

IN THE SHADOWS BENEATH THE TEMPLE by Jeremy Weate

I will begin with a polemical contention: that there are two prevailing and dominant ways of thinking the relation between aesthetics and history in our time. In both cases, it turns out that this relation is mutually constitutive, in a fundamental sense. That is to say, both views contend that historical processes can only be understood in terms of the way in which aesthetic considerations pattern them, and, moreover, that the work of the aesthetic is most fundamentally a *historical* work.

These two ways represent extremes of a kind. At the moment, what lies between them is an impasse, a blockage. Both models break down in such a way that their work of mutual constitution can no longer be produced. This impasse can be given a name: the 'impasse of post-modernism'. Its most essential form of *crisis*, to employ a modernist term for a moment, is that the historicity of the historical can no longer be thought. This blockage takes place, I will argue, precisely because an uncertainty has arisen as to the position modes of the aesthetic have within that historicity. The same 'crisis' occurs in the obverse sense, for the work of art and for the aesthetic. That is, it is precisely because of an uncertainty over the *work* of the aesthetic's relation to historical processes that the impasse occurs. To put it more succinctly: within the impasse of the post-modern, the 'contemporary' in culture can no longer be expressed, precisely because the relation between aesthetics and history can no longer be expressed.

What I will attempt to do in this paper is characterise these two influential views and explore their relation to the blockage which lies between them

and to which they contribute. I will contend that the blockage is most fundamentally a *metaphysical* failure, which can only be addressed in terms of metaphysical solutions. It is on these terms that I will begin to sketch a way out of the impasse of post-modernism, by way of the phenomenological ontology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

1.A monumentalist history

In the work of Martin Heidegger, especially in his ‘middle period’, his thinking of historicity, of the form of the historical nature of history, is entwined with how he considers the work of art should be thought. When Heidegger thinks of the *work* of art, he considers this work to be historical. In other words, works of art are significant for Heidegger to the extent that they act as the context for all that takes place in the present. And put in yet different terms, we can say that for Heidegger, the contemporary is expressed through the currency of aesthetic paradigms, and vice versa.

The aesthetic therefore begins to take centre stage in Heidegger’s thinking at this time. Historicity, which in his earlier magnum opus “Being and Time” was grounded in the subject acting authentically, is displaced onto the art’s work. For Heidegger, there is no more fundamental form of the production of the present than this art work.

The well-known paradigm for Heidegger’s aestheticisation of history is found in his essay “The Origin of the Work of Art”. This paradigm is that of the Greek temple. In a much-quoted passage, he writes

A building, a Greek temple, portrays nothing. It simply stands there in the middle of the rock-cleft

valley. The building encloses the figure of the god, and in this concealment lets it stand out into the holy precinct through the open portico. By means of the temple, the god is present in the temple. The presence of the god is in itself the extension and delimitation of the precinct as a holy precinct. The temple and its precinct, however, do not fade away into the indefinite. It is the temple-work that first fits together and at the same time gathers around itself the unity of those paths and relations in which birth and death, disaster and blessing, victory and disgrace, endurance and decline acquire the shape of destiny for human being. The all-governing expanse of this open-relational context is the world of this historical people. Only from and in this expanse does the nation first return to itself for the fulfillment of its vocation. (Heidegger, **Basic Writings**:167)

The temple is, in this passage, what we might call the zenith of the historical. For Heidegger, historicity no longer works through the authentically acting individual who steps into the breach of history's need for heroes. On the contrary, the process of history has become an altogether more silent, vertical and nationalistic affair.

