

“One Must Go Forth to Evil Houses”: Kitsch, the Aesthetic Sense, and the Ethics of Negative
Thinking

Douglas Jason Anderson

A dissertation
submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

University of Washington

2023

Reading Committee:

Jennifer Bean, Chair

Leroy Searle

James Tweedie

Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

Department of Comparative Literature, Cinema and Media

© Copyright 2023

Douglas Jason Anderson

University of Washington

Abstract

“One Must Go Forth to Evil Houses”: Kitsch, the Aesthetic Sense, and the Ethics of
Negative Thinking

Douglas Jason Anderson

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:

Jennifer Bean

Cinema and Media Studies

The faculty of taste as a dialectical unity of sensual and moral pleasure (or displeasure), an idea first consolidated as an effective concept by Immanuel Kant, has been fully commodified by capitalist-consumerist culture. Algorithms track the minutest habits of our online footprints, accompanied by a vast and anarchic network of scheming profiteers sending constantly morphing sign patterns to our brains, designed to accommodate and alter the mapped trajectories of our desires. Beyond the virtual, ideas and products are sold on the basis of individual and corporate adherence to normative rules of thought and conduct. Surveillance capitalism, the recently termed phenomenon of “wokeism,” and religious fundamentalism (to name a few major coordinates of the present) all participate in and respond to these realities. It is in this medial and ideational landscape that the faculty of taste operates today and in which it must work to attain an ethical orientation, individually as well as corporately, personally as well as politically. But these developments cannot be disavowed, and these processes cannot be reversed, because they are the most forceful logical conclusions of the very Kantian transcendental aesthetic that gave their initial conceptual form to reality. Now, the very concept of taste itself, falsely concretized

as “*my* taste” (or even “*our* taste”) by the widespread hagiography of the Self, must be undone from within, by returning to the sources of its current formations and determining the extent to which other possibilities are still salvageable from the ruins of its cultural degradation and authoritarian manipulation. And this then poses an important “why” question: Why did the Human Mind desire this atomistic interpretation of taste so intensely that it would develop it so extensively and so powerfully? (Answering this completely would mean something like revealing the actual beauty available in both capitalism and narcissism, which I am not prepared to do here.) Within the sense of “the aesthetic” conceived in German Idealism most prominently first by Kant, but significantly developed in its more properly Romantic mode by the underappreciated Friedrich Schiller, one finds that the emphasis in “the faculty of taste” does not lie on *taste* as much as it lies on *faculty*; which marks it as a function of reason, the faculty of desire bound by the moral mandate of the categorical imperative to act in accordance with duty. More recently, two modern ideas track the most contemporary developments of both “taste’s commodification” and “the *faculty* of taste’s ethical possibility.” These are, respectively, Hermann Broch’s conception of “kitsch” and Susan Sontag’s elaborations of “the aesthetic sense.” Taken together, these ideas offer a different characterization of late 20th and early 21st century cultures of expression than is available in the popular (and notoriously inarticulate) concept of postmodernism. This dissertation challenges the binary opposition of modernism and postmodernism by reapproaching some of the dominant aesthetic ideas of the 19th and 20th centuries. Sontag’s understanding of “the aesthetic sense” demands a refusal of periodizations of this kind and offers a model, shared by Broch and others, for an ethical engagement with reality, directed against “kitsch” through a *value*-based notion of truth founded in aesthetic achievement and aesthetic knowledge. It is an argument for an approach to media studies that grounds all

understandings of aesthetics within the realms of both disinterested knowledge and ethical judgment.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements (Page 7)

Prefatory Remarks and Outline of Parts (Page 8)

PART I: HIGH ART and KITSCH (Page 12)

PART II: WORLDS and AESTHETIC SENSIBILITY (Page 58)

PART III: VISCERAL AESTHETICS and MODERNIST THEATRICALITY (Page 124)

PART IV: INTEGRAL SIMULTANEITY and TRANSGRESSIVE KNOWLEDGE (Page 188)

Bibliography (Page 237)

Acknowledgements

In addition to my committee members—Jennifer Bean, Leroy Searle, James Tweedie—I'd like to acknowledge the countless conversations and exchanges about these ideas with Sarah Ross in our time together as students, as well as our experiences teaching together, and the very particular affinity that kept us talking about it beyond that. The following people have also assisted invaluablely in the writing and development processes in various indirect and extremely unique ways: Michael Buchert, James Cooper, Jay Craver, Timothy Deak, Nick Laughlin, Michael McDonald, Anna Parkhurst, Thomas Pepper, and Holly & Joey Thies.

Prefatory Remarks and Outline of Parts

By now, the literature on kitsch is extensive and growing. The arguments that follow take as their starting point the literature that centers the intervention of Hermann Broch as a decisive turning point in the life of kitsch as an idea. Conversely, the literature on Susan Sontag is relatively limited and generally treats her as a far more marginal figure than she in fact is or ever was. Almost no writing on Sontag has adequately assessed her achievements as an heir to the traditions, equally, of continental philosophy, modernist aesthetics, and 20th century critical theory; which includes the way that her work then also filters these influences into broader cultural-intellectual tributaries.¹ This dissertation attempts to place Sontag in the position of respect that her work deserves, which should occupy as central a place in the canon of Media Studies as the writings of Marshall McLuhan or Walter Benjamin, the latter from whom she derives the structure for many of her important ideas.

The methodology can be summed up as an insistence on an understanding of media studies in a trans-historical sense, wherein *The Book* (all genres, from owner's manual to poetry anthology) figures equally as a medium-for-study as any website, film, streamable music album, social media profile, or city park design. In this sense, reference to philosophy constitutes the study of media exactly as if I were studying the aesthetic parameters of TikTok.² Ultimately, the medium is always consciousness as the filter of a world. Media Studies as a discipline has the largest role to play in the future of thought only when expanded to this extreme, as the most promiscuous and non-ideological of humanities disciplines.

¹ A major exception to this rule is Mena Mitrano's *In the Archive of Longing: Susan Sontag's Critical Modernism* (2016).

² A worthwhile argument to this effect is found in Andrew Piper's *Book Was There: Reading in Electronic Times*.

Part I provides a philosophical background and develops the oppositional dynamics between “high art” and “kitsch,” starting with two examples taken from outside the official history of art, in order to establish the expanded sense with which “aesthetic” is understood and employed as a term throughout all of the parts, particularly in connection to how Sontag uses the term “the aesthetic sense.” It then traces the origins of both “the aesthetic sense” and “kitsch” in the inheritance of German Idealism and Romanticism. From this tradition, “Beauty” is both set up as a metaphysical ideal to be obeyed *and* engaged as a notion to be undone, developed, and profaned for the purposes of aesthetic knowledge. For Sontag, “art” became the primary source of spiritual transcendence conceived in a secular mode. In giving her accounts of art and thinking in modernity, Sontag offers a reconceptualization of the Idealist and Romantic conceptions of art and aesthetic ideas that meets its complement in Broch’s understanding of kitsch in opposition to genuine art, or “high art.” Taken together, Broch and Sontag offer a way of thinking aesthetically that undoes dogmatic conceptions serving only to dampen life and curtail knowledge.

Part II relates Sontag’s understanding of aesthetic sensibility to Heidegger’s concept of a “world.” Sontag almost never directly references Heidegger, but her characterizations of art relate extensively to his particular aesthetic ideas in fruitful ways. Broch’s concept of the “earthly absolute” also figures in this relationship, introduced via a discussion of Abbas Kiarostami’s *Certified Copy* that attempts to identify it with the ambiguity of a particular image both real and virtual, particular and general. Complications are then addressed that differentiate between Sontag’s understanding of sensibility and Heidegger’s “world,” again invoking a distinction between “high art” and “kitsch” reconceptualized as a genuine “work” (representative of a sensibility) versus a “brand” (representative of kitsch). From this, the “aesthetic sense” emerges as a tool to be harnessed against the unavoidable temptation of kitsch. A discussion of

Les liaisons dangereuses across cultural and temporal boundaries, through its adaptations and emanations, then grounds this function of the aesthetic sense in a discussion of a particular history of kitsch that is inextricably bound with genuine aesthetic expressions and discoveries. Broch's notion of *mythos* then emerges as part of the possibility of this history and as another resource for identifying, avoiding, or undoing kitsch, exemplified in the form of Lars von Trier's *Melancholia*.

Part III applies Broch's idea of *mythos* more directly to reality, outside of expressly aesthetic expressions and as part of the way people think and live. Through looking at Walter Benjamin's reading of *Elective Affinities*, I draw a connection between Broch's ideas of *mythos* and kitsch, on the one hand, and Benjamin's idea of fate on the other--and all of them as connected to Sontag's consciously employed "aesthetic sense." For both Sontag and Broch, everyone has a duty (if ethically minded at all) to both acknowledge and avoid kitsch wherever it appears or threatens to appear. Additionally, Sontag reads Benjamin's fate as a variant of existential freedom regarding the valuation of things and of reality, which finds a complement in Broch's understanding of the "earthly absolute" as likewise a source of valuation and ethical judgment. John Waters's *Pink Flamingos* then serves as a perhaps unexpected example of ethically engaging the aesthetic sense.

Part IV extends earlier discussions of theatricality and identifies, along with Broch and Sontag, the dangers of the aesthetic sense being used to produce and enforce kitsch. It likewise complicates the previously discussed inheritance of German Idealism and Romanticism through Sontag's ambivalent reprisals of the aesthetic ideas of disinterestedness, stylization, and decadence. A reading of Pasolini's *Sálo, or the 120 Days of Sodom* again applies Broch's idea of *mythos* and aims to demonstrate how Pasolini supplies an aesthetic possibility for transgressive

knowledge that requires identification with violence in a violent world. This reading then expands to the ways in which this applies outside of concrete works of art, to engagements of consciousness with itself and with the work of living, through discussion of Antonin Artaud. From Artaud's work, Sontag receives a model of heroic heresy grounded in the primacy of aesthetic knowledge directed against all metaphysical illusions and moral simplifications (*i.e.* against kitsch). Broch's "earthly absolute" is the possibility of this aesthetic knowledge, and I briefly discuss how this idea relates to similar ideas of Gregory Bateson and Charles Sanders Peirce in order to unify Sontag and Broch around a simultaneously general and particular understanding of "Mind" as a project that one engages and to which one tends in the objects and beings one encounters.

PART I: HIGH ART and KITSCH

The Aesthetic of Reality and the Emptiness of Kitsch

In the first part of his brilliant genealogical and diagnostic survey of “selfhood” in 21st century culture, titled *The Century of the Self*, BBC journalist Adam Curtis pinpoints the early 20th century transformation of psychoanalysis into “public relations” as a major transition of cultural and political reality.³ In the 1920s, Edward Bernays read his uncle Sigmund Freud’s *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* and applied the conception of “unconscious desires” to a theory of mass behavior (not unlike Carl Jung, but with less benevolent aims). If the scientific categories of psychoanalysis are accurate, thought Bernays, then one can direct group behavior by appealing to irrational emotions rather than persuasive argument. He applied this insight to the manipulation of consumer demand in a free market economy. Bernays’s discovery hinges on psychoanalysis participating in a broader set of developments in 20th century consciousness. These concern the dialectical relationship between Self and World as aesthetic phenomena and the possibility of altering the coordinates and orientation of either.⁴

³ The methods and works of Curtis more broadly, in the programs he’s made for the BBC over the past three-ish decades, are a major model for the style and method of this dissertation and the practice of its thesis. Describing how and why would take another dissertation.

⁴ One can think of this understanding of “aesthetic phenomena” as the 20th century’s broad complication of the definition of scientific observation (as a corollary of experiment) offered by Claude Bernard in his 1865 *Introduction to the Study of Experimental Medicine*: “Observers...purely and simply note the phenomena before their eyes. They must be anxious only to forearm themselves against errors of observation which might make them incompletely see or poorly define a phenomenon. To this end they use every instrument which may help make their observations more complete. Observers, then, must be photographers of phenomena; their observations must accurately represent nature. We must observe without any preconceived idea; the observer’s mind must be passive, that is, must hold its peace; it listens to nature and writes at nature’s dictation” (Bernard 137-8). All of the various programs that go under the moniker of modernisms are demonstrations that there is nothing pure and simple about this side of the scientific process. Sontag’s writings on photography, as well as Benjamin’s before her, are ruminations on the precise way that Bernard uses it here metaphorically. And Sontag, particularly, is interested in demystifying photography from this scientific faith in its factuality--while simultaneously retaining Bernard’s metaphoric use of it here as entirely appropriate and accurate. A photograph is always both a fact *and* a preconceived idea, just like an experience.

First among Bernays's real commercial successes was expanding the market of cigarettes by affecting the symbolic resonance they hold for American women. George Hill, president of the American Tobacco Corporation, wanted Bernays to help break the taboo against women smoking and paid for Bernays to consult with A.A. Brill, "one of the first psychoanalysts in America," who told him that cigarettes are symbols of "male sexual power" and that, "if he could find a way to connect cigarettes with the idea of challenging male sexual power, then women would smoke." What Bernays decided to do resembles a kind of anticipatory flash-mob blended with performative political protest: a group of debutants hired to light up cigarettes during an opportune moment of the 1929 Easter Day Parade in New York transforms into a media spectacle of "liberated" women photographed and disseminated as symbols of empowering rebellion. What the success of this "irrational" logic demonstrates is that "patriarchy" was effectively incorporating its own *symbolic transgression* into the sustainability of its enduring cultural hegemony. A political-cultural liberation of women is commodifiable if reduced to an empty gesture filled out by symbolic significance. This emptiness is called kitsch.

Acting against kitsch means transgressing beyond the moral-aesthetic program of a particular historical ideology. For Hermann Broch, the writer Hannah Arendt claims as the first to write about the question of kitsch "with the keenness and profundity it demands," kitsch is what art becomes "as soon as it breaks out of the controlling value system" and asserts its autonomy in an ahistorical aesthetic sphere, which Broch identifies first in the aristocratic movement of *l'art pour l'art* in the late 19th century (though its seeds are planted much earlier), as well as the *libertinage* of the *ancien régime* that allowed inheritors of "the courtly tradition [...] to make their lives a work of art and to procure for themselves, by means of unbridled debauchery of the senses and of the mind, all the pleasures possible, including those of art"

(Broch, "Notes on the Problem of Kitsch" 54). The tautology of *l'art pour l'art*, art for its own sake--aesthetic awareness for the sake of aesthetic pleasure--operates "just as in the commercial realm the slogan 'Business is business' already contains within itself the dishonesty of the unscrupulous profiteer, and just as in the First World War the obtrusive maxim 'War is war' had already transformed the war into mass slaughter" (Arendt, "Hermann Broch" 122).

Kitsch represents "evil in the value system of art," the negation of true art's dedication to knowledge in the aesthetic sphere, existing only for the amoralities of pleasure and profit. It evolves, for Broch, out of the bourgeoisie's task of transforming the decadently hedonistic inheritance of the courtly tradition to meet its own needs--with recourse, on the one hand, to "the ascetic Puritan-Calvinist ideal" of Protestantism and, on the other, a Catholicism that "made virtue into a universal guiding principle" (Broch, "Notes on the Problem of Kitsch" 54). That old hedonism became bourgeois Romantic Love, embodied in the heterosexual couple as the expression of the Eternal in the profane world. Lasciviousness is tied to chastity in heterosexual bourgeois repression: intensity of sensual desire adheres to the juridical sense of marriage, the new major covenant with God as a "universal guiding principle."

This is why, for instance, the predominant form of kitsch in Protestant-Catholic countries is the love song, the breakup song, the song of romantic longing. Intense, possessive love (along with the despair of the damaged heart) is one of the major forms of kitsch that the bourgeoisie introduced into the world, the weight of God reduced to the feeling of the finite subject. Kitsch is a mode of rationalizing, domesticating, and controlling the sensual impulse to pleasure, beauty, order, and decorative excess once authoritatively confined to and directed within the theater of Religious Myth in the court of Power; and so its resistance requires devising a representation or

mode of being that persists outside the matrices of tyrannical power and ruling ideologies--*i.e.* dogmatisms--of all kinds.

Slightly over 30 years after Bernays's public relations stunt, in the American South, a very different application of performative protest demonstrates a slight alteration to the aesthetic principle that allowed Bernays to poeticize cigarettes for commercial gain. Early in 1960, four black university students occupied space at a Woolworth's department store in Greensboro, North Carolina, in protest of the store's refusal to serve them. Each day, for a period of about five months before the store changed its practices, the students returned and stayed seated until closing time. If the purpose of Bernays's experiment was to expand the powers available to a hegemonic economic structure by "weaponizing" psychoanalysis, the sit-ins likewise use the power of aesthetic manipulation in modern media to affect the functioning power of a cultural hegemony. The pressure of public perception persuades institutions to alter their practices in order to sustain and/or expand their markets. One major question is: do the Greensboro sit-ins merely expand the markets of capitalist free enterprise in a slightly different way than Bernays's cigarette stunt? Namely: is the performative transgression of actual political protest really all that different from the aesthetic appropriation of transgressive protest for corporate profit? Yet if each of these examples is merely an instance of capitalist expansion, then what would it mean to truly (and not just symbolically) transgress a hegemonic order?

Any attempt to answer the above questions must confront a category not often acknowledged as a major determining theme of 20th century life, at least not explicitly: what Susan Sontag called "the aesthetic sense." One might say that attempts to answer these questions produce the whole range of political and social upheaval characterizing the historical period known as "The Sixties." Sontag's writing, like Broch's in an earlier generation, is an exemplary

case in English of the interdependence between aesthetics and ethics beginning in the 1960s and extending into the early 21st century. (Even earlier, for Wittgenstein, aesthetics and ethics were indistinguishable in his repudiation of traditional styles of philosophizing or thinking.) Taking both Sontag and Broch as guiding lights, differentiating aesthetically and ethically between Bernays's profit-driven theatricality and the Greensboro sit-ins means understanding the distinction as analogous to the difference between kitsch and "high art," respectively. "High art" can be commercial or non-commercial, successful or unsuccessful, though it cannot be kitsch. One can only navigate this distinction by cultivating the aesthetic sense as a faculty of judgment that one uses actively rather than passively.

Some Origins of Kitsch and the Aesthetic Sense in Romanticism and German Idealism

Both "kitsch" and Sontag's "aesthetic sense" effectively enter European consciousness through German Idealism and Romanticism. One way to clarify the centrality of these ideas in our own time is to consider that only in the 20th century did ideas of political change effectively and consciously merge on a *mass* scale with aesthetic ideas drawn from the history of art. Of course, the connection between these two sets of ideas was already very old by the early 1900s. In its more modern form, it is perhaps birthed by the general revolutionary upheaval in the European Mind that led to the American revolution and its descendants. One exemplary case in modern thought, grounded precisely in this historical moment, is Friedrich Schiller's *On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters*, first published in 1795. Its publication follows after Thomas Paine's far more influential attempt at practical application of Enlightenment philosophy, *Common Sense*, but is part of that same general movement toward the political-

practical implementation of abstract subjective universality that began most emphatically with the American revolution and Declaration of Independence.

Abstract subjective universality also gives rise to the abstract subject conceived in its particularity. Individuation, the apotheosis of authorial voice, is the modern aesthetic of art-making solidified most emphatically in the time period of Romanticism. In Sontag's words: "All pre-modern literature evolves from the classical conception of writing as an impersonal, self-sufficient, freestanding achievement. Modern literature projects a quite different idea: the romantic conception of writing as a medium in which a singular personality heroically exposes itself. [...] In the view initiated by the romantic sensibility, what is produced by the artist (or the philosopher) contains as a regulating internal structure an account of the labors of subjectivity. Work derives its credentials from its place in a singular lived experience; it assumes an inexhaustible personal totality of which 'the work' is a by-product, and inadequately expressive of that totality. Art becomes a statement of self-awareness--an awareness that presupposes a disharmony between the self of the artist and the community. Indeed, the artist's effort is measured by the size of its rupture with the collective voice (of 'reason'). The artist is a consciousness trying to be" (Sontag, "Approaching Artaud" 15-6).

While Paine developed the abstract-universal Subject into a collective "Common Sense" embodied in government, Schiller's *Letters* refer more to the legacy of Kant, and he claims that this commonality (Kant's *sensus communis*) is rather a perennial source of habit to be, likewise, perennially undone. Rather than construct a *paean* to ideal government like Paine (whose ideas served more straightforward purposes of political propaganda for inter-colonial alliances in North America), Schiller focuses on an ideal form of Culture and connects the subjects of "Art and Beauty," rather than government or Statehood, with "all that is best in human happiness" and

“what is noblest in our moral nature” (Schiller 3). He wants to move away from the ever emptier abstractions of speculative thought. Philosophical analyses and conceptualizations “veil” truth away from feeling, thereby leaving only the possibility of mechanistic adherence to the practical logics of Common Reason. In his letters, Schiller differentiates the “aesthetic” and the “moral” as discrete modes of attention for apprehending any present reality, and he argues that they should rather unite dialectically.

Anticipating potential objections to his quest for “a code of laws for the aesthetic world” as irrelevant in times that call for moral action, he concedes that moral affairs must be urgently concerned with “the construction of true political freedom,” referring to the body of thought converging around the French Revolution. To this end, Schiller privileges an aesthetic philosophy based on “the art of the ideal”--what Herbert Marcuse, writing later amidst the turmoil of 20th century revolutionary thought, would ambivalently term bourgeois “affirmative culture.” This kind of art necessarily abandons practical concern, as well as any consideration of what one already expects the world to be, because “Art is a daughter of Freedom, and takes her orders from the necessity inherent in minds, not from the exigencies of matter” (Schiller 7). His conception favors the mental operations of the artist over the formal determinants of the medium, and in this is wholly “idealist,” but his rhetorical opposition of mind and matter also conveys a polemic against utility and “degraded” dedications to material needs (or what are *perceived* as needs).

The Active Discovery of Beauty Where it Didn't Exist Before

Schiller's diagnosis of a split sensibility that degrades aesthetic consciousness prophesies the movements of early 20th century modernism that make art-production a quasi-scientific

mode of aesthetic hypotheses and inquiries, such as conceived by Broch (himself an exemplar of modernism in his literary work, most importantly *The Sleepwalkers* and *The Death of Virgil*). Sontag, as well, indicates the sense in which modernism is a dethroning of the Romantic conceptions of masterpieces and geniuses in her essay on Antonin Artaud: “In the established conception under chronic challenge, literature is fashioned out of a rational--that is, socially accepted--language into a variety of internally consistent types of discourse (e.g., poem, play, epic, treatise, essay, novel) in the form of individual ‘works’ that are judged by such norms as veracity, emotional power, subtlety, and relevance. But more than a century of literary modernism has made clear the contingency of once stable genres and undermined the very notion of an autonomous work. The standards used to appraise literary works now seem by no means self-evident, and a good deal less than universal. They are a particular culture’s confirmations of its notions of rationality: that is, of mind and of community” (Sontag, “Approaching Artaud” 14).

As Schiller writes: “Utility is the great idol of our age, to which all powers are in thrall and to which all talent must pay homage. Weighed in this crude balance, the insubstantial merits of Art scarce tip the scale, and, bereft of all encouragement, she shuns the noisy market-place of our century. The spirit of philosophical inquiry itself is wresting from the imagination one province after another, and the frontiers of art contract the more the boundaries of science expand” (Schiller 7). Later, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti’s 1909 “Futurist Manifesto” likewise promotes the non-utility of aesthetic production: “Let’s break out of wisdom, as if out of a horrible shell; and let’s fling ourselves, like fruits swollen with pride, into the wind’s vast and contorted mouth!...Let’s throw ourselves, like food, into the Unknown, not in desperation but to fill up the deep wells of the Absurd” (Marinetti 50). Here “wisdom” applies in the same way as

Schiller's "Common Reason," as the mode of moral-aesthetic consciousness that fails to meet the world in its changing forms and comprehend its altered states by acknowledging the *beauties* (allures, pleasures) they introduce into the world. Likewise for André Breton and the Surrealists, the "realistic attitude" (as with "wisdom" and "Common Reason") is "hostile to any intellectual or moral advancement" (Breton 87). If the world changes, then morality and beauty must likewise change as concepts in order to adequately encapsulate it. Therefore what is deemed beautiful should never be static, and one should also recognize that every aspect of life can be conveyed in the mode of its beauty.

In 1993, looking back on the time-period of modernism with a certain nostalgia, Milan Kundera chastises Theodor Adorno for accusing Igor Stravinsky of barbarism by musically "identifying" with "the destructive element" rather than "the victim" in rendering his ballet culminating in "the sacrifice of a young girl" (*Le Sacre du printemps*, first performed in 1913). Contrariwise, Kundera claims the ballet's aesthetic value lies precisely in its ability to express "the *beauty* of the barbaric," and "to give barbaric rites a grand [musical] form." More importantly, he argues that, "without its beauty, the barbaric would remain incomprehensible" (Kundera, *Testaments Betrayed* 91). No phenomenon, according to Kundera, is knowable without understanding its beauty, which is another way of saying: only the allure of a phenomenon (or more broadly and abstractly, an event) can explain its full meaning in the world. And understanding this allure without being entranced by it (experiencing it with aesthetic ambivalence, or what Kant termed disinterestedness) can also prevent our understanding of "facts" from being unduly inflected with preconceived ideas. There is a subtle psychoanalytic logic at work in this pronouncement: a phenomenon is like a symptom, and understanding the

source of the patient's drive to compulsively repeat the symptom (*aka* its allure) will reveal its full meaning.

Another example, equally counterintuitive as the "beauty" of barbarism, is the way that Lou Reed expresses the beauty that lures people into extreme, drug-induced states in the song "Heroin," included on the 1967 debut album of *The Velvet Underground & Nico*. Droning, repetitive, unmelodious and increasingly ecstatic musical sounds accompany a poetic expression of modern despair concerning a corrupt and violent world, and how the experience of heroin offers an artificial and numbing relief: "Heroin, be the death of me / Heroin, it's my wife and it's my life / Because a mainline to my vein / Leads to a center in my head / And then I'm better off than dead / Because when the smack begins to flow / I really don't care anymore / About all the Jim-Jim's in this town / And all the politicians makin' crazy sounds / And everybody puttin' everybody else down / And all the dead bodies piled up in mounds / 'Cause when the smack begins to flow / Then I really don't care anymore / Ah, when the heroin is in my blood / And that blood is in my head / Then thank God that I'm good as dead / Then thank your God that I'm not aware / And thank God that I just don't care / And I guess I just don't know." Only an understanding of the very real beauty that is offered by heroin, in the sense of its aesthetic experience, can explain the phenomenon of heroin addiction as a social problem. And it is in this sense that all discourse of the chemical dependency of addiction, explained in purely physical-scientific terms, misses the equally key problem of subjective desire that leads to the *acquired habits* of chemical dependency. The truth is aesthetic as well as bodily, and the body is both an ideational and physical machine.

This is precisely how Sontag describes what she terms the "loud style," in the polarity of "loud and soft" advocates of "silence" as an aesthetic ideal of 20th century art: "The loud style is

a function of the unstable antithesis of ‘plenum’ and ‘void.’ The sensuous, ecstatic, translinguistic apprehension of the plenum is notoriously fragile: in a terrible, almost instantaneous plunge it can collapse into the void of negative silence. With all its awareness of risk-taking (the hazards of spiritual nausea, even of madness), this advocacy of silence tends to be frenetic and overgeneralizing. It is also frequently apocalyptic and must endure the indignity of all apocalyptic thinking; namely, to prophesy the end, to see the day come, to outlive it, and then to set a new date for the incineration of consciousness and the definitive pollution of language and exhaustion of the possibilities of art-discourse” (Sontag, “The Aesthetics of Silence” 32). The “loud style” insists that beauty is to be found elsewhere, or otherwise, interminably.

Works of Art as Modes of Aesthetic Thinking and Moral Understanding

The paths of philosophical questions are apparently infinite, and for Schiller they offer the danger of blindly following them into this infinity. But this is a false (imprecisely conceived) infinity projected by the intrinsically finite nature of knowledge; merely a statement of the limitation of subjectivity itself conceived only in its concrete particularity. In the grand traditions of German Idealism and Romanticism, all knowledge stops at the *non-I*, against which all its “knowing” is perennially tested. Disappointed by the impossibility of absolute knowledge (which of course Hegel never claimed as concretely possible, despite all arguments to the contrary, but instead indicated as a perennial *overcoming* of knowledge), Walter Benjamin (a major influence on Sontag) poses an inevitable “counterquestion” to the bad infinity of philosophical speculation: In its search for absolute knowledge, or the unity of Truth (Hegel’s proverbial “End of History”), what does consciousness hope to achieve? When its desire is directed at totality and finality, the

answer can only be a kind of domination, thereby returning the infinite (but anguished) speculative ideal back into the confines of the finite desiring ego: the fascist sublimity of the political reconciliation of Subject and Substance. But this question is itself illusive in its attempt to get at the essence of philosophical desire, because the aim of knowledge has never been unified or constant. The question as posed is necessarily unanswerable, because the context of the question is also infinite.

And so a change of emphasis is needed from “knowledge’s aim” to “knowledge *as* aim,” which is open-ended and plural. There is only the *fact* of desire, the desire to *know*, to *have*, and to *use*. A philosophical system is merely the scheme of a particular orientation of desire to *have* and *use* reality, later rearticulated as “discourse” by critical theory (itself a re-orientation of abstract philosophical naivety into more purportedly scientific models). And these schemes are endless.

Benjamin poses further alternatives to the inevitable infinity of dogmatic conceptions that philosophical inquiry can pose, and he defines them as “constructs that bear the deepest affinity to philosophy, or rather to the ideal form of its problem, without constituting philosophy themselves.” These constructs are “works of art,” which are not discursive (“neither questions nor answers”). If all philosophical speculation aims at “the true” as its basic goal (and “absolute knowledge” as its ideal end--in Lacanian psychoanalysis, its aim but not its goal), then Benjamin argues works of art serve the representation of this truth via the sensual experience of beauty: “a manifestation of the ideal of the philosophical problem can be discovered in every work of art,” and this manifestation is in fact the “aura” of the philosophical problem that cannot be concretized into concepts (Benjamin, “The Theory of Criticism” 217-18). Beauty should here be understood as the extremely contextual nature of the aesthetic experience offered by the work of

art, whether it be a series of tones struck by a piano or a sequence of images displayed on a screen. The sensual concreteness of the work of art singles out the precise nature of a philosophical problem by grounding it in the particularities of its formal articulation without proposing any fixation in concepts.

Modern science develops ever more concrete and complex understandings of physical reality, reducing mystery from our collective experiences of the world; but this absence of mystery also becomes ideological, our hypothetical understanding often taken for granted as adequate where it remains incomplete or possibly false. According to Schiller, at the end of the 18th century all eyes are on “the political scene,” and his concern with “the aesthetic world” admittedly (for some) betrays “a culpable indifference to the common weal” because it insistently lacks immediate concern with the great shift in political reality (then) taking place. He conceives this shift as a qualitative transformation away from the blind forces of power and weakness, in their perennial struggles, toward the democratic Rights of Man determined in their conceptual universality (grounded in the Cartesian subject); the idea that each subject can conceptually rise “from an individual into a representative of the species” (Schiller 9). Each citizen views itself as both a Judge in the Tribunal of Justice and an object of its judgment, abstractly equal to any other self.

Schiller’s notion of a great political moment refers to the mass experience of self-determination and speculative universal freedom conceptualized philosophically into the various strains of German Idealism. But Schiller’s main theoretical wager is that one only successfully rallies Freedom via “the problem of the aesthetic, because it is only through Beauty that man makes his way to Freedom” (Schiller 9). Beauty thus conceived is the disinterested stopover point between one Aesthetic State and another, and therefore it is the only mode of experience

that allows for genuine comprehension of a changing world. It is this insight that will produce the various modernisms of the 20th century, from their most dogmatic manifestos to their most innocuous formal experiments (but more on this later).

Schiller privileges Beauty as precisely the notion that differentiates “Man” from a mere object of Nature. Human consciousness is rather capable of understanding Nature in its laws and processes, and then subsequently judging the adequacy of its work for its own desires, what Schiller describes as “elevating physical necessity into moral necessity,” transforming *rote existence* into a *style of existing* (Schiller 11). The political abstraction of a “Person” as bearer of universal values simultaneously posits the notion of a Natural State as opposed to a Moral State, because the abstract-universal Subject-Person comprises everything about the “human being” that is not a matter of natural compulsion. For Schiller, “the natural character of man” comprises concern for self-preservation and personal fulfillment, but the new Person of the radical political moment requires a conception of self that negates these drives.

But negation, in the traditions of Idealism, requires the sublation of that which it negates. This makes it a “determinate negation,” the source of a creation. And therein lies the truth content of the idealist privileging of mind: meaning actually *is* made, and this is a mental operation functioning both individually and collectively, always both at the same time. Therefore one cannot just negate human societies in their present forms, because one cannot just replace them wholesale by new ideas or new economies (as if a thought ever rises out of nothing). Rather, something must develop from *within* society that allies fully with neither the brute laws of physical existence nor contemporary moral conceptions of character. Freedom, properly conceived, bases itself on sense-impressions, by which Schiller means the aesthetic dimension of experience--what Sontag later continues to call the aesthetic sense or aesthetic sensibility. Before

one can theorize Freedom and enact it into laws as a program of morality, one must understand the relationship of consciousness to the aesthetic more precisely. Some connection must exist between natural developments and desire.

Aesthetic Knowledge as Transgressive Knowledge

What Schiller recognizes as the prime political/moral concern of his time reads as a precursor to modern identity politics: “The State should not only respect the objective and generic character in its individual subjects; it should also honour their subjective and specific character, and in extending the invisible realm of morals take care not to depopulate the sensible realm of appearance” (Schiller 19). Beauty is the medium through which the State incorporates the manifold of subjective experience into its moral structure. It does this by turning all beauty into kitsch, the late capitalist rehabilitation of religious devotion. For a random example, one need only think here of the ubiquitous American romance movies, all with more or less the same plot, that tell of providential love centered around Christmas (any produced by Hallmark would suffice). Audiences return, year after year, to re-experience the same dull round, compelled to repeat it by the kind of habit one barely even understands that one has, the same way a non-believer might habitually and devotionally attend mass. They know not what they do.

Schiller’s ideal State serves as moral guide to its individual members in their objective and subjective diversity, effectively serving the function of a conscience guiding action, but the reified conscience of Law as a living and morphing Super-Ego. Functioning this way means that individual citizens put moral faith in the decisions of representatives as aiming to accommodate the full diversity of human experience. Politics, then, must avoid giving way to arbitrary natural impulse as well as enforced tyrannical control, and for Schiller it is only in Culture that humanity

“honors [Nature’s] freedom whilst curbing only her caprice” (Schiller 21). He grounds this conception of Culture in the discriminating capabilities of Kantian reflective judgment, which is a never-ending and initially non-purposive activity of the mind. One can think of the meaning of Kantian non-purposiveness--more specifically, purposiveness without purpose--in the sense that Benjamin speaks of hope, as necessarily absent in the dialectical relationship between knowledge and love, in *One-Way Street*: “The only way of knowing a person is to love that person without hope” (Benjamin 467). This is the only model of love, and therefore of ethics, that embodies a moral code without imposing an arbitrary subjective order onto the sovereign freedom of reality. As T.S. Eliot also wrote in *East Coker*, echoing Benjamin 15 years later (in 1943) and demonstrating with poetic felicity a key experience of a new, self-critical (non-programmatic) modernism:

I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love,
For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith
But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.
Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought:
So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing.
Whisper of running streams, and winter lightning.
The wild thyme unseen and the wild strawberry,
The laughter in the garden, echoed ecstasy
Not lost, but requiring, pointing to the agony
Of death and birth (Eliot 28).

It is only fitting that Eliot be an exemplar of this self-critical modernism (what Kundera, in *Testaments Betrayed*, later terms “antimodern modernism”), coming at its aesthetic principles from a conservative rather than revolutionary critical perspective. His melancholy tone mixes both resignation and faithful expectation in its refusal of dogmatic striving, while also being elegiac about the order that has been lost. In order to understand the world--the world into which, in Heideggerian language, one has been thrown--one must love it, and this requires that one not fix or conspire to fix *what it is*. Aesthetic beauty is our access to the ways in which reality does not conform to our desires, but instead offers us the possibility of expanding desire beyond the narrow confines of the finite subject conceived in its particularity. Love of the world extends from the most complex consciousness to the simplest atom.⁵ Art, coordinated and engaged in this way, offers us possibilities for learning how to love.⁶

Aesthetic education aims to remedy the prospect that abstract speculative concepts lead humanity to “become a stranger to the world of sense” and thereby incapable of actually incorporating the full diversity of objective existence; meaning, the formal organization of concepts into a State likely cannot serve the moral needs of all its citizens. No objective Law is really possible, and the State’s desire for a perfect form historically makes it tyrannically reject multitudinous Nature. Schiller describes this mode of the State in terms anticipating modern conceptions of *kitsch* as false and simplifying universalities:

⁵ This conception of love is one of the major thematic treatments, dialectically related to contrary conceptions, in Lars von Trier’s comic-epic treatment of anguished consciousness, *Nymphomaniac* (2013). Ideal universal love, a love that equally values subjective consciousness and objective nature as inextricably intertwined, is the mode of being Joe learns from her father and that contradicts her impulses toward constant self-gratification.

⁶ It is in this context that one should also read Jacques Lacan’s poetic formulation that “Love is giving what you don’t have to someone who doesn’t want it.” More precisely, love is an act of giving that gives nothing, that only attends to and cares for what it finds worthy of love. Love gives its presence by also simultaneously offering its absence, both of which desire nothing but that the Beloved subsist without pain.

The practical spirit, by contrast [to the spirit of speculation], enclosed within a monotonous sphere of material objects, and within this uniformity still further confined by formulas, was bound to find the idea of an unconditioned Whole receding from sight, and to become just as impoverished as its own poor sphere of activity. If the former [the spirit of speculation] was tempted to model the actual world on a world conceivable by the mind, and to exalt the subjective conditions of its own perceptual and conceptual faculty into laws constitutive of the existence of things, the latter [the practical spirit] plunged into the opposite extreme of judging all experience whatsoever by one particular fragment of experience, and of wanting to make the rules of its own occupation apply indiscriminately to all others (Schiller 39).

What Schiller opposes, on principle, are both the Abstract and the Practical understood as *distinct* guiding determinants of thought and action. The Abstract risks missing the nuances of particular realities, and the Practical risks acting on desires limited to myopic concerns.

For Schiller then, the starting point of political thinking is necessarily false, as the European State, given its conceptualization at the turn of the 19th century, could be nothing other than a “cause of evil,” for *it* created the conditions of violence. But the ideal State of Reason cannot then itself exist until a “better humanity” exists to serve as its foundations. Here Schiller returns to his opposition of the Aesthetic and the Political, because “every attempt at political reform is untimely, and every hope based upon it [is] chimerical” so long as the “form of humanity” itself is not constructed to produce the form of the Ideal (Schiller 45). In other words, one must first tend to consciousness before tending to the State.

In full idealist fervor, Schiller calls on the powers of Truth against the forces of Nature and simplification, and this Truth derives from aesthetic engagement with “heart”--the mere

feeling for Truth--and “drives,” which act on the knowledge “heart” provides. Without the “resolute will” of the drives, directed by a heart’s “ardour of feeling,” no execution of Reason--its discovery and establishment of law--is possible (Schiller 49). Any expressive or denotative representation of existence can enact or make use of the powers of Reason, and so the *formal nature* of that representation becomes the object of Schiller’s “aesthetic education” rather than any simplistic idea of canonical works that edify by their intrinsic beauty. One should not romanticize “all enlightenment of the understanding,” because the power of Reason is only the power of limiting the sense of reality within demonstrable bounds. Those aspects of understanding that respond to appearances are informed by a dual “character,” the character of *the perceiver* and the character of *the object of perception*--and of course, these two are inextricably bound, as understanding cannot divorce from feeling, and feeling does not exist without a base of understanding, whether that understanding be true or false. Schiller then recommends a “development of man’s capacity for feeling” as “the most urgent need of our age” (Schiller 53). This capacity for feeling improves human insights into effective modes of life and instills a principle of insufficiency to all perceptual and conceptualized experience, as the desire for “feeling” requires a corollary acknowledgement that *adequate feeling* is not given but must be perennially (re)attained.

Sontag’s Variation of Idealist and Romantic Aesthetic Philosophies

Writing over 150 years later, Sontag’s call for “an erotics of art,” in place of a hermeneutics, echoes the very same urgency: “What is important now is to recover our senses. We must learn to *see* more, to *hear* more, to *feel* more” (Sontag, “Against Interpretation” 14). As with Schiller, the issue for Sontag appears as an antagonism between thought and feeling, and

between the intellectual and the moral senses. One cannot accomplish Sontag's critical task, to show "how [*the work of art*] is what it is, even that it is what it is, rather than to show what it means," without first establishing the difference between formal understanding and interpretive projection (Sontag, "Against Interpretation" 14). In Schiller's view, all rationality that's effectively human requires "the ennobling of character" (always a suspect phrase), but that very ennobling (which implies transformation between subjective states) also requires the use of established rational thinking to mobilize and direct its capacity for feeling. If the current mode of rationality (Schiller's proto-Marxist variant of a *ruling ideology*) is morally deficient, how can it produce a character that transcends its boundaries? This is the problem, for instance, of Nietzsche's Over-Man, who by definition must first appear as mad. For Schiller, the mere possibility of this antagonism requires an aesthetic principle of transgression ("some instrument not provided by the State") that's invulnerable to "political corruption," which is the corruption of dogmatic desire (Schiller 55). The instrument not provided by the State is what Schiller calls "Fine Art."

In Sontag's estimation, Modern Art's central problematic--the function and comportment of art and artists in society--derives from the earliest theories of art as mimesis, meaning the core of the problem lies in a relation between Art and Life (the aesthetic sense and the practical sense). On the basis of this theory, "the peculiar question of the *value* of art arose. For the mimetic theory, by its very terms, challenges art to justify itself" (Sontag, "Against Interpretation" 3). Modernist aesthetics re-approach this question with a different conception of "Art" than the Greeks understood; most importantly, a conception of the artist as a kind of exemplary transgressor. Primarily, this transgression occurs in the forms that works of art give to reality, and so Sontag's re-articulation of Schiller's argument also re-articulates the old

speculative opposition between *form* and *content* once so central to philosophical discourse. Ultimately, form refers to the principles of organization given to reality by the work of art, and content refers to the recognizable attributes of a Heideggerian World present within that formal arrangement.

