‘becoming alterity’, by our changing our very situatedness or our shared situation.



Aesthetic democracy, as I term it here, would be that which places a rather austere and difficult set of demands upon the critic, the teacher, the student, the reader. The fundamental task of criticism would be, quite simply, to make culture happen, to bring about the event that reveals the extraordinary by making us step out of that which is ordinary for us. This is what is at the root of the long history of the fraught relations between aesthetics and politics. The truism has it that in *The Republic*, Plato banished the poets from the ideal republic essentially on political grounds. However, this is not entirely precise. Plato has Socrates make a fundamental distinction between two kinds or modes of literature. There is the diegetic, in which a narrative may be recited in the third person; and there is the mimetic, in which I assume the character of one of the persons in the narrative and portray her or his words dramatically and in the first person. It is only the latter that is to be banished:

if we are visited in our state by someone who has the skill to transform himself into all sorts of characters and represent all sorts of things, and he wants to show off himself and his poems to us, we shall treat him with all the reverence due to a priest and giver of rare pleasure, but shall tell him that he and his kind have no place in our city.⁵

In this argument, Socrates has it that mimesis, or adopting the voice of someone other than the self, is a fundamental threat to identity as such; and, further, if our educative practices are grounded in such mimesis (learning by heart; reciting dramatically), then there is the danger that we will be seduced away from our own identity and be too given over to alterity. Yet, as always in Plato, this cannot be the full story; for this is asserted precisely

by Plato speaking mimetically in the figure and voice of Socrates. It follows that, if we banish mimesis, we must also banish the very text that argues for the banishing of mimesis; and thus mimesis can be re-permitted, in an endless cycle of what we have learned to call undecidability. In this book, as the reader will see in due course, I prefer to think of this as a 'passion of the possible' or a 'potentiality'. Culture, I shall argue, forces us to inhabit potentiality in this unsettling way in which, for example, we cannot simply 'situate' an identity for ourselves in our reading of *The Republic*. The formulation that says that 'Plato banishes the poets' is, as it were, knowledge for the TV show: definite, fixed, reassuring in that it requires no thinking and is thus, in all essentials, wrong; on the other hand, the formulation 'Plato dramatically banishes the dramatic' is a knowledge that troubles in that it is unsettling to the self who speaks it, even as it constitutes knowing as such. This latter knowledge requires a democratic attitude, as I outlined it above, for its reading and understanding.

This earliest example demonstrates that the question of culture is traversed by the political. What I have tried to do in this book is to articulate the grounds and conditions on which a specifically 'democratic' politics might be possible. At the root of this is the problem of the status of aesthetic (or indeed of any) experience. The task, as so amply dramatised by Plato, is to find a mode of intimacy with art that does not preclude an intimacy with those others that form the condition of our being social. The logic of this, of course, is that 'my' experience of reading disappears, replaced by 'our' experience of reading. Democracy, properly understood, is not just something that allows the self to come to full fruition; it is also, and simultaneously, a threat to the very self that demands the democratic fulfilment of itself. My claim in this book is that it is in art and in aesthetics that we find a privileged site or a paradigm of the very *potentiality* of selfhood that establishes this democratic condition.



Aesthetic Democracy begins with an exploration of the foundations of a critical consciousness. From where, I ask, does criticism or the critical act and the critical consciousness emerge? I take it as read that a certain deconstruction is intrinsic to the critical consciousness as such; and accordingly, one first requirement of the book is to find an at least hypothetical *fons*

et origo of deconstruction. In my opening section, I identify a grounding condition of criticism in what is essentially a classic encounter with otherness as such: the colonial and postcolonial context of modernity. I am able also here to relate the urgencies of reading critically to the always emergent awareness of the imminence and immanence of death, against which criticism might be construed as a form of apotropoeia, that warding off of a final closure through which we become, once dead, *only* figures in and through alterity, through the memory that others may have of us, and the traces that we may leave as remains. The name that we have often given to those remains, of course, is literature itself; and thus criticism becomes imbued with the eschatological demands that themselves figure an absolute alterity. I bring this to a head through an exploration of what constitutes 'the west', and especially a west that might always be seen as the scene of a decline.

That colonial condition of criticism raises the question of how we can ever constitute the 'we' that experiences art or that makes culture come about. This requires an exploration of how experience relates to a new aestheticism, an aestheticism that I claim to be radical in the sense that it opens us to the very possibility of experience through the perception (*aisthanomai*) of alterity. Further, that experience is defined in terms of the potential for experience (and thus again an apotropaic warding off of death or of the end of experience as such), and in terms of the inhabiting of an uncertainty that I call, after Kierkegaard, a 'passion of the possible'. Through an exploration of Agamben, I am able to tie this directly to political issues, and to what we can see as the potential for and of democracy.

My final section follows the logic of the work in such a way as to argue that the concept of autonomy on which modern democracy rests is limiting and limited. I argue that we replace it with a notion of 'sovereignty', in which I can expose and explore the logic of exceptionality that shapes our 'multiculturalist relativities', whereby all beliefs become relative except our own. I argue that, through the kinds of radical aestheticism that I propound in the book, we can formulate a 'sovereign' subject that is always already multiple, always already conditioned by alterity, always already democratic.