Heidegger's temple literalises Nietzsche's conception of a *monumental* history which can be distinguished from the *critical* and the *antiquarian*.¹

¹ See "On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life". Nietzsche writes, "That the great moments in the struggle of individuals form chain, that in them the high points of humanity are linked throughout

Monumental history becomes physically realised, in the form of an actual monument. History is, for Heidegger in this text, a vertical imposition without a face. And yet, this imposition is hardly that of an external force. The god present in the temple will have been, in the time of the ancient Greeks, a popular god, a god that connects with the lives of the people in a specific way. For instance, in the Parthenon on the Acropolis in Athens, the Goddess Athena residing behind the open portico symbolised the city itself as it lay below and around her. Heidegger's temple therefore imposes an *internal* order upon all that lies below in the city: its people, its institutions, its laws, its mores, its desires, its rituals.

In this way, through the agency of the temple's *work*, history, as I have said, becomes de-humanised. History is not enacted by people. Heidegger takes Kant's Copernican revolution one stage further – and the decentering of a subjective historical agency onto a form of exteriority that is nonetheless an *internal* ordering means that the term ought to be renamed as a “Copernican *Involution*”. Moreover, history is not effected by bodies. Heidegger's temple is an extra-ordinary architectural work in the sense that it does not depend on the ambulant gaze of the spectator in order for all its meanings to be expressed. On the contrary, for Heidegger, it seems that the temple imposes its internal historical order by an ‘auto-effectuation’. This self-constitution works most clearly through a visual medium, and in Heidegger's text, through ocular tropes. The temple *illuminates* the destinies of the citizens of the *polis*, prior to the illumination of the sun. In another reversal from the thinking of “Being and Time”, Heidegger considers the temple's

millennia, that what is highest in such a moment of the distant past be for me still alive, bright and great- this is the fundamental thought of the faith in humanity which is expressed in the demand for a *monumental*

signification to be more fundamental than solar signification.² The vertical space of the temple shines its own historical light upon its guided people, who therefore live most fundamentally without shadows.

This ‘historical’ light is however of a strange form. There is no space in Heidegger’s thinking for the possibility that the expression of the historical might involve *transformation* of the present. The figure of the temple imposes itself as a form of immemoriality, or, to revert to Nietzsche once again, a form of *antiquarianism*. The faceless temple’s imposition of an internal order therefore demonstrates itself as profoundly conservative. The temple therefore expresses the historical as an ‘eternal present’. It speaks a monologue of a mythic order, addressed to its people.

In sum, we might say that Heidegger’s temple is therefore a mixture of lighthouse and Bentham’s Panopticon, in which a vertical ordering is shone onto the citizens of the polis. Like the Panopticon, the temple totalises the space that is before it, both external and internal. In everyday ancient Athens, the citizens would therefore not need to glance at the temple’s imposing frame of the eternal present, for its Law would be revealed in every act.

2. History as the Inscription of Bodies

In contrast to history being thought of as a monumental agency that finds its paradigm in the immemoriality of the monument, the second prevailing way of thinking the relation between aesthetics and history centres upon the

history.” It is possible to note here the employment of the vertical and optic tropes which Heidegger repeats in his passage on the temple cited above.

body. The “aesthetic” therefore returns to its ‘original’ meaning as the realm of the senses or that which pertains to the body. The thinker who most forcefully articulates this position is Michel Foucault. In his important essay, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History”, Foucault writes,

Genealogy, as an analysis of descent, is thus situated within the articulation of the body and history. Its task is to expose a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history’s destruction of the body. (Foucault, **The Foucault Reader**: 83)

In Foucault’s terms, history is not an abstract force or measure, it is rather materially present as the way in which bodies are conditioned or ‘imprinted’. The historical is, once again, deemed to be absolutely aesthetic, or of the body. And the aesthetic is the expression of the historical.

It is important to be careful about the sense of the word ‘historical’ in Foucault’s work however. In contrast to Heidegger, Foucault’s historicity is not monumental or the expression of an overarching immemoriality. The historical is for Foucault always grounded in the discontinuities of the space-time of the present social and material practices of a specific culture and set of institutions. The body is inscribed first of all within the specificities of what is closest to it in its spatio-temporal environment. Its coding is therefore always particular to a set of social and material practices; any similarity across cultural and temporal fields is ground in a prior and irreducible specificity.