Sontag's post-Heideggerian version of Schiller's aesthetic program develops an understanding of "content" that makes clear how it often functions non-dialectically for dogmatic and extra-aesthetic (largely political or cultural-hegemonic) purposes. No rule about "content" in art, its use or interpretation, can establish the sense of Fine Art argued by Schiller, because this content is always firmly entrenched in the boundaries of "the current mode of rationality" and thereby confined to the existing horizon of understanding. It cannot, in Heidegger's terminology, reveal a way of *being-in-the-world* hitherto unimagined. Modernism's thematic concern across its many variations is precisely this aspect of the new that refers to the unaccomplished, the unexpected, the (as yet) unprecedented.

Modernism is a Dialectic of "Art" as its Notion, Played Out by the Aesthetic Sense

It is fitting, then, that modernist art achieves the culmination of the Romantic conception of the artist by reducing it to "art," understood as the pure abstraction of what Sontag calls modernity's "spiritual project." And this reduction to "art" is just the final step in art's overcoming, in the Hegelian and Nietzschean senses together, pointing to a relocation of the "spiritual project" on another plane, with entirely new ideological coordinates. With this reduction of "art" to its Notion, now self-consciously realized and employed as such (the Heideggerian world consisting of producers and consumers of "art"), the concept of kitsch also emerges as its diabolical double. Just as Broch's theory of value locates the Reformation and

Enlightenment as a set of decisive turning points in human history that produce kitsch as a reaction to the loss of true Mythical Belief (the Reformation, specifically, “brought the act of revelation into every single human mind and thereby saddled it with the responsibility of faith, a responsibility which the Church had previously borne” [Broch, “Notes on the Problem of Kitsch” 55]), so Sontag argues the same turning point as ushering in the self-conscious engagement of consciousness with its aesthetic sense (the broadest extension of “Art” understood *as* its Notion), beyond the confines of particular taste, armed with an active ethical skepticism aimed at kitsch in all its forms.

And kitsch is precisely the attempt to reclaim the metaphysical guarantee that had been lost, as an antidote to the new anxiety of subjective responsibility for moral understanding. In the absence of Mythical Belief handed down from on high, “the mind settled the account and became presumptuous and boastful. It became presumptuous because it had been assigned this cosmic and divine task, and it became boastful because it was well aware that it had been given too much credit, that it had been loaded with a responsibility which exceeded its resources. This is the origin of Romanticism: here is the origin of, on the one hand, the exaltation of the man who is full of spiritual (and artistic) energy and who tries to elevate the wretched daily round of life on earth to an absolute or pseudo-absolute sphere, and, on the other, the terror of the man who senses the risk involved” (Broch, “Notes on the Problem of Kitsch” 55-6).

As a result of German Idealism’s philosophical achievements concerning aesthetic and historical consciousness (ultimately inseparable), Sontag claims that a certain popular cynicism seeps into the collective unconscious: “The human mind possesses now, almost as second nature, a perspective on its own achievements that fatally undermines their value and their claim to truth” (Sontag, “Thinking Against Oneself” 74). Historicizing is the operative mode of modern

awareness, and historicization is a species of aestheticizing. As Hegel imagines it, consciousness is the activity of (re)producing the moral tone of the past by positing the presuppositions of the present. For the cynical view, this constant (re)production of the past in the present constitutes “existence” as the “precarious attainment of relevance” for meanings that drown “in a stream of becoming: the senseless and overdocumented rhythm of advent and supercession” (Sontag, “Thinking Against Oneself” 75). Modernity is the time of apocalypse, in the negative sense of destruction, as well as the eternally positive sense of the constant annunciation of the Holy Spirit in death and rebirth. (Think of Marx’s messianic language about capitalism and communism.) This then gives way to the ideology of fashion functioning in the realm of ideas, and one cannot disavow how thoroughly this ideology has affected the pursuit of knowledge in most of its forms: the “advent and supercession” of schools of thought, theoretical tools, and (un)assimilated concepts; intellectual pursuits following the allure of the “freshest” conceptualization.

But Historical Consciousness itself is more than just a “mental ‘attitude’” that can be “annulled by refocusing the mind.” Therefore, the fact that all reality becomes a mere fragment in the archive of historical consciousness--and this “archive” idea is how photography becomes, for both Sontag and Benjamin, a key metaphor of modernity and, for Sontag, of the “aesthetic sense” itself--leads “the shrewdest thinkers and artists” to become “precocious archaeologists of these ruins-in-the-making, indignant or stoical diagnosticians of defeat, enigmatic choreographers of the complex spiritual movements useful for individual survival in an era of permanent apocalypse. The time of new collective visions may well be over: by now both the brightest and the gloomiest, the most foolish and the wisest, have been set down. But the need for individual spiritual counsel has never seemed more acute. *Sauve qui peut*” (Sontag,

“Thinking Against Oneself” 75). No difference any longer exists between art and philosophy, as both enter into the same sense of a “spiritual project.”

The (re)union of art and philosophy requires a renewed attention to the present and particular, a relative abandonment of abstractions in the same sense as denigrated by Schiller, but one that retains the sense of how the particular holds fast to its operatively accumulating (temporal and historical) abstractions. In the mid-1960s, Sontag recapitulates Schiller’s aversion to philosophical language: “Claiming to give an account of ‘what is’ in its various epistemological and ontological layers, philosophy secondarily insinuated an implicitly futuristic standard of how things ‘ought to be’--under the aegis of notions like order, harmony, clarity, intelligibility, and consistency” (Sontag, “Thinking Against Oneself” 76). An implicit moralism inheres in any philosophical system-building, and Sontag thereby interchangeably applies the more precise aesthetic description of “collective impersonal visions” that allies philosophy and religion in their formally tautological modes, as infrastructures of totality. In fact, philosophy merely replaces religion’s use of myth for a quasi-scientific mode of abstraction. The shift in the Human Mind that Sontag identifies as the legacy of Historical Consciousness requires a dialectical employment of *concretized* myth and abstraction together, philosophy/science and art together, neither ever forgetting the functioning of the other. What is clear, ultimately, is that the prior naive engagements of both art and philosophy (as entirely distinct modes of attention) cannot enter the new age, what Sontag elsewhere referred to as “the new sensibility.”

The Aesthetic Sense as a Tool for Overcoming

Extolled by Schiller as the principal tool of ethical transgression, “Fine Art” inevitably becomes the enemy of itself. Sontag’s understanding of “spirituality” is at times both Kantian

and Hegelian--perhaps vaguely idealist but without allegiance to a language or a formula. Kant's basic structure of the transcendental aesthetic appears in Sontag both as the subjectivity of a concrete individual and the subjectively unified, collectively unconscious texture (Hegelian Spirit) of whole societies. Philosophy's authority rests precisely in its ability to abstract reality into an "atemporal discourse" of "non-concrete 'universals' or stable forms that underpin the mutable world," and so philosophy's demise is grounded in its own gesture of historicism that relegates its language of articulation to the rubbish heap of history.⁷

For Sontag, the European Enlightenment that culminates in Hegel retains too much of a theological conception of nature in its universal characterizations (the Hegelian Absolute Spirit, along with Absolute Knowing, is an attempt to operate within a Christian eschatology and both are ultimately profanations of that eschatology), but its introduction of "historical consciousness" also paradoxically undoes that notion of nature and announces the end of its own way of thinking.⁸ Hegel's notion of the Owl of Minerva as flying only at dusk exemplifies his awareness of embodying a terminal moment in consciousness. Ultimately the stagnation of universal abstractions failed to keep up with the world and its rapidly accelerating particularities ushered into the European Mind by the Protestant Reformation (the same source Broch sites as the emergence of kitsch): "Confounded by the surge of an increasingly secularized, drastically more

⁷ Bohumil Hrabal's excellent novel, *Too Loud a Solitude* (1976), details precisely this conception of Hegelian History and Spirit in its interrelation with the Individual Subject of the Transcendental Aesthetic. Both are paradoxically embodied in its hero, Hant'a, a reclusive waste-paper compactor in Prague. He develops an encyclopedic cultural knowledge (with a good deal of thematic emphasis on Kant and Hegel) by recycling, haphazardly and driven only by temperamental affinity, all of the literature that passes through his compacting machine. In Hrabal's universe, everything--from the aesthetic to the philosophical to the scientific--enters the rummage heap of history and is aestheticized in the mind of Hant'a. This is precisely, in the novelized form of its *mythos*, what Sontag means when she claims that, in history, everything is aestheticized. Hrabal's novel is about the aesthetic sense in its intrinsically contradictory modes.

⁸ This, perhaps, is a more fruitful understanding of the "End of History" in Hegelian mythology; as an end to the *belief* in Theological History and the beginning of an active historical consciousness that works to sublimate the past by freely positing its own presuppositions in constructing an always incomplete future. One can find a reading of this kind in Slavoj Žižek's *Less Than Nothing* (2012). This offers an example, as well, of the logical/formal similarities between Hegel and William Blake.

competent and efficient human will bent on controlling, manipulating, and modifying ‘nature,’ its ventures into concrete ethical and political prescription badly lagging behind the accelerating historical change of the human landscape (among which changes must be counted the sheer accumulation of concrete empirical knowledge stored in printed books and documents), the leading words of philosophy came to seem excessively overdetermined. Or, what amounts to the same thing, they seemed undernourished, emptied of meaning” (Sontag, “Thinking Against Oneself” 77). Just as Protestants rejected the rituals and recitations of Catholic worship, so the new artist-thinkers reject the abstractions of philosophers that don’t seem to apply to any experience.

Still taking their lesson from the Enlightenment, though, the new artist-thinkers narrow their focus on the nature of consciousness itself more and more; this becomes their point of continuity with the abstraction they attempt to abandon. Already borrowed from the aesthetic sphere of religious myth by philosophy, abstraction in art becomes the pure form of the Subject on the Verge of Conceiving a World. In the 20th Century, “Art” is the vehicle for abstraction to move through the Hegelian negation of negation: from Myth, to Reason, and now to Aesthetic Sense, already announced as such from within the confines of Reason itself (in Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*) and requiring extensive recourse to Myth. It is at the intersection of these that Sontag locates the ethical function of aesthetic sensibility far beyond the limited sphere of explicitly artistic productions. Indeed, “art” becomes the modern era’s reinvention of “the project of ‘spirituality.’” In this sense art is a metaphor, “a particularly adaptable site on which to stage the formal dramas besetting consciousness, each individual work of art being a more or less astute paradigm for regulating or reconciling [the painful structural contradictions inherent in the human situation].” Art, and no longer religion or philosophy, is the locus of “plans,

terminologies, [and] ideas of deportment aimed at [...] the completion of human consciousness, at transcendence” (Sontag, “The Aesthetics of Silence” 3-4).

Everything has an aesthetic dimension that can be isolated and related to that of another dimension (the basis, for instance, of relating Bernays’s publicity stunt with the sit-ins in North Carolina). A section in “One Culture and the New Sensibility” is worth quoting at length, as it is the most extended definition of the aesthetic sensibility that directs Sontag’s entire critical and aesthetic practice:

If art is understood as a form of discipline of the feelings and a programming of sensations, then the feeling (or sensation) given off by a Rauschenberg painting might be like that of a song by the Supremes. The brio and elegance of Budd Boetticher’s *The Rise and Fall of Legs Diamond* or the singing style of Dionne Warwick can be appreciated as a complex and pleasurable event. They are experienced without condescension.

This last point seems to me worth underscoring. For it is important to understand that the affection which many younger artists and intellectuals feel for the popular arts is not a new philistinism (as has so often been charged) or a species of anti-intellectualism or some kind of abdication from culture. The fact that many of the most serious American painters, for example, are also fans of ‘the new sound’ in popular music is not the result of the search for mere diversion or relaxation; it is not, say, like Schoenberg also playing tennis. It reflects a new, more open way of looking at the world and at things in the world. It does not mean the renunciation of all standards: there is plenty of stupid popular music, as well as inferior and pretentious ‘avant-garde’ paintings, films, and music. The point is that there are new standards, new standards of beauty and style and taste. The new sensibility is defiantly pluralistic; it is dedicated both to an excruciating seriousness

and to fun and wit and nostalgia. It is also extremely history-conscious; and the voracity of its enthusiasms (and of the supercession of its enthusiasms) is very high-speed and hectic. From the vantage point of this new sensibility, the beauty of a machine or of the solution to a mathematical problem, of a painting by Jasper Johns, of a film by Jean-Luc Godard, and of the personalities and music of the Beatles is equally accessible (Sontag 303-4).

Beauty, taken from Schiller as the directive aim of consciousness, is discoverable in the various forms of arrangement in machines, in mathematics, in paintings, in films, in music--but also in people, in the arrangements of their personalities (the personality is the aesthetic of the person).

Sontag's position is most often taken as a leveler of culture, as if she claimed that all cultural products are equally valuable. She very clearly does not propose this view, which was later dubbed postmodernism. Sontag is not in any way allied with this conception of postmodernism, as she retains quite clearly a desire for and belief in cultural standards and cultural values. Accessibility and value are not equivalent ideas. And it also implies a demand, that the new sensibility *be able* to appreciate the Beatles *and* Godard. In more contemporary times, no one needs to convince anyone that so-called "popular" culture is worth attention; rather, the tide has turned in the other direction. Now it is Godard's work (and its descendants) which receives widespread condescension and scorn. The old "ivory tower" no longer exists in the same way it did when that term was coined, and Sontag's work is precisely aimed at eradicating this "ivory tower" without foregoing practical idealism. Hierarchy persists, still in service to an ideal, but it is an ethical one that changes, develops, and defines itself in collaboration with other minds and the changing world.

But this reorientation changes the sense with which consciousness is engaged: no longer as universal, abstracted from the self and the particular, but as emphatically--and sometimes over-emphatically--*only* the particularities of an “ego nucleus” taking in and looking out upon the world. In her essay on EM Cioran, Sontag allies him with Samuel Beckett as an example of the artist-thinker “concerned with the absolute integrity of thought.” Cioran characterizes this integrity, calling back to Schiller’s language, as the integrity of freedom: “The only free mind [is] the one that, pure of all intimacy with being or objects, plies its own vacuity.” What in Nietzsche begins as a perennial and demanding duty to un-interpret the world (Sontag’s sense of “against interpretation” applied throughout her work in different guises) becomes an excruciating act of the mind constantly undoing itself in the quest for self-transcendence, which remains a variation of Hegelian Spirit: “In the passion play of thought, the thinker plays the roles of both protagonist and antagonist. He is both suffering Prometheus and the remorseless eagle who consumes his perpetually regenerated entrails” (Sontag, “Thinking Against Oneself” 80-1). All responsible thought engages the process of its own development; indeed, it recapitulates its own development in offering itself as thought, the better to avoid being an imposition or an evil (*i.e.* kitsch).

The Aesthetic Sense as an Undoing of the Self and of Myth

Sontag identifies an important distinction made by Cioran concerning the mythical European figure of “the tired intellectual,” an exemplar of bourgeois boredom. Aside from lambasting the very vocation of the intellectual, Cioran attempts to locate “the exact difference between two states well worth distinguishing: being civilized and that mutilation of the organic person sometimes, tendentiously, called being ‘over-civilized.’” This distinction recalls the

similar one Sontag made just a few years earlier in “On Style” between style and stylization. In this version she finds in Cioran, the figure of over-civilization enters the domain of Camp stylization (pure aestheticization) in the realm of philosophy, wherever it does not attain poetry (when it’s “too good” to be Camp, but more on this later). The sublime lucidity and equality proffered by the *abstract universality* of the Enlightenment and “promoted by modern liberal culture” is ultimately an unprincipled position of self-negation when carried out strictly as a logic, a total leveling of value. And it now receives its apocalyptic version in the possibilities offered by Artificial Intelligence.

For Sontag, Cioran is an example of an artist-thinker engaging the Nietzschean tradition with the integrity of its nihilistic possibilities intact. Indeed, Cioran echoes Nietzsche’s warning about the abyss that eventually gazes back, if you linger too long staring into it: “no man concerned with his own equilibrium may exceed a certain degree of lucidity and analysis.” But the new artist-thinker is “emancipated from responsibility to his own health as well as his society’s.” Each artist-thinker of integrity must track the dialectic of a degeneration and a development in its own being, by adding and subtracting value from the realities that pass through its ego-nucleus. Here, again, the aim of knowledge is itself reduced to a method that remains Hegelian in form, but without comprising a system. Hegelian Absolute Knowing becomes a Sisyphean task enacted with the pride of its futility: “Futility is the most difficult thing in the world.’ It requires that we ‘must sever our roots, must become metaphysically foreigners” (Sontag, “Thinking Against Oneself” 85-6).

Cioran’s emphasis on futility is a gesture of what Sontag calls “*spiritual good taste*,” which she recognizes as the basic problem posed in all his writings because, by self-consciously embracing futility, one avoids the embarrassment of overstepping one’s knowledge by

precluding finality or completion in advance (a trait Cioran shares, aesthetically, with Godard-- both figures considered by Sontag as examples of “radical will”). Drawing on the language of German Idealism, Cioran states that the “Absolute corresponds to a meaning we have not been able to cultivate,” and thereby he simply cuts off hope of its attainment. Instead, one must keep this aspect of the Absolute in mind, the totality not only unachieved and unachievable but inexistent.⁹ Therefore everything will eventually undo itself on its own, so we should “surrender to all rebellions” because they are, ultimately, innocuous from the standpoint of a cynical historicism. This is a species of the aesthetic sensibility weighted on the side of nihilism or pessimism but nevertheless delineated with logical integrity: “It may seem outrageous for Cioran to advocate, as he often does, resisting the vulgar temptation to be happy and of the ‘impasse of happiness.’ But such judgments seem far from an unfeeling affectation once one grants him his impossible project: ‘to be nowhere, when no external condition obliges you to do so...to extricate oneself from the world--what a labor of abolition’” (Sontag, “Thinking Against Oneself” 90)!

Cioran re-enacts Nietzsche’s mode of thinking as a self-conscious revaluation of the Hegelian notion of a self-relating negativity conceived as the essence of consciousness, but minus Nietzsche’s sense of moral hopefulness. A free-floating mind, absent of schemes and ignorant of imposition, is one ideal that emerges in Cioran for Sontag’s valuation of aesthetic sensibility. In some sense, Cioran embodies a similar cynicism about the traditional conception of the artist, exemplified in the poet, as that offered by Broch: “[Broch] describes how the vocation of literature, particularly that of the poet, creates insurmountable conditions of inauthenticity. One may suffer, but when one deposits this suffering in literature, the result is ‘an

⁹ This is also how one should read Antonin Artaud’s aesthetic understanding of metaphysical ideas as “temptations,” to be discussed later.

accumulation of confusions, an inflation of horrors, of *frissons* that *date*. One cannot keep renewing Hell, whose very character is monotony” (Arendt, “Hermann Broch” 90). In Broch, this aversion to artistic form as involving too many “*frissons* that *date*” is precisely what led him to abandon art for the mathematical-scientific in his later years, denouncing precisely his vocation as a poet that produced his most important works (*The Sleepwalkers*, *The Death of Virgil*).

Broch owes his theory of value, and thereby his conception of kitsch, as much to Nietzsche as Cioran owes his critique of historical consciousness. Sontag argues that Nietzsche rejects historical thinking, not because it is false, but precisely because it is true. Yet its truth is limited to its historical position, and so all truth is something that must be overcome with a valuation of itself that steps beyond it, surpasses its limitations. Broch’s theory of value, with its central ideas of *mythos* and *kitsch*, was an attempt to offer a way of aesthetically articulating this understanding of truth and value for the purposes of the artist-poet. However Broch, unlike Cioran, *does* attempt to meet Nietzsche’s “heroic effort to surmount nihilism (the doctrine of eternal recurrence)” (Sontag, “Thinking Against Oneself” 92). (Likewise, at the opening of Kundera’s *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, which uses kitsch as one of its primary existential themes, one finds a playful rumination about Nietzsche’s eternal recurrence.) “Eternal recurrence” relates to kitsch by being Nietzsche’s ethically minded attempt to retain the truths of historical consciousness while allowing for their overcoming as another essential feature of historicism in its non-cynical mode. Broch attempted to accommodate Nietzsche’s eternal recurrence with a spatialized theory of time that rejected its Kantian basis in the transcendental subject of apperception. Instead of comprising a constituent element of subjectivity, Broch’s time

is the most alien thing there is for consciousness, entirely external to the finite subject conceived its particularity.

Broch attempts to answer what Sontag claims Cioran leaves unanswered, Nietzsche's critique of "the essential fraud and bad faith involved in the Platonic intellectual transcendence" (Sontag, "Thinking Against Oneself" 92). How Broch first attempts to mitigate the Platonic problem is a dual theory of myth, grounded first in the figuration of "childhood" and then in "the style of old age." In his introductory essay to Rachel Bepaloff's *On the Iliad*, titled "The Style of the Mythical Age," Broch draws his theory from a "startling statement" made by Bepaloff: "It is impossible to speak of an Homeric world or a Tolstoyan world in the sense one can speak of a Dantesque world, a Balzacian or a Dostoievskian world. Tolstoy's universe, like Homer's, is what our own is from moment to moment. We do not step into it; we are there" (Broch, "The Style of the Mythical Age" 9). Homer represents the childhood of myth, the beginning of the Human Mind's departure from naive belief in myth into poetry, a more disinterested relation to myth. Tolstoy, on the other hand, represents "the style of old age," a self-conscious return from poetry to myth. Any return to myth, such as occurs in Tolstoy's work, "is the reaching of a new level of expression, such as the old Titian's discovery of the all-penetrating light which dissolves the human flesh and the human soul to a higher unity; or such as the finding by Rembrandt and Goya, both at the height of their manhood, of the metaphysical surface which underlies the visible in man and thing, and which nevertheless can be painted; or such as the Art of the Fugue which Bach in his old age dictated without having a concrete instrument in mind, because what he had to express was either beneath or beyond the audible surface of music; or such as the last quartets of Beethoven, in which he--only then in his fifties but already near to death--found the way from earthly music to the music of the infinite; or such as Goethe's last writings, the final

scenes of *Faust* for instance, where the language discloses its own mysteries and, therefore, those of all existence” (Broch, “The Style of the Mythical Age” 10-11).

This sense of “all existence” beyond the known world is what Broch develops in his notion of the “earthly absolute,” the point of non-meaning that disturbs all meanings and leaves open the possibilities of futurity. In claiming a mystery as emerging from linguistic figuration, Broch discloses the nature of his notion of *mythos*, as the figuration of mystery at the horizon of current knowledge. Here Broch’s argument is close to identical with Simone de Beauvoir’s contemporaneously published book *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, her major expression of the Existentialist ethics that Sartre refused to write (though, as Sontag claimed, he indicated the possibility of this ethics in his great book on Jean Genet, which also deals in the dialectics of Myth and Reality). Myth, then, retains the figuration of a particular orientation of being and awaits its transformation in Kantian reflective judgment.

What each of Broch’s above examples incorporates is a movement into “abstractism in which the expression relies less and less on the vocabulary,” because it must indicate something beyond the defined. Instead, the expression “finally becomes reduced to a few prime symbols, and instead relies more and more on the syntax,” the aesthetic arrangement. *Abstractism*--the intentional approximation of a potently expressive abstraction--is “the impoverishment of vocabulary and the enrichment of the syntactical relations of expression; in mathematics the vocabulary is reduced to nothing, and the system of expression relies exclusively on the syntax” (Broch, “The Style of the Mythical Age” 10-11). Here Broch nicely approximates what Sontag later, and not necessarily with any direct influence, refers to as the “contentless” works of modern art. For Broch, the “syntax” of myth is a way of playing with time in its spatial reality, external from the “ego nucleus” (Broch’s early, more atomistic, term for his later “earthly

absolute”) of the self and waiting to be arranged in the form of a compelling logical necessity that would be akin to Schiller’s conception of Beauty.

Sontag relates Cioran to John Cage in a way that one might oppose Broch’s and Kundera’s renditions of kitsch: “What [Cioran’s] essays offer is diagnosis and, if not outright therapy, at least a manual of spiritual good taste through which one might be helped to keep one’s life from being turned into an object, a thing. Cage’s universe of discourse--no less radical and spiritually ambitious than Cioran’s--refuses to admit these themes. / In contrast to Cioran’s unrelenting elitism, Cage envisages a totally democratic world of the spirit, a world of ‘natural activity’ in which ‘it is understood that everything is clean: there is no dirt’” (Sontag, “Thinking Against Oneself” 93). Sontag ends her essay on Cioran by contrasting him with another sensibility that returns us to the operative dialectical antinomies of the aesthetic sense, the moral and the epicene.

The difference between Cioran and Cage is like the difference between High Art and Camp taste (which is not to say Cage is anything like an example of Camp--he’s “too good”). On the one hand, one finds the serious task of transcending and rearticulating values by finding “the correct vantage point, the right place to stand in a treacherous world” (Sontag, “Thinking Against Oneself” 94). This is Cioran’s seriousness and melancholy. But on the other hand, one finds Cage’s world, wherein there is no *should* or *should not*; a sensibility, like that offered by Jack Smith’s *Flaming Creatures* (to be discussed later), that “disclaims ideas.” However, one is not necessarily better than the other. Sontag proposes the sensibilities of Cioran and Cage as complementary, each requiring the limitations of the other to operate dialectically for a fully aware consciousness. One cannot merely diagnose the ills of the world; one must also move into and enact the relief that removes their weight.

Sontag again connects this historical moment of European sensibility with the moment of Romantic subjectivity, wherein Novalis offered a definition of philosophy as “home-sickness; the wish to be everywhere at home.” Out of the Romantic spirit emerges the desire to transcend the limitations of the finite ego in a way no longer allied to a theological order. Cage, in his modernist variation on Romanticist logic, offers the solution that the mind also negate itself: “If the human mind can be everywhere at home, it must in the end give up its local ‘European’ pride and something else--that will seem strangely unfeeling and intellectually simplistic--must be allowed in. ‘All that is necessary,’ says Cage with his own devastating irony, ‘is an empty space of time and letting it act in its magnetic way’ (Sontag, “Thinking Against Oneself” 95). This “empty space of time” is Broch’s “earthly absolute” that serves as a point of relation between a particular consciousness and the manifold of historical and perceptual data with which it directs its interpretations of the past into the abyssal possibilities of the future.

In a song lyric imagining Hansel and Gretel as “alive and well” and “living in Berlin,” she as a “cocktail waitress” and he as a small bit player in a Fassbinder film, Laurie Anderson re-articulates Walter Benjamin’s concept of an “Angel of History,” developed by him with reference to Paul Klee’s *Angelus Novus*, in a way that nicely poeticizes the modernist anguish of Hegelian Spirit, positing the presuppositions of the past from a selectively magnetic “empty space of time”: “[Gretel] said, What is history? / And [Hansel] said, History is an angel / Being blown / Backwards / Into the future / He said: History is a pile of debris / And the angel wants to go back and fix things / To repair the things that have been broken / But there is a storm blowing from Paradise / And the storm keeps blowing the angel / Backwards / Into the future / And this storm, this storm / Is called / Progress.” Behind the angel, in the future, is an empty space of time

into which it attempts to pull along with it as much debris as it can save. And the Angel of History performs this work in constant turmoil.¹⁰

The Nature of Aesthetic Thinking

Broch's "empty space of time" finds expression also in the work of Roland Barthes, as exemplified by his late theoretical focus on the figure of "the neutral," or the thing that "baffles the paradigm." In *Camera Lucida* he called it the *punctum* in the photograph, and in an earlier essay on "The Photographic Message," he referred to a "photographic paradox" as a "co-existence of two messages, the one without a code (the photographic analogue), the other with a code (the 'art', or the treatment, or the 'writing', or the rhetoric, of the photograph); structurally, the paradox is clearly not the collusion of a denoted message and a connoted message (which is the--probably inevitable--status of all the forms of mass communication), it is that here the connoted (or coded) message develops on the basis of a message *without a code*. This structural paradox coincides with an ethical paradox: when one wants to be 'neutral', 'objective', one strives to copy reality meticulously, as though the analogical were a factor of resistance against the investment of values (such at least is the definition of aesthetic 'realism'); how then can the photograph be at once 'objective' and 'invested', natural and cultural? It is through an understanding of the mode of imbrication of denoted and connoted messages that it may one day be possible to reply to that question" (Barthes 19). This last sentence is Barthes's articulation of

¹⁰ An analogue to Benjamin's Angel of History, as paraphrased by Anderson, might be the figure of Los--along with Los's emanation, Enitharmon, and their offspring Orc--in William Blake's mythology of the Human Universe. In fact, Blake's entire artistic body of work may be the most extended attempt at Broch's later aesthetic ideal of *mythos* in an ever more mathematical sense; reduction of the Real to its most basic and eternal coordinates, present also in the cinematic collaborations of Béla Tarr, Agnes Hranitzky, and László Krasznahorkai. Lacanian algebra is another variation of the same, though perhaps less precise and ambitious than Blake's while being equally esoteric.

the Subject-Object distinction in its inextricability. Mind and matter cannot separate: everything is messages; everything is code.¹¹

In an essay on Barthes, Sontag made one of her major late articulations of the aesthetic sensibility, grounded in a description of Barthes as an exemplar of “the formalist temperament” inherited from modernism. For Sontag, Barthes’s “proud refusal to propose anything that does not bear the stamp of subjectivity,” and his insistence on “assertions that are no more than provisional,” offer a standard model of the artist-thinker against which she also holds herself up for judgment. This is also the old Nietzschean iconoclasm she admired in both Cioran and Godard, armed against system-based thinking: “Throughout his late writings Barthes repeatedly disavows the, as it were, vulgar roles of system-builder, authority, mentor, expert, in order to reserve for himself the privileges and freedoms of delectation: the exercise of taste for Barthes means, usually, to praise. What makes the role a choice one is his unstated commitment to finding something new and unfamiliar to praise (which requires having the right dissonance with established taste); or to praising a familiar work differently” (Sontag, “Writing Itself” 65-6). Sontag’s invocation of delectation echoes her ambivalence toward the pleasures of aestheticism apotheosized in the camp sensibility, but Barthes is one of those figures who’s “too good” to be camp; in him, the aesthete also manages to be a moralist, without moralizing. The ethical, like the aesthetic, *begins* in the eye of the beholder.

Barthes was a practitioner of Sontag’s ethically oriented *aesthetic sense*, which is properly aimed at keeping meaning from fixating into dogma. This means that, in thinking, eccentricity becomes a value; the distance an expression falls from established taste (Schiller’s Common Reason) is a source of its truth, so long as it is directed in a way that does not itself

¹¹ This is Barthes’s far more radical theorization of what Marshall McLuhan intended by “the medium is the message.”

become kitsch yet again (*i.e.* the Stalinist catastrophe of a revolution that only reinvigorates State violence). What pleased Barthes, Sontag writes, “was to show insipid and reactionary works to be quirky and implicitly subversive; to display in the most extravagant projects of the imagination an opposite extreme--in his essay on Sade, a sexual ideal that was really an exercise in delirious rationality; in his essay on Fourier, a rationalist ideal that was really an exercise in sensual delirium.” By this description, Barthes is involved in an ethically directed application of deconstructionist logic. She reads his emphasis on the notion of a “text,” an emphasis shared by Derrida, as a theoretical method, a way “to suspend conventional evaluations (the difference between major and minor literature), to subvert established classifications (the separation of genres, the distinctions among the arts)” (Sontag, “Writing Itself” 66). Here Sontag rearticulates, *in nuce* and almost 20 years later, the argument found in “One Culture and the New Sensibility.” An artist-thinker working in the formalist mode (and Sontag is one in addition to Barthes) follows the dictates of a faculty of taste that is not based in anything like a “self,” but in the relation of signs to each other and an ability to discriminate truth on the basis of value--the *value* an expression has in a particular or general cultural context.

In her essay on Benjamin, Sontag refers admiringly to his description of Karl Kraus as a mind standing “on the threshold of the Last Judgment,” and she claims that Benjamin is really describing himself. This is true, Sontag argues, because it is an expression of Benjamin’s ideal of the artist-thinker: “At the Last Judgment, the Last Intellectual--that Saturnine hero of modern culture, with his ruins, his defiant visions, his reveries, his unquenchable gloom, his downcast eyes--will explain that he took many ‘positions’ and defended the life of the mind to the end, as righteously and inhumanly as he could” (Sontag, “Under the Sign of Saturn” 133-4). Every interpretation, or refusal of interpretation, is a *position* one takes in the world. This is the ethical

responsibility of modern thought as it originates in Nietzsche, the first major exemplar of the artist-thinker in the mode Sontag outlines. Of course, in describing Benjamin, Sontag is also describing her own ideal for herself--meaning, the ideal against which her work and ideas should be judged. Four years later, in her essay on Barthes, she articulates the more explicitly aesthetic side of this ethical ideal of heretical thinking: "Though work of every form and worth qualifies for citizenship in the great democracy of 'texts,' the critic will tend to avoid those that everyone has handled, the meaning that everyone knows. The formalist turn in modern criticism--from its pristine phase, as in Shklovsky's idea of defamiliarizing, onward--dictates just this. It charges the critic with the task of discarding worn-out meanings for fresh ones. It is a mandate to scout for new meanings. *Etonne-moi*" (Sontag, "Writing Itself" 66).

This mode of criticism is decidedly influenced by the aesthetic principles associated with modernism, particularly its ideal of an "open-ended, polysemous literature," making critics inventors of meaning along with "creators of literature." No distinction any longer exists between "literature" and "thinking about literature." Here, one finds an echo of her earlier admiration of Godard, who spoke of giving up film criticism for film-making by claiming that the only way to do criticism of cinema is to make cinema (Sontag, "Godard" 151). A critic is not looking for meaning in a text but, just like the text's creator, attempting to articulate it from a set of given phenomenal data. One's articulations, the messages one creates or arranges, are the meaning one puts in the world, and therein lies the aesthetico-ethical identification of *art* and *thinking about art* in the figure of the artist-thinker.

Acting on this aesthetico-ethical conceptualization of thought requires recourse to the concept of taste. It is, in fact, a decision (one which Sontag takes as her own) "to recommit criticism (if it had ever left) to the dominion of taste." And this recommitment is the true ethical

commitment, in a process of constant refurbishment, and a mode of commitment far more open to possibility than the political version once espoused by Sartre and now a part of widespread cultural discourse (*i.e.* “wokeism,” both in the sense of how it is deplored *and* how it is embraced): “For it is, finally, the exercise of taste which identifies meanings that are familiar; a judgment of taste which discriminates against such meanings as too familiar; an ideology of taste which makes of the familiar something vulgar and facile. Barthes’s formalism at its most decisive, his ruling that the critic is called on to reconstitute not the ‘message’ of a work but only its ‘system’--its form, its structure--is perhaps best understood thus, as the liberating avoidance of the obvious, as an immense gesture of good taste” (Sontag, “Writing Itself” 67).

Barthes’s specific variation of the formalist temperament is hyperbolic, somewhat theatrical, making of thinking a purely aesthetic activity: “Barthes enlists ideas in a drama, often a sensual melodrama or a faintly Gothic one. He speaks of the quiver, thrill, or shudder of meaning, of meanings that themselves vibrate, gather, loosen, disperse, quicken, shine, fold, mutate, delay, slide, separate, that exert pressure, crack, rupture, fissure, are pulverized. Barthes offers something like a poetics of thinking, which identifies the meaning of subjects with the very mobility of meaning, with the kinetics of consciousness itself; and liberates the critic as artist” (Sontag, “Writing Itself” 68-9). The purpose of the artist-thinker--ever since figures like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Wittgenstein--is not to construct a system of thought, to articulate a formulaic mode of thinking (the pitfall, say, of deconstruction understood as a delineable method without aim or end) but to declare the ultimate “absurdity of systems” in all their forms.

The same aesthetic history applies as much to the task of the critic as that of the artist. Refusals of Law and Power in modern society are versions of this older refusal of systems, indeed are indebted to them, and the artist-thinkers (it could easily be thinker-artists) embody

these refusals by being “epicures of their own consciousness.” These refusals lead the faculty of taste to evolve “a distinctive modern stylistics [...], the prototypes of which go back at least to Sterne and the German Romantics--the invention of anti-linear forms of narration: in fiction, the destruction of the ‘story’; in nonfiction, the abandonment of linear argument.” The artist-thinker, in one of its modes, calls into question or abolishes “all of the conventional demarcations or separations of discourse, such as chapters, paragraphing, even punctuation, whatever is regarded as impeding formally the continuous production of (the writer’s) voice--the run-on model favored by writers of philosophical fictions such as Hermann Broch, Joyce, Stein, Beckett.” In its other mode, it multiplies “the ways in which discourse is segmented, to invent further ways of breaking it up. Joyce and Stein used this method, too; Viktor Shklovsky in his best books, from the 1920s, writes in one-sentence paragraphs. The multiple openings and closures produced by the start-and-stop method permit discourse to become as differentiated, as polyphonous, as possible. Its most common shape in expository discourse is that of short, one- or two-paragraph units separated by spaces. ‘Notes on ...’ is the usual literary title” (Sontag, *Writing Itself* 70-1). Again, Sontag is articulating the method of her own thinking, delineating the correct way to understand her writing without trying to systematize it.

The temperament of the writer is the only system that exists, leading to an unexpected ethical re-assertion of *auteurist* thinking in an essay on the man who announced the “death of the author.” The artist-function is the principle of articulation given to the material content of the work, and it is not really arguable that this cannot be done with intentions that can be communicated and experienced near to those intentions. However, the sense in which “author” becomes “brand” in consumerist culture marks the equally ethical value of refusing the old sense of individual achievement, as Sontag argues with reference to Artaud:

Being an ‘author’ has been unmasked as a role that, whether conformist or not, remains inescapably responsible to a given social order. Certainly not all pre-modern authors flattered the societies in which they lived. One of the author’s most ancient roles is to call the community to account for its hypocrisies and bad faith, as Juvenal in the *Satires* scored the follies of the Roman aristocracy, and Richardson in *Clarissa* denounced the bourgeois institution of property-marriage. But the range of alienation available to the pre-modern authors was still limited--whether they knew it or not--to castigating the values of one class or milieu on behalf of the values of another class or milieu. The modern authors are those who, seeking to escape this limitation, have joined in the grandiose task set forth by Nietzsche a century ago as the transvaluation of all values, and redefined by Antonin Artaud in the twentieth century as the ‘general devaluation of values.’ [...] The modern authors can be recognized by their effort to disestablish themselves, by their will not to be morally useful to the community, by their inclination to present themselves not as social critics but as seers, spiritual adventurers, and social pariahs (Sontag, “Approaching Artaud” 14-5).

The Distinct Modes of Using the Aesthetic Sense in its Opposition to Kitsch

The real modernist lesson, going all the way back to Kant (or even Cervantes, with Quixote as the archetype of modern thoughtlessness and the Second Book an early example of *auteurist* assertion)¹², is the function of contemplation in relation to the aesthetic sense. This is the sense of art understood as “high art” and transformed by modernism to allow all aspects of life to enter the divine aesthetic sphere, no matter how conventionally vulgar its content. But it is

¹² This reading of Quixote is given in Milan Kundera’s *Testaments Betrayed*.

not enough to say that an aesthetic object holds one's attention. More qualities are required of that object or action than its categorization as an artwork. The work must contain *processes* that respond to contemplation, processes that require contemplation in order to appear. (This was Duchamp's articulation of the primacy of the concept.) No ideal form of art exists, and never has, even when aesthetics as a modern branch of thought dedicated itself to expanding that form with a Goddess of Beauty--the aesthetic ideal of the "*categorical agreement with being*" in notions like harmony--that Broch and Kundera term kitsch. Genuine modernism is always directed firmly against all reduction to kitsch, against all universalization of sentiment and feeling.

Artworks are not ends in themselves, a fact forcefully articulated by the modernist repudiations of masterpieces. Artworks are incomplete, aimed at giving rise to more artworks, new perceptions, alterations of consciousness.¹³ They change the world only in the Heideggerian sense but can be counted on for nothing more. This is not a failing but a question of fact. Modernisms function aesthetically in such a way that, of every work, one must eventually be able to say one is done with it, so long as one's engagement with it has been adequate to its form. The historical chain of artworks is not so much a line of influence but of taking up again and again the same gesture, the same attitude of attention, as an entirely new manifestation of the same impulse, always with the same inchoate aim in mind (but with its particular goal the concrete work itself). Knowledge of the gesture, relation to the attitude, and therefore experience of the impulse all change with time, in each historical work, but each work is of itself an eternally self-same act. A work of art is always posed against the existing world, in the material,

¹³ Adorno's posthumous book, *Aesthetic Theory*, contains an argument of this kind and is one of the best accounts of modernism I know, deserving a far more central place in any context where aesthetics and ethics in the 21st century are discussed.

idealist, and Heideggerian senses. Distance and disinterestedness, as aspects of aesthetic experience, are intrinsic to artworks of all cultures and periods, because they are never identical to conventional-empirical reality and thereby always suggest its transformation or negation, and at the very least its otherness in relation to the work, a dialectic that only exists in the mind and is only perceivable by the aesthetic sense.

Understood as opposed to kitsch, “art” becomes the simple idea of true utterance in the face of *dogmatic insistence*, what Broch calls evil in the value system of art. And this is “high art” in the sense also described by Sontag as both the first and second of the three “great creative sensibilities” listed in “Notes on ‘Camp.’” First is the “ordinary” sense of “high culture” valued for “the seriousness and dignity of what it achieves. We value it because it succeeds--in being what it is and, presumably, in fulfilling the intention that lies behind it. We assume a proper, that is to say, straightforward relation between intention and performance. By such standards, we appraise *The Iliad*, Aristophanes’s plays, *The Art of the Fugue*, *Middlemarch*, the paintings of Rembrandt, Chartres, the poetry of Donne, *The Divine Comedy*, Beethoven’s quartets, and--among people--Socrates, Jesus, St. Francis, Napoleon, Savonarola. In short, the pantheon of high culture: truth, beauty, seriousness.” Additionally, as the second great creative sensibility, Sontag identifies “the kind of seriousness whose trademark is anguish, cruelty, derangement. Here we do accept a disparity between intention and result. I am speaking, obviously, of a style of personal existence as well as a style in art; but the examples had best come from art. Think of Bosch, Sade, Rimbaud, Jarry, Kafka, Artaud, think of most of the important works of art of the 20th century, that is, art whose goal is not that of creating harmonies but of overstraining the medium and introducing more and more violent, and unresolvable, subject-matter. [...] Something is good not because it is achieved, but because another kind of truth about the human situation, another

experience of what it is to be human--in short, another valid sensibility--is being revealed.”

Finally, “third among the great creative sensibilities is Camp: the sensibility of failed seriousness, of the theatricalization of experience. Camp refuses both the harmonies of traditional seriousness, and the risks of fully identifying with extreme states of feeling” (Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp’” 269-70).

In the sections to follow, my argument will attempt to occupy a space traversing all three of these sensibilities as three necessary modes in the proper functioning of “the aesthetic sense.” And ultimately, they are all aimed against kitsch understood as evil in the precise sense invoked by Broch early in his novel *The Death of Virgil* (1945). Broch relates that, as the naval caravan of Caesar approached the shores of Brundisium, “the brooding mass-beast” of people “for whom Caesar had lived, for whom the empire had been established” gathered and “awaited to release its howl of joy and now it broke loose, without pause, without end, victorious, violent, unbridled, fear-inspiring, magnificent, fawning, the mass worshipping itself in the person of the One” (Broch 22). Here, one can unmistakably see Sontag’s later judgment of the aesthetics of fascism (which are also the aesthetics of kitsch): “Like Nietzsche and Wagner, Hitler regarded leadership as sexual mastery of the ‘feminine’ masses, as rape. (The expression of the crowds in *Triumph of the Will* is one of ecstasy; the leader makes the crowd come)” (Sontag, “Fascinating Fascism” 102). This image of the masses submitting to the forceful erotic power of the Leader is the basic logic of Evil that is harnessed in kitsch:

Evil, a tide of evil, an immense wave of unspeakable, inexpressible, incomprehensible evil seethed in the reservoir of the plaza; fifty thousand, a hundred thousand mouths yelled the evil out of themselves, yelled it to one another without hearing it, without knowing it was evil, nevertheless willing to stifle it and outshout it in the infernal

bellowing. [...] for this seething, befuddled, unrecognized evil was beyond the reach of every earthly force however great, beyond reach, perhaps, of the gods themselves, and no human outcry sufficed to overwhelm it except, it may be, that small voice of the soul, called song, which while it makes known the evil, announces also the awakening of salvation, knowledge-aware, knowledge-fraught, knowledge-persuading, the provenance of every true song (Broch, *The Death of Virgil* 22-3).

This is the sense in which Broch defines genuine art, which opposes the instant identifiability and narcissistic logic of kitsch: “the true work of art [...] dazzles you until it blinds you and then gives you back your sight” (Broch, “Notes on the Problem of Kitsch” 67).

PART II: WORLDS and AESTHETIC SENSIBILITY

Sensibility as the Embodied or Concretized Aesthetic of a World

Aesthetic sensibility refers to the parameters of a Heideggerian world. As Sontag understood it, articulated as a prologue to her “notes” on Camp in 1964, sensibility encompasses a certain kind of totality of place, time, or personality:

Though I am speaking of sensibility only--and about a sensibility that, among other things, converts the serious into the frivolous--these are grave matters. Most people think of sensibility or taste as the realm of purely subjective preferences, those mysterious attractions, mainly sensual, that have not been brought under the sovereignty of reason. They *allow* that considerations of taste play a part in their reactions to people and to works of art. But this attitude is naïve. And even worse. To patronize the faculty of taste is to patronize oneself. For taste governs every free--as opposed to rote--human response. Nothing is more decisive. There is taste in people, visual taste, taste in emotion--and there is taste in acts, taste in morality. Intelligence, as well, is really a kind of taste: taste in ideas (Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp’” 259).

This is an essentially Kantian conception, and the Kantian conception of taste is employed by Sontag as a tool for preventing thought’s restriction to the limited, the presentist, the purely subjective uses of mind. As Michel Foucault indicated concerning Kant’s understanding of Enlightenment, a cultivated sensibility precisely *lacks* identity with the reigning ideology of its age. In the times before Kant, the “present” might be understood as “belonging to a certain era of the world,” or “an attempt to decipher in [the present] the heralding of signs of a forthcoming event,” or as “a point of transition toward the dawning of a new world.” But Kant’s intervention

“defines *Aufklärung* [Enlightenment] in an almost entirely negative way, as an *Ausgang*, an ‘exit,’ a ‘way out.’[...] He is not seeking to understand the present on the basis of a totality or of a future achievement. He is looking for a difference: What difference does today introduce with respect to yesterday? [...] Thus Enlightenment must be considered both as a process in which men participate collectively and as an act of courage to be accomplished personally” (Foucault 33-5). It is in this sense that Kant’s philosophy, and Enlightenment as a project, prefigures “modernism” as a project. Indeed, the two are one and the same, most recently incarnated in its true dogmatic form in the equally problematic or ambivalent notion of “wokeism” in 21st century culture. But, to this one need only respond like André Gide: Trust those who seek the truth, but doubt those who claim to have found it. Enlightenment, modernity, and the awakening of consciousness are the perennial realities of the life of the mind, collectively and individually. The term “woke,” in its cultural effectiveness (whether as deplored or celebrated), is an embodiment of the false version of the Hegelian “end of History” that most cultivated minds purportedly reject so profoundly.

In Broch’s terminology, Sontag’s “sensibility” is relatively equal to the collected *mythos* of an historical period that necessarily becomes aesthetic retroactively due to the nature of time. All the elements of reality from a given period become “conventional vocables, by which the ‘content’ of the piece of art is transmitted to the spectator, the reader, the listener (procuring for him at the same time the naive pleasure of recognizing such contents) [as] the basic characterization of all period styles, style being the fixing of a set of conventions for a certain epoch.” Even an arrangement of musical notes, absent “content” as traditionally conceived (though of course the sounds of the notes *are* the content), follows “the same process of converting syntactical relations into a conventional vocabulary.” The new emerges from a point

outside of an epoch, from a point that can see (in Hegelian self-consciousness) “the existing vocabulary” from “a point beyond it” that allows for its dissolution in the “craftsmanship” of the artist (Broch, “The Style of the Mythical Age” 11-12). Eventually, Broch’s term for this exterior point is the “earthly absolute,” which is simply the void of consciousness itself as the perennial field on which the *mythos* of reality casts its Platonic shadows. Art offers one historical model for offering access to the aesthetic dimensions of enlightenment, modernity, and the awakening or broadening of one’s consciousness. But the aesthetic sense can be cultivated in many ways, and one cannot reduce its function for consciousness to the historical category of “art” in the sense that this idea encapsulates a limited range of materials and actions.

Juliette Binoche’s Face as an Empty Space of Time

In an important sense, the arguments of this dissertation rest in an attempt to articulate the ambiguities of a single plastic moment in Abbas Kiarostami’s 2010 film *Certified Copy*, a close-up of Juliette Binoche at the precise moment when the film’s narrative coordinates spontaneously become something other than they were previously taken to be; the plot changes, or disappears, in the middle of a static image, held in close-up on a single face. And indeed, all narrative coordinates persist for the rest of the film in being *only* this “something other,” emptied of delineable narrative certainty, without concretizing again into anything at all. Generally, Kiarostami’s film is an aesthetic investigation of this “something other” that makes even tautology itself impossible. This impossibility is expressed in the paradox of the film’s title, *Certified Copy*, which is also the primary subject of conversation for the protagonists in the first half of the film. Eventually, though, after the turning point in the plot mentioned above, the characters themselves become resonant and mysterious examples of the themes they’ve been

discussing--both for themselves and for the viewer. ("Everything is a copy of a copy of a copy," as the saying goes in *Fight Club*, a narrative addressing many of the same themes as *Certified Copy* but in their cynical-apocalyptic mode.)

In the first section Binoche, as "Elle" in the film's screenplay, brings James (a visiting scholar of art and reproductions of art) to see a painting fragment, "the famous Musa Polimnia," that provides "the exact illustration" of the ideas in his new book (also titled *Certified Copy*), as it is an "original" or "*real*" copy of a well-known work. For many centuries, experts believed this painting to be an original, and only sometime in the 20th century did they discover its status as a copy. Binoche and James listen while a museum guide explains the painting's history to some tourists and informs them of the museum's decision to restore the painting as if it *weren't* a copy, because it's "as beautiful" as the original, despite being the result of a commissioned forgery intended to claim talent and prestige for Tuscany.

James appears disinterested, and the two exit the museum. It's just one more example among many, he says. Binoche is frustrated by his lack of interest: "at least you could have said, 'I wish I'd seen this beautiful painting before I closed my book.'" However, he persists in his lack of excitement, explaining it in part as a disappointment in the fact that the museum finds it necessary to disclose the location of the "original" and emphasize the copy *as* copy, no matter how beautiful. Part of the intention of his book is not just to claim value for copies, but to argue against distinguishing between the two at all. Ultimately, James wishes to denigrate the notions of authenticity and originality altogether, insofar as they are deemed ontic facts, discoverable as graspable material content. It is a metaphysical argument, and they leave to discuss it further

over coffee. As they drive, his first example draws on an earlier conversation regarding Binoche's family: her sister's husband constitutes an "original."

Binoche bought her sister, Marie, a copy of James's book because the title reminds her of Marie's taste for fake jewelry ("it's less hassle") and her judgment that "a good copy is better than the original." When James agrees about the jewelry, Binoche qualifies this agreement by contrasting the simplicity of Marie to James's more complicated views on the subject: "she doesn't try and convince anyone," while James is "determined to try and prove the improvable." Somewhat accepting this distinction, James says he wrote the book to convince himself of his own idea, whereas Marie seems to believe it "simply and naturally," and he might envy that. When asked why he can't just be like her, James replies that "there's nothing very simple about being simple." What defines this distinction is an ability to embody one's own conceptions of things versus an anxiety concerning those same conceptions and their objective validity. Marie's philosophy of life, according to Binoche, is that only idiots work hard.

Binoche then describes Marie's husband as "the simplest man on earth" who stutters. When he says his wife's name, he stammers it: "Ma-Ma-Ma-Marie." For Marie, the stammered version is her true name, and James agrees with Binoche that in his articulation she must hear a love song. Stemming from this conversation, James decides to add a note to the signature in Marie's copy of his book, and the note exasperates Binoche. He suggests that perhaps their discussion is stopping them from enjoying the view, and at this point the image cuts from the two speaking (previously alternating between a two-shot through the car's reflecting windshield and individual close-ups, following a shot-reverse-shot pattern, inside the car) to their view of the Italian countryside. This cut adds a layer to their discussion by emphasizing and demonstrating

the notion of attention. At different moments in the conversation, these views directed outside of the car, as the two voices continue from their sources offscreen, invoke the very basic limitations on reality represented abstractly by a general notion of the argument, the disagreement, the secluded dispute of a conversation aiming--comically and tragically--at finality. The view outside the car is another context for the argument: the material reality being replaced by the abstractions of a conversation.

As a whole, this conversation has perhaps allowed the audience to pick sides; most will sympathize more with one or the other of the characters' positions, for any number of reasons or instinctual biases. When James attempts to add "one more" point to end the discussion, he expresses a platitude about how the purpose of (human) life is to have pleasure and that, if someone has found a way to be happy (Marie, for instance), they shouldn't be judged harshly for it. Of course, the validity or soundness of this view depends on what constitutes pleasure for any individual. What if someone finds pleasure in, say, sadistic violence? A statement like this about happiness is foolish for being unreflectively nihilistic in its implications and, because it ignores the potential negativity or violence of those implications (*i.e.* denying the "shit," as Kundera's most basic formulation of kitsch aesthetics), is its own species of kitsch. But it can also indicate the genuine *right* of pleasure, which sadistic violence necessarily negates or undoes and therefore contradicts the universal purposiveness of pleasure, if understood as a principle of the rights of *being*. (This difference defines the struggle, in the plot as well as thematically, between *The Marbles* and *Divine* in John Waters's *Pink Flamingos*, to be discussed fully in a later chapter.)

For James, the purpose of this view is to champion the subjective experience of objects and events. Therein lies his disparagement of the original/copy distinction: authenticity, insofar

as it refers to a *value*, is a quality of experience. To give his point a punchline, he tells Binoche his favorite joke. A man on a desert island finds a genie in a lamp who will grant him three wishes. For his first wish, he asks for an ice-cold bottle of Coca-Cola. When the genie asks for his second and third wishes, the man says—and here Binoche interrupts to supply James his own punchline—he wants two more bottles of Coca-Cola. The point, James insists, is not the joke but the moral (of which the joke, perhaps, is only a copy). No, Binoche counters: the point is the laugh, not the moral. For James, the moral is in the representation of a man so simple that he's satisfied with a bottle of Coca-Cola (a presumably exemplary attitude). Yet the moral could easily be that this man is so foolish that he fails to understand the logic of the wishes and confuses desire with impulse. Or it's a joke mocking the platitudinal imperative to live in the moment. All three possibilities (and there could be more) supply the potential laugh.

Binoche says it's a bad joke, but it reminds her of Jasper Johns's Coca-Cola, referencing an untitled work by Johns in which a large Coca-Cola label features prominently. Alright, says James: "Andy Warhol's Coca-Cola" (which could reference at least three different works by Warhol). His conclusion for this tangent is that it's possible to take an "ordinary object" and change its meaning by changing its context. What's important is not the object so much as the subjective perception of it. These three Coca-Colas are not representations of the same thing (the joke's, Johns's, Warhol's), because by changing the perception of an object they have changed the object. In the Johns work, the presence of Coca-Cola is not that of an object to either like or dislike (in the sense of enjoyment, as in the joke, or of approval), but the idea of an object's recognizability and its unique presence in the perceptible world. Warhol's formal approach to the object emphasizes its proliferated presence, and on top of recognizability draws attention to the

notion of mass reproducibility and banalized iconicity. In this series of examples, the notion of an “original” doesn’t really make sense outside of the *meaning* present for the object in each instance. This is the point at which the sentiment that “I could have done that” (with reference to artists like Warhol or Johns, as a self-satisfied expression of being unimpressed) imposes a narrow restriction on the function of art and re-hashes Romantic notions of the artist’s inimitable and irreplaceable genius. Such a judgment is more appropriate for a technically sophisticated and traditionally imitative landscape painter than it is for a Warhol or a Johns but, because the landscape artist “shows their work” in a more palpably appreciable way, the common judgment favors the former in bestowing the label of talent.

All of this hearkens back to Marcel Duchamp, the readymades, the notion of the concept: the artist creates meaning by changing context. Earlier, Binoche had rejected this sarcastically: “If your name is Jasper Johns, you can do that.” Because art is also the *institution* of art, and one’s action or work or deed must first be *recognized* by that institution (at least in this view). But no, James replies, this is not an insight about the art market. It’s an insight about perception, about the aesthetic sense. Marie, James tells Binoche, can do that just as well: “The way that she looks at her husband changes his value.” Then, indicating outside the car, as the image again cuts from an interior close-up of Binoche to a traveling shot looking out through the car’s windshield, James continues: “And look at these cypresses--look. They’re beautiful. They’re--they’re individual. I mean, you never see two cypresses looking the same. They’re old. Someone once told me there was one somewhere a thousand years old. Originality, beauty, age, functionality--definition of a work of art, really. Except that they’re not in a gallery. They’re out in a field, so nobody takes enough notice of them.” Our common sense attitude about art, James implies,

unnecessarily differs from our attitudes of appreciation in all other realms of life where the judgment of taste is equally operative. Yes, the beauty of a work of art is its uniqueness (what Benjamin called its aura, spiritualizing the matter in a theological direction¹⁴); or better, it is the minimal difference of uniqueness contained in its articulation of a *sameness*. (This principle is the degree to which the psychoanalytic uncanny pertains to all properly aesthetic experience, in the same sense as Shklovsky's defamiliarization. One has not engaged the aesthetic sense significantly until one feels at least a slight pang of uncanny anxiety or uncanny destabilization. This will be discussed more below.)

As the conversation continues, amidst interruptions, the characters and their surroundings increasingly become further illustrations of these philosophical ideas about art, just like the cypresses in James's example. Next, Binoche takes James to see another local cultural hotspot. In the jargon of social media, it's an Instagrammable location for couples "coming to get married because they think it's going to bring them luck." Inside an old building is a "golden tree" in front of which couples promise to be "faithful forever." All the couples who make the pilgrimage to this quasi-sacred site aim to participate in a Universal Ideal, against which they will inevitably measure the reality of their relationship. The very real goal is to *become* a copy, in a properly Platonic sense of participation in an Idea. This is the degree to which the golden tree functions as a basic form of kitsch, as the construction of the ideal against which reality always appears an imperfect approximation.

¹⁴ In a journal entry, Sontag claims Benjamin "is neither a literary critic nor philosopher but an atheist theologian practicing his hermeneutical skills on culture" (Sontag, *As Consciousness is Harnessed to Flesh* 412).

James asks if Binoche was married here, but she doesn't answer because a phone call--some trouble with her son--interrupts their conversation. (Her status must be both understood and unconfirmed in order for the plot "twist" to function later.) As they walk past all of the couples posing for their ideal wedding image, Binoche remarks that, "if they only knew what a hard time they're going to get from their children, they wouldn't have those stupid smiles on their faces on their wedding day." In other words, the reality is other than ideal. She proceeds to complain about dealing with the state of mind of children, all totally unaware of time, and the responsibility that falls on the parent. This frustration is prompted by the phone call and the concrete example of her own child, who continually fails to understand reality and consequences.

But James defends the innocence of the child, the child's openness and the child's ability to live in the moment. He says there's a contradiction between the way we scold the child for their naivety and the praise we give to philosophers for similar insights. For instance, when Binoche found her son outside in only a t-shirt, standing in the rain, she told him: "hey, get in, you're going to get soaked." Her son replied: "so what?" So she says: "no, come on, you're going to get a cold." Again: "so what?" Furious, she raises the stakes: "You'll die!" Then her son replies consistently in a manner that exasperates Binoche still: "I'll die? So what?"

Of course, James adds, the child is right: acceptance of death is essential to an engaged approach to life, as the philosophers and artists are so fond of saying. The child and the philosopher expound the same awareness, but we call the one naivety and the other wisdom. And ultimately, a failure to understand either results from a refusal to see their sameness; that the philosopher--if wise--is only the child backing up its instinctual knowledge with more learned vocabulary, denser historical knowledge, and broader experience. The wiser the philosopher, the

less they have abandoned their childhood. But, Binoche replies in frustration, “all of this is good for books, but it doesn’t ring with the reality. When you’re alone, and you’re dealing with it, it’s fucking hard. It’s different, I’m sorry.” Reality and thought are separated, theory and praxis non-identical; the perennial riddle of the Lacanian *passage à l’acte*, wherein action and meaning coincide. In other words: what would that *really* look like, to *really* understand the aged philosopher as a child?

This brings them to the aforementioned “Musa Polimnia,” and James’s objection to its being labeled a copy, as though everything—even the *Mona Lisa*, understood as representing a real woman—isn’t always a copy in some respect; and as though being a copy undermines beauty, originality, or authenticity. Binoche asks the key question: “So you mean there’s no originals at all, right?” But no, “there are plenty of originals,” James replies, such as Marie’s husband. This, just like the previous conversation in the car, exasperates Binoche, so she changes the subject.

She’d like to hear more about James’s speech that she missed a significant part of earlier, in the first scene of the film. Something he’d said about being in Florence grabbed her, but she’s forgotten what she wanted to ask. The image cuts back and forth between close-ups of the two characters, sitting across from each other, frontally facing the camera almost directly, though looking just past it rather than toward it. The framing constructs a feeling of direct address, a breaking of the fourth wall, which remains on the verge of happening, like a tease, throughout the scene. It’s like an Ozu-style framing, though somehow more insistent, as though to emphasize each character in its unique position in the dialogue; not a shot-reverse-shot pattern representing an *interaction* (though it is also that), but two shots--*separate*--in conversation;

emphasized in their difference rather than in the mode of a sameness intended to elide the sensation of cutting back and forth. It's continuity editing, in the classical sense, but in a way that subtly undermines the normative style of such continuity. It's the same as continuity editing, but unique.

Then a quiet, calm solemnity begins to pervade the scene, or pervades it *all of a sudden*. Just as suddenly, Binoche remembers what she'd wanted to ask. She'd like to hear more about how he described receiving the inspiration for his book when he was in Florence. He'd been watching a simple conversation between a mother and her son but, he says, "it was interesting." Something about it made it more than *just* a "conversation between a mother and her son;" unique in its appearance, somehow, while remaining in that conventional form. "They were in the piazza by the David statue, and the mother was telling the son something about it." Binoche wonders what the mother was saying, but James couldn't hear, so she then asks him what was so special about them. He says the idea for the book came from that conversation that he couldn't really hear, but his curiosity about *this particular* pair came from something else. So rather than hear about the idea for the book, Binoche pushes for "why [James] found this mother and son so intriguing." In other words, what was the uniqueness of their sameness?

At this point, they're interrupted, and a cut shows them reframed at the café table from the side, from the view of the barista who announces their coffee is ready. James gets up, grabs their drinks, and the former visual pattern resumes, but James does not sit down again. (This brief cut to a new view importantly establishes, though does not insist upon, the perspective of the barista that will shift the narrative in the second part of the scene.) As James elaborates, it wasn't the first time he'd seen the mother-son pair. He'd seen them often before. While staying

at a hotel, every morning when getting out of the shower, he'd see the same woman opposite his window. Every time he saw her, she'd do the same thing: reach the corner of the street, then turn around, drawing James's attention to the little boy, about eight, following behind her at a distance. He says: "And when she'd seen him, she'd turn and walk on. She always had her arms crossed, just like you." His comment, comparing the woman to Binoche, is already mysterious in its own right, as in the previous shot Binoche appears to be reacting rather intensely to the story even before it's really underway. James continues: "And when she'd get to the next corner, she would stop again. Again she'd turn, and she'd look and check that he was still following her." At this point, James is standing above Binoche, so the shot-reverse-shot pattern emphasizes her watching him, more distanced in relationship than before the interruption. She is now a spectator more than an interlocutor, though she is also both.

Binoche watches James tell a story about watching two people, and they (James and Binoche) themselves are being watched (unbeknownst to us yet, exactly) by the barista. Each of these views is a "copy" of what's happening in the scene. Binoche listens attentively to James tell a story. James recollects the story of himself watching a mother and son. And a barista watches Binoche listen to James tell the story. But most importantly, Binoche's facial expression is increasingly distressed; tears slowly well up in her eyes. What fascinated James, he says, is that they never walked together: "the mother was always 50 yards in front, and she'd never wait. And the boy would just stroll along at his own speed and never make any attempt to catch up." Then he saw them again next to the David statue, which is the interaction that sparked the idea for the book and was "the first time he ever saw them together."

Binoche is pensive, quiet, but intense in her gaze. “Sounds quite familiar,” she says, and a single tear falls down her cheek. Everything changes in this moment. Indeed, a very perceptive spectator (though highly unlikely on a first-time viewing) will recall that we’ve seen Binoche and her son act out a version of this in an early scene. And so we are predisposed, even if unconsciously, to equate Binoche with the woman in James’s story, as she appears to do as well. But something far more strange occurs, because it becomes more than an analogy. Binoche really *is* the woman. She takes the narrative into her person in this shot. The story imbues the “material content” of her face. The image holds on her close-up for a moment, then cuts to James, who’s suddenly confused at her demeanor (as might be the viewer). He apologizes, but she insists he go on describing. He asks if she knew them, and she responds with what seems either a *non sequitur* or a confirmation that she is *in fact* the mother of the pair: “I wasn’t well in those days.”

“Go on with your story,” she then says. So he does. The statue of David that James watched the mother and son discuss is a copy, James informs Binoche, but the mother hadn’t told the boy that information. Suddenly treating Binoche as though she’s more knowledgeable, he asks her if he’s right about that. But Binoche disinterestedly fiddles with her coffee cup, refusing to answer. He continues: “The boy was looking up at the statue as though it was a genuine, original, authentic work of art.” Suddenly, a phone call interrupts them and James leaves to take it. And at this point the barista, only implicitly present before via offscreen voice, interjects again to comment on James’s coffee getting cold. Binoche replies: “that’s how he is.” And then the barista reveals the function of her anonymous perspective included before, as she says: “He’s a good husband, though.” She has (mis)interpreted them, which functions as a formal culmination of the preceding discussions between Binoche and James. What does it mean to say that it’s all in

the eye of the beholder? Kiarostami literalizes this by having Binoche and James act as though the woman is correct for the rest of the film, instantaneously becoming a bickering married couple. A copy of a copy of a copy.

This switch in the narrative occurs in the moment that Binoche cries a single tear in response to James's story, when she fully *becomes* the character instantaneously. It is as though Kiarostami slows down the film (though he doesn't do this literally) and shows the process whereby an image (or a person, a body, some segment of "material content") acquires meaning, by keeping the performance in a liminal space of interpretability. What allows for this liminality is the archetype--the mother and the son--into which her figure necessarily falls. What occurs in the moment of the tear is a pure narrative void. It is Juliette Binoche, the actress, who cries and to whom we respond, as much as to her (importantly unnamed) character in the film, and as much as to her identification with the mother in James's story. It is an effective visual union of the Universal and the Particular, with all the abstractness of the former and all the concreteness of the latter. It is here that one can speak of access to an aesthetic state. This access is like a flash of total ambiguity; a momentary experience of total identification of subject and substance; total tautological equivalence. It is, as we shall see, what Broch terms the "earthly absolute" and what Walter Benjamin terms "material content." Binoche *is* herself, her character, the other mother. It *is* all a matter of perception, but it is also *really* there. And few know this better than the *talented* famous movie actor, like "La Binoche," who makes of their material content the filter of so many different worlds.

Ethical Versus Kitsch Functions of Heideggerian Worlds (The Work vs. The Brand)

One of the most prominent figures to articulate the sense of “world” discussed here is Martin Heidegger, whose phenomenological and existential philosophy attempts to qualify the correspondence theory of truth. According to this qualification, meaning is always situated in some pre-existing matrix of sense, and this matrix is a spontaneous subjective product: “Being able to know that [a given] claim is true must obviously presuppose some sort of access to what is claimed that is prior to and informs, confirms, the claim itself” (Pippin 104). Robert Pippin refers to this pre-existing matrix as the world that is “unconcealed,” according to Heideggerian jargon, and this unconcealment is otherwise understood as Heidegger’s interpretation of the Greek word for “truth” that makes it an action rather than a denotative description (i.e. *truthing*). Most crucially, Pippin points out that this action-based understanding of “truth” is essential to how Heidegger understands the function of art for human consciousness.

The revelation of a world in Heidegger’s philosophy follows from the spontaneous awareness of the meaningful context(s) that our perceptions of reality carry for us: “Such an unconcealing occurs within what Heidegger often refers to as the ‘horizon’ of possible sense or meaning, the human world into which any subject is always already ‘thrown’ (*geworfen*). This world should not be understood on the analogy of linguistic rules or Kantian categories or a conceptual scheme as necessary conditions. For Heidegger, any such world, on which the determinate unconcealing of any being depends and somehow brings into view, is a practical world of significance, a way in which things can be said *to matter* and are intelligible just in their

matter in the way they do” (Pippin 104). Thus a “world” is the source of a statement’s truth content, the context of sense in which it functions.

While Pippin is probably correct that this should not be understood *necessarily* in relation to “linguistic rules,” it is nevertheless a statement that concerns meaning-making in language as well as in non-linguistic signs, and so it is certainly akin to, if not equal to, a Wittgensteinian kind of language game.¹⁵ Indeed this attitude, treating the “world” as a game, became a major theme of much modernist art. James Joyce’s collage-like methods of writing for decipherment and William Faulkner’s formal differentiations of literary subjectivity, to be inhabited sequentially and brought to simultaneous awareness in the mind of the reader, are just two prominent examples in very distinct stylistic modes. Faulkner and Joyce participate, to this extent, in the more general trend of “modernist” aesthetics to privilege the *concept* of the work, as a form that directly engages the mind and only fully completes itself in the reflective requirements of relating the parts of an ultimately arbitrary whole--arbitrary, that is, from a cosmic perspective. Marcel Duchamp is one of the great exemplars of this, his ready-mades being virtually all “concept” and no “art” in the pre-modernist sense.¹⁶

But this notion of the “world,” as a game of concealment and unconcealment, becomes merely a method of branding as well. A useful if abstract contemporary example here, indebted to the aesthetic experiments of modernism as much as traditional bourgeois and academic art, is

¹⁵ This is the sense of the language game developed in Wittgenstein’s later thought, primarily in *Philosophical Investigations*.

¹⁶ Pippin’s writing here makes extensive use of other theoretical grappleings with modernisms and their philosophical, ethical, and aesthetic premises that also inform this particular reading and use of Heidegger, as well as my later understanding of modern theatricality: TJ Clark’s *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes From a History of Modernism* and Michael Fried’s *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot, Courbet’s Realism, and Manet’s Modernism*. Clark traces various directions taken by the politico-aesthetic aspect of modernism, and Fried asserts a sense of “anti-theatricality” that is akin to how I understand the sense of operating in opposition to kitsch. Georges Bataille’s book *Manet* is a precursor to Fried’s and an important contribution to the history of understanding the artist as an exemplary transgressor of aesthetic understanding, as taken up by Sontag.

the notion of a fictional “Universe” imagined with a certain consistency. For instance, in the Marvel Cinematic Universe as exemplified (for no particular merit amongst the group) in *Thor: Love and Thunder* (2022), Thor’s powers are transferable via his hammer to Jane, giving her the powers of a god. In order to accept this possibility, one must buy into the larger franchise’s premise of the “multiverse” with its logics of crossover, simultaneity, and continuity across spatio-temporal distances. But that is still relatively conventional. An example of what’s *new* in this type of franchise is how the narrative situates the appearance of past Peter Parkers (played by the same actors, Tobey McGuire and Andrew Garfield, from previous attempts to reinvigorate the profitability of the Marvel brand) crossing through the boundaries of the multiverse in *Spider-Man: No Way Home* (2021).¹⁷ The “world” of a fictional Universe is the minimally sufficient requirement for accepting the logic of such a fact (what people once called the “suspension of disbelief” for the spectator/reader/listener of a story). Therefore, this element of spontaneous context has a certain quality of “truth” or naturalness or *matter-of-factness* for consciousness. Ultimately, branding in the mode of the Marvel Cinematic Universe conflates Heideggerian “worlding” with Romantic notions of authorship engaged by committees over corporate holdings.

The “truth” of a fictional universe is an experience of sense that immediately sets itself against the backdrop of what Heidegger calls “earth,” meaning the empty (of symbolic meaning) mechanical-organic processes and existences of earth-matter (what Benjamin, to be discussed later, calls its material content, and what Barthes calls the “message without a code” embodied in

¹⁷ An entirely different style of this “crossover” of worlds is the appearance of Franco Nero, the original actor playing Django in the movies made in Italy by Sergio Corbucci, in Quentin Tarantino’s homage to that franchise, *Django Unchained*. In this variation, it is called an “easter egg,” because the reference is not part of the plot. This kind of “allusion” is also conventional, but its use ties it more to a history of modernism (such as in the cinephilic style of Godard) than traditional illusionistic fiction. Tarantino would have made an entirely different film if Nero’s character announced himself as the previous Django, incorporating the “fiction” self-consciously into the diegesis.

the photograph). This spontaneity is also akin to that shifting of sense in what Freud terms the “familiar” in the context of “the uncanny.” Indeed, Freud’s psychoanalytic conceptualization of “the uncanny” is one of the contexts in which to read the following passage from *Being and Time*:

State-of-mind is *one* of the existential structures in which the Being of the ‘there’ maintains itself. Equiprimordial with it in constituting this Being is *understanding*. A state-of-mind always has its understanding, even if it merely keeps it suppressed. Understanding always has its mood. If we Interpret understanding as a fundamental *existentiale*, this indicates that this phenomenon is conceived as a basic mode of Dasein’s *Being*. On the other hand, ‘understanding’ in the sense of *one* possible kind of cognizing among others (as distinguished, for instance, from ‘explaining’), must, like explaining, be Interpreted as an existential derivative of that primary understanding which is one of the constituents of the Being of the ‘there’ in general (Heidegger 182).

Heidegger’s use of “there” in this passage expresses the spontaneity with which a subject perceives and inhabits a “world” of sense, and an “understanding” of the “there” is an aesthetic state in which one finds oneself. Indeed, the connection between this conception of “understanding” and the Freudian “das Unheimliche” (or “the uncanny”) concerns the *aesthetic* aspects of both notions. And the difficulties in defining “the uncanny,” for instance, are the same as the difficulties in defining a notion like “kitsch.” They rely on similar logics for functioning as ideas, because they are aesthetic ideas and not actual things in the world. Aesthetic ideas such as these allow access to what Heidegger means by “state-of-mind,” or what Sontag terms sensibility. And uncanniness is one of the terms for crossing the boundaries of a sensibility or a state-of-mind.

First, the basic Freudian idea: “[t]he uncanny’ is Freud’s term for a subject’s experience of the familiar when, having been repressed into the unconscious because of the discomfort it induces for the subject, it returns to consciousness as defamiliarized or estranged, along with anxiety (conscious or not). The discomfort of this anxiety is the echo of the unpleasantness at the root of the original repression” (Pepper 181). The uncanny is thus a mode of abstraction, separated from an original experience (the familiar) and re-encountered somewhere unexpected (its “defamiliarized or estranged” form) that nonetheless reproduces the same anxiety disconnected from its prior context. To experience uncanniness means to experience the quasi-tautological equivalence of two constellations of “earth” or material content. Freud imagines this as “the unconscious” imposing a kind of superimposition from a past experience onto a present phenomenon. In this process, the “world” that one has repressed, because of the discomfort it initially caused, reappears and reasserts itself--*unconceals* itself--within the coordinates of another “world,” the one from which the repressed experience has been banished but nonetheless subsists and persists in the unconscious mind.

In a simplistic way, the reappearance of Andrew Garfield and Toby Maguire as old incarnations of Peter Parker in *Spider-Man: No Way Home*, along with Tom Holland’s most recent incarnation, is a mode of narratively harnessing this logic of the uncanny. And indeed, it even harnesses the sense of anxiety expressed in Freud’s term, because the plot revolves around the apocalyptic consequences that follow from crossing the boundaries between worlds, allowing different “universes” to co-exist in the same dimension. Narrative resolution means re-separating the different incarnations of the brand into their separate “universes,” which is like allegorizing the strategy of re-branding into the plot of the film. A brand must always deal with the past of its

familiarizations if it wants to remain “relevant,” or if it wants to pass off a *re*-branding (such as the effective transubstantiation of an aged brand, a tired brand, or a problematic brand).

Each new incarnation of a brand must both negate and sublimate, in proper Hegelian fashion, the previous incarnations. In fandoms, the sense of continuity within a fictional universe is called the “canon,” and breaks with the canon are furiously debated between fans. These debates repeat and mimic the old modernist debates against the art of the past, only now the debates are played out on the particular scales of individual taste, atomized into thousands of quirks and kinks and fetishizations. In commercial culture, the consistency or inconsistency of a fictional Universe is all a matter of branding, and continuity of “brand” is a common component of kitsch in the expressive arts of contemporary mass media for this very reason. Rejuvenating a brand, then, means undoing or transgressing its canon while adhering to the popular normative demands of a market context. To that extent, 21st century corporate art has fully assimilated modernist principles, from Dada to Heidegger.

The ideal brand is eternal, a universal kitsch. This insight is one of the keys behind modernist rambunctiousness, particularly the rhetorical nihilisms of Dada. Perfection, beauty, and permanence were deposed in the court of modernist striving. As Sontag argues, beauty is no longer “a term signifying (like health) an indisputable excellence,” contrary to the way that Pope John Paul II invoked the indestructible “beauty” of the Catholic Church (metaphorized as “a great work of art”) when faced with the “blemishe[s]” caused by “innumerable cover-ups of sexually predatory priests” (Sontag, “An Argument About Beauty” 3). This is a particular “deployment” of the concept of beauty, used in order to direct communal understanding and uphold an outmoded institution with recourse to “the bulwark provided by the use of beauty as unexceptionable commendation and consolation.” Of course, the pope’s eternal beauty is the

epitome of kitsch in the sense espoused by Broch. For this reason, the 20th century, along with its many experiences of decadent powers and entrenched authorities (from the actual amassment of vast personal hordes of wealth to the abstract functioning of notions like “white supremacy”), saw “the most prestigious communities concerned with the fine arts dedicated [...] to drastic projects of innovation, [wherein] beauty would turn up on the front line of notions to be discredited.” However, and most importantly for Sontag: “The subtraction of beauty as a standard for art hardly signals a decline of the authority of beauty. Rather, it testifies to a decline in the belief that there is something called art” (Sontag, “An Argument About Beauty” 5-6). Because art, properly conceived (at least in the modern sense), is a constantly renewed and developed valuation and re-valuation of “earth,” while “beauty” always functions external to “art” as the actual ideal around which society enforces itself at greater or lesser degrees of dogmatic insistence (from social mores to genocidal violence). One should here understand the Catholic Church as a “brand” the same sense as the Marvel Cinematic Universe, a connection made explicitly by the recent film *The Pope’s Exorcist*, which produces a comic-book stylization of Catholicism, an organization like the Illuminati, that effectively profanes its pretensions to virtue and truth.

The Aesthetic Sense and The Earthly Absolute as Dissolvers and Creators of Worlds

Years earlier, in the mid-1960s (the reflections on beauty were published in 2002), Sontag’s argument makes clear that the major issue is not so much *defining* art as attentively engaging with what goes under *the moniker of art*, in the aesthetic sphere, on its own terms. And in a Heideggerian sense, “art” means all things or actions or existences that effect an unconcealment. More or less, Sontag’s point is equivalent to her claim that “[t]he best theory of

beauty is its history. Thinking about beauty means focusing on its deployment in the hands of specific communities” (Sontag, “An Argument About Beauty” 5). Again, it’s a variation of Wittgenstein’s language-game: one doesn’t define “game” so much as point to the various instances of *games* and remark on their family resemblances. Anything else unduly restricts access to the realities of the contemporary world, and artists maintain their integrity by “disdaining” the opinion of the age and its inevitable corruptions or blindspots.

In this sense, the artist necessarily, to some extent, *opposes* Life in its current mode in favor of an Ideal constructed “out of the union of what is possible with what is necessary” (Schiller 57). Material content, or “earth,” supplies the necessary, and imagination supplies the possible, arranging the necessary into different articulations producing (ideally) novel subjective-aesthetic results. But an individual’s sense of either possibility or necessity is subject to ideological dogmatism, and artists (in order to be true to their Notion, in Hegelian terms) must be wary of their own tyrannical egotisms or myopias as much as the revolving tyrannies of Socio-Cultural Power.

Schiller’s question (“But did [the artist] ever ask himself whether those disorders in the moral world offend his reason, or whether they do not rather wound his self-love?” [59]) echoes in the 20th century through Roland Barthes as well (a major model for Sontag) in an open letter to Michelangelo Antonioni: the artist “is part of a changing world, but he changes too. This is banal, but for the artist it is bewildering, for he never knows if the work he is putting forward is the result of changes in the world or in his subjectivity. [...] This [intrinsic] fragility [of the artist] is that of an existential doubt which seizes the artist as and when his life and work move on; this doubt is difficult, painful even, for the artist never knows if what he sets out to say bears truthful witness on the world as it has changed or is just an egotistical reflection of his nostalgia or his

desire. An Einsteinian traveler, he never knows if it is the train or space-time which is in motion, if he is a witness or a man of desire” (Nowell-Smith 64). For Schiller, the artist’s restraints are based in duties “to the Necessary and the Eternal,” which Barthes conceives as requiring negation of any ideological allegiance that limits reality unnecessarily. One cannot define “art” any better than one can define “reality,” because they are always changing form in relation to each other, in the relation between what *exists* and what *is made*.

Kitsch is precisely such an ideological allegiance based on the tyranny of a supposed “mass audience.” According to one of Milan Kundera’s definitions, “the word ‘kitsch’ describes the attitude of those who want to please the greatest number, at any cost. To please, one must confirm what everyone wants to hear, put oneself at the service of received ideas. Kitsch is the translation of the stupidity of received ideas into the language of beauty and feeling. It moves us to tears of compassion for ourselves, for the banality of what we think and feel” (Kundera, *The Art of the Novel* 163). Of course, Schiller’s own invocations of “the Necessary and the Eternal” seem redolent of kitsch, but only to the extent that one reduces them to particular-historical-ideological versions of either idea serving particular programs of Power. That which is necessary is unavoidable as much as what is eternal, which is simply a principle of non-limitation, the fact of incompleteness contained in any conception of extension or futurity. Every non-necessary representation is likewise lacking in Eternity, because both ideas transcend the desires of the individual person or culture.

The Necessary and the Eternal are constituents of properly aesthetic disinterestedness, and the meeting point between them which Broch identifies as the “earthly absolute” is ultimately human consciousness itself, as the only source of aesthetic disinterestedness in the

known universe. In a chronological, developmental account of the “earthly absolute” in Broch’s entire body of work, Roderick H. Watt writes:

Sometimes man is referred to as the earthly absolute, i.e. the constant and invariable criterion against which all else is necessarily and unavoidably measured. At other times Broch describes as earthly absolutes those phenomena which have been shown to be absolute by measurement by and against the human standard, e.g. the speed of light or absolute zero temperature. In general terms, and this applies to both of the above cases, an earthly absolute is one which is open to empirical confirmation. [...] There is no logical reason why measurements of speed, temperature or space should have an upper or lower limit. That there are such absolutes, earthly absolutes, is determined solely by the limitations of the invariable human factor in any act of observation or measurement (Watt 144).

The earthly absolute is, ultimately, the condition of valuation which is itself conditioned by the aesthetic sense and the faculty of taste. It is Broch’s emendation of Kant’s transcendental aesthetic, removing Time from the realm of the subjective, which becomes pure spatio-temporal void (a Hegelian self-relating negativity as well as a Lacanian Subject).¹⁸

An artist’s duty to the Necessary and the Eternal, for Schiller, ultimately aims at conquering Reality and triumphing over Nature. Beginning in German Idealism, the Western conception of Art becomes, increasingly, the aesthetic aim of total transformation. Aesthetic disinterestedness, like scientific knowledge, is the ideal of both unprejudiced experience and the equanimity of non-anxious objectivity. Sontag traces this union back to the supreme Western example of poetry’s affinity with science : “The aim of Lucretius was not independent scientific

¹⁸ This last conjunctive reference to Hegel and Lacan is the major point of concern in Zizek’s *Less Than Nothing*, which puts forward an argument about consciousness that has important similarities with Broch’s.

knowledge, but the reduction of emotional anxiety. Lucretius saw man as torn between the pleasure of sex and the pain of emotional loss, tormented by superstitions inspired by religion, haunted by the fear of bodily decay and death. He recommended scientific knowledge, which teaches intelligent detachment, equanimity. Scientific knowledge is, for Lucretius, a mode of psychological gracefulness. It is a way of learning to let go” (Sontag, “The Anthropologist as Hero” 72-3). This union of the aesthetic and the scientific in Lucretius is a model for how Sontag understands the function of the aesthetic sense and the faculty of taste in modern consciousness.