² Heidegger writes, “The luster and gleam of the stone, though itself apparently glowing only by the grace of the sun, first brings to radiance the light of the day, the breadth of the sky, the darkness of the night.” (Basic Writings:168)

The similarity between Foucault and Heidegger lies in the sense of history being *imposed*. In Foucault, the historical, grounded and singular and specific as it may be, still involves a *monologue* with the body. There is no agency *from* the bodies of the inscribed which contributes towards the historical. Humans are embodied historical beings, under Foucault's view, only because the historical imprints itself upon their bodily practices. The modern body had become 'docile', incapable of resistance, in need of a "heterotopia" for redemption.³ There would seem to be no space, at least in the early and middle of Foucault's career, for the body to inaugurate its own modes of the historical.

It is as if embodied beings, under Foucault's lens, can only ever be the passive recipients of a historicity that absolutely conditions them. In this sense, this vision of the relation between the aesthetic and the historical marks out a continuing tragedy: the human body is always already the *victim* of the historical.⁴

3. The Impasse of the Post-Modern

I contend that both Heidegger and Foucault's views on the processes of history and the aesthetic as I have summarised them are unsatisfying. The reasons for this are common to both: they are the result of a metaphysical inadequacy concerning the subject's relation to time and history. In both cases, time and history are enacted *upon* the subject; the historical always

³ See Foucault's discussion of heterotopia in "Of Other Spaces", *Diacritics*, 1986

⁴ . In this sense, perhaps the paradigmatic figure of the historical in Foucault, to match the figure of the temple in Heidegger, is that of the torture machine in Kafka's short story, "In the Penal Colony". The condemned man is strapped into a machine which cuts a script into the flesh as the victim slowly dies from his wounds. The machine, on this reading, stands for an industrial-technological society which imprints itself on the body to the point of that body's destruction. In terms of Kafka's story itself, apart from the figure which I have taken it to suggest, the colonial aspect of the colony requires an additional reading for which there is not the space or the relevance in this paper.

bears the marks of an imposition. The subject therefore is deemed to have no historical agency.

This rejection of any subjectivism in a philosophical account of historical process is of course the hallmark of the post-modern. Both Heidegger and Foucault can be seen as laying the metaphysical groundwork for post-modern thought. Both of them respond, during the course of their intellectual careers, to an ever-deepening desire to escape the subjectivism of all previous modes of thinking.

I suggest that the form of this escape from subjectivism is not and cannot be successful, and that any attempt to avoid the subject's agency must involve its *displacement* onto another figure. In Heidegger, the displacement is onto the work of art, and, as we have seen, reaches its paradigm in monumental figures such as the temple. The temple's self-illuminating auto-poesis of an immemorial historicity can therefore be understood as the outcome of a displacement in a metaphysical economy: if subjective agency is displaced *from the subject*, this agency must surface elsewhere. Heidegger's neo-classical romancing of the stone therefore is grounded in a metaphysical economy beyond the mastery of his thought.

Likewise in Foucault, the eviscerations of agency, such that the embodied being becomes flattened out into a mere surface for the inscription of the destructive torture of the historical cannot sustain itself without affecting the metaphysical economy in which it operates. The agency of the subject gets radically exteriorised, such that historicity itself becomes invisible. Although Foucault's vision of history *appears* to be material, concrete and grounded in the specific, the appearance lies only in history's inscriptions. Of the

historicity of the historical, the process by which it occurs, we can have no knowledge. Thus, at the other extreme to Heidegger, in Foucault the historical becomes a mystery, the unknown Author of a Law of which we, as embodied beings, can only be victims.

To step outside of this impasse of the post-modern, it therefore becomes clear that we must think again about the subject's relation to time and history. After the work of Heidegger and Foucault, it is clear that this repetition cannot remain de-spatialised and disembodied. It is also clear that both have elaborated an insight into how the historical in an important sense does *transcend* the subject. The historicity of the historical has been shown to be the context into which we are thrown or conditioned.