In a grand sense, the 20th century is predominantly defined by two contrary modes of equanimity: the equanimity of either a passive or an active nihilism. Passive nihilism would be the jaded nonchalance of either a cynical hedonist or a cynical ascetic, while active nihilism is the willful and violent enforcement of one’s own desire on external reality. Nietzsche already predicted that the foreseeable future of humanity would be defined as a perpetual dialectical slide between these two poles of nonbelief: the nonbelief that despairs or dissipates and the nonbelief that throws tantrums of insistence.¹⁹

Grace, in Sontag’s terminology, is the ability to mentally situate oneself in a moderate middle position between these poles. For instance, she identifies the “didactic aims” of the Brechtian “Alienation Effect” as “a vehicle for the cool temperament that conceived those plays” (177-8). Brecht’s work participates in a history of “detached” and “reflective” art, a history in which she also then positions the work of Robert Bresson, as an exemplar of the aesthetics of

¹⁹ Lars von Trier’s *Nymphomaniac* presents an interesting exploration of this oppositional relationship between nihilisms and equanimity by narrativizing the basic subjective struggle of desire conceived in the binary of Desiring Body (Charlotte Gainsbourg as Joe) and Desiring Mind (Stellan Skarsgaard as Seligman). Indeed, each of the three films in Von Trier’s loose “depression” trilogy is structured around a similarly contrary opposition of central characters. In *Antichrist* it is the opposition of Guilt/Sickness (Charlotte Gainsbourg) versus Judgment/Healing (Willem Dafoe); and in *Melancholia* it is Negation/Despair (Kirsten Dunst) versus Affirmation/Hope (Charlotte Gainsbourg).

grace.²⁰ Bresson's version of detachment then offers a Nietzschean moderation between the extremes of modern nihilism, though more on the side of activity than passivity--but without being in any way aggressive, only hopeful--striving, but not forcing.

Writing in 1964, the same year she published her famous "Notes on 'Camp'" (Camp being an aestheticized mode of entering the nihilistic spectrum), Sontag aims to explain the "not well understood" tradition of "reflective or contemplative" art using the example of Bresson. Both Camp *and* "reflective or contemplative" art promote their distinct variations on aesthetic disinterestedness, yet most (if not all) literature on Sontag fails to understand the intrinsic relationship between these two essays (and therefore of Sontag's thought and work as a whole). If Bresson's art is "cold, remote, overintellectualized, [and] geometrical," as she claims his films are often described, then understanding it requires an effort "to understand the aesthetics--that is, find the beauty--of such coldness" (Sontag, "Spiritual Style" 179).

Reflective art, she argues--as distinct from a Camp disinterestedness--promotes an awareness of form that accomplishes two tasks: "it gives a sensuous pleasure independent of the 'content,' and it invites the use of intelligence." This kind of art aims to thematize, formally, the attitudinal orientation of consciousness as such, as it is contained (concretized) in the work of art. Equanimity, or detachment from the "content" as such (the actions of the characters, the morality of situations conventionally understood) aims "to discipline the emotions at the same time that it

²⁰ Another variation is offered in Sontag's assessment of Paul Goodman: "It was his voice, that is to say, his intelligence and the poetry of his intelligence incarnated, which kept me a loyal and passionate addict. Though he was not often graceful as a writer, his writing and his mind were touched with grace." She ends that same eulogy by indicating that grace is a Christ-like exemplariness, in the sense that Christians are properly directed to model their lives on the recorded life of Christ: "With or without his books, I shall go on being marked by him. I shall go on grieving that he is no longer alive to talk in new books, and that now we all have to go on in our fumbling attempts to help each other and to say what is true and to release what poetry we have and to respect each other's madness and right to be wrong and to cultivate our sense of citizenliness without Paul's hectoring, without Paul's patient meandering explanations of everything, without the grace of Paul's example" (Sontag, "On Paul Goodman" 7; 10). Grace, precisely, is the example of dignity and integrity in thought, expression, or action.

arouses them.” Involvement with Bresson’s films, as with Brechtian theater, is a critical involvement with the act of representation, and the style of understanding, rather than the plot and the fate of the characters in any direct or simplistic way (like in the previously mentioned “suspension of disbelief”). But Bresson’s coolness is different from Brecht’s. It is not aimed only at the apotheosis of intelligence but is derived from a desire to prevent spectator “identification” with his characters, which would be “an impertinence--an affront to the mystery that is human action and the human heart.”²¹ “Form” is the attitude that consciousness takes to reality, and only in this attitude does one find the real “emotional power” of art (Sontag, “Spiritual Style” 180-1). Full understanding of the other is a lie, and so any form that encourages “identification” (or assumes that it is possible) in such a direct way would also be a lie. Rather, the emotionality is a *product* of the formal arrangement and not some present and accessible content.

Sontag then identifies a Bressonian “anthropology” with “three basic theorems” that she identifies with Simone Weil’s theory of grace:

All the natural movements of the soul are controlled by laws analogous to those of physical gravity. Grace is the only exception.

Grace fills empty spaces, but it can only enter where there is a void to receive it, and it is grace itself which makes this void.

The imagination is continually at work filling up all the fissures through which grace might pass (Sontag, “Spiritual Style” 188).

Taken from Weil’s book *Gravity and Grace*, these principles serve to characterize Bresson’s art as one aimed against gravity in favor of grace, or lightness. The terms of Weil’s title, gravity and

²¹ This is precisely the sense of Bresson taken up by Michael Haneke in his essay “Terror and Utopia of Form: Robert Bresson’s *Au hasard Balthazar*.” In this essay, Haneke articulates the aesthetic principles he gleaned from Bresson for his own work, which is an attempt to achieve representational grace precisely in the sense that Sontag identifies here.

grace, also match the major aesthetic ideas that dominate Kundera's novelistic exploration of kitsch in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*: lightness (grace & being) and gravity (weight & dogma). Furthermore, in Kundera's treatment of kitsch (which draws on Broch's), the opposition of gravity and grace equals the opposition of kitsch and art. Aesthetically, to land on the side of grace means to "be patient, and as empty as possible. In such a regimen there is no place for the imagination, much less for ideas and opinions. The ideal is neutrality, transparency." Spiritual detachment--as espoused by the Vicar of Torcy in *Le Journal d'un Curé de Campagne*, who says "A priest has no opinions"--is the ideal mode of aesthetic disinterestedness embodied in reflective or contemplative art. Characters in Bresson's films are not fully articulated individuals, but rather often they are spiritual ciphers engaged in a project or embroiled in a crisis larger than themselves: "Large sections of *Un Condamné à Mort s'est Échappé* and *Pickpocket* are wordless; they are about the beauties of personality effaced by a project. The face is very quiet, while other parts of the body, represented as humble servants of projects, become expressive, transfigured" (Sontag, "Spiritual Style" 189-90).

What Bresson ultimately offers, for Sontag, is a focused articulation of spiritual-ethical engagement with reality, arrived at by equating formal arrangement with conscious awareness: "The power of Bresson's six films [as of 1964] lies in the fact that his purity and fastidiousness are not just an assertion about the resources of the cinema, as much of modern painting is mainly a comment in paint about painting. They are at the same time an idea about life, about what Cocteau called 'inner style,' about the most serious way of being human" (Sontag, "Spiritual Style" 195). Here Sontag opposes the "reflective and contemplative" version of the aesthetic sense against the "epicene" version associated with Camp taste, *Flaming Creatures*, and *Happenings* (if limiting to the early essays collected in *Against Interpretation*), which would

account for the “non-serious” way of being human (eliminating distinctions rather than promoting conscious discernment). Both are extremes, and both have their fanatical forms, neither of which is to be rejected outright except in the complete absence of the other. But this complete absence of the other is also possible as a thought experiment, conditioned by the formal properties of the work of art that prompt it.

Sontag’s positive characterization of Weil’s “fanatical asceticism” in an essay written the previous year, and also collected in the same volume, anticipates her argument about Bresson’s ideal detachment: “[S]o far as we love seriousness, as well as life, we are moved by it, nourished by it. In the respect we pay to such lives [as Weil’s], we acknowledge the presence of mystery in the world--and mystery is just what the secure possession of the truth, an objective truth, denies. In this sense, all truth is superficial; and some (but not all) distortions of the truth, some (but not all) insanity, some (but not all) unhealthiness, some (but not all) denials of life are truth-giving, sanity-producing, health-creating, and life-enhancing” (Sontag, “Simone Weil” 51). (In her essay on Camp, Weil is an example of the second of the three major forms of sensibility, preceded by “high culture” or “high art” and followed by “Camp” or stylization, to be discussed more fully later.)

These ideas about art are born with Romanticism, but in Sontag’s variation they are made to reject the clichés of Romanticism that distort their truth content, such as the reductionist idea of the genius artist constructing eternal masterpieces. (There *are* geniuses, and there *are* masterpieces, but each of these ideas easily becomes kitsch.) Focusing on the non-accidental, Schiller’s aim in his *Aesthetic Education* is basically the old religious one against the profane world, or what Schiller terms “the sensuous drive” serving as “the medium of limitation” (Schiller 81). Art is the form given to this material content that transcends its accidental and

limited character. Later, Sontag's position *against interpretation* opposes all reductions of art to a limited, discursive vantage point of reasoning. Only via formal procedures do the particular elements of sensuous or cognized reality transcend themselves via aesthetic comportment. If "the sensuous drive" concerns the materially existent, then "the form-drive" concerns material forms and their relations *as much as* any relations between these forms and consciousness.

Beauty, in Schiller's idealist conception, is the play with forms beyond their expected or established senses: "The beautiful is to be neither mere life, nor mere form, but living form. I.e., Beauty; for it imposes upon man the double law of absolute formality and absolute reality. Consequently, Reason also makes the pronouncement: With beauty man shall *only play*, and it is *with beauty only* that he shall play" (Schiller 107). This is Schiller's most important interdiction concerning art, a judgment that *play* concerns discovering the concealed aspects of reality (Heideggerian unconcealment), or what Kundera later terms "the suddenly kindled light of the never-before-said" (Kundera, *The Art of the Novel* 123). Ultimately, Schiller's "aesthetic education" is about conveying to people a sense of Beauty in its abstract-ideal sense, something always to-be-attained just like Morality or Happiness or Virtue. This means that Beauty cannot be learned by reference to any single example, because it does not inhere intrinsically as a quality of objects or experiences, but is ultimately a never-ending Wittgensteinian language game: "To make Beauty out of a multiplicity of beautiful objects is the task of aesthetic education" (Schiller 113). And this means, particularly for Sontag's conception of art and aesthetics in modernity, that Beauty must contain "the beautiful" in all of its historically contradictory examples, including its own perpetual and necessary negations.

All this is in keeping with a Kantian basis of aesthetic thought. Hans Georg Gadamer interprets the Kantian explication of "genius" in the same way that Sontag, in her great essay on

pornography, describes the artist conceived, mythologically, as the exemplary transgressor:

“[Kant] described the genius as a ‘favorite of nature’ who thereby, like nature, creates something that seems as though it were made in accordance with rules, although without conscious attention to them. Furthermore, the work seems like something unprecedented, which has been produced according to still unformulated rules. Art is the creation of something exemplary which is not simply produced by following rules. Clearly this definition of art as the creation of genius can never really be divorced from the congeniality of the one who experiences it. A kind of free play is at work in both cases” (Gadamer 21). The rules Gadamer writes about, the ones that the work of genius must ignore in order to set up an exemplary creation “not simply produced by following rules,” are what contribute to the establishment of kitsch. Kitsch is the enforcement of a particular orientation of the aesthetic sense, a dogmatic and totalitarian aesthetic regime.

Sontag updates the notion of Kantian disinterestedness by breaking it into two primary modes mentioned above, the “reflective and contemplative” formalism of detachment that is “calculated” and “cold” versus the “epicene” form of sensibility that revolts against this calculation in an ecstatic expression beyond conventions. (The third, situated between them, contains both the seriousness of coldness and the ecstasy of ebullience, most powerfully exemplified by Antonin Artaud and his “theater of cruelty.” But this will be discussed more later.) This other sensibility, which she investigates most thoroughly in “Notes on ‘Camp’,” is discussed more ambivalently by Sontag than the reflective or contemplative one embodied by both Bresson and Weil (and Weil, again, also occupies a position in the middle sensibility). If these latter represent the “serious” side of the aesthetic sense, its ethical implications and possibilities, then a film like Jack Smith’s *Flaming Creatures* represents the side of “joy and innocence,” beyond good and evil in a Nietzschean sense: pure exuberance.

If Bresson's films are pared down, sometimes excessively as in his *Proces de Jeanne d'Arc*, then work like *Flaming Creatures* is overfull, "crowded with visual material." And this crowdedness is not in the service of knowledge so much as thralldom: "There are no ideas, no symbols, no commentary on or critique of anything in *Flaming Creatures*. Smith's film is strictly a treat for the senses. [...] Unlike most serious modern art, this work is not about the frustrations of consciousness, the dead ends of the self. Thus Smith's crude technique serves, beautifully, the sensibility embodied in *Flaming Creatures*--a sensibility which disclaims ideas, which situates itself beyond negation" (Sontag, "Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures*" 229). For Sontag, these are the two primary modes of denying kitsch in modern sensibility. Bresson's film and Smith's film offer two different solutions to the problem of gravity in a post-metaphysical world.

Kitsch as a Perennial Orientation of Consciousness (the Fixing of Worlds)

Thinking about *kitsch* today, one must resist the urge to consider it merely an appendage to the rise of an historical "mass culture" grounded in commodity exchange, because the term "mass culture" already indicates a sense of reality that the concept of kitsch presupposes as its *end*, not its beginning. "Mass culture" itself is only a rhetorical and practical adaptation, within the aesthetic of free-market capitalism, of earlier theological concepts of spiritual homogeneity. Furthermore, in its most influential elaborations, the concept of kitsch arises at a later point, when the various Cultures of Mass Appeal--emerging from the long Bourgeois Century--attain a crisis and face a crossroads.

It is in this context, developed within and then looking back over the full crisis of mass culture in the first half of the 20th century, that Hermann Broch re-approached and amended his 1933 essay "Notes on the Problem of Kitsch" at the beginning of the 1950s. Broch begins with a

warning that his discussion of kitsch will “not talk strictly about art, but about a fixed form of behavior with regard to life.” This is an important distinction for Broch, and it means to convey that the issue of kitsch is as much an aesthetic as an ethical one. Whether it be a form of art or a form of behavior, kitsch is primarily an *attitude* that can attach to infinite contexts. He goes on: “Kitsch could not, in fact, either emerge or prosper without the existence of kitsch-man, the lover of kitsch; as a producer of art he produces kitsch and as a consumer of art is prepared to acquire it and pay quite handsomely for it” (Broch 49).

The following might be considered a primary axiom of aesthetic history and theory: *Before something exists, it is first desired.* Here, the very notion of the “aesthetic” expands beyond the realm of art in a turn of phrase that anticipates the rise of “life-style” branding already emerging by the 1950s. “Kitsch-man” is the abstract sign of the very desirability of a “life-style,” the image of a Subjectivity in search of an Aesthetico-Moral Style. The full metaphysical authority of Myth (which was long lorded over by Religion) first had to give way to the powers of Interpretation (Protestantism) for this subjectivity to form and thrive. In order for “kitsch” to properly exist, the world had to produce a consciousness to desire it *as such*; an approach to reality oriented by an aesthetic desire for final reconciliation between Subject and Object, Perception and Reality; but as a result of its own striving and no longer based on First Principles alone. (It was really Martin Luther who proclaimed the death of God, only he didn’t know it--that is, so long as one does not blame Jesus Christ and his apostles for the same deed.) Another way to understand this is to view kitsch as a series of attempts (conscious or unconscious) to secularize the religious impulse while retaining its totalizing moral imperatives, from the most innocuous (“all fluffy bunnies are cute”) to the most catastrophic (ethnic cleansing).

Kitsch emerges precisely at the tipping point of Religion's capitulation to Reason in European history, otherwise known as the Enlightenment. Yet, according to Broch, the *seeds* of kitsch's emergence in the Human Mind as a basic aesthetic orientation occurred simultaneously with the Reformation, the decisive blow to Catholicism's control of Christianity's mythology that eventually led to the philosophical conceptualizations (beginning with Descartes) that would condition a thriving environment for both bourgeois liberalism and kitsch. According to Broch, "The Reformation came about due to a great discovery, which was partly mystical and partly theological and rational: this was the discovery of the awareness of the absolute, the infinite, of the divine conscience of the human mind. This brought the act of revelation into every single human mind and thereby saddled it with the responsibility of faith, a responsibility which the Church had previously borne" (Broch, "Notes on the Problem of Kitsch" 55). The problem of kitsch emerges, then, out of the long excavation of interiority prompted by the Reformation, within the era known as the Renaissance.

Kundera (after Broch, the second most influential writer on kitsch), in providing a history of the Modern Era at the outset of his first effort toward a poetics of the novel, implies that all philosophic themes have aesthetic origins. For him, Descartes's elevation of the Human Subject as "master and proprietor of nature" is prefigured by Cervantes's no less definitive discovery of novelistic prose and novelistic irony. Don Quixote's radical ignorance prefigures Descartes's radical doubt. This then carries forward to all descendents of the Cartesian Subject, its adherents and its detractors, as Kundera says: "all the great existential themes Heidegger analyzes in *Being and Time*--considering them to have been neglected by all earlier European philosophy--had been unveiled, displayed, illuminated by four centuries of the novel (four centuries of European reincarnation of the novel)" (Kundera, *The Art of the Novel* 5). The assumption here is that

philosophical/scientific conceptualizations are all responses to the primary aesthetic discoveries that precede them: the aesthetic sense precedes the conceptualization of its contents. According to Kundera, these originary aesthetic themes are: adventure, interiority, historicity, banality, irrationality, ephemerality, and irony. Some of their philosophical conceptualizations would be: politics, subjectivity, history, existence, the unconscious.²²

Broch follows a similar logic when he locates the emergence of kitsch-*proper* (in its self-conscious stage) as the result of a negotiation between the aesthetic (*i.e.* the mythology) of the *ancien régime* and the “bourgeois tradition,” long before industrialization made “mass culture” a possibility. This moment is also a transition from dogmatic religion to secular religion in the mode of the Reformation as it culminates in Romanticism. Modernity’s apotheosis of the interiorized subject, now endowed with the responsibility of revelation previously borne by the Church, “is the origin of Romanticism; here is the origin of, on the one hand, the exaltation of the man who is full of spiritual (and artistic) energy and who tries to elevate the wretched daily round of life on earth to an absolute or pseudo-absolute sphere, and, on the other, the terror of the man who senses the risk involved. That uncertainty which is peculiar to the Romantic mind and which is timorous and hesitant, longing to turn back and hide in the bosom of the Church, to take refuge once again in its absolute certainty, derives in fact from this mixture of exaltation and terror” (Broch, “Notes on the Problem of Kitsch” 56). Out of this “mixture of exaltation and

²² Another example is Broch’s own anticipation of certain treatments of “acting” or “play-acting” in Sartre’s existentialism, from the third book of *The Sleepwalkers*, published in 1932: “Incapable of communicating himself to others, incapable of breaking out of his isolation, doomed to remain the mere actor of his life, the deputy of his own ego—all that any human being can know of another is a mere symbol, the symbol of an ego that remains beyond our grasp, possessing no more value than that of a symbol; and all that can be told is the symbol of a symbol, a symbol at a second, third, *n*th remove, asking for representation in the true double sense of the word. Therefore it will raise no difficulty for anyone, and will at least make for brevity, if we imagine that Herr and Frau Esch together with Major and Herr Huguenuau find themselves in a scene on the stage, involved in a performance which no human being can escape: that of play-acting” (Broch 497).

terror” emerge both sublimity and kitsch, two polar extremes of the subject’s negotiation with the enormous task saddled to its apparent finitude.

It is this historical and political transition that requires the aforementioned aesthetic negotiation to take place. According to Broch, the new “middle class [...] had, on the one hand, to assimilate the traditional patrimony of the courtly-feudal class, changing as it went along, and, on the other, to reaffirm its own original tradition, which was a revolutionary tempo” (Broch, “Notes on the Problem of Kitsch” 53). The bourgeoisie cannot disavow its origins in courtly-feudalism (which is the originary *objet a* of its desire, in Lacanian terms; meaning, the origin of its own--sublimated--metaphysical aim, which remains the establishment of an Order and the pursuit of a particular kind of Prosperity), but it must transform those values to match a “revolutionary tempo” that is contrary to their basic and essential aristocratic inertia--*i.e.* the tempo of revolution must also establish a functioning authority. It is this very notion of “authority” that defines the aesthetic tautology between courtly-feudalism and bourgeois liberalism, though it appears in the latter with a minimal difference, which is likewise aesthetically mappable onto the transition from Catholicism to Protestantism. It is a movement, generally speaking, from Proclamation to Interpretation, and from Debauched Pleasure to Holy Pleasure--from the pleasure of a (class) status to the pleasure of a (sovereign) self.

Therefore, the bourgeoisie appropriates an aesthetic taste from courtly-feudalism, namely *libertinage*, but no longer taking it seriously as based in a metaphysically real, “God-willed hierarchy” (Broch, “Notes on the Problem of Kitsch” 54). In the prior aristocratic *libertinage*, the individual life becomes a work of art--but with a very different stamp than, say, Don Quixote’s earlier failed efforts to become a literary hero. The *life-as-a-work-of-art* in the *libertinage* form views the phenomena of social reality itself as comprising a manipulable aesthetic text that

responds to seduction and power, and those who manipulate most successfully--that is, most totally--achieve the status of Most High.²³ The libertine is a Don Quixote endowed with wisdom, cunning, and the unguilty appetite of entitled wealth. In its deposed, non-aristocratic form, this version of the *life-as-a-work-of-art* is the great central theme of the bourgeois heritage, from the Bildungsroman to Camp aesthetics, Pop Art, Instagram and TikTok, a period comprising the terminal stage of “modernity” as traditionally conceived. And this terminal stage is defined, in large part--since the birth of modern irony in such works as *Gargantua & Pantagruel* or *Don Quixote*²⁴--by the anarchic proliferation of new interpretations and permutations for the interdependencies of Self and World.

And the libertine is also appropriated by the new bourgeois order as a way of transposing and domesticating this aesthetic power into Calvinist-Protestant asceticism, to safeguard its efficacy as it waned alongside a growing commercialism and greed for the new excesses of the emerging bourgeois class. According to Broch: “when asceticism began to lose its strict dominance, the bourgeois felt that the veto on exaltation had also been swept away, so he exalted, paradoxically, to save the ascetic tradition. Any asceticism, any repression of pleasure has its sexual center of gravity. Puritanism certainly did not impose a monastic type of chastity, but strict monogamy. It was precisely this monogamy that was to be reaffirmed and reinforced;

²³ Maurice Blanchot’s novel *The Most High* (1949) is an excellent exploration of how this individual tendency, the ideal of self-sovereignty, extends in a certain logical direction toward totalitarian violence, particularly the fascisms of 20th century Europe. In this logic, fascism is a symptom of what Nietzsche earlier diagnosed as the general incapacity to comprehend the death of God. Nazism would then not be a fulfillment of any of Nietzsche’s actual ideas (as still sometimes gets asserted) so much as a tragic development stemming from a willful and collective misreading, famously orchestrated by his sister, of Nietzsche’s essentially aesthetic mode of argument.

²⁴ An argument for privileging these works as turning points in European consciousness (as a starting point of the Modern Era) appears in different iterations across three important works of aesthetic philosophy by Milan Kundera: *The Art of the Novel*, *Testaments Betrayed*, and *The Curtain*. He equates the discovery of properly novelistic prose with the discovery of “humor” in a precise modern sense that marks it as an aesthetic parallel to the scientific-conceptual revolutions and political secularizations of the Modern Era.

all the more so because in this way it could strike at the heart of *libertinage*. Monogamous love was saved by being intensified to a level of exaltation which at one time had been severely condemned by asceticism. Puritan frigidity was transposed into passion” (Broch, “Notes on the Problem of Kitsch” 56). Ultimately, the bourgeoisie had to re-aestheticize (re-decorate) sensual pleasure and sensual desire to meet its needs of accommodating the new atomized self of the universal subject of apperception, grounded in the heterosexual couple and the family.

The Aestheticization of Reality as a Source of Both Kitsch and Knowledge of Kitsch

One can glimpse the continuity between this historical aesthetic discovery of the late 18th century and more contemporary times by looking at the correlations between Stephen Frears’s 1988 adaptation of Pierre Choderlos de Laclos’s 1782 novel, *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (adapted as *Dangerous Liaisons*), and Michael Moore’s 2004 polemic documentary, *Fahrenheit 9/11*. In their own ways, each of these films is about Power conceived as condescension and willful manipulation; but more importantly, they each bookend this theme using the same figuration (what Broch would call a syntactical structure, the basic form of a *mythos*): the Figure of Power conceived as Performer and Director of Artifice (an eroticized variant of a Macchiavellian prince, a diabolical dandy), festooned with wigs, make-up, costume, and rehearsed expression. Understanding the connection between Frears’s and Moore’s films means understanding how to connect them on the basis of this figuration while retaining their separate historical contexts--that is, their distinct (though similar) horizons of meaning.

First, one must understand this Power in its precise Romanticist origins, which Frears’s film then re-imagines with certain late-modern interpretations. This figure’s emergence, as it is inherited from aristocratic *libertinage* according to Broch, parallels the emergence of kitsch as a

desired falsehood that flatters the self: “In a broad sense art always reflects the image of contemporary man, and if kitsch represents falsehood (it is often so defined, and rightly so), this falsehood falls back on the person in need of it, on the person who uses this highly considerate mirror so as to be able to recognize himself in the counterfeit image it throws back of him and to confess his own lies (with a delight which is to a certain extent sincere)” (Broch, “Notes on the Problem of Kitsch” 49). Rather than a history of objects, a history of kitsch is a history of “mind.” (This understanding of “mind” aligns Broch with Hegel’s concept of Spirit, though it is not identical, in the same sense that it is similar to a kind of Jungian collective unconscious).

One origin of this “falsehood” as a desired end, for Broch, is the fact that Romanticism (an era defined by a relatively delineable sensibility, in Sontag’s terminology) produced no form of architecture that competed with neo-classicism (*i.e.* attempts to approximate and imitate the aesthetic ideals, and consequently the cultural values, represented by ancient Greco-Roman art). Therefore the aesthetic ideals of Romanticism tended to favor forms that sit falsely in the reality of their contemporary setting. In addition to this widespread taste for the ideals of the past, another contributing factor is “the extremely rapid industrialization and development of large cities” that made it difficult for architecture (and therefore general cultural-aesthetic orientations) to keep up with changing contexts and requirements. The world becomes anachronistic in relation to its own contents, and blatant absence of function becomes the norm for this kind of inherited style (“lower-class dwellings built in Gothick kitsch”). But then this absence gives way to an attempt to claim the false facade as a sincere expression of the time and of the self. “What interested people was beauty, the fine effect, decoration,” says Broch. Appearing--because so much better than the real thing, given the resources--becomes a real and active *value*. (The notion of “keeping up appearances” is a dialectical cousin of “art for art’s sake.”)

One reason that *Les liaisons dangereuses* retains such appropriate and resonant aesthetic ideas even still is that the 20th century produced another aesthetic period--like neo-classicism, but more diverse--defined by recycling, repetition, idealization, and crisis of the interior self in its relation to the social whole. Print technology began this period, though photography transformed it in the most decisive way, and it was identified by Benjamin as the age of technological reproducibility. One may also call this the age of the copy, in many different senses. One of Broch's arguments is that bourgeois ideology is a "copy" of aristocratic decadence, with a minimal difference. *Les liaisons dangereuses* is then a novelistic (aesthetic) precursor to the argument laid out in Broch's essay on kitsch. It demonstrates the transition from the aristocracy to the bourgeoisie that Broch describes, in the precise aesthetic mode that he delineates for the emergence of kitsch.

Valmont's capitulation to virtuous monogamy enacts the transition from *libertinage* and overt aestheticism to bourgeois devotion and romantic love. Valmont's abandonment of the Marquise de Merteuil, and their traditions of erotic and sadistic machination, marks the new inflection placed on aristocratic debauchery. In Romanticism, Broch writes, "every casual act of love in everyday life was raised to the astral plane; the level of the absolute (or rather the pseudo-absolute) was transformed into an incorruptible and eternal Tristan-and-Isolde-style love. In so doing it simply introduced the most terrestrial aspects of life into the eternal and immortal kingdom--the worldly aspects *par excellence*" (Broch, "Notes on the Problem of Kitsch" 56).

This can perhaps best be gleaned by looking at the novel's kitsch transcription in the 1999 modernization of Laclos, *Cruel Intentions*, starring Sarah Michelle Gellar, Ryan Phillippe, and Reese Witherspoon. In this version, Valmont becomes Sebastian, an enormously wealthy and notoriously promiscuous high school student in New York City; and the Marquise de

Merteuil becomes his step-sister Katherine, the outwardly perfect valedictorian who secretly shares equally (if not more-so) in Sebastian's sexual and sadistic escapades. Their target is Annette, a new girl in town featured in *Seventeen* magazine as the poster-child for sexual purity and virtuous (Christian-Protestant) femininity and monogamy. By the end of the film, Sebastian realizes the nature of "true love" and reveals all the truth about his and Katherine's history of schemes. And Katherine is publicly humiliated, represented as the divine comeuppance of a clear villain without even a shred of interior complexity. Just over 200 years after Laclos's novel, *Cruel Intentions* distills Valmont's choice into kitsch by absolutizing it as the narrative's lesson (which Laclos's novel has the good taste not to do). It is the tendency to see Valmont as the novel's hero and the Marquise de Merteuil as its villain that produces the kitsch that Broch theorizes. His choice, understood as incontrovertibly virtuous, is precisely the anxiety of non-belief lingering in the air of bourgeois modernity from the end of the 18th century to the end of the 20th century.

Laclos's novel is also a major precursor to both 20th century literary modernism, with its investigation of aesthetic manipulation via letter-writing (and the collecting of typologies to direct and provoke) being a not-so-distant precursor for contemporary media culture and its attempts to control the public conceived as a "mass" (from Edward Bernays to Cambridge Analytica). Alongside aesthetic manipulation, however, is its chief mythical figure produced in the time since the 18th century, the Monstrous Woman, the supreme sign of Deceptive Artifice as inherited by the bourgeoisie from the *ancien régime*. Unlike the male libertine, who takes up *libertinage* assertively as freedom and can leave it behind just as well, the figure of the libertine woman is *condemned* to artifice by being more readily reduced to it. Therefore she cuts a more potent figure in the history of existential dramas about life-as-theater. Only the male libertine

enacts an acknowledged and true ethical freedom in the course of the novel, while both the Marquise de Merteuil and Madame de Tourvel (the latter an image of bourgeois virtue to which Valmont complies as the reformed libertine) exist (relatively speaking) as polarly opposite caricatures of female duplicity and female purity, respectively.

In *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, it is the Marquise de Merteuil, the feminine mode of *libertinage*, who suffers the same mythical fate (a metaphorical beheading) in Laclos's novel as that other great Monstrous Woman, Marie Antoinette, later suffered in reality. After hearing about the Marquise de Merteuil's public humiliation after the Vicomte de Valmont exposed her schemes, Madame de Volanges (one of her victims) writes to her friend that the Marquise de Merteuil had contracted smallpox but recovered, and the physical transformation described is explicitly conveyed as a moral one for the social circle of the novel: "She has recovered, it is true, but she has been fearfully disfigured; and, in particular, she has lost an eye. You will imagine that I have not seen her; but I am told that she is really hideous. The Marquis de ***, who never misses an occasion for saying something malicious, said yesterday, in speaking of her, that the disease had transformed her, and that now her soul was to be seen in her face" (Laclos 287).

In contemporary terminology, the Marquise de Merteuil is "canceled," the 21st century equivalent of aristocratic banishment that often retains the same tenor of moral debasement in its rhetoric. At the same time, it is Valmont's redemption--unintentionally finding love in what was designed to be an act of disinterested theatrical seduction--that marks the passage from the aristocracy to the bourgeoisie; from libertine decadence to modern romantic love. The Marquise de Merteuil is condemned for aestheticism while Valmont succumbs to kitsch, forgiven his sins in exchange for abandoning *libertinage* for the purity of devout bourgeois monogamy; the new

egalitarian covenant with God and access to Divine Pleasure--that is, pleasure about which one need not feel guilty. Kitsch is always that which dispels all guilt, removes all need for judgment, and surrounds us for a moment in the security of the womb that all imaginings of Paradise project into the void.²⁵ In this sense, Laclos tracks exactly the aesthetic transition that Broch describes in his essay on kitsch, as the reason for its origins in the Romanticist sensibility.

Contrariwise, Sofia Coppola's 2006 film *Marie Antoinette* is an effort to update this image of the female libertine from within the historical mythology itself. It effectively transforms that great Monstrous Woman, the supreme symbol of Aristocratic Decadence punished and destroyed by Revolution, into the Helpless Girl of Fate caught up in a Network of Power entirely beyond her capacity to understand. (A reading of this kind appears in a beautiful passage from Roger Ebert's succinct 10-point review: "the more you know about [Marie Antoinette], the more you may learn [from this film], because Coppola's oblique and anachronistic point of view shifts the balance away from realism and into an act of empathy for a girl swept up by events that leave her without personal choices. Before she was queen, before she was a pawn, Marie was a 14-year-old girl taken from her home, stripped bare, and examined like so much horseflesh. It is astonishing with what indifference for her feelings the court aristocracy uses her for its pleasure, and in killing her disposes of its guilt.")²⁶

This manifests in Coppola's film through anachronistic music, unrealistically exaggerated fashion styles, and theatrically posed attitudes blending historical kitsch with contemporary taste. Ultimately, Coppola projects the image of Aristocratic Decadence onto the modern socialite while still setting it in the past: Paris Hilton as heir to the throne. And this contains an aesthetic

²⁵ An argument of this kind, and an important complement to Broch's conceptions of both mythos and kitsch, is offered in Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*.

²⁶ The review is archived at RogerEbert.com: <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/marie-antoinette-2006>

argument at its core: that hereditary aristocracy persists in the upper echelons of capitalist wealth, albeit in a slightly altered form wherein these new aristocrats are empowered beneficiaries of a world beyond their powers to affect and doomed to a beautiful (Instagramable) existential emptiness. (Coppola explores different variations on this theme in *Lost in Translation* [2003], *Somewhere* [2010], and *The Bling Ring* [2013].) As a comparison between time periods, the example of Hilton contains all the more pathos when one considers the role that she was compelled to play by the ruling aesthetic *mythos* most readily available to ambitious Women of Mass Culture in the early 2000s (the sex tape scandal, the performed stupidity exemplified in *The Simple Life*, the endless barrage of public ridicule and dehumanizing appraisals).²⁷

However, one of the main tropes of Hilton's revival of her own image (most prominently with her *This is Paris* documentary in 2020) is to distance herself from the Dumb Blonde Slut mythology that made her famous. She reveals herself as a modern Marquise de Merteuil, redeemed by her hidden victimization (boarding school abuse as a child), and this time the Monstrous Woman is rewarded and called, in an embarrassingly condescending term, a "girl boss" who overcame the constraints of her society by embodying them. But Coppola's narratives of Aristocratic Capitalism--which includes *Marie Antoinette*--provide a more ambivalent emotional access to the problem of pleasure-seeking power, by embodying both the beauty and the emptiness of *libertinage* as it lingeringly and even more decadently exists in the 21st century, now in the form of reality TV shows like *Keeping Up With the Kardashians*, any of the *Real*

²⁷ It is no accident--or should not be read as one--that Hilton's protracted death, as an exclusively sexualized character in the 2005 re-make *House of Wax*, orchestrates a lengthy shot of her dead body on its knees, suggestively impaled with a pole through its throat, viewed through the filter of a home video camera and thereby suggesting the pornographic context of her cultural mythos exemplified in the sex tape scandal (but essential, as a typology, to her comedic character, just like Marilyn Monroe before her).

Housewives franchise on the Bravo Network, or *Temptation Island* and its analogues. Hedonism never looked so boring.

No work of representational art in the past 100 years adequately addresses contemporary aesthetic concerns without in some guise addressing this loaded, fickle, *paradoxical-at-every-turn* inheritance of gendered signs that became increasingly potent after the Enlightenment, as the question of “essential” roles on the basis of sex gradually entered its own, protracted and ongoing (and likely interminable), period of reformation. Indeed, it is no accident that “gender” has attained a central place in the public debates of (neo)liberal countries around the basic constituents of subjective identity or selfhood. It is the great theme (in psychoanalysis, the primordial theme) of the Embodied Self taking on Social Significance. (Lars von Trier’s trilogy of *Antichrist* [2009], *Melancholia* [2011], and *Nymphomaniac* [2013] is an exemplary case of this theme reduced to its most basic Brochian *mythos* in three variations.) The notion that there actually *is* such a thing as gender “identity” is a very tenacious illusion. And *Les liaisons dangereuses* is one of the first great prose achievements in the long list of modern Battles of the Sexes, perhaps *the* principle exemplar of the bourgeois aesthetic in its infancy and all the ambiguity of possibility that comes with that.²⁸

²⁸ This is far from a minor fact if one considers it in light of a centerpiece in Jacques Lacan’s antiphilosophy, the ultimate antinomy he positions at the heart of modern subjectivity: sexual difference. (Indeed, one might call the Lacanian theorization of sexual difference one of the most elaborate decadent forms of late bourgeois treatments of that theme--or else, a heroic attempt at mathematizing thought as envisioned by Hermann Broch in his final years). It is also traced by Stanley Cavell in his attempts to marry American philosophical history with its Hollywood contributions to the Comedy of Remarriage genre that extends back to Shakespeare from films like *Bringing Up Baby* or *Adam’s Rib*. The two most useful works by Cavell in this context are *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* and *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life*. This line of thought also allows for the history of Laclos adaptations to serve as evidence for the following claim from one of Sontag’s lesser known pieces of writing, because uncollected during her lifetime, “The Third World of Women.” The passage from the aristocracy to the bourgeoisie held onto lasciviousness, transposing it into romantic love, but it also retained the diminution of women because a true revolution never actually took place. In her essay, Sontag argues that the plight of women transcends class boundaries and cannot be reduced to a Marxist inflection (which includes all the coordinates of Marxian ideas, from his understanding of capital to his fantasy of communism): “As I see it, the main point about the relationship of the struggle of women to what Marxist-oriented revolutionary movements define as the central struggle, the class struggle, is the following. To liberate women requires a cultural

This “bourgeois aesthetic” concerns the freedom of mind in the world, loosed from dogmatic spiritual authority as well as made empty (what existentialism later re-names its pregrant freedom) for the construction of new authorities. Reduced to the “battle of the sexes,” the bourgeois situation assumes the most basic formal dynamic of consciousness negotiating reality with itself: in the Romanticist and Idealist senses, the sublime confrontation of the I and the not-I is envisaged as a game of seduction. The transition from feudal aristocracy to bourgeois aristocracy was a long road, but it rests on the emergence and establishment of dogmatic kitsch in ever-more secular modes. What matters most in this early version of *Laclos* (as opposed to Coppola’s revisionist treatment through contemporary eyes) is the centrality of seduction in the game of social power wherein the female seducer is the most diabolical because most defined by the nature of a facade. Valmont, on the other hand--the born-again male libertine--is the one who capitulates to the bourgeois dogma of monogamous romantic attachment that makes Mythologized Love the official earthly mode of spiritual communion with the Divine. Bourgeois marriage is the legal recognition of this covenant, and the source of salvation for bodily desire. Non-monogamous love remains antithetical to the normative values of the late-bourgeois world; and so the Marquise de Merteuil remains a devil, while her and Valmont’s program of aesthetic

revolution that will attack attitudes and mental habits which otherwise could well survive the reconstruction of economic relationships that is the goal of the class struggle. The position of women could, conceivably, be scarcely affected by a change in class relationships. Because Marx and Engels were humanists, heirs of the Enlightenment, they denounced the oppression of women under capitalism. But the traditional ‘feminism’ of Marx and his successors is not *logically* connected with the Marxist analysis. (Neither, I would argue, is Freud’s coarse ‘antifeminism’ *logically* connected with the basic ideas of psychoanalytic theory.) Socialism will not inevitably bring about the liberation of women. Nevertheless, only in a society that one calls, for want of a better name, socialist, would it be *possible* to invent and institutionalize forms of life that would liberate women. Therefore, though the struggle to build socialism and the cause of women’s liberation are hardly identical, militant feminists do have a vested interest in the fortunes of a revolutionary socialist movement and good reason to be, if only tacitly, allies--as they have reason to be enemies of all right-revolutionary (or fascist) movements, which always preach the reinforcement of male privilege and the subservience of women” (Sontag 781).

amorality continues to reign supreme in the free market pursuit of profit.²⁹ Whatever sells is *good*.

Frears's adaptation was the first major commercial success for Laclos adaptations (though preceded by an important adaptation directed by Roger Vadim in 1959), to be surpassed a decade later (in popularity) by *Cruel Intentions*. What survives amidst all adaptations is the discovery of monogamous devotional love as a salvation from the treachery of aestheticist or hedonistic pleasure-seeking. But the real narrative *allure* of these adaptations remains the game of duplicity itself. In that sense, one can see 2007's TV series *Gossip Girl* as yet another rendering, for the cell phone and internet age, of *Les Liaisons dangereuses* as filtered through *Cruel Intentions*, where the fascination Laclos's novel appears yet again in its truer form, as the incapacity to articulate the boundary between machination and reality. And it is at that level of manipulation (controlling perceptions of reality via broadcast media) that Laclos's novel finally reaches Moore's film mentioned above, which is explicitly intended to function for the American government (and particularly George W. Bush's administration) the way Valmont's public denunciation and unmasking functioned for the Marquise de Merteuil. Only now, in a proper post-Godardian (or post-*auteurist*) sense, the artist (Moore) is one of the characters in the drama, which has irretrievably spilled over into the real (as if it wasn't always already there).

²⁹ This allows for a radical re-reading of a largely forgotten (in critical discourse) masterpiece directed by Marcel Carné, *Children of Paradise*. Often, it is read as a kind of kitsch recapitulation of melodramatic motifs (even insultingly as "the French *Gone With the Wind*"). But this is true only insofar as Baptiste, the melancholic victim of unrequited love, is viewed as the "hero" in the traditional sense. Rather, it is Garance who emerges as the hero, and Baptiste is the victim and perpetrator of his own possessive sense of love in the form of divine bourgeois devotion. Garance is "truth," according to the carnival show booth where we first see her--"but only from the neck up." She is unattainable, ungraspable, a proto-Lynchian heroine (think Patricia Arquette in *Lost Highway* when she tells Bill Pullman "you'll never have me"). Her refusal to be possessed while still offering herself wherever she's desired makes her the oppositional determination of Monogamous Love and also a major precursor to Charlotte Gainsbourg's character in Lars von Trier's *Nymphomaniac*.

The visual and narrative metaphors used to bookend Frears's and Moore's films indicate the basic tautology of the ideas they wish to express in their different contexts (which is not to say that the two films are identical in their expressiveness or in their meanings). What's identical between the two is also present in Laclos's novel (as well as all of its adaptations and variations, down to *Gossip Girl*) is a kind of "conventional vocabulary" (in Broch's terms) of power and control. In Laclos's novel, this vocabulary had a different meaning than it does in Frears's film, because it *really did* transpose the transition from one epoch to another, from the aristocratic to the bourgeois subject of pleasure. In its reduction to a *mythos* (the figure of the libertine, broken into two forms, male and female) it embraces what Broch calls "the totality of a world" that is also full of "counterweight," this being the entirely new monogamous and devotional love that will define the next 250-plus years, exemplified in Madame de Tourvel's seductive puritanism (Broch, "The Style of the Mythical Age" 12). Not that "love" itself was a new concept, as a way one person can feel toward another, but its precise Romanticist sense (accompanied by the "modern subject" and its identification with a covenant) was indeed new and was an effect of its oppositional determination in conjunction with *libertinage* and aesthetic decadence.

200 years later, the repetition of the same ideas in *Cruel Intentions* becomes regressive, trite, naive--that is, kitsch. The turn to monogamous devotion becomes the normative aesthetic that the bourgeois aristocracy performs (from the "Real Housewives" to the Kardashians). What Sontag would term "stylization" (or the Camp sensibility) is precisely what Broch refers to as the lesser kind of art that is "bound to [a] conventional vocabulary, seduced by the known richness of its content" (Broch, "The Style of the Mythical Age" 12). In this sense, *Cruel Intentions* is readable as a Camp variation on *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, dressing a trite conception of love

with more modern spices. (But of course, nothing can really be done to dispel the diabolical attractiveness of Katherine's--the Marquise de Merteuil's--sovereign sadism.)

After an extended close-up on a pair of hands holding a letter that eventually reveals the title-card (the only major reference to the novel's exclusively epistolary form), Frears's *Dangerous Liaisons* begins with an over-the-shoulder and reflected medium close-up of Glenn Close, as the Marquise de Merteuil, inspecting her face in a mirror. It is this image, and not the letter (although the letter is related as a source of the film's theatrical metaphor), that supplies the major thematic function of Living-as-Playing-a-Role in the visual language of the mask, the costume, the facade. Embodied comportment merely replaces the privileged literary form of expression dominant in the European imagination in the late 18th century, and which became the primary appearance of high Bourgeois Form during the 19th century--the exploration of psychology (Richardson) and sociology (Balzac, Zola).

What follow are a series of images insinuating the careful and delicate rituals that contribute to the maintenance of these essential modes of appearing: the servants that ready the room, bringing in the light of day; applying make-up to face, neck, chest, shoulders; choosing of shoes, outfit, fragrance, wig; application of powder--the final settling of one's three-dimensional image for participation in the spectacular *Everyday World Transformed for Enjoyment*. This emphasis on self-conscious appearance in a theatrical mode transforms a major aesthetic feature of Laclos's novel (its epistolary form), but in doing so it also indicates how the possibilities of both deception and self-deception extend far beyond the literary while remaining in the mode of period fiction. Readers of Laclos "are involved in an essentially epistemological problem--how to know, how, from fragmentary and slanted accounts of characters and events, to put together a total and objective view" (Brooks 175). By this account, Laclos (along with his late-

Enlightenment contemporaries) anticipates by two centuries Fredric Jameson's concept of cognitive mapping.³⁰

In this light, Moore's polemical 2004 documentary about the George W. Bush administration begins in a similar way, with performance (now cinematic or televisual rather than theatrical, image-based rather than stage-based) as an effective metaphor of the political style in early 21st century American life. In a brief prologue setting the scene of events beginning during the 2000 US presidential election in Florida, Moore implies a conspiracy whereby Bush's institutional and generational connections created a fraudulent victory. After the Supreme Court finally decides the election in favor of Bush, a group of black senators submit petitions claiming misconduct and widespread disenfranchisement of voters on the basis of race, but the petitions receive no confirming signatures to proceed their investigations. In response, the public voices disapproval, and Bush's legislative attempts and judicial appointments are stalled. He's ineffective but unbothered, and he goes on vacation during 42% of his first 8 months as president, Moore reports. *Fahrenheit 9/11* paints a picture of Bush as a Man of Leisure (an asexual, juvenile libertine), uninterested in or unqualified for the responsibility of his office and incapable of understanding the life of an "actually working" American. He, like Coppola's Marie Antoinette as the symbol of Aristocratic Decadence played to the tune of contemporary capitalism (i.e. a remix of Bow Wow Wow's "I Want Candy"), is a Boy of Fate caught up in a Network of Power entirely beyond his capacity to understand. At the close of his prologue, Moore narrates how Bush then goes to sleep on the night of September 10th, 2001, "in a bed made of fine French linens." Moore's deliberate reference to *ancien régime* aristocracy in its genealogical trace-presence is unmistakable here.

³⁰ Jameson's rendering of this concept is offered in *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*.

Then, during the film's opening credit sequence, a strain of portentous music accompanies images of Bush and members of his administration readying themselves for TV appearances: Bush hooks in his microphone and a woman combs his hair; Donald Rumsfeld checks on some statistics for talking points; a set of hands reach into the frame to powder Dick Cheney's face; Condoleeza Rice has her make-up retouched. The political class readies itself for addresses to the masses, putting on its public face for the camera that stands in as that empty Universal Subject to be swayed. This is what one might call aesthetic engagement in the active rather than passive sense of contemplation. They are *doing work* on the aesthetic sphere as an artist would, and the public face (the politician's mask) is a tool for controlling the public's response to (and understanding of) political action; a ritual of aesthetic manipulation conducted by the political class, which remains in the hands of the aristocracy (or the equivalent thereof) in its late-capitalist (re)formations.

"President" is a role that the capitalist aristocracy now plays. In Moore's film, George W. Bush effectively *is* Paris Hilton as heir to the throne, marking this film's affinity with Coppola's more affectionate portrayal of the same theme two years later. But the emphasis on performance allies it equally to Frears's adaptation of Laclos decades earlier. In many ways, Moore's film anticipates all of the themes defining Donald Trump's run for office, his 2016 victory, his subsequent presidency, and the aftermath of his 2020 defeat--as well as anticipating the increasing calls for celebrities or gurus, rather than traditional politicians, to run for political office. The dividing line between celebrity and actual power continues to fade, if it had ever been separated at all.

In Frears's film, after Valmont and the Marquise de Merteuil declare war on each other--two former lovers long engaged in a supreme game of erotic puppeteering administered on

unsuspecting participants, but now turning against each other--he ensures her social destruction by revealing to the public her years of behind-the-scenes maneuvering and scheming with people's lives. In the final scene, she appears in her usual box at the theater, but when she walks in, following the custom of standing at the edge of the box to scan the room and perform one's arrival, the audience all turns to glower at her. Immediately, she senses the cause: they see her now, in the full truth of her actions, and she has lost control of her own life by losing her effective power over others (*i.e.* the death of aristocracy itself). When she retreats back into her solitude, Frears holds a close-up on the character's face, her make-up smeared after claspng her mouth in the shock and humiliation of her undoing. The true horror of this Aristocratic Decadence is the baselessness of its privilege; the simple possibility that chance can always turn the tides of power and throw the mighty into the muck. In the most basic form of its *mythos*, the experience of Madame de Merteuil is the experience of Aristocratic Decadence understanding its own illusory nature and the condemnation, by the world it viewed as a puppet-show, of its megalomaniacal presumption.

But it is furthermore an indictment of what Broch termed the "aestheticizing literary man," which for him chiefly included figures like Nero and Hitler, the mythological figurehead of a totalitarian network of power (Arendt 122). This "aestheticizing literary man" is also the kitsch-man, because both stem from the idolization of beauty, purity, perfection. And here "beauty" refers to ephemeral attractiveness, fashion, as first embodied most concretely in *l'art pour l'art*, the major aesthetic mode that passes directly from the aristocracy to the bourgeoisie. If the purpose of art is ornament, finery of appearance, the effective value-system of a society likewise becomes defined by ornament and finery of appearance. And, traditionally, with this necessarily ideological conception of beauty (a beauty conceived as seamliness within a concrete

cultural context) come such ideas as purity and perfection--the idyll--which leaves fertile soil for the rise of fascism in all its forms (which for Broch includes both Nero and Hitler, anachronism be damned).

The “aestheticizing literary man” is the one who plays Literary Master with the Masses in the same way as Valmont and the Marquise design the *liaisons* of their milieu; in the same way as Edward Bernays manipulated the public’s “relations” to businesses and politicians (from American Tobacco to Calvin Coolidge). It is not, however, in exactly the same way as those protesters in North Carolina achieved rights of service at Woolworth’s, but it feeds on the same principle of knowledge, grounded in both kitsch and the aesthetic sense. For the “aestheticizing literary man,” all life becomes a work of art expected to conform to their desire, as in Broch’s description of Nero: “The firework spectacle of Rome in flames and the human torches of Christians impaled in the imperial gardens was certainly prized artistic currency for the aesthetic emperor, who showed how he could remain deaf to the screams of pain coming from his victims or even appreciate them as an aesthetic musical accompaniment” (Broch, “Notes on the Problem of Kitsch” 65).

At the end of *Fahrenheit 9/11*, Moore laments the fact that a vast majority of the soldiers serving in the Iraq War after September 11, 2001, come from “the worst parts of town,” “the worst schools,” and “have it the hardest.” These people, Moore narrates, are sacrifices for “our”--the American people’s--freedom, and they have been used as empty symbols of this in a war waged for nefarious purposes but touted in terms of moral beauty--that is, the soldiers are pawns in a kitsch puppetshow enacted to control the public’s knowledge of political reality and its approval of political schemes. Moore’s narration expresses hope that his film accomplish the necessary unmasking that leads the proverbial audience to glower at the Aestheticizing Literary

Figures of Power, as they present themselves and perennially perform their arrivals on the political screen, etching out their ideal *mythos* in the mass political image.

The film's final images present the **actual** performances of the figures who'd been getting camera-ready during the opening credits: Bush, Rumsfeld, Cheney, and Rice all touting the presence of Weapons of Mass Destruction (itself a mythical term, in Broch's sense, for an ultimate threat of evil) in Iraq. Moore hopes to effectively produce an aesthetic response to his contemporary reality by demonstrating the aesthetic pretense and moral hypocrisy of American politics. For Moore, American politicians are bent on American supremacy and the continued thriving of its elite, its capitalist aristocracy, and this requires a world that bows to the consonance of its rule. These "Men of Desire" (Barthes's later term that equates with Broch's "aestheticizing literary man," and signals a nod to Kant in that these are also Men of Reason) are the real aesthetes and the real evil: "they are enchanted by the consonance of their own system, and they become murderers because they are prepared to sacrifice everything to this consonance, this 'beautiful' consistency" (Arendt 122-3). This is what leads Kundera to situate kitsch, in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, most firmly in the domain of political theater. Sontag's argument concerning the photographs of torture at Abu Ghraib offer a similar sense of this aesthetic spectacle:

Considered in this light, the photographs are us. That is, they are representative of the fundamental corruptions of any foreign occupation together with the Bush administration's distinctive policies. The Belgians in the Congo, the French in Algeria, practiced torture and sexual humiliation on despised recalcitrant natives. Add to this generic corruption the mystifying, near-total unpreparedness of the American rulers of Iraq to deal with the complex realities of the country after its 'liberation'--that is,

conquest. And add to that the overarching doctrines of the Bush administration, namely that the United States has embarked on an endless war (against a protean enemy called ‘terrorism’) and that those detained in this war are, if the president so decides, ‘unlawful combatants’--a policy enunciated by Donald Rumsfeld as early as January 2002--and thus, as Rumsfeld said, ‘technically’ they ‘do not have any rights under the Geneva Convention,’ and you have a perfect recipe for the cruelties and crimes committed against the thousands incarcerated without charges or access to lawyers in American-run prisons that have been set up since the attacks of September 11, 2001 (Sontag, “Regarding the Torture of Others” 131-2).

It is in this precise sense that Kundera writes, in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, that “in this light, we can regard the gulag as a septic tank used by totalitarian kitsch to dispose of its refuse” (Kundera 252).

The Truth Content of Romanticism and The Rediscovery of Myth as an Archive of Kitsch

But this political theater is also grounded in a very personal and individual theater of kitsch as well. This personal and individual kitsch is the reigning aesthetic of Bourgeois Divine Love, the individual’s expulsion from the world and connection to the pure metaphysical force of Desire Fulfilled in the Individual (the concrete reconciliation of Subject and Substance, in Wagner’s profane Hegelianism). At the height of Romanticism, this mythology has its apotheosis in Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde* and its “tragic dissolution” of the mythological fantasy of the love-potion that goes through many variations in the history of the mythic iconography borrowed by the opera (Sontag, “Wagner’s Fluids” 200).

Wagner's is "a potion that, rather than making something possible, heightens impossibility, loosening the tie to life. The fluid that Brangäne gives the hapless pair does not just reveal (and therefore unleash) a feeling. It undoes a world. Love subtracts them instantly, totally, from civil society, from normal ties and obligations, casting them into a vertiginous solitariness (rather than a romantic solitude *à deux*) that brings on an inexorable darkening of consciousness." This is Sontag's reading of Wagner from a 1987 program essay accompanying Jonathan Miller's staging of *Tristan und Isolde* at the Los Angeles Opera. Wagner conceives love as passion, wherein the individual falls out of the world and effectively dies to it by giving over to the sublime force of Libidinal Desire. "Passion means an exalted passivity," Sontag writes (Sontag, "Wagner's Fluids" 200-1).

Love is a drug, a transformation of consciousness that, like heroin (to recall the Lou Reed lyric), provides an ecstatic removal from reality, the desired "surcease of oblivion." While Wagner does foreground explicitly sexual eroticism, with the music and narrative of Act II offering "a most extravagant way of describing the voluptuous loss of consciousness in orgasm," this eroticism is not Wagner's true subject, says Sontag. Rather, "Act III makes it clear that the eroticism is more means than end, a platform for the propaganda against lucidity; that the deepest subject is the surrender of consciousness as such" (Sontag, "Wagner's Fluids" 201). This kind of surrender is like a tragic inversion of the May Day parade image in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*:

The women all wore red, white, and blue blouses, and the public, looking on from balconies and windows, could make out various five-pointed stars, hearts, and letters when the marchers went into formation. Small brass bands accompanied the individual groups, keeping everyone in step. As a group approached the reviewing stand, even the

most blasé faces would beam with dazzling smiles, as if trying to prove they were properly joyful or, to be more precise, in proper agreement. Nor were they merely expressing political agreement with Communism; no, theirs was an agreement with being as such. The May Day ceremony drew its inspiration from the deep well of the categorical agreement with being (Kundera 249).

As the May Day parade's tragic inversion, the deaths of Tristan and Isolde in Wagner's opera reveal precisely what Kundera reveals in his novel, that the May Day parade--and kitsch itself--is nothing but "a folding screen set up to curtain off death" (Kundera 253). Total agreement of being is as empty as death, and just as threatening to life.

Wagner takes this subject from "the elaborate understanding of solitude and the exploration of extremes of feeling that seem the most original achievements of the Romantic movements in the arts" of the 19th century. In this Romantic mythology, the self reigns supreme in a world that "is thought to be so easily negated by the pressure of extreme feeling" (Sontag, *Wagner's Fluids* 202). Undoing a world means, in Heideggerian terminology, to conceal it, even if just from oneself. And this is one of the services kitsch performs, by providing something to which one can surrender one's consciousness. Kitsch is a relief from the agonies of uncertainty and responsibility, what Kierkegaard called the dizziness of freedom; it is a balm that one places over one's inexorable anxiety. The Wagnerian construction of an overwhelming spectacle, in the precise sense of aesthetic sublimity, is structured both technically and narratively to function as relief in this sense of total surrender: "The characteristic, plot-generating situation of Wagner's operas is one that has gone on too long, and is infused with the anguished longing to terminate. ('Unending melody'--Wagner's phrase for his distinctive musical line--is one formal equivalent of this essential subject of prolongation, of excruciation)"

(Sontag, “Wagner’s Fluids” 203). Kitsch, in order to function at its greatest level of power, must be totalizing, enrapturing, but it must also numb the senses to ordinary or actual reality.

Lars Von Trier’s 2011 film *Melancholia* appropriates both Wagnerian and more generally Romanticist iconography to tell a mythological story about the existential finitude of human consciousness, updating the sense of world-undoing taken from *Tristan und Isolde*, and putting it in more literal terms while removing Bourgeois Love from the center of the picture as just another variation of kitsch’s repression of the real and its totalitarian allure. In the film’s opening prologue, during which Wagner’s overture from *Tristan und Isolde* plays over a set of images prefiguring the film’s plot and major themes, a particularly stylized image appears featuring three of the film’s characters (Justine, Claire, and Claire’s son) standing equidistant from each other on an expanse of green turf, facing the camera as if in a tableaux. Above each of them is an astral body that aligns with their respective characterological or typological figurations later in the film. Justine stands below Melancholia, the blue planet that has appeared from behind the sun and will destroy earth and all known life. Claire stands beneath the sun, a symbol or principle of Life that, until now, covered over the threat of Melancholia. And finally, Claire’s son stands beneath the moon, which reflects the light of both Melancholia and the sun (meaning, of both Claire and Justine).

In the first half of the film, the story of Justine tracks the increase of her depressive catatonia as parallel to the arrival of Melancholia. Part I begins with the purest scene of happiness in the film, as Justine and her new husband Michael (the beautiful fool) find a great deal of humor in trying to wind a long white limousine along an unpaved, narrow, and winding country road. Then, they arrive at Claire’s husband’s estate to be greeted by frustration at their lateness. An elaborate ceremony has been prepared for Justine’s wedding, and both Claire and

her husband express exhaustion at Justine's apparent lack of respect for their efforts and expenses. Eventually, Claire pulls Justine aside to remind her not to make a scene, the first indication that Justine suffers from recurrent spells of depressive episodes. As the night continues and unravels, Justine chooses to reject her marriage, to quit her corporate job, and to refuse the general Social Festivity represented by the sense of ceremony, tradition, and ritual contained in all the imagery centered around the ornate wedding reception. She rejects Life as it exists or is offered, and indeed much later she will tell Claire that "life on earth is evil."

Every character in *Melancholia* can be identified with a type. Kiefer Sutherland, as Claire's husband, plays the Man of Science and Reason as well as an Elitist Miser (he forbids Claire from researching Melancholia, insisting she take everything he tells her as incontrovertible truth, and constantly complains about spending money, also expressing disdain for servants). Next, John Hurt plays Justine's neglectful or absent father. Charlotte Rampling plays her cold, distant, probably narcissistic mother. Each of these is, to some extent, a cliché. Justine herself is the figure of nihilistic depression, refusing all consolation for herself and refusing to provide it for others. Claire plays the figure of a Type A personality, dependent for sanity on expert planning, the reliability of routine, and the comfort of tradition and ritual. In the first half of the film, Justine's mounting depressive state reacts against the constraints of societal normalcy and traditional signs of happiness or success (the marriage to a Beautiful Fool, her new promotion as Art Director at an advertising firm she regards as exploitative). Then, during the film's second half, when the world *really is* going to end, with human existence reduced to meaningless oblivion (at least projectively), Justine is suddenly serene while Claire devolves into pure existential dread.

They are two polar opposites as types, each representing a different Brochian *mythos*. Justine is the destructive force, accepting as imperative the eventual undoing of all worlds, in keeping with the sense of the melancholic temperament as an experience of the death in all things, of the passing of all experience, and the necessary incapacity to hold fast to any concrete reality.³¹ In other words, she represents the negative pole of kitsch mentioned above, the ecstatic “death” from *Tristan und Isolde*. Claire represents the power of tradition, from her orchestration or overseeing of a perfect wedding reception to her later attempt to ritualistically stave off the inevitable by having a toast of wine on the terrace as Melancholia collides with earth. She is, as it were, an individual embodiment of the ideal of the May Day parade.

As types, they give the film a different kind of meaning than most readings provide, which prefer to situate it most often within the confines of modern cultural and neurological interpretations of “clinical depression.” But Von Trier’s choices of terminology and iconography reject that interpretation, at least insofar as it can be deemed allegorical in any direct sense.

³¹ Here is a description by Broch, in his late novel *The Death of Virgil*, of this same basic mythic situation: “[Publius Vergilius Maro] had always been aware of this strange almost volcanic population in his hands, always the intimation of the strange separate life of his hands had accompanied him, an intimation that once and for all had been forbidden to overstep the threshold into actual knowledge, as if an obscure danger lurked in such knowledge, and when now, as was his habit, he turned the seal ring, the one finely-wrought and even a little unmasculine in its delicate workmanship, which he wore on a finger of his right hand, it was as if by so doing he could avert that obscure danger, as if he could appease the hands’ longing, as if by this act he could bring them to a certain self-control, abating their fear, the longing fear of peasant hands that never again might grasp the plough or scatter the seed and therefore had learned to grasp the intangible, the foreboding fear of hands to whose will-to-form, robbed of the earth, nothing remained but a life of their own in the incomprehensible universe, threatened and threatening, reaching so deeply into nothingness and so gripped by its perils that the dread foreboding, lifted to a certain extent above itself, was transmuted into a mighty endeavor, an endeavor to hold fast to the unity of human existence, to preserve the integrity of human desire in a way that would protect it from disintegrating into manifold existences, full of small desires and small in desire; for insufficient was the desire of hands, insufficient the desire of eyes, insufficient the desire of hearing, sufficient alone was the desire of heart and mind communing together, the yearning completion of the infinity within and without, beholding, hearkening, comprehending, breathing in the unity of the doubled breath, the unity of the universe; for by unity alone might one overcome the lowering hopeless blindness of fearful isolation, in unity alone occurred the twofold development from the roots of understanding, and this he divined, this he had always divined--, oh the yearning of one who was and always must be only a lodger, oh yearning of man--, this had been his prescient-listening, his prescient-breathing, his prescient-thinking, drawn by reciprocal listening, breathing, thinking, into the flowing light of the universe, into the the never-ending approach to the endlessness of the universe, unattainable the pearly shimmer of its abysmal depths, unattainable even its outermost edge, so that the longing desirous hand dares not even touch it” (Broch 18-9).

Rather, Von Trier's appropriation of types, or basic mythic categories of social reality, should be read in the sense that Kundera describes kitsch: "The feeling induced by kitsch must be a kind the multitudes can share. Kitsch may not, therefore, depend on an unusual situation; it must derive from the basic images people have engraved in their memories: the ungrateful daughter, the neglected father, children running on the grass, the motherland betrayed, first love" (Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* 251). However, importantly, Von Trier is not making a kitsch film. Rather, he is making *use* of kitsch as a starting point for his story; as a source of recognizable imagery that can allow him to articulate a certain basic *mythos* of consciousness, in its trans-historical forms, confronting either actual catastrophe or existential dread.

During one curious scene, rarely mentioned at length in readings of the film, Justine finds herself anxious and alone in a small art-book library as the wedding reception dissolves without her elsewhere. Claire has stormed out in frustration at Justine's failed attempts to join in the festivities--to express her proper *agreement* with the ceremony. On the surrounding shelves, a series of books are opened to pages displaying classic examples of abstract modernism, such as the geometric shapes of Kazemir Malevich. They express Justine's world-destroying melancholia, both the exuberance of destruction (modernism's rejection of history) and the anxiety of decision (what to do now, in the wake of such rejection). Justine changes all of the books to show older representational art, from Millais's *Ophelia* (1851-2) to Bruegel the Elder's *The Hunters in the Snow* (1565), both of which were also referenced directly in the film's prologue. In this way, Von Trier signals his own method: a film narrative made up of images quelled from the archive of mind, rearranged in the context of the present; a collection of *mythos*

offered not in order to raise them to the Absolute, but to acknowledge the way they do, in fact, compose the worlds around us.

The representational images appease Justine's anxiety; they appease the fear of dissolution and alienation. But they do so differently than the wedding ceremony does for Claire. Justine knows the images are false, ephemeral, doomed to oblivion. This should be read in the same way as Sabina, in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, relates to her own kitsch. Living for a while with an old woman and an old man, the latter of whom has become her patron as a rich lover of paintings. After a long session of work, Sabina "laid down her palette and went into the bathroom to wash. The old man raised himself out of the armchair and reached for his cane, which was leaning against a table. The door of the studio led directly out to the lawn. It was growing dark. Fifty feet away was a white clapboard house. The ground-floor windows were lit. Sabina was moved by the two windows shining out into the day" (Kundera 255). The rest is also worth quoting at length, considering Sabina as a quasi-tautological equivalent for Justine:

All her life she had proclaimed kitsch her enemy. But hadn't she in fact been carrying it with her? Her kitsch was her image of home, all peace, quiet, and harmony, and ruled by a loving mother and wise father. It was an image that took shape within her after the death of her parents. The less her life resembled that sweetest of dreams, the more sensitive she was to its magic, and more than once she shed tears when the ungrateful daughter in a sentimental film embraced the neglected father as the windows of the happy family's house shone out into the dying day.

[...] Now all of them [Sabina, the old man, and his wife] were having supper together. The old woman called Sabina 'my daughter,' but all indications would lead one

to believe the opposite, namely, that Sabina was the mother and that her two children doted on her, worshipped her, would do anything she asked.

Had she then, herself on the threshold of old age, found the parents who had been snatched from her as a girl? Had she at last found the children she had never had herself?

She was well aware it was an illusion. Her days with the aging couple were merely a brief interval. The old man was seriously ill, and when his wife was left on her own, she would go and live with their son in Canada. Sabina's path of betrayals would then continue elsewhere, and from the depths of her being, a silly mawkish song about two shining windows and the happy family living behind them would occasionally make its way into the unbearable lightness of being.

Touched by the song, Sabina did not take her feelings seriously. She knew only too well that the song was a beautiful lie. As soon as kitsch is recognized for the lie it is, it moves into the context of non-kitsch, thus losing its authoritarian power and becoming as touching as any other human weakness. For none among us is superman enough to escape kitsch completely. No matter how we scorn it, kitsch is an integral part of the human condition (Kundera 255-6).

Justine enacts Von Trier's own dialectical sublation of modernist self-reflexivity and abstraction into a new mode of representation that's conscious of kitsch and makes use of it in this self-conscious mode. All of Von Trier's work functions, in one way or another, to make of traditional figuration itself an abstraction, in a new self-conscious aestheticization.

By the end of the film, Von Trier returns to a new variation on that tableaux of Justine, Claire, and Claire's son described above. After rejecting Claire's request to toast with a glass of wine on the terrace, as a way of ritualizing the experience of apocalypse, Justine shows an

unexpected kindness to Claire's son when he reports that his father told him "there's nothing to do and nowhere to hide." Then Justine responds that his dad must have forgotten about the "magic cave." He asks her if the magic cave is something everybody can make, and she responds in keeping with her earlier assertion of uniqueness: "Aunt Steelbreaker [meaning Justine] can." And the "magic cave" is just a small tee-pee made of large sticks, into which she guides Claire and her son. In the *mythos* of the film, Justine is the sign of destruction--the only one capable of serenely acknowledging oblivion. Claire is "anxiety" (her husband was "denial"), and her son is "blissful ignorance." Around them, Justine builds the most basic and primitive form of kitsch, the bulwark against the inevitable. Together they sit inside it as the world dies.

In this way, one might read this ending, and the idea of the magic cave, as imagining a version of what Jacques Lacan means by "shelter" in the following (slightly cryptic) formulation: "The term *Signor, Herr* [the Name of the Father], passes underneath--the absolute master, I once said, which is in fact death, has disappeared there. Furthermore, do we not see, behind this, the emergence of that which forced Freud to find in the myths of the death of the father the regulation of his desire? After all, it is to be found in Nietzsche, who declares, in his own myth, that God is dead. And it is perhaps against the background of the same reasons. For the myth of the *God is dead*--which, personally, I feel much less sure about, as a myth of course, than most contemporary intellectuals, which is in no sense a declaration of theism, nor of faith in the resurrection--perhaps this myth is simply a shelter against the threat of castration" (Lacan 27). The planet Melancholia coming out from behind the sun and revealing its threat is a theological image, undeniably: the destroyer of worlds. And the shelter of the magic cave is the basic mythological form of denying or fighting against this principle of the subject's necessary and

total powerlessness in the face of its inevitable oblivion and its structural emptiness. It is an image of kitsch revealed in its full human tenderness, like Sabina's "silly mawkish song."

One of Broch's best descriptions of his conception of the Cartesian Subject as reduced to an "ego nucleus" as the source of communicating the "earthly absolute" (the Unchangingness of the Eternal) is found early in *The Death of Virgil*, as the first moment when Virgil feels the sense of futility in the task of shoring up values:

Now, tempting though it would have been to let himself be carried off on an ebbing consciousness, to escape in this way the noise, to shut himself off from the yelling mob, the volcanic, infernal yelling which flowed incessantly and heavily over the plaza as though it would never come to an end, such an escape was forbidden him, all the more as it might lead to death; for overstrong was the command to hold fast to each smallest particle of time, to the smallest particle of every circumstance, and to embody all of them in memory as if they could be preserved in memory through all deaths for all time; he clung to consciousness, he clung to it with the strength of a man who feels the most significant thing of his life approaching and is full of anxiety lest he miss it, and consciousness kept awake by the awakened fear obeyed his will: nothing escaped his observation, neither the careful gestures and the careless comfort of the smooth-faced, young, and foppish assistant-surgeon, who at Augustus' order was now at his side, nor the stolid, estranged faces of the porters who had brought a litter aboard to fetch him, the sick and strengthless man, as if he were some fragile and precious commodity; he took notice of all, he must retain all (Broch 24-5).

It is in this same spirit that one should read Sontag's short story "Debriefing," collected in *I, etcetera* in 1978:

We know more than we can use. Look at all this stuff I've got in my head: rockets and Venetian churches, David Bowie and Diderot, nuoc mam and Big Macs, sunglasses and orgasms. How many newspapers and magazines do you read? For me, they're what candy or Quaaludes or scream therapy are for my neighbors. I get my daily ration from the bilious Lincoln Brigade veteran who runs a tobacco shop on 110th Street, not from the blind news agent in the wooden pillbox on Broadway, who's nearer my apartment.

And we don't know nearly enough (Sontag 38).

At the end of the story, Sontag summarizes this situation of consciousness in the similar sense of *determined anxiety* that Broch summons to imagine Virgil's idealized task: "Sisyphus, I. I cling to my rock, you don't have to chain me. Stand back! I roll it up--up, up. And...down we go. I knew that would happen. See, I'm on my feet again. See, I'm starting to roll it up again. Don't try to talk me out of it. Nothing, nothing could tear me away from this rock" (Sontag 52).

Understood in this way, the aesthetic sensibility is a tool for world-building, like Benjamin's articulation of the Angel of History as a well-intentioned collector of civilizational debris, functioning endlessly in an impossibly violent situation.

PART III: THEATRICALITY & VISCERAL AESTHETICS

“There was a silly bloody war on. After five years there it was again, an even stupider cuntin’g war than it had been in Italy, in France... We didn’t even think about it. All automatic. Like making a film.”

-- a soldier from the Foreign Legion in Blaise Cendrars’s *To the End of the World* (1956)

The Contemporary Functioning *Mythos* of Political Theater

Dave Chappelle reprised Michael Moore’s indictment of the United States’s political theater in his *Saturday Night Live* monologue from November 2022, using language that also aligns with themes in *Les Liaisons dangereuses* without likely intending to do so. He talks about Kanye West’s “cancellation” for using anti-Semitic language. West, Chappelle notes, broke one of the untouchable “show business rules,” by which he means “rules of perception.” Each of the examples Chappelle gives for these “rules of perception” is a kitsch mythology of identity for mass cultural representations: “If they’re black, then it’s a gang. If they’re Italian, it’s a mob. But if they’re Jewish, it’s a coincidence and you should never speak about it.” Now, Chappelle’s point is not to defend West’s anti-Semitism but to address a certain double standard in the cultural allowance of kitsch representations; and anti-Semitic caricature, when expressed in earnest or otherwise, is precisely that--a kitsch-driven attempt to fix the meaning of reality and put it to use.³² Conspiracy theories abound in the early 21st century, and there’s nothing really all

³² This, for instance, is what the character Yakov learns about his own anti-Semitism in Anton Chekov’s short story “Rothschild’s Fiddle” (1894). After realizing that his wife would rather die than continue to spend one more minute with him, and then also realizing he’d never considered her as an actual complex human person during the entirety of their marriage, Yakov comes to understand that he only ever regarded the world in the sense that it aesthetically agreed with his requirements and his desires. Everything else was rubbish, trash, filth, or at least massively inconvenient to the point of warranting expulsion. He’d constructed a world of kitsch in which he positioned himself as the sole Good against Universal Evil in an entirely fantasmatic battle of all against all.

that surprising about West's ramblings into the void of Twitter. But the self-righteous and market-based public condemnation of West's anti-Semitism *does* provide other powers, without themselves having any legitimate claims to universal-liberal benevolence, to nonetheless occupy a position of Righteous Judge in the political theater of public discourse--and to *profit* from that position.

Chappelle then transitions to talking about the "Trump era" and projections of its closure, which he deems false and due to a misunderstanding of what causes Donald Trump's popularity among voters in the first place. Trump is loved among the "poor whites," Chappelle claims, because they've "never seen somebody like him" in the political arena, a persona Chappelle defines as an "honest liar." Chappelle admits that he himself was surprised by the spectacle, during Trump's first debate, of "a white male billionaire screaming at the top of his lungs: 'This whole system is rigged!'" This put Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama in the position of denying that the system is rigged, to which Chappelle replies: "Now, wait a minute, bro. It's what [Trump] said." Trump's reply, as reported by Chappelle, after pushed to provide evidence was: "I know the system is rigged, because I use it."

This is the sense in which Trump lies honestly: "No one had ever heard someone say something that true." To the accusation that he doesn't pay his taxes, Chappelle paraphrases Trump as saying: "That makes me smart. [...] If you want me to pay my taxes, then change the tax code. But I know you won't, because your friends and your donors enjoy the same tax breaks that I do." It is at this precise moment that Chappelle claims "a star was born," and Trump's presidency was sealed: "No one had ever seen somebody come from inside of that house outside and tell all the commoners, 'We are doing everything that you think we are doing inside of that house.' Then he just went right back in the house and started playing the game again." Life is

officially a theatrical enterprise, in the sense that such a narrative directs perceptions and incentivizes behaviors, and the facade is no longer fully possible or fully necessary.

The Aesthetic of Reality in its Theatrical Mode (i.e. Being-as-Playing-a-Role)

In a completely different context, Linda Myrsiades writes about Theodoros Angelopoulos's *The Traveling Players* (1975) "as an exploration of theater as a metaphor for a way of seeing or living, as a 'gaze' or life text" (Myrsiades 135). Angelopoulos's film presents a trans-historical narrative centering on a theatrical troupe that embodies social and aesthetic tropes related to the Greek theater of the 1940s. It was a period defined by a kind of enforced kitsch in the major theaters of the urban centers: "Having to deal with blackout regulations, curfews, and transportation shutdowns, while competing for a continually shrinking audience, theaters thus relied on safe choices of plays, what critics referred to as 'toys'" (Myrsiades 136). Alternatives were either the "theater of the mountains," associated with the resistance movement outside the cities, or else "regional touring groups," which found particular difficulties in the political geography of the 1940s: "Theater thus found itself in a devastated condition throughout the decade of the 1940s.

In this sense, *The Traveling Players* shares characteristics of both the typical situation in which all theatrical groups had to struggle to survive and the atypical situation in which only a handful of small touring groups were able to keep going, maintaining themselves by moving between towns occupied by whichever political or military force was in power in the unsecured countryside" (Myrsiades 137). Angelopoulos's narrative thus follows the interstitial space of experience between a kind of totalitarian sheen of innocuousness--a traditional kitsch produced by German occupation, "safe choices of plays" or "toys"--and politically dogmatic aesthetic

projects directed against this tradition, the official aesthetic of “resistance” (something like Sartre’s “committed” literature)..

Against the background of the two dominant traditions of the period (urban kitsch versus provincial resistance), the “traveling players” represent an empty vulgarity, having no stable position in the contemporary coordinates of aesthetic acceptability. But precisely because of this, they represent a unique political object in that context of ultra-factional uncertainty: “Since commercial travelers had difficulty securing passes from occupation authorities, and unauthorized personnel were unable to move freely from area to area, one clear advantage troupes offered was their ability to pass on information about the war, acting as word-of-mouth news sources and as links to relatives in out-of-the-way sites. In a significant sense then, the historical concept of a troupe such as we find in *The Traveling Players* is an apt one for Greece in its troubled times. [...] *The Traveling Players* provides a metaphor for a nation in duress, struggling to regain itself and insisting on continuity in the face of rupture” (Myrsiades 137).

Myrsiades then collects the variations which the critical tradition around the film has devised for its metaphoric expression of “theater” as an idea. First, there’s the “world-as-a-stage theme” demonstrated by the contrast between the characters’ “attempt to perform a Greek popular play that is always being interrupted by the greater ‘play’ of Greek history [...], German and Italian invasions, civil war, and the interfering influences of both Britain and the United States” (Myrsiades 138). This plays on the “political” as a stage, and the enormous play of political ideologies jockeying for position as a metaphor of the twentieth century’s rapid and incessant political unrest. “Theater troupe,” “nation,” “city,” and “history” are all variations on the notion of collective experience and narrativization.

In Angelopoulos's own words, the film's use of theater allows its narrative to "take off from daily life into something else...from a sense of reality to a theatrical one" (Myrsiades 139). The plays, and the mythical archetypes they represent, enter into instructive mixtures with the lived historical reality of the film's characters: "Whereas the film's contemporary updating of the myth of the House of Atreus (Orestes's assassination of Aigisthos and Clytemnestra in revenge for their murder of his father Agamemnon) is generally accepted by film critics, we are reminded that it is used as a performance within a performance which is itself performing a performance. By this argument, we find a contemporary Orestes killing his modern counterparts Aigisthos and Clytemnestra in the guise of an actor in a 1940s traveling troupe which is at that very moment engaged in a costumed performance of the nineteenth-century idyll *Golfo*" (Myrsiades 139).

This reading echoes with a description Milan Kundera gives of Hermann Broch's operative aesthetic in *The Sleepwalkers* concerning the presentation of character: "Broch speaks of Esch and all at once compares him to [Martin] Luther. Both belong to the rebel category (Broch analyzes it at length). 'Esch is a rebel like Luther.' We tend to look for a character's roots in his childhood. Esch's roots (his childhood remains unknown to us) are to be found in another century. Esch's past is Luther" (Kundera, *The Art of the Novel* 54). Here Kundera provides a nice expression of Broch's notion of *mythos* as it operates in his own work, because the "rebel" figure is an historically developing *mythos* that *actually* connects the concrete existences of Esch and Luther. Esch is then like Luther's reincarnation. Kundera continues: "For Broch, a character is conceived not as a uniqueness, inimitable and transitory, a miraculous moment fated to disappear, but as a solid bridge erected above time, where Luther and Esch, the past and the present, come together" (Kundera, *The Art of the Novel* 55). Kundera's description of how

Broch's style relates to a later novel by Carlos Fuentes then even more closely resembles the reading of *The Traveling Players* quoted above:

By Broch's light, I read Carlos Fuentes's *Terra Nostra*, in which the whole great Hispanic adventure (European and American) is encompassed in a wonderful telescoping, a wonderful oneiric distortion. Fuentes transforms Broch's principle, *Esch is like Luther*, into a still more radical principle: *Esch is Luther*. He provides us the key to his method: 'It takes several lives to make one person.' The old mythology of reincarnation materializes in a novelistic technique that makes *Terra Nostra* an immense, strange dream in which History is made and continually traversed by the same characters endlessly reincarnated. The same Ludovico who found a hitherto unknown continent in Mexico turns up several centuries later in Paris, with the same Celestina who centuries earlier was the mistress of Philip II. [...] Indeed, if Luther is Esch, the history that leads from Luther to Esch is merely the biography of a single person: Martin Luther-Esch. And all of History is merely the story of a few characters (a Faust, a Don Juan, a Don Quixote, a Rastignac, an Esch) who have traversed Europe's centuries together (Kundera, *The Art of the Novel* 55-6).

This is the point at which *mythos* and kitsch really merge, and wherein "kitsch" becomes a useful tool, yet again, when recognized for "the lie that it is": the precise orientation of a yearning consciousness, true precisely by virtue of the sincerity of its falseness. In Sontag's words, it is a specific stylization of consciousness incorporated as a part of a genuine style. Whether a stage or a novel, the world is a play of abstractions vying for the absolute. And the artist-thinker would do well to take the same advice the Bishop offers to the young man enlisted to provide a report

of mysterious remote happenings in Halldór Laxness's *Under the Glacier*. Sontag offers the Bishop's words as "a theory of spirituality and a theory of literature"; that is, of art and of life:

Don't be personal. Be dry! ... Write in the third person as much as possible ... No verifying! ... Don't forget that few people are likely to tell more than a small part of the truth: no one tells much of the truth, let alone the whole truth ... When people talk they reveal themselves, whether they're lying or telling the truth ... Remember, any lie you are told, even deliberately, is often a more significant fact than a truth told in all sincerity. Don't correct them, and don't try to interpret them either (101).

Theatrical tradition, according to Hans-Georg Gadamer (a self-conscious practitioner of the Kantian tradition in aesthetic philosophy), involves first "the age of elevated religious presence," in which "theatrical festivities were still part of the festive celebration of the whole community" (Gadamer 61). Life and theater effectively blended in a performance before God. There was thus an essential, palpable understanding of the relationship between performance and spectatorship in the very fact of theatrical presentation, because the spectators understood themselves as *participating* in a drama. Subsequently, this relation to theater undergoes the secular transfer from the religious metaphysical empyrean to the commonwealth, the nation, the "cultural," very like the historical moment Broch marks as the transition that produces both Romanticism and kitsch (from aristocracy to bourgeoisie, and from Catholicism to Protestantism). This is what Gadamer calls the age of the "permanent theater" as well as of "moral transcendence or moral sublimity." One can glimpse this in the Puritan desire to build "a city on a hill," a way of life as an aesthetic model of the Kingdom of Heaven. But this newer development is characterized by a sense of divorce between performance and spectatorship, where "the audience now senses [a tension] between the prevailing form of real life and the

enchanted world presented on stage” (Gadamer 61-2). The trajectory of modernity leading from this point to now is the long process whereby the “city on a hill” became nothing more than an object of entertainment (*i.e.* the world inside the screen, the life lived on the Instagram feed) in an otherwise vastly chaotic and violent reality.