The task before us in the wake of Heidegger and Foucault is to think the historical as the product of an *embodied agency* in relation to a historical given which it cannot master. Only if we can begin to see historicity as a *dialogue* with embodied forms of subjectivity can we escape the post-modern metaphysical affliction of being its passive, victim-like recipients. I will argue in a moment that it is through Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological ontology that this metaphysical possibility gets opened up.

4. Against the Temple

In reading Heidegger, it is always important to get a sense both of his insights and the residual metaphysical (and therefore political) conservatism that governs his thought. In terms of his attempt to displace the historical agency of the subject onto the architectural as discussed in this paper above, there is a significant insight which is at work. This insight centres around the *historicality* of objects. It is clear that we do not perceive or become

absorbed by objects in our midst in a way which is somehow non-temporal. On the contrary, objects in the world often operate as totems for the temporal and historical itself. Here it is possible to describe a broad range of phenomena, from the smell of Proust's *Madelaines* involuntarily invoking childhood days to the places of our life which have defined its unfolding. These objects, be they food or architecture or the rural and urban spaces of all our before, act as the repositories for the traces of our bodily being. In other words, when Heidegger elaborates phenomenologically upon the temple, upon the jug of wine, or upon the bridge across the water, he is at the same time providing a *phenomenology of the displacement of the subject onto its objects*.

Having said this, what is clearly misguided in Heidegger is that this phenomenology of displacement slips into a *metaphysical* displacement. Objects become the masters of our being, rather than the phenomenological surface of our historical trace-structures. We end up with the panopticism of the temple which Heidegger claims (implicitly) absorbs all the shadows of embodied difference through the work of its auto-illumination.⁵

If we were to take Heidegger's own paradigm of the historical work of art of the temple, it is possible to question the totalising and conservative violence of its role within the context of the Attic *polis*. Such a questioning can be aided by Richard Sennett's recent book, "Flesh and Stone – The Body and the City in Western Civilization". After a description of an imagined walk

⁵ The metaphysical failure of the figure of the Panopticon as it emerges within Heidegger's thinking of the temple has been given its contemporary expression in Wim Wender's recent film "The End of Violence" (1997). In this complex and multi-layered work, the theme of the invisibilities that emerge within each new paradigm of the absolutely visible (in this case, the C.I.A.'s plan to put closed-circuit television onto every street in Los Angeles) is one of its dominant motifs.

around the Acropolis in Athens, Sennett goes on to describe another important space within the Ancient Greek city – the agora.

Those who could participate found in the agora many discrete and distinct activities occurring at once, rather than sheer chaos. There was religious dancing on the open flat ground, in a part of the agora called the orkhestra; banking took place at tables set out in the sun behind which the bankers sat facing their customers. Athenians celebrated religious rites out in the open, and within sacred ground such as a sanctuary called the “Twelve Gods” located just north of the orkhestra. Dining and dealing, gossiping and religious observance took place in the stoas, which in Periklean times lined the west and north sides of the agora. *The evolution of Athenian democracy shaped the surfaces and the volume of the agora, for the movement possible in simultaneous space served participatory democracy well.* [emphasis added here] By strolling from group to group, a person could find out what was happening in the city and discuss it. The open space also invited casual participation in legal cases... In the open space of the agora the Athenians did their most serious political business: ostracism, or sending people into exile from the city... Orthos ruled bodily behaviour in the agora. A citizen sought to walk purposefully and as swiftly as he could through the

swirl of other bodies; when he stood still, he made eye contact with strangers. Through such movement, posture, and body language, he sought to radiate personal composure. (**Flesh and Stone**: pp54-55)