This is the beginning of secular aesthetics of paradise as well as what Herbert Marcuse calls bourgeois “affirmative culture.” It is furthermore the birth of modern spectatorship, the voyeur, the Peeping Tom, the erotomane. And these figures have their analogue in the absolute value that bourgeois puritanism placed on monogamous devotion. As Sontag writes in an underknown essay from 1973, *sexual relations in repressive societies* (*i.e.* most societies, but certainly ours) become “hysterically craved as a substitute for genuine freedom and for so many other pleasures (intimacy, intensity, feeling of belonging, blasphemy) which this society frustrates” (Sontag, “The Third World of Women” 780).

Here, theater is variously a spectacle of consolation, hopefulness, social critique, and propagandistic ideology. But this also meant, writes Gadamer, that representation incorporated the sense of “moral transcendence” in relation to the present reality, and a reimagining (or the possible reimagining) of “the apportionment of guilt and punishment, struggle, and achievement” (Gadamer 62). It is like a call to action (a pre-Marxist Marxism): “In the darkness, the solitary onlooker hears from the stage the call of moral transcendence” (Gadamer 62). This call of moral transcendence is the Messianic utopia of modernity, from Communism to the abstract notion of “social justice.” No longer does the mass participate in a theatrical spectacle performed for God, but it takes within itself the metaphysical drama in order to act out its principles in reality and build, thereby, the Kingdom of Heaven. It is in this light, for instance, that one should insist on

reading the Greensboro sit-ins from 1960, even if they are also limited actions that merely expand capitalist markets.

In the same vein, the actions by The Satanic Temple in recent years, directed against Christian fascism and Christian kitsch primarily (but not only) in America--documented in the excellent 2019 film *Hail Satan?*--are acts of “performance art,” self-described as such, intended to redirect the aesthetic engagement of societies by manipulating the mass media’s desire for marketable kitsch. Perhaps their most iconic achievement, because directed at the rights of speech and of religion, is to have a monument to the Mosaic “Ten Commandments” (originally a set-piece related to the Cecil B. DeMille production) removed from the grounds of the state legislature in Oklahoma. How did they get it removed? By proposing an equally prominent statue of the satanic figure Baphomet be placed on the same grounds, as an expression of the state government’s dedication to religious pluralism. Of course, the legislative body of Oklahoma doesn’t agree to the Baphomet statue, but they understand the constitutional argument and agree to remove the ten commandments.

Gadamer’s invocation of the “permanent theater,” with its revivals, reinterpretations, and generally historical program of works, in addition to its interpretation as akin to how Kundera reads *Terra Nostra*, anticipates the culture of remakes, mash-ups, and re-mixes of more contemporary aesthetics that often receives the falsely unifying and largely nonsensical moniker of “postmodernism” (because every idea associated with postmodernism is also associated with modernism). One might call either Youtube or TikTok exemplary cases of the new form of theater finally blended with cinema, the virtual theater in which all are condemned to participate. The kaleidoscopic presence of the past (*i.e.* the world inside your phone) in the current cultural environments of reality are simply extensions of this moment when Gadamer claims that, “for

the first time, [in the permanent theater] we are faced with the task of mediating between the contemporaneity of the present and the presence of our historical cultural heritage” (Gadamer 62).

The new form of utopia is the re-mix, the adaptation, appropriation; the alteration of a constellation is the (post)modern image of creation; what Slavoj Zizek has emphasized as the “parallax view,” or Thomas Kuhn as the “paradigm shift,” but is also an aspect of Hegel’s “Absolute Knowing,” Broch’s “earthly absolute,” Sontag’s “aesthetic sense,” and Gregory Bateson’s “sacred” core of Mind. (It is also, in the prior religious context, a version of transubstantiation.) Yet it is not simply a matter of holding the past in its factual state and representing it: “On the contrary, the characteristic value of this chapter in the history of theater is precisely the power of fusion that the present possesses as such when it succeeds in elevating past life into presence” (Gadamer 63). In another context, Bateson’s and Charles Sanders Peirce’s terminologies of mental structures and signs (to be more thoroughly discussed in another chapter) argue that the effect of engagement between the Person and the Sign produces a World--here, Heidegger’s conception of “worlding” remains relevant--and this World is an aesthetic effect sustained by the habits of aesthetic perception.

It is around this point that both kitsch and the aesthetic sense engage their infinite dialectical negotiation within the point of the “earthly absolute” (Broch’s term for the subject of consciousness), the ultimate level of the conjunction that William Blake, during the great period of Religion’s capitulation to Reason, termed “the marriage of heaven and hell.” And the actions of The Satanic Temple, for instance, can be read as a reincarnation of the following section in Blake’s poem:

[I]f Jesus Christ is the greatest man, you ought to love him in the greatest degree; now hear how he has given his sanction to the law of ten commandments: did he not mock at the sabbath, and so mock the sabbaths of God? murder those who were murdered because of him? turn away the law from the woman taken in adultery? steal the labor of others to support him? bear false witness when he omitted making a defense before Pilate? covet when he pray'd for his disciples, and when he bid them shake off the dust of their feet against such as refused to lodge them? I tell you, no virtue can exist without breaking these ten commandments: Jesus was all virtue, and acted from impulse: not from rules.

[...] One Law for the Lion & Ox is Oppression (43-4).

It is this capacity to act on impulse that has baffled the world for the past 2000 years, give or take. Existentialist philosophy tried to articulate this ethical impulsiveness in its conceptualization of freedom, which Sontag articulates--in her review of Sartre's *Saint Genet*, which she claims is his complex gesture in the direction of an ethics he never wrote--in the following way:

The [intellectual agony of revelation] comes from the philosopher's commitment to impose meaning upon action. Freedom, the key notion of existentialism, reveals itself in *Saint Genet*, even more clearly than in *Being and Nothingness*, as a compulsion to assign meaning, a refusal to let the world alone. According to Sartre's phenomenology of action, to act is to change the world. Man, haunted by the world, acts. He acts in order to modify the world in view of an end, an ideal. An act is therefore intentional, not accidental, and an accident is not to be counted as an act. Neither the gestures of personality nor the works of the artist are simply to be experienced. They must be understood, they must be interpreted as modifications of the world. [...] The name 'Genet' repeated thousands of

times throughout the book never seems to be the name of a real person. It is the name given to an infinitely complex process of philosophical transfiguration (Sontag, “Saint Genet” 95).

Genet, ultimately, is the “earthly absolute” in the sense Broch intends it. According to Roderick H. Watt, Broch developed his theory of the “earthly absolute” precisely as a way of dealing with the requirement to act on impulse, as opposed to rules, with respect to the *mythos* of Jesus Christ:

The pressure of circumstances, the lesson taught by the horrors of the Second World War, and the need for some immediate, practical contribution to the restoration of humanitarian principles in politics forced Broch to abandon his formal concept of ethics founded on the transcendental Absolute of the Logos [i.e. the Law, the Name of the Father] and turn to a more concrete, practical morality grounded on man as the earthly absolute. Broch describes this change in several ways. His law of human rights is based not on the ethical question, [‘What should I do?’], but on the negative moral command, [‘You should not’]. In his earlier writings Broch had been highly critical of precisely this negative aspect of morality as opposed to the positive, progressive nature of his conception of ethics. His law of human rights is founded not on the positive principle of what man should be, but on the negative command that man must never be deprived of his humanity by being reduced to the status of an inanimate object (Watt 174).

Freedom is the capacity to choose, of course, but it is never certain whether this is a diabolical or a graceful choice; and so the ethics of a choice is grounded not on a rule but on the awareness of the concrete circumstances and effects of the choice. This, precisely, is one of the chief senses of Blake’s “marriage of heaven and hell” conceived as a description of an engaged consciousness--

that is, engaged with the aesthetic sense and mindful of its ethical implications, never thinking that the meaning of either “heaven” or “hell” is clear or even really expressible.

Benjamin’s “Fate” as Both a Source of Kitsch and an Ethical Function of the Aesthetic Sense

Along these lines, a key aesthetic territory emerging from the European Age of Enlightenment appears in its dual aspect in the titles of two early Bourgeois Masterpieces, one of which I’ve yet to mention. The first I’ve already discussed, *Dangerous Liaisons* (referring to the possibility of a diabolical choice), but the second is *Elective Affinities*. In each of these works, and in the poetic resonance of each title, one finds a source of Broch’s much later theory of fate, which is central in his aesthetic philosophy and practice, as well as to an adequate understanding of the “earthly absolute.” Indeed, a very similar theory of fate to Broch’s appears in Walter Benjamin’s extensive essay on Goethe’s novel, drawn in connection to a likewise similarly conceived ethical requirement for an attuned aesthetic sensibility later taken up by Sontag.

For Benjamin, the primary theme of Goethe’s novel is not marriage (a particular cultural-ideological mode of elective affinity most often taken as its theme), but rather the Myth of Marriage in the process of its disintegration--indeed, even more profoundly, the disintegration of Myth itself, the naive realism of the symbol. And he begins his discussion with a reprisal of Kant’s definition of marriage in *The Metaphysics of Morals* as “the union of two persons of different sexes for the purpose of lifelong mutual possession of their sexual organs.” After criticizing the apparent fact that Kant assumed a moral possibility of marriage as deducible from this premise, Benjamin counters that it spells only depravity. But he does not disagree with

Kant's definition, because it does articulate the bourgeois ideal, a quasi-scientific definition outlining its *mythos*, the ideal of monogamous devotion.

Instead, he differentiates between Kant's description as the "real matter" (the "sublime *ratio*" deprived of any concrete particularities) versus "the seal which presents the matter." Just as the seal is produced from the material ("real matter") of the wax and the stamp, but is not equivalent with the wax's or the stamp's matter, and cannot be imagined on either basis alone-- because it requires the interpreting and relating mind to perceive it--so the actuality of a coupling is not equivalent with or deducible from the "real matter" of marriage itself, understood as the "lifelong mutual possession" of "sexual organs." Kant's definition is only an amoral material starting point in its conceptual form, the catalyst of a moral possibility that doesn't pre-exist its formation *as* a concept.

Paired with *Dangerous Liaisons*, *Elective Affinities* also marks the difference between the libertine's decadent imperial energies and the Calvinist-Puritan asceticism that produces bourgeois cultures, and a more insidious imperialism of the mind. This imposed asceticism attempted to forestall any return to the libertine debauchery of the courtly tradition while maintaining the break with dogmatic (*i.e.* Catholic) religious power. However, asceticism lost its dominance with the rise of commercial and consumerist cultures that were the bourgeoisie's great development in the restructuring of economic life. So the bourgeoisie, in its Puritan-Calvinist mode of idealism, discovered a new mode of exaltation: the exaltation of monogamous love, already mentioned at length, exemplified in its most "sublime" ascetic form by Kant's definition of marriage.

To quote Broch again: "Puritanism certainly did not impose a monastic type of chastity, but strict monogamy. It was precisely this monogamy that was to be reaffirmed and reinforced;

all the more so because in this way it could strike at the heart of *libertinage*. Monogamous love was saved by being intensified to a level of exaltation which at one time had been severely condemned by asceticism. Puritan frigidity was transposed into passion. Every casual act of love in everyday life was raised to the astral plane; the level of the absolute (or rather of the pseudo-absolute) was transformed into an incorruptible and eternal Tristan-and-Isolde-style love” (Broch, “Notes on the Problem of Kitsch” 56). What this accomplishes is the mythologization of desire in the apotheosis of the loving couple and the birth of the family unit as the center of social reality, a ritual of repressed desire. Romanticism exalts the prosaic and endows the banalities of daily life with sublimity, access to the stars: this is primarily how Romanticism solidifies the power of kitsch.

Beneath this sublimity is a concrete possession within a concrete structure of power. The mythologization of sexual difference produces a repressive regime. When asked whether “the family is an obstacle for the liberation of women,” in a questionnaire, Sontag begins her response as follows:

Certainly the modern ‘nuclear family’ operates to oppress women. And little consolation is to be had by considering other shapes that the family is known to have taken in the past and has today outside the societies of ‘European’ type. Virtually *all* known forms of the family define women in ways that subordinate them to men--keeping them within the ‘home’ while investing public power exclusively in the hands of men, who organize in all-male groups outside the family. In the chronology of human lives, the family is the first and psychologically the most irrefutable school for sexism. It is as small children, through the systematically contrasting ways in which girls and boys are treated (dressed, talked to, praised, punished), that the norms of dependency and narcissism are instilled in

girls. Growing up, children learn the different expectations they may have for themselves from the models of mother and father: the fundamentally dissimilar geography of commitment that women and men make to family life (Sontag, “The Third World of Women” 791).

Kant’s “mutual possession” has never really been mutual, because the conditions for that mutuality have never existed. And indeed they are in large part barred precisely by the devotional and eternal definition of marriage, and thereby of love, that Kant provides. And we are still debating the problems Sontag discusses without acknowledging the radicality of the changes and transvaluations that need to take place.

Therefore, *Elective Affinities* is also about the tenuous reality of the Myth of Marriage as an effective value in the minds of the bourgeoisie, and so it appears in the novel as nothing but an empty ritual to which its participants bear no authentic relationship: “In its dissolution, everything human turns into appearance, and the mythic alone remains as essence” (Benjamin, “Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*” 302). Its essence, in this sense, is kitsch. Here Benjamin anticipates Kundera, who writes in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* that, “in the sunset of dissolution, everything is illuminated by the aura of nostalgia, even the guillotine” (Kundera 4). Ephemerality redeems the past by aestheticizing it, reducing it to the mythical figuration of its basic idea outside of all particular contexts and thereby transferable to all possible contexts. This phrase introduces the sense of “kitsch” that will be central later in the novel, in a way that connects Kundera’s self-characterization in the first section with his later characterization of Sabina in “The Grand March,” wherein he provides his definitions of kitsch.

Kundera offers a personal anecdote relating how nostalgia transforms history: “Not long ago, I caught myself experiencing a most incredible sensation. Leafing through a book on Hitler,

I was touched by some of his portraits: they reminded me of my childhood. I grew up during the war; several members of my family perished in Hitler's concentration camps; but what were their deaths compared with the memories of a lost period in my life, a period that would never return? / This reconciliation with Hitler reveals the profound moral perversity of a world that rests on the nonexistence of return, for in this world everything is pardoned in advance and therefore everything cynically permitted" (Kundera 4). What Kundera calls the "aura of nostalgia" is the aesthetic stamp of kitsch that all phenomena receive in memory (collective or individual) before being consigned to historical oblivion.

Kitsch is a loss of nuance in meaning, a subtraction of particularity from the experience of a person, an event, an idea. Kundera likens this to the engraving on one's tombstone after death, reducing the individual to a maxim, such as the phrase "HE WANTED THE KINGDOM OF GOD ON EARTH" that adorns the grave of the staunch atheist Tomas, placed there by his well-meaning son who equates "the kingdom of God" with justice, because "Tomas longed for a world in which justice would reign" (Kundera 276). In this way, Kundera concludes this section of the novel with a final remark on kitsch, identifying its structuring principle: "Before we are forgotten, we will be turned into kitsch. Kitsch is the stopover between being and oblivion" (Kundera 278). An empty ritual is like the false kitsch description of a person or a memory, replacing the complicated reality with a simplifying assertion of essence.

This is likewise what Benjamin implies: the past is always, essentially, an aesthetic phenomenon that the "ego nucleus" or "earthly absolute" (in Broch's terms) interprets as it would a Mythical Sign. The present receives these mythical signs as so many styles of comportment with which it can choose to administer its participation in reality. The characters in *Elective Affinities* receive rituals of conduct from their ancestry and the ancestry of their

environment, and in these rituals one finds the mythologization--or the aestheticizing--of the present via the past and the past via the present: a past pattern of conduct becomes the foundation of present reality by confirming its participation in Meaning.

To liberate oneself from “tradition” is then to pull the ground from underneath one’s feet, to lose all foundation of context that can provide meaning to one’s actions. Paradoxically, this “liberation” is a form of binding, because it leaves the liberated subject without understanding of the myths that nonetheless continue to effectively produce the actions and events of a culture (Benjamin, “Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*” 303). Removal from tradition is always an illusion. (As EM Cioran wrote, with ambivalence: “Blithely, we shall dissolve the centuries” [Cioran 114]) Goethe’s characters live through a period when Myths begin to lose their power, and so they are caught in a kind of fate that consigns them to empty parroting of ritualistic norms. Kitsch is not so much the empty performance of the ritual but the insistence that the ritual is real and that one fully identifies oneself with it, as merely one coordinate engaging with others. This is the full Bourgeois Crisis of losing the Absolute Standard by which to measure moral conduct.

Affinities are elective, but nothing guarantees their survival or productivity; and every affinity is equally liable to a dangerous--that is, fatal--mistake of connection: every elective affinity is a potentially dangerous liaison. And this is the kind of mathematical language that Broch increasingly preferred to use after he abandoned art as a solution to the problem of the “earthly absolute.” Pretending there to be no difference between self and function is also, as Adorno reiterated often, the birth of fascism in all its forms:

In the form of the few sentences about the health of one’s wife that prelude the business discussion over lunch, the utilitarian order has taken over and assimilated even its opposite. The taboo on talking shop and the inability to talk to each other are in reality

the same thing. Because everything is business, the latter is unmentionable like rope in a hanged man's home. Behind the pseudo-democratic dismantling of ceremony, of old-fashioned courtesy, of the useless conversation suspected, not even unjustly, of being idle gossip, behind the seeming clarification and transparency of human relations that no longer admit anything undefined, naked brutality is ushered in. The direct statement without divagations, hesitations or reflections, that gives the other the facts full in the face, already has the form and timbre of the command issued under Fascism by the dumb to the silent. Matter-of-factness between people, doing away with all ideological ornamentation between them, has already itself become an ideology for treating people as things (Adorno, *Minima Moralia* 41-2).

In a strange turn away from the normal run of the argument, whereby fascisms are described as aestheticizations of politics (which indeed they are), Adorno re-affirms the importance of aesthetic distance and aesthetic engagement (the value of some minimal ceremony or courtesy) to avoid reducing all human interaction and existence to the same kind of "mutual possession" of "organs" that define Kant's depraved conception of marriage.

Fiction, precisely, is the domain of human activity that attempts to "prophecy" the futures of elective affinities and dangerous liaisons that cannot be reduced (abstracted) to mathematical or scientific formulae. All narratives answer, in one way or another, this basic question: given the premises of *such-and-such* a structure of reality, what can be expected for the future? What happens next? And how? For Benjamin, this interrogative premise of fiction explains the inappropriateness of all ethical judgment leveled against fictional characters, and thereby against art in general, because "the fictional character is always too poor or too rich to come under ethical judgment." Unlike real people, novelistic characters are "entirely rooted in nature,"

meaning they follow the strict rules of an originary assumption formulated as the configuration of a character (Benjamin, "Goethe's *Elective Affinities*" 304).

What Benjamin refers to here is a notion of the "type" understood as a kind of mythological figuration. Engaging with fiction appropriately means not ethical judgment but moral understanding, and this is because characters and situations represent a *style* of selfhood or behaving, fully grounded in figuration and therefore in myth. Ethical judgment, on the other hand, can only apply to actual concrete actions. Moral understanding, in this sense, means tracing the trajectory of a conceptual figure according to the logic of its form--what Hegel would call the "notion" understood as the "principle of all life." The "unfolding" of a form in a work of art, and the "unfolding" of a concept in Hegelian logic, are one and the same. This is why photography becomes such a central metaphor in Benjamin's philosophical system, particularly in a concept like the "dialectical image," which captures a moment of transition between historical states of consciousness; a moment of disintegration that is also a moment of becoming. Broch's "earthly absolute" is their point of connection. When Benjamin writes about "synthetic realities" in his *Arcades Project*, he refers to the same idea as when he refers to "myth" in his essay on *Elective Affinities* and in his book on the *Trauerspiel*: they are "worlds [...] of static realities" (Benjamin 857). These "worlds" are what Sontag calls sensibilities, most emphatically in "Notes on 'Camp.'" Camp is the sensibility that best grasps this ultimate aesthetic aspect of things, the very real arbitrariness of conceptual distinctions, over and above the equally operative requirements of moral understanding and ethical judgment: "Camp sees everything in quotation marks. It's not a lamp, but a 'lamp'; not a woman, but a 'woman.'" To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role. It is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theater" (Sontag 263).

Photography is a key metaphor of this concept, because it is the objective correlative of the “synthetic reality” (of a character, of a world); a technologically produced synthetic reality that one can hold in one’s hand. (The photograph of a lamp, for instance, like René Magritte’s “pipe,” is “not a lamp, but a ‘lamp.’”) A photograph is like a concept without the limitations of language (though it has limitations of its own). And the photographic metaphor also makes clear the “symbolism of death” that pervades all representations of ritual in Goethe’s novel: the ritual, like the photograph, holds fast to the ephemeral and signifies its presence for the contemplation and use of the present. Both ritual and photograph serve as springboards to a fate that cannot be foreseen, which arises from how the present moment interprets them and acts upon that interpretation. Through the “typicality” they freeze into a form, they contain both the past of a development and the future of a possibility: this is Benjamin’s dialectical image. And real change is a matter of transgressing the type, or even sooner of *allowing* for its transgression and effectively *searching* for it.

Ultimately, the most thorough transgression undoes the typology from within, so that the dialectical image is like the famous split-screen close-up of Bibi Andersson and Liv Ullman in Ingmar Bergman’s *Persona* (1966); the sign of an impermissible simultaneity, an uncanny moment of pure difference. And it is this that Bergman attempts to accomplish--the presentation of an ambiguity inherent in “a body of material, a subject”--according to Sontag’s reading of the film: “Actually, the plot isn’t there at all in the old sense; the point of these new [modernist-inspired] works [of which *Persona* is just one example] is not to tantalize but to involve the audience more directly in other matters, for instance, in the very processes of knowing and seeing” (Sontag, “Bergman’s *Persona*” 133-4).³³ Indeed, the search for the dialectical image is

³³ But this tendency is not strictly “modernist” in any precise sense of periodization, except to the extent that Flaubert was also a modernist: “An eminent precursor of this concept of narration [in *Persona*] is Flaubert; the

always a search for the uncanny contained in reality. Benjamin notes a “strange turn of phrase in Goethe” that reads: “One can see right at the outset that one must go forth to evil houses” (Benjamin, “Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*” 305). Here Goethe offers a mandate of transgression (though also offered within the irony of the novel as a form, because “evil” retains its full Blakean ambiguity): development occurs only by way of profaning the ritual and embracing a certain form of evil from the perspective of the past; profaning a traditional meaning by reading it *otherwise*. Or profaning a traditional way of life by refusing it without being wilful, but by embodying one’s will in the mode of an aesthetico-moral style entirely one’s own. This is the sense, delineated in Sontag’s great essay “On Style,” wherein the notion of the “author” in the traditional sense merely becomes the notion of the “person,” retaining the full ethical weight of intentionality and expressiveness.

If tradition is the way a society organizes and systematizes its aesthetic interpretation of the past, then action requires the background of tradition in order to be either ethical or unethical. Convention, writes Adorno, is “the universal” that produces “the very substance of the individual claim. Tact is the discrimination of differences. It consists in conscious deviations. Yet when, emancipated, it confronts the individual as an absolute, without anything universal from which to be differentiated, it fails to engage the individual and finally wrongs him” (Adorno, *Minima Moralia* 37). Nothing can separate the individual from this context of convention, and the predilections of the individual attain ethical value only in their relation of continuity or deviation from a substantial base.

Tradition and convention are collective judgment(s) of taste conferred on narrated reality, and in Benjamin’s philosophical glossary the figure of the individual “collector” opposes the

persistent use of off-center detail in the descriptions in *Madame Bovary* is one instance of the method” (Sontag, “Bergman’s *Persona*” 134).

dogmatic force of collective tradition, not by breaking with it, but by *playing* with it. And this is unmistakably Kantian: the collector *confers* value rather than accepting it passively in the form that tradition passes it down, but this very conferred value emerges only by its deviation from expectation--it's not *all* in the eye of the beholder (i.e. the existentialist notion of facticity that retains the Kantian *in-itself*). Hannah Arendt likens this to the subsequent (in relation to Benjamin) French existentialist concepts of originality and authenticity, because in Benjamin's figure of the collector "meaning" carries the function of a free subjective decision as Sontag defined it above with reference to Sartre (Arendt, "Walter Benjamin" 199). And this makes valuation itself an ethical matter rather than a merely aesthetic matter (such as in the purely ideological "to each their own" or "there's no accounting for taste"), which extends to the ethics of critical judgment itself *as* aesthetic judgment.

The Critical Task of Identifying and Avoiding Kitsch

One of the main tasks of both the critic and the artist, in the sense taken seriously by Benjamin as well as Broch and Sontag, is to discover novel aesthetic renderings of reality. Viewed as an ethical matter, the task of aesthetic criticism is always an attempt to root out and label kitsch versus non-kitsch; the bad versus the good work of art. Judgments of taste carry an ethical dimension as *positions* taken in a cultural context. For Broch, kitsch is explicitly equated with evil (the principle of anti-Life), and so the critic has an intrinsically moral-ethical task of eradicating death (metaphorically) from thought.

An 1857 essay by George Eliot, published in the *Westminster Review*, serves as an exemplary case in point, because Eliot's contention is precisely that Edward Young's work (a now-forgotten poet) is kitsch, but without use of that term. This is evident from the following

judgment, which is basically a definition of kitsch affectation: “There is already some artificiality even in his grief, and feeling often slides into rhetoric” (Eliot 36). One mode of such artificiality is “grandiloquence,” which replaces the “true qualities” of an object or an emotion with rhetorical flourish. Just like Broch’s “kitsch-man,” Eliot singles out not grandiloquent objects but “the grandiloquent man,” who “is never bent on saying what he feels or what he sees, but on producing a certain effect on his audience” (Eliot 37). Likewise in Broch: “The essence of kitsch” holds “an effect of beauty” as the only criterion of value. This beautiful effect is like the empty ritual, in Benjamin’s reading of *Elective Affinities*, that provides stability to lives fated to oblivion: “These characters are not natural, for children of nature--in a fabulous or real state of nature--are human beings. At the height of their cultivation, however, they are subject to the forces that cultivation claims to have mastered, even if it may forever prove impotent to curb them. These forces have given them a feeling for what is seemly; they have lost the sense for what is ethical” (Benjamin 304).

When Eliot writes about Young’s penchant for empty abstractions, she echoes for the field of poetic rhetoric what Benjamin says about ritual surviving in “rudimentary fashion” without actual belief but not exactly as superstition:

Here lies the distinction between grandiloquence and genuine fancy or bold imaginativeness. The fantastic or the boldly imaginative poet may be as sincere as the most realistic: he is true to his own sensibilities or inward vision, and in his wildest flights he never breaks loose from his criterion--the truth of his own mental state. Now, this disruption of language from genuine thought and feeling is what we are constantly detecting in Young; and his insincerity is the more likely to betray him into absurdity, because he habitually treats of abstractions, and not of concrete objects or specific

emotions. He descants perpetually on virtue, religion, 'the good man,' life, death, immortality, eternity--subjects which are apt to give a factitious grandeur to empty wordiness. When a poet floats in the empyrean, and only takes a bird's-eye view of the earth, some people accept the mere fact of his soaring for sublimity, and mistake his dim vision of earth for proximity to heaven (Eliot 36-7).

Abstraction is a ritual of language, and all writing that forgets the real in favor of abstractions speaks only of unreality and fantasy without realizing it. In addition to being kitsch, one might also say that Eliot's reading of Young positions him as proto-Camp in the sense later employed by Sontag (though Eliot doesn't exactly show Young any affection).

What is missing in Young is "genuine emotion," which also prefigures the authenticity Benjamin speaks of with reference to the collector. Young snatches meaning from tradition alone and forgets reality, whereas the collector's ideal replaces tradition with a free and subjective conferral of meaning grounded in the collector's existential (ethical) context, albeit grounded also in the received cultural meaning(s) of the object itself. Young is, as Broch would say, "the prisoner of a purely conventional system of symbols" (Broch, "Notes on the Problem of Kitsch" 63). The purity of this conventionality recalls and recontextualizes Friedrich Schiller's excoriation of abstract philosophical concepts. Furthermore, Eliot prefigures Broch's definition of kitsch as the universalization of a false sentimentality:

[Young] sees Virtue sitting on a mount sere, far above the mists and storms of earth: he sees Religion coming down from the skies, with this world in her left hand and the other world in her right: but we never find him dwelling on virtue or religion as it really exists--in the emotions of a man dressed in an ordinary coat, and seated by his fireside of an evening, with his hand resting on the head of his little daughter; in courageous effort for

unselfish ends, in the internal triumph of justice and pity over personal resentment, in all the sublime self-renunciation and sweet charities which are found in the details of ordinary life (Eliot 41).

Present here as well, encapsulated and prefigured, is Benjamin's critical principle of attending to the fragment and to cultural rubbish, as well as the Surrealists' aesthetic ideas from which Benjamin adapted his own. Real emotion requires particulars, according to Eliot, and abstraction is both a break from reality and a break from subjective feeling. Those who attach strong emotion to abstract principles are suspect of inauthenticity at best and dogmatism or even sadism at the worst (for the reduction to concept is equivalent to the reduction to object), understood as a principle of manipulative enforcement on an individual or a mass scale. Inauthenticity means failure to address the concrete present, and dogmatism means the enforcement of this failure in a way that requires sadistic logic; the logic of despotic power as a source of pleasure, individual or communal.

The Aesthetic as a Mode and the Aesthetic Sense as a Tool Opposing Kitsch

The aesthetic always begins as an orientation "with regard to life." Indeed, it is the very condition of perception acquiring an element of purposiveness in the interpretations applied to its contents. Kant was the first to fully articulate this meaning of "aesthetic" within the scheme of philosophical distinctions. He writes that "aesthetic ideas," while incapable of formulation by a determinate thought or concept, "contain rich material" for the aim of executing "a proposed end in the presentation of a determinate concept" (Kant 192;195). It is from the aesthetic sense that we receive our capacity for making determinations of any kind, and every end conceived by consciousness begins as an aesthetic idea. The difference between an "aesthetic idea" and an

“idea of reason” is then a difference between two versions of “purposiveness” or tendential movement: on the one hand, the tendency toward a *possible* end (grounded in an aesthetic ideal); and on the other, a tendency toward a *logical-practical* end (grounded in the basis of established common reason). These concern the sense in which Kantian purposiveness gets updated into the concept of intentionality by Husserlian phenomenology as well as neurobiology. Neither an aesthetic idea nor an idea of reason can become a cognition (though each indicates conscious intention), because they both concern interpretations of an object/event that move beyond any direct perceptual experience. They don’t so much “conceptualize” anything as derive different kinds of implication from concepts that *do* apply to a direct experience.

An example from the Prologue to Arendt’s *The Human Condition* can help differentiate these three modes. First, the objective-conceptual description of an event: “In 1957, an earth-born object made by man was launched into the universe.” This is followed by an idea of reason: “for some weeks it circled the earth according to the same laws of gravitation that swing and keep in motion the celestial bodies--the sun, the moon, and the stars.” Then, an aesthetic impression: “To be sure, the man-made satellite was no moon or star, no heavenly body which could follow its circling path for a time span that to us mortals, bound by earthly time, lasts from eternity to eternity. Yet, for a time it managed to stay in the skies; it dwelt and moved in the proximity of the heavenly bodies as though it had been admitted tentatively to their sublime company” (Arendt 1). The simple event of Sputnik’s launch “into the universe” is both *occasioned by* and *appreciated as* the result of knowledge about objective laws and a certain mastery of the sources of that knowledge. But the *meaning* of the event is entirely aesthetic, in the sense of the purposes to which it will be put or the reactions to which it will give rise.

Arendt then singles out and laments the preponderant interpretation of the event's aesthetic: "The immediate reaction, expressed on the spur of the moment, was relief about the first 'step toward escape from men's imprisonment to the earth.' And this strange statement, far from being the accidental slip of some American reporter, unwittingly echoed the extraordinary line which, more than twenty years ago [from the vantage of 1958], had been carved on the funeral obelisk for one of Russia's great scientists: 'Mankind will not remain bound to the earth forever'" (Arendt 1). Thus the crisis of the event itself is an aesthetic crisis, the unavoidable imperative to respond to a properly sublime achievement (Arendt also claims this to be "second in importance to no other [event], not even the splitting of the atom"). Indeed, all major aesthetic changes in the constructions of reality accompany a collective experience of sublimity, whether simultaneously or gradually (in the past century alone: the two world wars, the Holocaust in particular, the atom bomb, various epidemics, the increasing success of artificial intelligence).

Central to Arendt's lament is the translation to reality (*i.e.* effective action) of an aesthetic idea: "The banality of the statement should not make us overlook how extraordinary in fact it was; for although Christians have spoken of the earth as a vale of tears and philosophers have looked upon their body as a prison of mind or soul, nobody in the history of mankind has ever conceived of the earth as a prison for men's bodies or shown such eagerness to go literally from here to the moon" (Arendt 2). To desire emancipation from earth conceived as a prison is to extend the Nietzschean overman into a principle concerning far more than moral sensibility, and it is to abandon "the very quintessence of the human condition" itself. This is true for Arendt because it also implies emancipation from our relatedness to all other living organisms on earth, and therefore from the very basis and constitution of our embodied and conscious lives.

This kind of idea, along with ideas of *creating* life artificially (whether in a test tube or with code), express “a rebellion against human existence as it has been given” for another version of it that “[man] has made himself.” But the crisis is not whether humans can actually achieve this. In fact, Arendt supposes it’s likely they can, at some point in the future. Her characterization of the real question is slightly ambiguous in its implications: “The question is only whether we wish to use our new scientific and technical knowledge in this direction, and this question cannot be decided by scientific means; it is a political question of the first order and therefore can hardly be left to the decision of professional scientists or professional politicians” (Arendt 3). If the question is political, properly speaking, then it is a question posed from outside the domain of all professionals concerned with politics; because a “political question of the first order” indicates a sense of the political as external to the established order.

But this is not an ideological opposition between, say, a ruling ideology and a subaltern position within it, because even the subaltern position itself effectively dissolves. Instead, it is an opposition between a current order and the various possibilities of that order’s demise. Every political orientation emerging from this point diverts from the ruling ideology, because that ideology has just assassinated itself. (There is a clear Marxian logic at work here.) What Arendt indicates in this prologue, through her expressed worry about the weightiness of this historical *moment-of-decision*, is paralleled in the more recent development of concepts like transhumanism or posthumanism, which should only be read as particular historical interventions in a concept (humanism) and not as descriptions of a real transfiguration of being. Arendt’s book, *The Human Condition*, is precisely an attempt to reclaim “the human” as a necessary conceptual construct for ethical engagement. While these later concepts might be practically useful as transitions out of a particular historical ideology of “the human,” they must only--for

Arendt--serve to return us back to “the human” in a conceptual renewal (transubstantiation, in the prior theological language materialized by Marx) of its material content.

In the world of art, one such break with traditional “humanism” appeared in the various instances of aestheticism emerging in late modernist works. In 1964, Sontag published a review in *The Nation* of Jack Smith’s *Flaming Creatures*, identifying it as an exemplary representative of trends in the New York “underground” film culture and using the occasion to mount some of her developing ideas about art, criticism, and aesthetic consciousness. It preceded and introduced ideas from her most famous essay, “Notes on ‘Camp’,” that would follow later the same year, but it also contains important applications of ideas developed in her more theoretically oriented early essays, “Against Interpretation” (1964) and “On Style” (1965), written around the same time.

Sontag positions herself on the defensive, albeit grudgingly, in both her *Flaming Creatures* review and in “Against Interpretation.” But she frames the defense differently in both cases--on the one hand abstractly, and on the other practically. But for each, the stance of defensiveness is a function of the *position*-taking role of the artist-thinker, in the terminology Sontag uses to express the ethical side of aesthetic knowledge in her essay on Benjamin. Emphasizing the aesthetic dimension of experience does not mean abandoning all judgment but is rather an exercise in renewing one’s awareness and observational capacities; declogging the normative pipes to open up the flows of thought.

As Sontag writes in “On Style,” recapitulating the same defensive position contained in “Against Interpretation”: “it is sensibility that nourishes our capacity for moral choice, and prompts our readiness to act, assuming that we do choose, which is a prerequisite for calling an act moral, and are not just blindly and unreflectively obeying. Art performs this ‘moral’ task

because the qualities which are intrinsic to the aesthetic experience (disinterestedness, contemplativeness, attentiveness, the awakening of the feelings) and to the aesthetic object (grace, intelligence, expressiveness, energy, sensuousness) are also fundamental constituents of a moral response to life” (Sontag 25). And further on: “morality, unlike art, is ultimately defined by its utility: that it makes, or is supposed to make, life more humane and livable for us all. But consciousness--what used to be called, rather tendentiously, the faculty of contemplation--can be, and is, wider and more various than action. It has its nourishment, art and speculative thought, activities which can be described either as self-justifying or in no need of justification. What a work of art does is to make us see or comprehend something singular, not judge or generalize. This act of comprehension accompanied by voluptuousness is the only valid end, and sole sufficient justification, of a work of art” (Sontag 29).

The practical defense of *Flaming Creatures* against the label of “pornography” led to Sontag’s inclusion as expert witness in the trial that convicted Jonas Mekas of “showing an obscene film” at the New Bowery Theater in New York. (This practical defense also prefigures the essay on pornography Sontag later published in 1967.) After defining pornography, in her review of Smith’s film, as “the manifest intention and capacity to excite sexually,” she claims that *Flaming Creatures* doesn’t qualify because its “depiction of nakedness and various sexual embraces [...] is both too full of pathos and too ingenuous to be prurient” (Sontag, “Jack Smith’s *Flaming Creatures*” 227). Smith’s “childlike and witty” sexual images are contrasted to “sentimental or lustful” images that might qualify as pornographic.

This distinction is important for Sontag’s then-developing ideas about aesthetic value and aesthetic function in modern society, and the target of her defense was not so much the courts as the “mature intellectual and artistic community” that responded with “indifference,”

“squeamishness,” and “downright hostility” to *Flaming Creatures* (Sontag, “Jack Smith’s *Flaming Creatures*” 227). When called in as the only expert witness for Mekas’s trial, lawyers were intrigued by Sontag’s definitions of pornography even if she didn’t impact the court’s decision. Pressed to clarify examples of images designed to arouse sexual interest, Sontag cited “posters outside Times Square movie theaters that advertise war movies with sadistic atrocity pictures” (Moser 235).

Her logic follows from the distinctions made in her review of Smith’s film, because the violent images mentioned qualify as “sentimental or lustful” to the extent that they exploit the allure and libidinal catharsis of approved violence. (In the preceding decade of Cold War dichotomies, a popular war movie boasted Manichaeic simplicities of clearly distinguishable good or evil aggressions, as part of the American propaganda machine.) And sentimentality in this case refers to the universalization of a simplifying and self-aggrandizing moral feeling: “American Victory” equals “Triumph of Good.” These war images therefore rely on and encourage an exercise in self-gratification that Sontag coyly compares to a masturbatory voyeurism.

Therefore, also, the violent images lack pathos (because pathos cannot self-aggrandize) and are disingenuous for being falsifications with propagandistic intent (or *enjoyed as falsifications with libidinal investment*). Smith’s images elicit fascination and shock, to be sure, but they are also tender representations of sincere erotic frenzy abstracted beyond any moral context; as opposed to being *incitements* to erotic frenzy, which always have the moral quality of intentional assimilation to a particular or centralized desire.³⁴ *Flaming Creatures* is, in an important sense, an embodiment of that indistinguishable “marriage of heaven and hell” that

³⁴ This is the kind of dictatorship of Reason that Lacan writes about in his great essay, “Kant avec Sade.”

Blake wrote about and is a valuable--if relatively minor--instance in the same aesthetic history that includes Blake.

Sontag's definition of pornography also agrees with Broch's understanding of Manichaen moral principles being used as kitsch in historical unions of political and religious power: "Every system of values, if attacked from the outside in its autonomy, can become distorted and corrupt: a form of Christianity that forces priests to bless cannons and tanks is as close to kitsch as any literature that exalts the well-loved ruling house or the well-loved leader, or the well-loved field marshal or the well-loved president" (Broch, "Notes on the Problem of Kitsch" 62).

Pornography, in the sense Sontag uses it in her court testimony, becomes a basic paradigm of the functioning of kitsch: the reduction of reality to tropes designed to inspire libidinal desire, whether that be desire for use and control of a single body or use and control of a socio-political body. All pornographic imagery works to conform desire to a particular trope and focus all libidinal investment into a particular iconographic or mythological context, for the attainment of a very Tristan-and-Isolde-style, ecstatic and orgasmic, dissolution of consciousness.

Here, one can consider the most searched-for pornographic iconographies on the internet--some examples: lesbian, hentai, ebony, latina, Asian, threesome--in the sense that they are also mimicked in political rhetoric as identity categories or questions of civil rights: LGBTQ+ rights, black rights, latinx rights, Asian rights, the rights of non-traditional unions (such as polygamy, in the juridical sense, or the more general "open relationship"). The very linguistic possibility of this reduction to categories is the basic logic of kitsch that is inescapable for human consciousness, because it pertains to the similarly basic function of abstraction for the purpose of useful communication regarding experiential reality. But a simple psychoanalytic logic becomes useful here for understanding the role of kitsch in this basic function of consciousness: if

something can be fetishized (over-invested with libidinal value), it can also be used for cultural domination or manipulation (think: Edward Bernays); or not only *can* be, but *will* be.³⁵

More important is what this distinction means for Smith's film. While the "sadistic atrocity pictures" advertising war movies belong in a tradition of pornographic (self-gratifying) pleasure, Smith's images belong to a different tradition--but a tradition nonetheless. In fact, Sontag claims that even Smith's defenders obfuscate his work's value in art history by overstating its novelty as "a totally unprecedented departure in the history of cinema." For Sontag, the merit of *Flaming Creatures* is precisely its *participation* in a tradition, "the poetic cinema of shock." Included in this tradition are "Buñuel's *Le [sic] Chien Andalou* and *L'Age d'Or*, parts of Eisenstein's first film, *Strike*, Tod Browning's *Freaks*, Jean Rouch's *Les Maitres-Fous*, Franju's *Le Sang au Betes*, Lenica's *Labyrinth*, the films of Kenneth Anger (*Fireworks*, *Scorpio Rising*), and Noël Burch's *Noviciat*" (Sontag, "Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures* 227). Of course, this list contains a loaded variety for which Sontag doesn't bother to provide a logic of connection. But her selection references the tie to Surrealism through a mode of "radical juxtaposition" she wrote about two years earlier in an essay on Happenings, as each item on the list employs a minimal montage- or collage-effect (literal in the case of Lenica) to play on different levels of unease caused by anything from physical violence to vague disquiet. All of them are attempts at radical defamiliarization in the sense that Viktor Shklovsky used the term.