Here we have in Sennett's evocative and powerful research a figure to interpose against the monumentalism ascribed to the temple by Heidegger. The agora, as the quintessential open space, was, as Sennett notes in the passage, shaped by the political discourses of the day. In other words, the agora was defined, in the history of the Ancient Greek city state, by its transformation according to the changing political structures of the day, for instance, the gradual change from autarchy to democracy. As Sennett so clearly points out, these political structures were themselves defined according to the bodily practices taking place within spaces such as the agora. This 'heat of words'⁶ took place in a space that was not, unlike the temple, governed by visual imperatives. The agora, as a flat space, could not be completely mastered by eye or voice of mouth. In this sense, the spatial dynamics of the agora were more *haptic*, concerned with the proximities of contact and full of occlusions and shadows, than ocularcentric and masterable by panoptic, auto-illuminative structures such as the temple on the hill.

Sennett's account of the agora would then provide the historical resources for challenging the historical passivity of bodies implicit in Heidegger's thinking of the temple. In a moment we will ground these historical resources in a dialogic metaphysics.

⁶ The phrase is Sennett's.

5. Against the historically inscribed body – towards the *historising* body

Again, the insight of Foucault's project needs to be announced before a criticism of it can be undertaken. One of the important legacies Foucault has bequeathed philosophy is the need to think the body as central to how we think the historical. Moreover, Foucault's work is valuable in that he does not valorise the body as universal. It is the fact of the specific contexts of social and material positioning that leads to the difference of bodies. In other words, bodily difference is explained and grounded in Foucault's work through the specificities of the spatio-temporal here and now, albeit that he places more of an emphasis on its institutional form.

But, as we have already stated, Foucault's work suffers from the post-modern metaphysical affliction of not being able to think the embodied historical agency of the subject. In Foucault's view, the subject has no basis in which to transform the world into which he or she has been conditioned. I will now provide a reading of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's "Phenomenology of Perception" in order to transcend this impasse of the post-modern.

I will concentrate on one passage from this text which encapsulates how Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology enables this transcendence to take place. He writes,

My personal existence must be the resumption of a prepersonal tradition. There is, therefore, another subject beneath me, for whom a world exists before I am here, and who marks out my place in it. This captive or natural spirit is my body, not that momentary body which is the instrument of my

personal choices and which fastens upon this or that world, but the system of anonymous ‘functions’ which draw every particular focus into a general project. Nor does this blind adherence to the world, this prejudice in favour of being, occur only at the beginning of my life. It endows every subsequent perception of space with its meaning, and it is resumed at every instant. Space and perception generally represent, at the core of the subject, the fact of his birth, the perpetual contribution of his bodily being, a communication with the world more ancient than thought. (Merleau-Ponty, **Phenomenology of Perception**:254)

Here in what I take to be the most important passage of the whole book, Merleau-Ponty articulates a *dialogic* relation between the body and the space-time into which it is thrown. ‘The body’ does not refer to my body here and now in its simple physical sense. It refers instead to the body as the capacity to transform the ways in which it has been conditioned. The body is neither subject or object, it is *both*. Or rather, the body operates in a pre-representational (or prepersonal) behind-the-scenes space. The body is the expressive locus for a synergistic ‘third kind’ of being: a being that is an intertwining of the subjective and the objective, in such a way that the interior is constituted by its exteriority, and its exterior is constituted by its interiority.

In more simple terms, Merleau-Ponty ascribes to both Foucault and Heidegger’s general thesis that historicity is at bottom a fundamental conditioning of our bodily practices. His difference lies in the fact that these

patternings are always already transformed in their being taken up in each new spatio-temporal context of action. Prior to mentalistic representation, the body for Merleau-Ponty is working and re-working the ways in which it has been conditioned. Each moment of action is therefore the opening towards the possibility of transforming the way in which the 'given' contributes towards that action. The historical is therefore no longer 'monumental', an imposition which is merely repeated from context to context through the violence of an immemorial historicity. Rather, the historical is the form of the given which is open to transformation, according to the terms of the space-time of the present and the expressions of embodiment. The body 'perpetually contributes' to the construction of the historical given and the possibilities which are henceforth opened out in the present.