³⁵ This is, for instance, the sense in which Dave Chappelle mocks the sanctity of "LGBTQ" political rhetoric and political theater in his willfully misunderstood comedy special, *Sticks and Stones*, from 2019. Imagining the political "movement" as a road trip, Chappelle notes that it is clearly the Gs that are driving the car, because the "G" allows for the dominant ideology to persist in the form of cis-gender white men. Next to them are the Ls, which likewise admit of cis-gendered whiteness remaining the hegemonic mode. Behind them are the Bs, who disgust both the Ls and the Gs, because they refuse to identify themselves in the hegemonic way of exclusive sexual orientation. And then way in the back, hated by all for confusing the issue beyond all conventionality, are the Ts. The Gs, the Ls, and Bs all resent the Ts for holding up the political progress of the "movement," which is not really a movement at all but an ideological cover for the perpetuation of traditional identifications within the bourgeois order. This is how, for instance, the Gay Liberation movement, starting from a genuine ethical position as mythologized in the Stonewall riots, becomes a repressive regime just like any other.

Sontag is careful to stipulate that “Surrealism” in this sense cannot be indexed to any specific movement like the particular painters inspired by André Breton’s 1924 manifesto. Rather, she means “a mode of sensibility which cuts across all the arts of the 20th century.” This broader sensibility rallies around different modes of “destroying conventional meanings, and creating new meanings or counter-meanings through radical juxtaposition (the ‘collage principle’).” One effect of this aim is a position of “aggression toward the presumed conventionality of its audience and, above all, aggression toward the medium itself” (Sontag, “Happenings: An Art of Radical Juxtaposition” 269). Smith’s film retains the sense of eradicating moral “content” from its figurations, buoyed by its affinity to the Surrealist sensibility, but it embodies this emptiness with a fullness of exuberance that differentiates its aesthetic from an otherwise Surrealist gloominess or melancholy (*i.e.* it has nothing of those strains of Surrealism that inherit Charles Baudelaire’s utterly bourgeois sense of spleen): “*Flaming Creatures* is a triumphant example of an aesthetic vision of the world--and such vision is perhaps always, at its core, epicene. But this type of art has yet to be understood in this country. The space in which *Flaming Creatures* moves is not the space of moral ideas, which is where American critics have traditionally located art. What I am urging is that there is not only moral space, by whose laws *Flaming Creatures* would indeed come off badly; there is also aesthetic space, the space of pleasure. Here Smith’s film moves and has its being” (Sontag, “Jack Smith’s *Flaming Creatures*” 231).

By the early 1960s, when Smith made his film and when Sontag began publishing her first influential essays, the aesthetics of conventionality underwent a major upheaval on a mass scale. After various art movements blurred boundaries between aesthetic and political acts (the Surrealists, the Futurists, and Sartre’s “committed” literature being a few major examples), the

category of “*the aesthetic*” itself appeared as an amorphous principle of perceptual existence traversing all domains of life. In some of its main tributaries, one can trace this development back to Kant’s delineation of the transcendental subject of apperception; or to Descartes; or to Cervantes (to name only examples from the Western mind). There’s no single source, no single genealogy, but all of its possible presuppositions speak to a movement in the direction of a renewed skeptical capacity; George Berkeley remade for the 20th century as the primacy of subjective perception and rearticulated as a field of knowledge: the aesthetic domain and the aesthetic sense.

But this new skepticism retains neither the actual solipsism of Berkeley nor the literal doubt of whether we can “really” perceive the material world at all (though this myth continues in cultural narratives as disparate as *The Matrix* and *Avatar*). Rather, it is a skepticism relocated to the history of our interpretations, to what Kant called the *sensus communis*, what Hegel called Spirit, what Foucault called discourse and/or *dispositif*, Derrida called Logos, and what Lacan called the big Other. Of course, these terms and intellectual articulations cannot be fully equated, but they relate to each other by virtue of the aesthetic field that each of them grasps. And Sontag offers a simplification that collapses them all together in the aesthetic sense or aesthetic sensibility, which is a *skill* to be cultivated and a *mode* to be occupied rather than a concept to be delineated. But this sense and sensibility contain contrary tendencies, one toward the ethical-moral and the other toward the epicene, based in the pleasure principle alone outside of all distinction and beyond all negation.

The Aesthetic Sense as a Tool For Neutralizing Dogmatic Conceptions

It is in this light that one should read the infamous song released in 2020 by Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion, “WAP” (or: Wet Ass Pussy). The song created a firestorm, best encapsulated in the embarrassing “take-down” of the singers and the song by Ben Shapiro on his podcast *The Ben Shapiro Show* shortly after its release in August 2020. Shapiro represents the song as a depraved humiliation of women and himself as a defender of moral “respect” for women (this coming from a man who also speaks on behalf of a political party bent on authoritarian control of reproductive life). He speaks of the song as degrading, and indeed the rhetoric *is* degrading, reducing the body to a series of comically graphic pornographic exchanges and desires. But Shapiro makes a fool of himself for misunderstanding the aesthetic sense in which the rhetoric is couched. Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion appropriate pornographic rhetoric, long a mainstay of rap and hip-hop music, and re-articulate it from a subject-position that asserts its degrading sense of objectification from the opposite direction than it generally comes from in American culture.

When the song describes cartoonishly exaggerated sexual acts, it is absurd to describe them as “degrading” or “objectifying” in the usual moralistic sense that such lyrics are described, because they are expressed in the mode of a defiant exuberance:

He got some money, then that’s where I’m headed

Pussy A-1, just like his credit

He got a beard, well, I’m tryna wet it

I let him taste it, and now he diabetic

I don’t wanna spit, I wanna gulp

I wanna gag, I wanna choke

I want you to touch that lil’ dangly thing that swing in the back of my throat.

The “degrading” sense in which these same images can function are annulled, denied, refused, thrown back in the face of the people who use them sadistically. A quotation of Sartre’s from Saint Genet can help to articulate here the sense in which this appropriation is an act of ethical defiance precisely because Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion neutralize the power of traditional pornographic rhetoric by making it Camp. In Sartre’s example, a woman is having marital difficulties, alienated from her husband and family and “feels that she is drowning.” Her impulse is to react with anger. My contention is that, in “WAP,” this anger becomes a defiance that rejects the imposed weight of the Woman’s oppression and objectification in a world that refuses to provide her a real space of subjective freedom:

But if, out of remorse, out of masochism, out of a deep feeling of inferiority, this young woman adopts the social and objective datum as if it were the absolute truth about her, if she accuses herself of having an irascible nature, if she projects behind her, into the darkness of the unconscious, a permanent predisposition to anger of which each particular outburst is an emanation, then she subordinates her reality as a conspicuous subject to the Other that she is for Others, and she grants to the Other a superiority to herself and confers upon what is probable a superiority to what is certain. She endows that which had no meaning other than social with a metaphysical meaning, a meaning prior to any relationship with society. In short, I would say that she alienates herself from the object which she is to others (Sartre 33-4).

“WAP” is precisely a refusal to alienate oneself, and instead to deny one’s objectification by over-identifying with it, exaggerating it. There is no other way to read the song itself, and the music video that accompanies it, than as perhaps the most widely disseminated “drag” performance in the history of “drag.” And drag is a way of making one’s body--and thereby

one's "self," which remains in question--an extension of the artistic act, indistinguishable from the expression. The refusal to understand that Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion are performing as drag queens is the source of all misunderstandings, and all puritanical judgments (whether rightist or leftist), of the song itself. As William Blake wrote, in "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell," "Exuberance is Beauty" (Blake 38) and an ability to appreciate the real *beauty* of the song, and its cultural presence as an aesthetic *position*, requires an application of the appropriated "sophistication" that Sontag describes as the Camp sensibility but is otherwise merely "the aesthetic sense." Ultimately, "WAP" just went way over everyone's head.

In an important way, this aesthetic sense became a major working principle of Freudian logic in the early 20th century (to cite a major example). What Sontag identifies as "the Surrealist principle of radical juxtaposition," for instance, because it operates in the domain of interpretive judgment, plays a key role in the basic premises of psychoanalysis and its principle of "free association": "By its accepting as relevant every unpremeditated statement made by the patient, the Freudian technique of interpretation shows itself to be based on the same logic of coherence behind contradiction to which we are accustomed in modern art" (Sontag, "Happenings" 270). What Freudian interpretation grasps is precisely "the aesthetic" as a particular register of psychic life and, like with Kant's exposition of "aesthetic ideas," Freud uses the language of purposiveness to distinguish between voluntary and involuntary chains of association. When therapist and patient "abandon reflection and allow involuntary ideas to emerge," it is in order to abandon *known* purposes for *unknown* purposes (Freud 566-7). (The purposes to which Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion put the pornographic rhetoric described above, are precisely these "unknown purposes.")

Indeed, Freud also uses terms echoed in Heideggerian aesthetics, making the excavation of the unconscious similar to the unconcealment of worlds: “when conscious purposive ideas are abandoned, concealed purposive ideas assume control of the current of ideas” (Freud 570). The work of radical juxtaposition, when broadened to express a general sensibility, is then a process of unconcealment in the sense of revealing new meaning(s) by transporting an object/idea from one aesthetic context to another, and the Perceiving Subject from one aesthetic state to another. Completion of dream interpretation results in awareness that the dream is “the fulfillment of a wish,” the product of desire endowed with purposiveness concealed beneath non-purposiveness. Here is the Kantian basis of Freudian thinking. Seeing the “wish” means replacing the already “known” purposes of the dream imagery with the “unknown” purposes that will also, then, reveal the unconscious desire that serves as the wish’s organizing principle. This organizing principle is the concealed aesthetic orientation that transforms *known* into *unknown*, recreating the world in the likeness of desire; or symptomatically (re)asserting desire against its cultural or circumstantial repression (as in the case of “WAP”). Here it is no longer just individual-psychic but socio-cultural conventionality at stake, though of course the two are always dialectically related.

It is this basic idea that connects Freud to the developments of 20th century aesthetic theory: editing and association (construction and thinking) are purposive activities aimed at the organization of meaning, but the related associative principles of the Surrealist sensibility develop more explicitly from Nietzsche’s insight that “there are no facts, only interpretations” (Sontag, “Against Interpretation” 5).³⁶ A major shift of modernity occurs at a point when life

³⁶ Godard’s great film, *2 or 3 Things I Know About Her* (1967), is an attempt to express this set of ideas aesthetically by presenting, as a kind of Brochian simultaneity, the quasi-tautological equivalence of urban planning, existential freedom, and political idealism that opens up the possibility for imagining a better future from the vantage point of a degraded reality.

becomes art and art becomes life (already established in its modern *mythos* by the figure of Don Quixote). No distinction exists any longer between these two domains understood in the old sense of art as mimesis of reality: life is perceived as a work of art, essentially an aesthetic phenomenon. Psychoanalysis marks just one exemplary case in a far more general transition in the history of consciousness between interpreting the unconscious mind on the basis of a Theology versus the basis of a Psychology. In Lacan's reinterpretation of Freud, this becomes the difference between the Other's desire (theology, political theology) and the Subject's desire (the abstract subject of the *Cogito*). In the Lacanian mythology, the Individual Subject is an enactment of the Other's desire, the unconscious plaything of a sovereign mythological order of signs, but it is also--potentially--the Brochian "earthly absolute," freely incorporating and freely rejecting the representations of the Other in the outwardly projected style of its will. This is, for instance, how one should understand Sontag's choice to title her second collection of essays "styles of radical will," as an extension of the previous collection's title of "against interpretation."

History, in a post-Hegelian sense, is the beginning of subjects taking their interpretations as their own. According to Freud, the trans-historical and oppositional currents of all thinking concerning dreams (and therefore all interpretations of desire and purposiveness) are those between the "truthful and valuable dreams, sent to the sleeper to warn him or foretell the future, and vain, deceitful and worthless dreams, whose purpose it was to mislead or destroy him" (Freud 37). One way to understand kitsch is as a history of worthless dreams. The "truthful or valuable dreams" shore up and retain associations learned in the past in order to place them in fresh contexts, to produce new associations aiming at an uncertain (but ever *more* certain) future.

But “deceitful and worthless dreams” attempt to use the past in order to produce the context itself, to calmly anticipate it as one anticipates the Unchangingness of God. Most religious interpretations of scriptural texts are “deceitful and worthless dreams,” as Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud all argued in their own ways, though each of them created work that also functioned effectively as new scriptural texts. This is true least of Nietzsche, though he unarguably approached a line that allowed for his work’s use in this way, as many of his liberal-leftist detractors never tire of assessing. As Sontag once wrote in a private journal, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is basically kitsch, the Wagnerian side of Nietzsche giving its last frustrated flowering (Sontag, *As Consciousness is Harnessed to Flesh* 434).

In order to be remembered, associations placed in new contexts by “truthful or valuable dreams” must lend themselves to memory via placement into some level of narrative structure, or what Freud calls the “appropriate[ly arranged] concatenations and groupings” that produce “susceptibility to being remembered” (Freud 77). This is why, for instance, a musical education is conducive to knowledge retention in any other field of inquiry. Musical notation performs the basic aesthetic function of ordering elements--sounds--for pleasurable results. Many of the major musical developments in the last 150 years attempt to reimagine precisely what it means to speak of “pleasurable” results; not, to be sure, to renounce pleasure as diabolical, but to expand pleasure outside of dogmatic boundaries and actively practice the mind in processes of *discovering* pleasure instead of succumbing to it in the modes through which it is handed down from on high. For Sontag, one should merely be wary of one’s interpretations, because they are as much entryways as they are blockages to understanding.

Freudian psychoanalysis announced itself as a study of “modifications in the conditions of functioning of the mental apparatus,” meaning it aims to understand the different and

potentially changing logics of association applicable to consciousness (Freud 40). In one sense, psychoanalysis emphasizes cultural continuity (*i.e.* understanding the unconscious/unknown origins of present psychic phenomena), but it is also about radical *breaks* in continuity through its proposal that the very “conditions” of the mind undergo changes that alter its functioning (and thereby, in some sense, potentially its essence). Understanding dreams as manifestations of psychic life or history is analogous to understanding artworks as manifestations of historical consciousness--what Hegel called Spirit in one of the first extensive aesthetic theories actually applied to artworks in Europe.

Those who relate naively to their dreams (as merely indexical references to basic elements of one’s life or memory) are like those who relate naively to artworks, as though the artwork indicates an external reality (accurately or inaccurately) rather than being itself a *reality of consciousness* constructed from the historically accumulated image-bank of experience and suffused with subjective meanings and significant interconnections projected into the future. Artists in the early 20th century--at the same time as psychoanalysis began its ascendancy to a supreme cultural power--likewise showed interest in modifying the conditions of aesthetic experience and thereby of consciousness. This meant rejecting old modes of engaging with art, both as consumer and producer, and allowing for the possibility that even the most generally accepted categories like pleasure or displeasure should be re-evaluated or altered, if not outright rejected.

Aesthetic Judgment is an Ethical Judgment Understood as Conferral of Value

Here lies the basic thrust behind Sontag’s argument “against interpretation”: engaging the dream/artwork *correctly* means first abandoning the fantasy that a work of art communicates or

expresses something *true* about the world, like a message pre-existing the experience of it and awaiting discovery or decipherment. The artwork is itself a reality, and its consistency or logic or effects alone comprise whatever “meaning” it might have. This leads Sontag to emphasize the “formal” aspect of art to the detriment of “content.” Marshall McLuhan’s famous argument that “the medium is the message” is a similar idea from the same period, but Sontag’s formulation is more far-reaching.

McLuhan argues, for instance, that cubism announces the medium as the message by demonstrating the notion of “the total view” in opposition to the perspectival (McLuhan 4-5). And for McLuhan this signals a transition from a sequential to a configurational-structural orientation of consciousness (not entirely dissimilar from Broch’s idealized development of *mythos* into mathematical formulae). After cubism, every work of painting appears under the light of this modernist reduction. Every painting is equally inaccurate to reality, though some adhere more or less to certain conventions or experiences of reality. For Sontag, the lesson of modern art is gleaned from attending to how the artwork formalizes reality through the elements it selects for associative juxtaposition or blending.

Abandoning the mimetic theory of art as first proposed by the Greeks means eradicating any requirement that art justify its existence by the standard of “truth” as a kind of correspondence, which gets replaced by what the artwork leaves open for *valuation*. The artwork is a mere *fact* of existence. Even more to the point, the *aesthetic sense* itself is a fact of existence (like the “earthly absolute”), and modernist art announces this field in its historically self-conscious dimension as a value-producing field of *action*, contrary to all fashionable discriminations between theory and *praxis*. Indeed, the objection to “high-minded” theory has

revealed itself as a collaborationist (with consumerism, with fascism) form of (post)modern philistinism.

In order to grasp the work, one must understand “content” (that to which the work allegedly refers) as indistinguishable from its “form” (the actual substance of the work itself, its material content), because there is no “content” separable from the mode of its rendering. In Kantian language, there’s no *in-itself* left unaffected by the transcendental aesthetic, as quantum physics later also argued. By the 1960s, Sontag says, the notion of “content” became a way of ignoring the work of art and its function(s) in the world. The idea of content itself is “a subtle or not so subtle philistinism,” meaning it serves only a simplifying or propagandizing function, like the emphasis on *action* over and against *thought* (Sontag, “Against Interpretation” 5).

Interpretation, in the sense of common codes or rules for deciphering art, fails to grasp the value of works generally categorized as modernist and thereby represents a regressive mode of engagement because it has fallen behind the actual material reality of the world.

Freud’s elaborate hermeneutics of psychic life appears, from Sontag’s view, as a regressive use of the Surrealist sensibility whenever it reduces meaning to a dichotomy between manifest and latent content, the latter being the level of “true meaning” as the goal of aesthetic experience. “Content” is then a mode of kitsch in the sense that it reduces a work of art to a manageable, understandable, communicable intention, meaning, or use. The whole crux of modernism’s multiplicity of experiments with expressivity is to counter the basic Freudian axiom “that as a rule dream-pictures contain what the waking man already thinks” (Freud 42). The modernist “project,” to the extent that there is one, revolves around a drive to deny this bit of received wisdom and demonstrate its falsity via radical poetic creation. And this meant deposing the traditional hierarchies of the acceptable or the beautiful. Modern artists trafficked in garbage,

refuse, waste, ugliness, disorder. And so a song like “WAP” should also be properly situated in this very same modernist heritage.

But eventually the axiom revealed itself as true nonetheless (or both true and not true, at the same time). Just like a dream can remember more than we are capable of in our waking lives, so a work of art remembers more of the collective unconscious than its contemporary audience can immediately comprehend. Everything in the work of art is borrowed, taken, stolen. This was always the case, but now that dimension itself is revealed and valued (unconcealed) *as* the aesthetic field of inquiry, broadly speaking, comprising any medium through which human consciousness expresses itself. After the 1960s, the boundaries of art and non-art continuously blur. Already through media-covered sit-ins, as well, the lines were blurring in the opposite direction and bringing existence itself into the aesthetic fold. Are the most effective sit-ins of the Civil Rights movement not also theatrical exercises aimed at achieving an aesthetic effect? And is not this aesthetic effect also aimed at producing a kind of “disinterested” reflection whereby those in power agree to give up some level of their own interest in favor of understanding or accommodating that of another?

Just like modern art embraced trash or untraditional materials, Freud understood that dreams don’t tend to remember what waking-life deems most important, but rather “what is most indifferent or insignificant as well” (Freud 52). He quotes Hildebrandt writing in 1875 about these details as “worthless fragments.” In these observations, one can see the other major connection of Freud to the currents of modern aesthetics: the obsession with ephemera, the unimportant, the fleeting, or the accidental, from Benjamin’s *Arcades Project* to flea markets to photography to the fact that “art” itself has entered the margins of even academic cultural purviews (in favor of value-neutral and overbroad conceptualizations like “media,” which really

does require some oppositional determination like “cinema” or “art” or “literature” in order to have value). The real ephemeral aesthetic works of the contemporary world, the real “low” works from the standpoint of contemporary cultural hegemony, are (if limited to “cinematic art”) those by figures like Béla Tarr, Chantal Akerman, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Lav Diaz, the late works of Jean-Luc Godard, Agnès Varda. Today, these are regarded by the majority as “worthless,” with a similar disdain as was once shown by cultural elites for popular films by Howard Hawks or Busby Berkeley. And it is now these that need defending, not the so-called arts of the masses. To understand Sontag’s ideas is to understand the truth of this.

Writing in 1899, Havelock Ellis notes “the trifling, the incidental, the ‘forgotten’ impressions of daily life which reappear in our dreams. The psychic activities that are awake most intensely are those that sleep most profoundly” (Freud 53). Ultimately, the law of energy conservation applies to experience and the phenomenal innervations of consciousness: nothing passes away, but it often goes unnoticed or unknown (the point of intersection between Heidegger’s “concealment” and Freud’s “unconscious”). For Sontag, the very best art is that which expresses the deepest wells of conscious experience, the fullest breadth of reality contained in or alluded to by its materials. It is a matter of concentration, condensation, or the density of knowledge.³⁷ Ideal expressiveness contains the greatest concentration of historical awareness, what Jacques Derrida would call the traces of meaning, conjured into an aesthetic unity by the radical juxtaposition or blending of their formal arrangement.

³⁷ There is an opposite, contrary value to this density as well, as Sontag expressed in her brief essay commemorating Paul Goodman after his death: “That I have been living and working for more than a year in such small bare quarters, though not at the beginning planned or thought out, undoubtedly answers to some need to strip down, to close off for a while, to make a new start with as little as possible to fall back on” (Sontag, “On Paul Goodman” 3). It is in light of this attitude that one can understand the sense in which Samuel Beckett is an heir to James Joyce, Beckett’s greatest works representing the paring down to essentials of Joyce’s allusive grandiosity.

Indeed, Derrida's concept of trace comes in large part from his conscious appropriation of this Freudian basis, "that even the most insignificant impression leaves an unalterable trace, which is indefinitely capable of revival" (Freud 54n1). And just as in dreams, the contents of artworks that aesthetically incorporate contemporary events or contemporary references are only catalysts to further association or connection. The present moment of a subject's experience is only ever a fragment of the artwork, never its full beginning or end--or even its only context.

Generally, the deconstructionist program of interpretation is an update of the Freudian classification of dream-sources: (1) the context of the work/dream, the sources of its intuitions; (2) the artist-dreamer's own particular colorations of those contextual sources based on personal past experiences and associations, including all learned knowledge; (3) the even more particular bodily/material life-experience of the artist-dreamer during the time of the dream-work's creation; and (4) purely accidental or fortuitous qualities emerging from the processes and materials of production itself. Every kind of experience has somehow registered into the aesthetic records of reality, and thereby so has every possibility, realized or unrealized. The very best art condenses the widest breadth of consciousness into the smallest possible space, constructing value in its construction of a world. This is what Broch refers to as the function of *mythos* and Benjamin as the function of his idiosyncratic definition and use of allegory (and even earlier, what Samuel Taylor Coleridge referred to as tautegory).

The Density of Thought as an Ethical Imperative (Broch's "Earthly Absolute" & Benjamin's "Fate")

What Sontag finds in Benjamin, though, offers a very different account of the "deferral of meaning" branded as deconstruction. She locates it in Benjamin's obsession with small things,

both literal (tiny) and metaphorical (insignificant). “He loved old toys, postage stamps, picture postcards, and such playful miniaturizations of reality as the winter world inside a glass globe that snows when it is shaken.” He loved the unimportant, but he also loved impossible density, a concentration of thought metaphorically similar to a black hole: “[Gershom] Scholem relates that when he visited Benjamin in Paris in August 1927 (the first time the two friends had seen each other since Scholem emigrated to Palestine in 1923), Benjamin dragged him to an exhibit of Jewish ritual objects at the Musée Cluny to show him ‘two grains of wheat on which a kindred soul had inscribed the complete Shema Israel’” (Sontag, “Under the Sign of Saturn” 123). How Sontag reads this interest informs her valuation of the density of knowledge contained in art: “Benjamin was drawn to the extremely small as he was to whatever had to be deciphered: emblems, anagrams, handwriting. To miniaturize means to make useless. For what is so grotesquely reduced is, in a sense, liberated from its meaning--its tininess being the outstanding thing about it. It is both a whole (that is, complete) and a fragment (so tiny, the wrong scale). It becomes an object of disinterested contemplation or reverie” (Sontag, “Under the Sign of Saturn” 124).

Here Sontag positions Benjamin in relation to Kantian aesthetics: disinterested contemplation and “free play” (reverie) are the conditions of reflective (aesthetic) judgment. But she continues by relating these aesthetic concepts to Surrealism: “Love of the small is a child’s emotion, one colonized by Surrealism. The Paris of the Surrealists is ‘a little world,’ Benjamin observes; so is the photograph, which Surrealist taste discovered as an enigmatic, even perverse, rather than a merely intelligible or beautiful, object, and about which Benjamin wrote with such originality. The melancholic always feels threatened by the dominion of the thing-like, but Surrealist taste mocks these terrors. Surrealism’s great gift to sensibility was to make melancholy

cheerful” (Sontag, “Under the Sign of Saturn” 124). A child’s love for smallness involves the pleasure of control, such as the doll house in which the child imagines a world that is its own creation. Surrealism, understood as a broad historical sensibility, imagines the mutability of meaning, and thereby of social reality, as a source of sublimely cheerful and rebellious power that does not require class privilege, even while it means the melancholy acceptance that the world has no guiding idea. The joy of that melancholy is that it can *create*, poetically, as many guiding ideas as it wants. And even more joyously, that it can reject them too.

One of Surrealism’s goals, likewise, is to control the world; to wrest away its meaning in a sublimely joyful profanation of meaning; ironic condescension to *all* meanings. Surrealism is one of the primary antecedents of contemporary stand-up comedy in its more confrontational forms, such as George Carlin or Dave Chappelle, where disrespect of established or conventional pieties is a primary aesthetic mode. The Surrealists, like the comics, play with the world in the form of its fragments. They enact the Derridean slippage of meaning on images, words, symbols, objects, ideas. (This connection is prefigured in Freud’s *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, a favorite of many Surrealists and too few contemporaries.) This is a Heideggerian unconcealment at work: opening worlds by the continually renewed process of emptying and restoring meaning. The photograph is an ideal site for such a process: it is a fragment of “World” that enters the context of other “Worlds” so long as it survives as an object. And the older the photograph, the more empty its meaning but also--and more importantly--the more space available to *fill* it with meaning, just as the subjective point of the “earthly absolute” is filled with meaning. As the photograph loses the context of its World, it becomes increasingly an ironic counterpoint to the World that exists. It becomes an existing, factual symbol of ephemerality and

death by showing a world--and *as* one that exists fragmented within this one--that no longer *actually* exists but *could*.

But here is where, in Benjamin, the principle of condensation (of ideas onto a single point) mixes with the principle of the collector: it is the collector who must arrange the most compelling juxtaposition of meanings into what Broch would call “a simultaneity which transforms all sequence into coexistence and in which the temporally structured course of the world with its empirical richness is presented as it would be seen by the eye of a god, who would take it all in simultaneously” (Arendt, “Hermann Broch” 133). Sontag characterizes Benjamin himself as just such a simultaneity when, at the beginning of her essay she describes his “opaque” look in a photograph as the look of someone “with books behind his head” (110). In Benjamin’s own language (mixed with Broch’s), a “person” comprises the *fate* that determines the meanings transcribed onto the “ego nucleus” of their consciousness. Broch’s “ego nucleus,” his scientific term for the Cartesian Subject that later becomes the “earthly absolute,” is a receptor and relater only, reducible entirely to the function of what’s called Thirdness (relation, interpretation) in Charles Sanders Peirce’s semiotics.

This is, likewise, how Sontag describes the photograph as a kind of nucleus similar to Broch’s “ego nucleus” or “earthly absolute,” a point at which things converge: “Unlike the fine-art objects of pre-democratic eras, photographs don’t seem deeply beholden to the intentions of an artist. Rather, they owe their existence to a loose cooperation (quasi-magical, quasi-accidental) between photographer and subject--mediated by an ever simpler and more automated machine, which is tireless, and which even when capricious can produce a result that is interesting and never entirely wrong” (Sontag *On Photography* 53). Consciousness ultimately functions, or exists, in the same way, beyond justification but nonetheless requiring

understanding. And this is precisely what Broch attempted to articulate in his concept of the “earthly absolute” as a rejection of all metaphysical absolutes:

A final confirmation of Broch’s rejection of the transcendental for the earthly Absolute is to be seen in the way he describes this as a process of secularization. His use of this word is best understood if it is remembered that, although he did not believe in a personal Deity, he identified God with the Logos or absolute formal principle which guarantees the systematic unity of reality. For Broch this secularization is synonymous with [‘the Copernican twist’]. Man can no longer rely only on logical speculation with abstract concepts or absolute ideals. Every discipline must recognize the inevitable, absolute, empirical limitations imposed on it by the human factor which can never be excluded from the process of observation or thought (Watt 184).

And this notion of the “earthly absolute” applies as well to Broch’s theory of politics, which he articulates as follows:

A democratic ideology has ... to be based on a theory of human rights. However, though we have histories of the development of human rights, there does not exist a real scientific theory, quite simply because the human rights are still a religious concept deriving from the idea that man is an image of God. What we need is secularization. We have to bring back to earth the absolute that as yet was only in Heaven, and I think that the time is ripe for it. Everywhere in scientific thinking you see that the dialectical absolute had to yield to an empirical and earthly one (Watt 185).

Broch’s “earthly absolute” is ultimately an attempt to define an articulate consciousness explicitly as a rejection of kitsch, denying the mythologies of other-worldliness and metaphysical dogmas of action and being. This is also, ultimately, the function of Sontag’s aesthetic sense in

its formal rejection of moral parameters for the purpose of opening the mind's capacity "to see more, to hear more, to feel more." Broch's rejection of the metaphysical Absolute in favor of the "earthly absolute," conceived as a process of secularization, is echoed in Sontag's final statement in "Against Interpretation": "In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art" (Sontag 14). It is not so much the subterranean mind as *the world*, conceived externally, that we need to raise to consciousness.

According to Benjamin, the movements of Surrealism embody the "ruins of the bourgeoisie," meaning that the many elements of "radical juxtaposition" that comprise ever so many Surrealist techniques are exemplary quotations from the realm of bourgeois ideals, wrested from context and devoid of what Benjamin famously called "aura," a concept referring to a quasi-mystical quality of authenticity and an unfortunate vestigial remnant of what Broch denigrates as the metaphysical Absolute. Coming after the 19th century European novel's discovery of historically rooted grand narratives, embodied in Honoré de Balzac's encyclopedic aspirations to aesthetic totality, the Surrealist ruins are the decadent afterlife of those earnest explorations of abstract-universal subjectivity that emerged from the Enlightenment. No longer able to take principles, values, or convictions seriously in their traditional forms, the Surrealists committed themselves to tradition's systematic destruction and/or transformation. The fragments of the bourgeoisie were to be drained of their meaning by way of ironic ambiguation.

Yet this principle of irony developed directly out of the bourgeois tradition, best exemplified in the history of the European novel, conceived more broadly than its 19th century epitome, but also the many theories of irony that appeared in and after the Romantic period (from Schlegel to Kierkegaard). One can even construct a happy symmetry between the birth and

dissolution of the European novel, as both give way (whether moving backward or forward in time) to a proliferation of the literature of pure fantasy and a diminution of ironic sensibility.

Milan Kundera locates this novel's birth in either Rabelais or Cervantes, but either figure is marked primarily by the dissolution of religious authority, just as in Broch's "earthly absolute": "As God slowly departed from the seat whence he had directed the universe and its order of values, distinguished good from evil, and endowed each thing with meaning, Don Quixote set forth from his house into a world he could no longer recognize" (Kundera, *The Art of the Novel* 6). Absence of recognition is again the aesthetic impetus of the surrealist shock effect, but it has become a perennial and intrinsic revocation of meaning for all fragments of any cultural mosaic. Is Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*, for instance, not a repetition of the basin used by Quixote for a helmet? But if the comical object-transformation of Quixote's rested on that character's delusions of grandeur and overactive imagination, Duchamp's provocation was aimed more broadly at the delusions of all bourgeois pretensions to cultivation. Not only is the basin not a helmet; it's not even really a basin. Surrealism's irony is more total: no authenticity anywhere, and we're all a bunch of bungling Quixotes.

In Benjamin, Broch's thematic treatment of "the disintegration of values" appears as the commodification of all forms, artistic or otherwise. He draws a direct throughline between the 16th century separation of science from philosophy and the 19th century emancipation of "the forms of construction from art." Architecture becomes "engineered construction," no longer in service of an ideal beyond the ideally functional. And then, furthermore, representation of nature becomes mechanical via photography. Beyond these canonical examples of scientific and technological transformation, Benjamin foresees the very act of creating fantasy (the work of imagination) becoming a practical activity of commercial enterprise, wrested from the autonomy

of “Literature” and placed in submission “to montage in the *feuilleton*” (Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* 13). Everything becomes merely a *piece of world*, analogously to how Heidegger spoke of a world-picture but without any totality of context.

Benjamin’s unfinished project on the Arcades was intended to capture this moment on the verge of total commodification, where the arcades, intérieurs, exhibition halls, and panoramas are “residues of a dream world” even before psychoanalysis and Surrealism took on such rhetoric scientifically and aesthetically. These arcades, et cetera, are the premonitions of the latter; in fact, they are a concrete premonition of what later goes under the moniker of postmodernism, as most prominently theorized by Fredric Jameson. But really, according to Benjamin’s account, these features of “postmodernism” as identified by Jameson emerge simultaneously with what’s called “modernism” and so the distinction, at least in terms of periodization, seems specious. What Jameson denigrates as the leveling of value in postmodernism, resulting from a sense of worldlessness, misunderstands the fact that there *really is* no world--in the sense of an Absolute--to begin with.

***Pink Flamingos* as an Exercise in Visceral Aesthetic Defamiliarization**

In 2014, *The Baltimore Sun* reported that John Waters had made concrete efforts toward producing a re-make of *Pink Flamingos*, his notoriously shocking film from 1972 that garnered a cult following and remains an iconic facet of American cinema (and “punk” cultures more broadly), as it was most recently incorporated into the official registry of aesthetic value kept by the Library of Congress. The catch was that this re-make was intended to work for children, meaning everything would have to change to give the film a G-rating by the MPAA. In fact, Waters actually wrote a version of this and recorded children doing a table-read, according to the

article by Julie Scharper. At the time of the article, Waters was set to present this recording as its own piece, outside of the commercial circuit of his better-known filmmaking, at the Marianne Boesky Gallery in New York City, and it would be called *Kiddie Flamingos*.

For Waters, the hope was that this new version would make the film “even more perverse.” The scene where Crackers kills a live chicken during sex became a scene about bad table manners. Connie and Raymond Marbles’ business of kidnapping hippies, impregnating them with sperm extracted from their servant, selling the babies to lesbian couples, and using the money to create a heroin market for inner-city elementary schools--this became a storyline about “people stealing talking dolls from rich people’s cars.” The spirit of the act, embedded in its context both narratively and culturally, is the core of *Pink Flamingos*’s representational logic; the particular “atrocities” are entirely dependent on the cultural setting of their articulation. The aesthetic logic of the film functions with or without its particular “atrocities” (Scharper).

Pink Flamingos, like *Flaming Creatures* before it, participates historically in “the poetic cinema of shock,” and it does so with a unique level of self-awareness. While Waters sometimes prides himself on the assertion that his work lacks any “socially redeeming” value (Young 140), it nonetheless (and perhaps precisely *by* refusing redemption) reintroduces a moral element into this tradition (Smith’s variation being a sublime amorality) and qualifies as what Sontag once referred to as “moral science fiction,” fantastically imagining a world wherein conventional morality gives way to its obscene inversions.

At the end of *Pink Flamingos*, Waters’s narrating voice announces the final “spectacle,” relatively disconnected from the movie’s narrative thread, which is already resolved. It’s an epilogue, and one that bridges the gap between representation and reality: “Watch as Divine proves that, not only is she the filthiest person in the world, she is also the filthiest *actress* in the

world. What you are about to see is a *real thing!*” Then Pattie Page’s 1952 recording of “The Doggie in the Window” plays non-diegetically on the soundtrack as Divine prepares to indulge in eating dog feces. That song itself represents an overall wholesome mentality of the popular novelty song in American culture from the 1920s and ‘30s and again in the Baltimore of the 1950s and ‘60s. It encapsulates the *mythos* of a certain American kitsch embodied most forcefully in the suburban ideals of the 1950s, which Waters claims lived an extended afterlife in Baltimore and places like it. This wholesome quality serves as an ironic counterpoint to the juvenile shock value of consuming shit.

Prior to this epilogue, in the concluding violent act of murdering the Marbles, Waters already signaled this shift beyond mere representation via his gimmicky allusion (intentional or not) to the shot fired directly into the camera in Edwin S. Porter’s *The Great Train Robbery* (1903). (Waters’s reference has a further effect of situating the film in what Tom Gunning called the “cinema of attractions” in early filmic practice, and which persisted in the kinds of gimmicky movies Waters admired from the 1950s and 1960s, such as the output of William Castle or Russ Meyer.) In breaking the fourth wall, pointing the gun at the camera, Divine addresses the audience as identified with the Marbles: “Connie and Raymond Marble, you have breathed your last breath. You have sighed your last sigh. You are no longer alive.” Divine, and the representational mode of the movie itself, holds an adversarial position toward anything that gets in the way of Divine’s (or the movie’s) rights to embody filthiness. It is a sublimely juvenile assertion of authoritarian abjection, directed against the (proverbial and actual) puritanical presence of the audience that flinches at its grotesque playfulness.

In a purely aesthetic mode, *Pink Flamingos* demonstrates both the old Marxist-Leftist logic concerning a “dictatorship of the proletariat” and the fascist-fundamentalist logic of

totalitarian violence and power. The beauty of *Pink Flamingos* is in its entirely amoral presentation of these contrary ideologies as simultaneous, historically tautological, while also expressing their truth content, the real moral *value* of transgression embodied in the film (the film as expressive utterance) itself. *Pink Flamingos* takes “camp” taste far beyond “camp,” no longer capable of simple affection for kitsch, no matter how sincere its expression.

Kitsch’s takeover of America in the 1950s was a form of cultural totalitarianism not to be taken lightly. Waters’s work as a whole—including his spoken word performances, his essays, his novel *Liarmouth*, his museum pieces, his cultural presence—speaks to the unification of campy aestheticism with modernism’s ethical conundrum about how to undo dogma without reinstating a new one.³⁸ Waters distills, in a mode of comically exuberant revolt, the old categories of alterity and abjection exemplified by modernist figures like Arthur Rimbaud, Lautréamont, and Jean Genet, but he adds in his own “character”—the *auteur* in a very broad sense, borrowed from his admiration for William Castle as master of ceremonies—as one that also holds claims to the lineage of a Jean Cocteau. And he does so in a quintessentially multi-medial, anti-utilitarian, and self-performative mode characteristic of much of the best art since the 1960s.

Waters resides as much in the history of so-called “high art” as he does in the history of so-called “mass culture.” Another scene in *Pink Flamingos* establishes its relation to cinematic history, when Divine and Crackers enact an absurd filth-terrorism on the Marbles’ home, licking their furniture and performing incestuous fellatio on their couch. Hanging on the walls of the Marbles’ home is a set of posters, most of which are of movies that Waters later writes about in his non-fiction works. Included are Joseph Losey’s *Boom!* (1968), Roman Polanski’s *Cul-de-sac* (1966), Elia Kazan’s *Baby Doll* (1956), Frank Simon’s *The Queen* (1968), and Pier Paolo

³⁸ Waters’s published non-fiction writings are enactments of the Benjaminian notion of the collector as an ethical evaluator, in books like *Shock Value*, *Role Models*, and *Carsick*.

Pasolini's *Teorema* (1968). The presence of these references exists as a contextualization of the film itself as the aesthetic history in which it positions itself. In Hegelian terms, Waters is positing the film's presuppositions, connecting it to a tradition. Each poster is an item in the Benjaminian collection that constructs the sensibility contained in *Pink Flamingos*.

To single out just one of these: when asked what counts as "the best movie" most people haven't seen in a poll of well-known filmmakers, Losey's *Boom!* was Waters's choice. He calls it "a great failed art film," "beyond bad," and "the other side of camp." *Boom!* also, according to Waters, "was a huge influence on *Pink Flamingos*." In parts of the original script cut from the final movie, Divine is "hiding out, writing her memoirs—very much like Sissy Goforth, Elizabeth Taylor's character [in *Boom!*]. That really, really led to it, I think. The excesses of the ego, of being so famous that you retire to write about yourself and live in peace with your richness and filthiness, as Divine did" (Elder 37-8). Indeed, one of *Pink Flamingos*'s subjects is the inherent fascism of celebrity star power, its inherent complicity in the figure of the iconic ruler. (Donald Trump's presidency is itself adequate evidence that we are still learning our lessons about this complicity.)

The protagonists of *Pink Flamingos* are then a parody of both the Charismatic Star and the Inflated Autonomy of Self. In *Pink Flamingos*, next to the poster of *Boom!* is a copy of Andy Warhol's portrait of Elizabeth Taylor, an influence on the drag persona of Divine even beyond Losey's film: the celebrity as grotesque ego, a parody of glamor, a commodifiable sense of self as a branded entity. The reason the film is "the other side of camp" rather than *camp proper* is perhaps explained by Waters's response to the claim that he enjoys *Boom!* for being bad (the "so bad it's good" cliché associated with camp aesthetics): "No, it's a great movie! It's not a good movie, but it's a great movie. It's a failed art film. That is possible" (Elder 38). An "art film"

doesn't have to be "good" in any traditional sense, because that notion is fully commodified by such institutional programs of judgment as embodied by The Oscars.