Merleau-Ponty therefore allows for what we might call an 'embodied freedom' to be expounded. We are free, on this view, to the extent that we are not merely conditioned by the exteriorities of institutional conditioning or all the other frameworks of the 'given'. We are free, that is, to the extent that we can *re-work* this given, articulating the demands of the present here-and-now situation according to how the given can be transformed. In this way, the time of tradition is seen to be resolutely non-linear. Each re-working of the tradition's given enacts a discontinuity upon how that tradition itself can subsequently be presented. Bodily freedom is therefore a freedom from the tyranny of origins; the 'origin' of a culture would no longer mark its first definitive moment, but is rather the after-effect of each expression's cultural inflection. The origin is that which is eternally differentiated from itself across the course of each repetition.

Moreover, this freedom is neither visible or invisible: it is always both. The time of tradition is never completely given or completely visible. The past itself offers itself as a play of shadows, not as an auto-illumination. The past is never completely remembered nor completely forgotten by the anonymous, transformative prepersonal body. The transformation of what has been given to the body, prior to its being thought, is a matter of shadow play or 'skia-morphology'⁷. Between the visible and the invisible lies shadows.

6. Conclusion

Out of the impasse of the post-modern, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenologically-derived 'communication more ancient than thought' therefore allows for a return to the embodied historical agency of the subject. This return does not however signpost a return to the subjectivism in philosophy which Foucault and Heidegger rightly sought to avoid. It merely demonstrates that human beings are not tortured by a historicity that renders them absolutely passive. Just as Richard Sennett provides the historical basis to challenge the thesis that history transcends absolutely its subjects at the same time as working through them in his work on the agora, Merleau-Ponty provides the *metaphysical* grounds to substantiate that challenge.

Merleau-Ponty's ontology is, as the passage cited and the commentary after it imply, non-dualistic. The body is always already *both* subject and object in that its ways of being are transforming what is given according to its own spatio-temporal imperatives. A future of embodied possibilities is opened up

⁷ I must thank Nick Webber for introducing me to this term.

once the demands of the present are met by re-working the way in which the past has been given.

The past therefore cannot be said to impress itself upon the horizon of the present through the trope of an auto-illumination or an ocularcentrism. With each form of visibility, there is an attendant *invisibility*. Put in historical terms, in the shadows beneath the temple different bodies dance their dance across the agora. Many are these forms of agoric dance, and they all have their contemporary equivalents. In the open, panoptic/haptic space of the contemporary metropolis, the anonymous dances of money, desire and spirit define the surface of the present. By turns, the discourse of nations intervenes, but increasingly as an exteriorised rustle, whipped into the occasional delusion of grandeur by the media.

This synergistic metaphysics has profound consequences for how we engage with objects-in-the-world. What is typically understood as ‘the object’ must be revised, given that we take on board what Merleau-Ponty says, as fundamentally *ambiguous*. The ‘object’, be it the madelaine, the temple, the jug, the bridge, the place where we first made love, is *subject* to a reversion into a quasi-subjectivity. This is where Heidegger’s *phenomenology* of the subjective displacement mentioned above is exactly right. Objects in the world, to the extent that they involve us, no longer remain ‘simply present’ to us. They themselves begin to take on the non-linear discontinuities of the historical I talked about just now. The difference between Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger here is that the ‘object’ remains ambiguous in the former, whereas, as I said above, its phenomenological displacement tends to slip into an ontological transference in the latter.

In sum, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological ontology allows for the insights into the intra-relationality between aesthetics and history that Heidegger and Foucault developed to be maintained, without however falling back into the impasse of the post-modern that afflicts the theory of our times. Merleau-Ponty leaves us with the idea that history works through an embodied subject which it neither masters nor is mastered by. Instead of a monologic subjectivism or objectivism, a dialogic 'middle voice' is made available through which the parameters of embodied agency and freedom can be set. The aesthetic and the historical remain metaphysically intertwined, according to a logic of ambiguity and reversibility.

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