Indeed, "camp" often marks itself as such by attempting to achieve the normative success of "good" commercial products, not by trying and failing to achieve something new, strange, or difficult. A short section from Sontag's famous essay alludes to what Waters might mean here:

There is a sense in which it is correct to say: 'It's too good to be Camp.' Or 'too important,' not marginal enough. [...] Thus, the personality and many of the works of Jean Cocteau are Camp, but not those of André Gide; the operas of Richard Strauss, but not those of Wagner; concoctions of Tin Pan Alley and Liverpool, but not jazz. Many examples of Camp are things which, from a 'serious' point of view, are either bad art or kitsch. Not all, though. Not only is Camp not necessarily bad art, but some art which can be approached as Camp (example: the major films of Louis Feuillade) merits the most serious admiration and study (Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp'" 278).

These same considerations relate to why Waters's films do not really constitute Camp, even while they retain the emphasis on artifice associated with the Camp sensibility. Waters is too *in-on-the-joke*, too self-aware to produce Camp, although knowledge of Camp's irony and aestheticism informs his practice.

When Waters puts Edith Massey in a crib as an adult baby with a fetish for eggs, it does meet the criterion Sontag lays out that "Camp is the triumph of the epicene style" (a decadent representation of "Woman" as "grotesque object," the comical inverse of the Woman as Ideal of Purity, sexualized yet completely asexual, innocent yet demonic), but it does so as a parody of conventional forms *in general*, not as a failed attempt to embody the artificial by over-identifying with it. The "real" Camp style results from a naïve belief in the ability to *become* (to

embody) the aesthetic ideal. It is a sincere expression of kitsch that arouses affectionate pity from the observer positioning themselves as knowing better, the modern ironic position of the refurbished “dandy.” As Sontag writes: “Thus, the Camp sensibility is one that is alive to a double sense in which some things can be taken. But this is not the familiar split-level construction of a literal meaning, on the one hand, and a symbolic meaning, on the other. It is the difference, rather, between the thing as meaning something, anything, and the thing as pure artifice” (Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp’” 281). Any articulation of “identity” as somehow expressive of some spiritual self is also, by this logic, a kitsch attempt to wrest the absolute from some external, metaphysical realm.

Naïve Camp, then, is a result of believing in the possibility of identifying with “pure artifice,” of being able to replace reality with its stylization, or of mistaking oneself as identical with a role. Sartre’s famous description of the café waiter in *Being and Nothingness* is apt here: “His movement is quick and forward, a little too precise, a little too rapid. He comes toward the patrons with a step a little too quick. He bends forward a little too eagerly; his voice, his eyes express an interest a little too solicitous for the order of the customer. Finally there he returns, trying to imitate in his walk the inflexible stiffness of some kind of automaton while carrying his tray with the recklessness of a tight-rope-walker by putting it in a perpetually unstable, perpetually broken equilibrium which he perpetually re-establishes by a light movement of the arm and hand. All his behavior seems to us a game” (Sartre 101). Sartre’s mixture of affection and condescension in describing the plight of the waiter’s attempt to fulfill his function sincerely, by a failed over-identification, articulates precisely the sense of how Camp taste experiences a “passionate failure” as elevated to “good bad taste” by the touching simplicity of its earnestness. This attitude also encapsulates the sense in which, once “kitsch is recognized for the lie it is, it

moves into the context of non-kitsch, thus losing its authoritarian power and becoming as touching as any other human weakness” (Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* 256).

But this affection was more possible in the 1950s and ‘60s, when naivety concerning moral relativity and scientific uncertainty was more widespread and profound in its social power. The same affectionate condescension embodied in what Sontag terms “Camp taste” is no longer possible in the same way she articulated it, because the contexts of culture to which Sontag was responding no longer exist. This is why the more recent embodiments of quasi-Camp, such as the *Real Housewives* series or the multi-medial lives of the Kardashians—where everything is about appearing and the artifice of appearing, but with an eye only to economic power—more-so indicate the anachronism of Camp as an idea rather than its persistence. One can no longer innocently occupy the aesthetic sense in its extreme of indiscriminateness, because indiscriminateness has become the norm.

As Sontag writes in “An Argument About Beauty” in 2002, re-evaluating the long modernist revolt against traditional forms of beauty:

The failure of the notion of beauty reflects the discrediting of the prestige of judgment itself, as something that could conceivably be impartial or objective, not always self-serving or self-referring. It also reflects the discrediting of binary discourses in the arts. Beauty defines itself as the antithesis of the ugly. Obviously, you can’t say something is beautiful if you’re not willing to say something is ugly. But there are more and more taboos about calling something, anything, ugly. (For an explanation, look first not at the rise of so-called ‘political correctness,’ but at the evolving ideology of consumerism, then at the complicity between the two.) [...] Similarly, there is more and more resistance to the idea of ‘good taste,’ that is, to the dichotomy of good taste/bad taste, except for

occasions that allow one to celebrate the defeat of snobbery and the triumph of what was once condescended to as bad taste. Today, good taste seems an even more retrograde idea than beauty. Austere, difficult ‘modernist’ art and literature have come to seem old-fashioned, a conspiracy of snobs. Innovation is relaxation now; today’s E-Z Art gives the green light to all. In the cultural climate favoring the more user-friendly art of recent years, the beautiful seems, if not obvious, then pretentious. Beauty continues to take a battering in what are called, absurdly, our culture wars (Sontag 7-8).

This is the inherent nihilism of vulgar postmodernism that is also an extreme appropriation of the Camp sensibility, turning irony and theatricality into a value-less, nihilistic moral program that takes Camp’s playfulness as actual and final. The selection quoted above then receives an oddly authoritarian character, as a mandate to refrain from judgment: “Camp sees everything in quotation marks. It’s not a lamp, but a ‘lamp’; not a woman, but a ‘woman.’ To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role. It is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theater” (Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp’” 280). Of course, none of these things really are the words or ideas projected onto them. But removing judgment from the thing to the idea effectively moves in the opposite direction than Broch’s “earthly absolute,” back into the Platonic cave where shadows are taken for reality and projected into a metaphysical Absolute as the only true realm of being.

When the image replaces reality, only appearances matter. In its postmodern variation, the metaphor of life as theater becomes the unconscious tendency to mistake theater for life, even while consciously acknowledging that “things aren’t really like that.” Life really *is* a movie, after all, no matter how you cut it. An insistent difference between contemporary Camp and Waters is important: Kim Kardashian (or any of the *Real Housewives* celebrities, who are merely her

copies, as she is a copy of a false and kitsch idealization of Marilyn Monroe's tragic reduction to form) really *want* to be perceived as extraordinarily glamorous objects, whereas Divine played with the extraordinarily grotesque via the *parody* of glamor (based on figures such as Elizabeth Taylor). Divine remained a character, always, played by Harris Glenn Milstead.

There is no dividing line, however, between "Kim Kardashian" and anyone else: the actor and the role are fused in the (post)modern screen icon. (And in this sense, "(post)modern" refers to a regressive rejection of modernism's aesthetic lessons and discoveries.) Camp taste has become conventional taste, and the impossible ideal is the branded image one creates for oneself as a replacement for the real. Thus if traditional Camp works to neutralize the innervations of bodily anxiety (by neutralizing the moral sense), then *Pink Flamingos* goes "beyond" this by re-inflecting the aesthetic sense with its bodily comportment. Waters's aesthetic is a visceral aesthetic. It doesn't work unless you've been "shook" in your guts, whether from disgust or laughter or both. The visceral in this sense is one of the latest rehabilitations of aesthetic defamiliarization, no longer merely intellectual (conceptual) but bodily, where sensibility properly resides. This brings us emphatically back to reality, not away from it.

PART IV: INTEGRAL SIMULTANEITY and TRANSGRESSIVE KNOWLEDGE

The Kitsch of Subjective Identity and the Value of its Refusal

While Sontag's essay on Camp remains influential, it is not often viewed through its context in Sontag's thought as a whole, both at the time of publication in the mid-1960s and in her later writings. Placing it more firmly in this context allows for an understanding of it that complicates the usual view of her as offering a pivotal moment in the so-called democratization of culture--or what Sontag, derogatorily, refers to as its leveling by even prominent leftist thinkers like Jean Baudrillard and Fredric Jameson.³⁹ Chiefly, "camp" remains firmly allied to abstract identity categories even if its relation to identity is slightly mutable, as when Lauren Levitt claims that camp has an "ambiguous status [...] located somewhere at the margins of gay and straight taste." For this view, camp is often a "mode of resistance" in the politics of identity (Levitt 171). However true this might be for particular instances of later appropriations, this ideological-political sense of resistance is completely absent from Sontag's articulation of "camp" as an idea. Because to claim an objective reality for "gay and straight taste" is to claim,

³⁹ In an interview conducted in 2000, Sontag provided the following assessment of Jameson: "Jameson is the leading scholar who has tried to make more sense of the category of postmodernism. One of the reasons I remain unconvinced by his use of the term is that I don't think he's interested in the arts. Not really. Not even in literature. He's interested in ideas. If he cared about literature he wouldn't have quoted--at great length--Norman Mailer. While you illustrate your ideas with quotations from novels, you're also implicitly suggesting to people that they read these books. I think that either Jameson doesn't know that Mailer isn't a very good writer, or that he doesn't care. Another example is when Van Gogh and Warhol are treated as equivalent by Jameson for the sake of theory-building, for fitting examples into his theory. That's when I get off the bus. In my view, what's called postmodernism--that is, the making everything equivalent--is the perfect ideology for consumerist capitalism. It is an idea of accumulation, of preparing people for their shopping expeditions. These are not critical ideas." During the same interview, in response to Baudrillard's claim that Sontag is one of the mistaken "intellectuals" who naively believe in the possibility of being "responsible for 'something,'" Sontag says the following: "Baudrillard is a political idiot. Maybe a moral idiot, too. [...] I think he's ignorant and cynical. And he definitely has opinions about intellectuals. There are intellectuals and intellectuals. The majority of them are conformists. But some are brave, very brave. And what are intellectuals doing with postmodernism? How people move these terms around instead of looking at the concrete reality! I'm for complexity and the respect for reality. I don't want to think anything theoretically in that sense. My interest is to understand the genealogy of ideas. If I'm against interpretation, I'm not against interpretation as such, because all thinking is interpretation. I'm actually against reductive interpretation, and I'm against facile transposition and the making of cheap equivalences" (Chan).

erroneously, that there really are such things as *being* “gay” or *being* “straight” in a metaphysical sense.

In a response to the question “What meaning does the idea of women’s liberation have for you?” in 1973, Sontag’s long response ends with an implied affinity for Sartre’s notorious (but accurate, within the logic of any existentialist thought) account of “the homosexual’s” self-deception:

The more profound depolarization of the sexes must take place in the world of work and, increasingly, in sexual relations themselves. As ‘otherness’ is reduced, some of the energy of sexual attraction between the sexes will decline. Women and men will certainly continue to make love and to pair off in couples. But women and men will no longer primarily define each other as potential sexual partners. In a nonrepressive society non-sexist society, sexuality will in one sense have a more important role than it has today--because it will be more diffused. Homosexual choices will be as valid and respectable as heterosexual choices; both will grow out of a genuine bisexuality. (Exclusive homosexuality--which, like exclusive heterosexuality, is learned--would be much less common in a nonsexist society than it is at present.) But in such a society, sexuality will in another sense be less important than it is now--because sexual relations will no longer be hysterically craved as a substitute for genuine freedom and for so many other pleasures (intimacy, intensity, feeling of belonging, blasphemy) which this society frustrates (Sontag, “The Third World of Women” 779-80).

Thus it is not just bourgeois possessive monogamy that must be undone to undue bourgeois repression, but the atomized notion of bourgeois identity itself, which is inflected in all consumerist notions of taste. Indeed, one need only look at any prominent streaming platform to

understand how identity categories are really just marketing devices for commodities. “Black Voices” and “LGBTQ Voices” are given primacy of place, around Black History Month and around Pride Month, as a kind of corporate “virtue signaling,” in exactly the same way as Romantic Comedies are pushed around Valentine’s Day or like *It’s a Wonderful Life* and *A Christmas Story* are suddenly ubiquitous across the United States every December. Indeed, the notion of “diversity” itself has been commodified precisely to domesticate it and prevent actual diversity from ever taking place. These commodifications are not unlike Edward Bernays’s commodification of “women’s liberation” in the empty symbolic transgression of women smoking. As soon as a political position is transformed into a “market,” it has ceased to respond effectively to real political needs.

Very late in her list of “notes” describing the discontinuous aspects of the notion of Camp--note 51 out of 58--Sontag acknowledges that “the peculiar relationship between Camp taste and homosexuality has to be explained.” First, she identifies Camp taste as a moment in the history of “snob taste,” which aligns it with an aristocratic position toward culture and power. In a time (the 1950s and ‘60s) without any authentic aristocracy, snobbery was maintained by a “self-elected class” consisting of “mainly homosexuals” claiming to be “aristocrats of taste.” “Homosexuals,” she claims, have an “affinity” for Camp taste, but this taste is not identical with any necessary aspects of “homosexuality,” and “homosexuality” itself does not constitute Camp taste. Any equation between the two is specious, but the connection arises from a similar affinity held by those identifying (or identified) as “homosexuals” with a certain level of “aestheticism and irony” (Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp’” 290).

To the extent that Camp taste aligns with “homosexual identity,” it is a mode of “propaganda” aimed at “integration into society” through promotion of “the aesthetic sense,”

which long predates the concept of the “homosexual.” And the aesthetic sense achieves this integration through ironizing moral dogmatism: “Camp is a solvent of morality. It neutralizes moral indignation, sponsors playfulness” (Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp’” 290). In this variant of camp taste, kitsch identity is put in the service of an ethical reorganization of social-symbolic reality. The notion of an identity, as well as a mis-identification, are put to use, in order to get people to *relax* their moral hang-ups a bit. In the genuine aestheticization of “camp” as Sontag articulated it, there is no such thing as an identity category actually existing beyond its mythologization. Indeed, it is precisely this sense of relaxation (of indignation, of disgust, of shock, of terror) that the Camp sensibility provides in the cultural context in which Sontag engaged it.

Disinterestedness, Stylization, and Decadence

Playfulness was already the aim of Kantian disinterestedness in the realm of aesthetic reflection, and so Camp taste is also a direct descendant of this aesthetic philosophy, which Sontag makes clear in an essay written the following year, also in *Partisan Review*, called “On Style.” Indeed, the essay “On Style” begins to develop a *position* that Sontag refused to take *vis-à-vis* Camp due to her ambivalence (“deep sympathy modified by revulsion”) toward it. But “style” refers to that broader history of “the aesthetic sense” of which Camp taste is a modern weaponization.

In this later essay, Sontag identifies “‘camp’ taste”--now uncapitalized and placed in scare quotes--with stylization as opposed to style. Stylization occurs when the artist (rather than the critic) distinguishes between “matter and manner, theme and form” (Sontag, “On Style” 19). The matter or theme, then, are treated as a kind of Platonic idea that can be treated or mistreated

according to taste; stylization expresses an *attitude* (ironic or sincere) more-so than the “truth” of a situation or experience. This attitudinal orientation is an essentially decadent relation to ideas, in the sense that ideas *decay* as effective values of a culture. Broch’s notion of a “disintegration of values,” which occupies a central place in his novel *The Sleepwalkers* as well as his early theoretical writings, is a description of decadence. As soon as something gives way to stylization, it has lost its firm position in the authentic articulation of a culture or a self. Sontag uses some of the same examples as she used in the camp essay to clarify her use of “stylization” in opposition to style: Josef von Sternberg’s great collaborations with Marlene Dietrich (*Blonde Venus*, *The Scarlet Empress*) are aesthetic stylizations of “romantic love” or “the *femme fatale*” as ideas, ironized for the purpose of exaggeration and the pure pleasure of effect (Sontag, “On Style” 19). These exaggerations serve to reinvigorate the *interestingness* or allure of trite ideas like “romantic love” and “the *femme fatale*” for a jaded audience or a jaded artist.

Nietzsche defined a “decadent style” as “anarchy of the atom, disintegration of the will.” No effective consistency exists in a decadent culture, which is a culture of stylization rather than style: “Paralysis everywhere, exhaustion, numbness *or* hostility and chaos [...]. The whole does not live at all anymore” (Ridley 278). Sontag references this notion of decadence as a “disintegration of the will” by claiming that the difference “between ‘style’ and ‘stylization’ might be analogous to the difference between will and willfulness” (Sontag, “On Style” 34). For Nietzsche, decadence in art meant a spiritual decadence which was “something to be overcome in the interests of human excellence. It is not, that is, a mere ‘change of perspective’ (as, for instance, an interesting new point of view might be). It is, rather, a sickness, something to be fought against” (Ridley 280).

But style, writes Sontag, is a mode of preservation rather than a sign of decay, citing writers like Coleridge and Valéry who viewed aesthetic form as preservation of “the works of mind against oblivion.” Form exists to preserve thought from dissolution. Indeed, a style is a mode of asserting perspective, orientation, or a certain logic of relation: “Every style is a means of insisting on something” (Sontag, “On Style” 34-5). Style, unlike stylization, cannot be cynical. It is the will asserting itself as part of the Immortal Mind and is therefore always affirmative in a kind of amoral sense--the sense of Broch’s “earthly absolute.” But it is this very amorality that necessarily prefigures the possibility of ethical action and a free moral sense.

Nietzsche’s notion of *décadence* is an important precursor both to Broch’s understanding of kitsch and Sontag’s understanding of the aesthetic sense. In *Twilight of the Idols*, a definite influence on Broch’s theories of myth and history, Nietzsche constructs an iconic rendering of Socrates as a Decadent Spirit. It is iconic in a proper sense: not a realistic portrayal of an historical personage, or an explication of particular texts as representative of a concrete man, but a description of the function of Socrates in the *mythos* of European history. His description is both the portrait of a literary figure and a diagnosis of a psychological bad habit, an exemplary case of decadent thinking.

As Andrew Huddleston claims in his excellent re-reading of Nietzsche’s philosophy against the common tropes of contemporary dismissal, titled *Nietzsche on the Decadence and Flourishing of Culture*, the passages on Socrates in *Twilight of the Idols* function to present a “specific psychological dynamic” (Huddleston 78). Huddleston rejects the reading that Nietzsche diagnoses historical decadence in order to propose a remedy for it. Rather, decadence emerges as a constant process, though at varying degrees of intensity across time or space, and an ever-present temptation of human thinking, a natural tendency toward self-gratifying aestheticization.

Nietzsche himself sometimes succumbs to this decadence in his very efforts to overcome it in his own work, one prominent example being the general style and tone of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. His Zarathustra runs dangerously close (by Nietzsche's own standards) to playing the role of another mythical Socrates, simply by the literary conceit chosen to convey the ideas.

Thus Spoke Zarathustra becomes, as Sontag wrote in a journal entry, an example of kitsch by promoting the spiritual overcoming of earthly decadence in the figure of a poet-philosopher hovering somewhere between this world and the next (read: Socrates re-incarnated, but not as an earthly entity in the sense that *Luther is Esch* in Kundera's reading of Broch, but in a messianic sense of annunciation). One imagines that the experience of this failure (the shame of his own Wagnerian decadence) led directly to Nietzsche's excoriation of Socrates four years later, in the 1889 publication of *Twilight of the Idols*. He'd committed the same sin as the mythical figure of Socrates, wherein "the 'cure' is itself a manifestation of the sickness" (Huddleston 79). Rather there is no cure, only the necessity of constant vigilance against the perpetually recurring loss of an ethical or aesthetic ideal; what Broch refers to as the "disintegration of values" and identifies as the characteristic problematic of the Modern Era and of all future modernity. The "fall" from these standards is the condition of modernity understood as the secular disintegration of effective belief in religious myth. Modernity actually just *is* the disintegration of values, metaphysically conceived.

In its "modernist" sense, the "modern" refers to an eccentricity pointing in the direction of change. As Benjamin puts it, updating a Nietzschean sense of history: "There has never been an epoch that did not feel itself to be 'modern' in the sense of eccentric, and did not believe itself to be standing directly before an abyss. The desperately clear consciousness of being in the middle of a crisis is something chronic to humanity. Every age unavoidably seems to itself a new

age. The ‘modern,’ however, is as varied in its meaning as the different aspects of one and the same kaleidoscope” (Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* 545). In contrast to this forward-moving orientation directed at an abyss, decadence is modernity’s cynical-analytic mode, the effective belief that what’s known is all there is and all one can hope to achieve is more precision, more refinement, more stylization.

It is also the logic of late consumer capitalism: the substance matters less than the branding one gives it, the stylization provided for one brand can “outperform” another branding of the same basic product. Therefore, the product (the thing, the idea, the use value) matters less than its stylization (the camp-inflected cynicism of the market). One might characterize decadence as enacting a vulgar understanding of Hegel’s “End of History” characterized as a future doomed only to recycling, rehabilitation, and re-organization of existing thought. Indeed, Benjamin writes that Paul Bourget viewed Charles Baudelaire (the epitome of bourgeois boredom) as an intellect “stamped by the *esprit d’analyse*, [a type] determined by *décadence*. [...] Together with the spirit of analysis, Bourget considers ennui an element of decadence” (Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* 255). A future of recycled sameness, the sense of being at the end of History, produces the decadent boredom of “nothing new under the sun.”

This future of the “nothing new” calls only for stylization, because subjective pleasure becomes the only value in a stagnated and senselessly violent world. Freud later (than Baudelaire), of course, famously wrote of the need to go “beyond” this “pleasure principle” for the good of society, and he indeed sees the failure to move beyond it as a sign of decadence. Huddleston needlessly differentiates the early 21st century sense of “decadence” as luxury from Nietzsche’s more pejorative sense, but Nietzsche’s basic idea survives in today’s vernacular usage. Pampering oneself “with ‘decadent’ bubble baths and chocolate truffles” as “respite from

the demands of life” is just a specific functioning of a pleasure principle that can also operate on a mass scale, and does (Huddleston 79). The phrase “you deserve it,” or some variation thereof, has become a ubiquitous advertising slogan--as if we all don’t inherently feel entitled to our own pleasure but instead are too often looking for someone to tell us *how* to enjoy it.

And this modern decadence understood as well-deserved “leisure” (i.e. “treat yourself” or the logic of the “impulse buy” displays next to the register at every drugstore and grocery store) is also an enactment of Baudelaire’s aestheticist principle, only the “work of art” is replaced by life itself: the perceptual experience of the all-sovereign self and the capitalistic requirement that one please it. And here is where the traditionally fascist mandate enters into free-market reality. Whether one speaks of the interests of the Self or the interests of the Fascist State, a kind of dogma overrides all deviations from the supremacy of a mythological subjective center. Indeed, Nietzsche takes Baudelaire’s aestheticism much further, by advocating the possibility of an entirely (and perpetually) new aesthetic, which he referred to as existing “beyond good and evil.” Going “beyond the pleasure principle,” in the Freudian sense, is then a regression from Nietzsche’s earlier “beyond,” because Nietzsche radically questions the far more fundamental interpretation of pleasure *as* pleasure rather than succumbing to Freud’s ideological moralism. A society marked by a surplus and overvaluation of decadent pleasures would be, for Nietzsche, a society refusing to acknowledge its own imminent obsolescence.

Pasolini’s *Salò* as a Source of the Transgressive Knowledge via the Collected *Mythos* of Sadistic and Totalitarian Violence

This is precisely the logic that defines the decadence presented in Pier Paolo Pasolini’s final film, *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom*, released in 1975. Pasolini’s film is an exemplary case

of an aesthetic development in film of certain formal principles derived from different facets of early 20th century European modernism. Indeed, Pasolini is explicit about this by making “modernism” a constituent theme of the film. After a wedding ceremony that culminates in an awkward forced orgy, the small group of masters overseeing the film’s fantasmatic final “hurrah!” of Italian Fascism are shown relaxing in a dimly lit room with walls painted as modernist murals with a cubist bent.

“The principle of all greatness on earth,” one of them says, “has long been totally bathed in blood. And still, my friends, if my memory doesn’t betray me, yes, it’s so.” He then quotes Baudelaire, the great bourgeois poet of aesthetic shock, as saying “Without bloodshed, there’s no pardon.” In Baudelaire’s mouth, the phrase refers to a quasi-nihilistic aestheticism, where the pleasure of symmetry is the supreme value. As André Gide remarked in the preface to a 1917 edition of *Les Fleurs du mal*: “*Les Fleurs du mal* is dedicated to what Gautier claimed to be: magician of French letters, pure artist, impeccable writer--and this was a way of saying: Do not be deceived; what I venerate is the art and not the thought; my poems will have merit not because of their movement, passion, or thought, but because of their form” (Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* 254).

This bourgeois aesthetic nihilism is *one* sense of the phrase, but one of the other men informs him the quote is not from Baudelaire but from Nietzsche, in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, which shifts its meaning from the context of a principle of aesthetic sovereignty in modernity to an ideological critique of European morality: Nietzsche links the requirement of bloodshed before receiving a pardon to the slave morality of Judeo-Christian traditions and a principle of the will to power. Each is a truth of the quotation, no matter who’s correct, but then another of the men interjects that the quote is from neither Baudelaire nor Nietzsche. And he

adds--by way of countering the Christian context in which Nietzsche places the thought--that it is also not from St. Paul's epistle to the Romans but is rather the basic principle of "Dada." It is a principle of nothingness and the Nothing. Death, negation, ephemerality--these are all pardons for the sins of the world. The fact of all bloodshed is the only *reason* for a pardon, which is given necessarily by the nature of time and the failures of memory.

In a poem titled "Nothingness" from the (pre-Dada) 1918 publication of Francis Picabia's *Poems and Drawings of the Daughter Born Without a Mother*, Baudelaire's aesthetic nihilism receives a sublimely mathematical rendering: "The forms of the sensual universe / take part in the obstacle will. / Mystical forms / without intelligence / like mathematics / in each other's arms" (Picabia 91). The combination of Baudelaire's bourgeois aestheticism and Dada's sublime mathematical abstraction contribute to the sense with which Pasolini incorporates the source of the film's subtitle: the Marquis de Sade's *120 Days of Sodom*, with its orgy of "interminable mechanistic inventiveness," as Sontag defines the Sadean pornographic aesthetic (Sontag, "The Pornographic Imagination" 341).

For Pasolini's purposes, the question of the quotation's source doesn't really matter, because the answer is that it comes from all of them. Each context provides the phrase a distinct emphasis of interpretation, and each interpretation is a moment in the unfolding of the very sense of violence established by the characters of the film and their actions. They are all part of the mythos that the fascists invoke by their thoughts, their desires, and their deeds. Furthermore, and most importantly, these characters don't *really* inhabit a concrete reality, because their actions pertain to *all* the realities of the film's references. Pasolini makes no effort to ground the scenario in a recognizable event, though its location and historical dating mark the action of the film as *related* to the historical moment of Italian Fascism's forced abnegation of power. The fascists in

Salò act on the basis of all the interpretations offered for the quote, as a justification of their right to declare their pleasure and enforce its sovereignty. This, precisely, is the sense in which they enact their decadent stylization of reality. The series of references quoted above serves to articulate the discontinuous temporal antecedents to the psychology of their behavior; the psychology of fascism.

Pleasure is the only principle directing the small society set up by Pasolini's fascists. It is a dictatorship of their pleasure, limited only by strictly forbidding the intentional connection of action to any utility that would subordinate pleasure to something other than itself (like love or procreation), thereby making it impure, less sovereign in its relation to the world. That which gives pleasure is the sole criterion of value, and the *greatest* pleasure is the subjugation of the beautiful, the degradation of the exalted, because this is the experience of sovereignty. Modernism's rejection of tradition receives its fascist articulation, already present in the aesthetic tenors of Futurism.

Pasolini, in this respect, makes explicit reference to the work of Georges Bataille. Bataille's thinking borrows an essential element from the Hegelian dialectic that is both conceptual and aesthetic, the act of moving from the particular to the universal. It is in a precise way best demonstrated in Bataille's very underknown but enduringly prescient 1933 essay "The Psychological Structure of Fascism," which Pasolini cites in the credits of *Salò*. Here Bataille uses the methodology of individual psychology to construct a general image of power, exploitation, and transgression as it congeals around the structure of the Fascist State. This essentially borrows the strategy of Hegel's *Phenomenology*: a method of moving from the individual subject of perception to the World Historical Process and the consciousness of Spirit. (It turns the Subject into Substance and back again.) Indeed, Hegel was perhaps the first to fully

articulate the life of the Human Mind as one single Bildungsroman, his real affinity for the “spirit of the age” that he also theorized as the essence of thought in general. And Bataille’s target, though far more modestly attacked, is as grandiose as Hegel’s, only now incorporating the later insights of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud (the towering monuments, both venerated and decried, of the 20th Century European Mind).

In Bataille’s essay on fascism’s “psychological structure,” not just cited by Pasolini but also a major source of the film’s erotic and excremental themes, he claims that all fascist action “makes an appeal to sentiments traditionally defined as *exalted* and *noble* and tends to constitute authority as an unconditional principle, situated above any utilitarian judgment” (Bataille 145). Fascism makes an appeal to beauty. If the beautiful object is always imagined as superior to oneself simply through regarding it as beautiful, then degrading that which is superior becomes the ultimate act of sovereign power. Indeed, the basic narrative conceit of *Salò* is the subjugation and control of a self-selected Society of Beautiful Youth in the final days of Italian Fascism. Controlling beauty means controlling the world, because it means controlling the standard of authority. This is also the sovereign act of Dada: by declaring everything to be Nothing, it legitimizes all claims to sovereignty as equally valid. *The winner takes it all*.

An effective and important *critique* of modernism occurs here, so long as one does not sit with the interpretation that the film’s fascists are justified in their actions by the consistency of their logic. If Dada marks one of the logical endpoints of Bourgeois Enlightenment with its apotheosis of the Individual Subject as a source of sublime irony, then Pasolini marks his own practice as deviating from this logic that is also the logic of the fascists. What he retains, aesthetically, is the collage principle of many modernist artists but with a productive rather than destructive emphasis. If Dada functions to reduce all signs to their emptiest state, by destroying

meaning, then Pasolini's film *relates* disparate sign systems in such a way as to produce *knowledge* from what Kundera refers to as--with reference to Broch's *The Sleepwalkers*--the "true 'polyphonic' unity" of their similar but distinct contexts and meanings (Kundera, *The Art of the Novel* 65). It is a mode of collage achieved, not by juxtaposition, but through a "blended" superimposition of aesthetic layers.

A few of these layers are: historical fascism in Italy, Dante's *Divine Comedy* (particularly the *Inferno*), the Marquis de Sade's *120 Days of Sodom*, and George's Bataille's theoretical account of the "psychological structure" of fascism. Each of these layers remains simultaneously present throughout the film, though perhaps emphasized more in some sections than others, and this simultaneity is the real aesthetic wager of the work's form. Something identical in each of these elements allows for their simultaneity of presentation, and that identity is the subject of the film. It is the quasi-tautology of the *mythos* contained in each, and each is (in Hegelian terms) a moment in the unfolding of the next, with Italian Fascism merely a more recent variant. Understanding that identity requires entering, subjectively if not entirely empathetically, into the *world* of the fascists. Indeed, the great aesthetic achievement of the film is that it positions the spectator both within and outside the psychological understanding of fascism in its trans-historical modes.

By emphasizing the beauty of the young people's bodies, *Salò* places the spectator in the perspective of the fascists who regard them as beautiful and use that beauty as a source of power. At the end of the film, Pasolini literalizes this idea by placing the camera in the position of a spectator watching through binoculars as the final tortures take place to punish all those refusing total submission. During this final torture, the other beautiful conscripts and collaborators amuse themselves by dancing to music, enacting Broch's description of Nero as the "aesthetic

emperor”: “The firework spectacle of Rome in flames and the human torches of Christians impaled in the imperial gardens was certainly prized artistic currency for the aesthetic emperor, who showed how he could remain deaf to the screams of pain coming from his victims or even appreciate them as an aesthetic musical accompaniment” (Broch, “Notes on the Problem of Kitsch” 65).

And this sequence of final tortures also signifies that totality ultimately means death: the theater of domination is a theater of slaughter. Structuring the rituals of the fascists in the form of Dante’s description of descent through the circles of hell positions the mind of the fascist as an anthropomorphized individuation of the most egregious human sins conceived by the Catholic Mind of Dante’s time, and positions Pasolini’s film as a reincarnation of Dante’s critique of institutional power and corruption within 14th century structures of power. Fascist desire is equated with the basic sinfulness of tyrannical human desire cataloged in Dante’s poem and follows its same hierarchy of evil.

Then, the reference to the Marquis de Sade places that same Fascist Mind in the context of *libertinage* and the emerging Bourgeois Subject. Sade’s work is an exemplar, like Laclos’s *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, of the transition whereby the Catholic metaphysical standard of authority (with its ties to hereditary aristocracy) gives way to the Protestant principle of individual autonomy and self-determination. Taken to its logical extreme, in Bataille’s interpretation of Sade, this principle of individual autonomy culminates in the sovereign freedom of the Desiring Subject to act in the service of its own pleasure (so long as this right is universalized to all as a basic condition). Fascism, historically, is a mass phenomenon of this principle in action, but it is also a description of capitalist free enterprise; and the superimposed references that structure *Salò* relate the temporal development of this mass phenomenon, in their

historical aesthetic manifestations, as a formal simultaneity that posits the presuppositions of fascism's actuality and gives it mythological form.

Allusion functions in service to the aesthetic presentation of fascism as a phenomenon of both individual and mass psychology. *Salò* traces the roots of fascism as an aesthetic attitude that degrades both beauty and complexity. Ultimately, no beauty is possible in a world that subjugates it to power, because degradation and stagnation annul the beautiful. But rejection of beauty as an external ideal, in the Dada-ist spirit of rejecting convention and exalting its destruction, only re-legitimizes the fascist's right to subjugate by rescinding all standards of judgment (like *The Marbles* in *Pink Flamingos*, as the fascist variation of its anarchic aesthetic mode). Rejecting idealism ultimately means tacit acceptance of solipsistic narcissism and the total anarchy of values, which few would openly accept or defend.

Pasolini's collage is not in service to irony only in the traditional sense of an open ambiguity, nor is it a montage producing a distinct synthesis in any Eisensteinian sense, but rather it primarily serves the production of what Broch would call a quasi-tautology or a "compelling logical necessity," demonstrating that the principle of individual sovereignty (abstract equality imagined in abstract universality) results necessarily in a barbarous society. According to Adorno, neither total tolerance of difference in abstract equality, nor the ideal assumed as a fact in an "abstract utopia," can adequately address the problems of difference and desire in society. In a repudiation of melting-pot ideology (Adorno was then writing and living in the US), to which he opposes the concept of "*mélange*," a medley, Adorno writes: "That all men are alike is exactly what society would like to hear. It considers actual or imagined differences as stigmas indicating that not enough has yet been done; that something has still been left outside its machinery, not quite determined by its totality" (Adorno, *Minima Moralia* 103). This is the

totalitarian logic of beauty, power, and desire that operates in the little theatrical world of Pasolini's fascists. Irony still operates, but in a way to reveal continuities between otherwise distinct situations, ideas, or histories. Irony in *Salò* consists in the unexpected aesthetic assertion, embodied in the formal arrangement of elements, that Catholic judgment, Sadean *libertinage*, fascist authority, and the commodification of both idealized strength and beauty, all share similar logics of desire--which are, of course, logics of reason. *Salò* is a profoundly Hegelian film in its formal understanding of the continuities and logics of history, but it is also primarily Hegel as filtered through Georges Bataille.

Pasolini's is an attempt to construct a moral understanding of the development of the Fascist Mind by presenting its sequential developments in a condensed form that equates its individual historical moments from theocracy, through democracy, and into capitalism, each moment of which contains the sufficient conditions for a fascist orientation to thrive and enact a fascist state through idealized, and thereby sanctioned, violence. Ultimately, the real subject of *Salò* is not even fascism so much as the problematic interconnectedness of desire, pleasure, and power that are exemplified in its ideological structures. In Bataille's essay on "the use value" of Sade, he writes a description that can serve equally well to describe the aesthetic project of *Salò*, in creating what Sontag referred to as a "near unwatchable" film:

The life and works of D.A.F. de Sade would [...] have no other use value than the common use value of excrement [if they only served as instances of ways of thinking or being to be expelled from the social body]; in other words, for the most part, one most often only loves the rapid (and violent) pleasure of voiding this matter and no longer seeing it.

I am thus led to indicate how, in a way completely different from this usage, the sadism which is not completely different from that which existed before Sade appears positively, on the one hand, as an irruption of excremental forces (the excessive violation of modesty, positive algolagnia, the violent excretion of the sexual object coinciding with a powerful or tortured ejaculation, the libidinal interest in cadavers, vomiting, defecation...)--and on the other as a corresponding limitation, a narrow enslavement of everything that is opposed to this irruption. It is only in these concrete conditions that sad social necessity, human dignity, fatherland and family, as well as poetic sentiments, appear without a mask and without any play of light and shadow; it is finally impossible to see in those things anything other than subordinate forces: so many slaves working like cowards to prepare the beautiful blustering eruptions that alone are capable of answering the needs that torment the bowels of most men (Bataille, "The Use Value of D.A.F. de Sade" 92-3).

In the terminology of Broch's early writings on aesthetics, *Salò*'s form presents the *mythos* of fascism in the mode of both its past and current fascinations, and it does so by abstracting this *mythos* onto the objectified body and the objectifying subject. A year before *Salò*'s release, in 1974, Sontag published an essay precisely on this subject of fascism's allure, titled "Fascinating Fascism." In this essay, Sontag returns to ideas present in "Notes on 'Camp,'" "On Style," and the essay on *Flaming Creatures*. This continuity (like most continuities in Sontag's work) has never really been addressed. (Though, as I am trying to argue, it is an idea present in every one of her essays and works of fiction.) Both *Salò* and "Fascinating Fascism" attempt to convey the fascist experience and fascist desire in the modes of their beauty, and in Pasolini it is an intensely destabilizing beauty. It is the general failure to appreciate the beauty of

Salò, and the film as a genuinely *pleasurable* experience, that contributes to the ongoing retrenchment of the fascist sensibility into (neo)liberal global capitalism.

Artaud's Theater as a Program for Living

Both *Salò* and the aforementioned *Pink Flamingos* engage a visceral aesthetic--one prompting the response of the body--in a mode that both extends and slightly domesticates the sense of aesthetic engagement theorized by Antonin Artaud as the "theater of cruelty." Artaud's theater of cruelty finds its "only value [...] in its excruciating, magical connection with reality and with danger" (Artaud 242). This connection implies a quasi-Nietzschean "transvaluation" of subjectivity and the subject, alogically connected with reality and with its own destruction (the danger is a danger *for* consciousness).

In the *world* of "magic," understood historically as invoking a time of actual and effective *belief* in magic, "the part can and does stand for the whole. [...] It is] a world in which all things and persons are interrelated, but the not-yet-centered Ego is dispersed over the world of phenomena" (Gebser 46). Consciousness, in the realm of magic, is not a concept of an individual perceiving subject: "In a sense one may say that in [the magic structure] consciousness was not yet *in man himself*, but still resting *in the world*. The gradual transfer of consciousness, which streams toward him and which he must assimilate from his standpoint, and the awakening world, which he gradually learns to confront (and in the confrontation there is something hostile), is something that man must master" (Gebser 46).

What Artaud desires is a form that returns (the modern subject of) consciousness to this experience of confrontation and hostility, prior to the formation of the Ego. It is a sacrifice of consciousness undertaken to produce "a dissociative and vibratory effect on our sensibilities"

(Artaud 242). There is a double possibility in this sacrifice: on the one hand, a regression to pre-linguistic magic unity (the perceived interconnectedness, to the point of interchangeability, of all things); but on the other, a rediscovery of this inherent potential of consciousness to form its relation to reality and *make* connections between things. Both entail a danger (in the latter, the danger of power), but only the second entails a productive engagement with contemporary existence.

As an idea, theater must serve “to create a metaphysics of speech, gesture, and expression, in order to rescue it from its psychological and human stagnation.” But this metaphysics must be a real (continuously effective) “temptation,” not just another elaboration of metaphysical concepts in abstraction. Metaphysical ideas, insofar as they function for theater in Artaud’s sense, are unusual, unlimited, and undefined: “These ideas, which have to do with Creation, with Becoming, with Chaos, and are all of a cosmic order, provide an elementary notion of a realm from which the theater has become totally estranged. These ideas can create a kind of passionate equation between Man, Society, Nature, and Objects” (Artaud 243). Artaud’s “passionate equation” is precisely the function of the previously mentioned “magical connection” between theater and reality and danger.

Creation, Becoming, and Chaos are to be invoked—but not expressed—as *temptations*. The ends toward which Artaud’s theater directs itself exist on “other levels,” and one should not expect them to be grasped intellectually, via concepts (or the conquering domination of mind). Instead, “what matters is that by reliable means the sensibility be put in a state of subtler and more profound perception, and this is the very purpose of that magic and those rites, of which the theater is only a reflection” (Artaud 244). Understood in this way, theater is what Artaud calls a “function,” something to which one offers one’s attention (and cooperation) the way one offers

one's body in a ritual. But the "sacred," to which theater must always be somehow connected, is a temptation rather than a goal (or even a lost origin); and it must *remain a temptation*. This latter status of the sacred is its uniquely modernist iteration, an areligious and necessarily blasphemous iteration of the sacred, but one that allies it to Kundera's description of kitsch, as the "silly mawkish song" that, when recognized for the lie that it is, allows it to be experienced without the danger of self-delusion at best or fascistic violence on the other. This understanding of the sacred is also identical, more or less, with Broch's understanding of the "earthly absolute."

Temptation, in Artaud's idiosyncratic iteration, is a transfiguration of the notion of "idealism," as a way of dialectically retaining its positive and negative modes. Cruelty is a process, or function, of de-inhibiting the sensibility. But there is a flipside to Artaud's cruelty (a pious variation of its blasphemy), which is generally (in one important sense) a cruelty one does to oneself, as the process of subjecting oneself to the parameters of theatrical practice and negating one's preconceived ideas or ideals in favor of an immanent communal engagement, aesthetic and actual. If Artaud's "theater of cruelty" can be seen in its paradigmatically modernist sense of eradicating the authoritarian hold of "the word" and all of the notions of tradition, convention, and dogma that go along with it, it can also be linked to a religious counterpart: prayer.

For Jean Gebser, prayer is an essential feature of the "magic structure" of consciousness, because it indicates a space-timelessness (a sense of consciousness prior to the individualized Ego):

We have seen that prayer is a magic form of manifestation in addition to being a *communio*, that is, a 'being one with' (the Latin word is built upon *con-*, 'with,' and *unio*, 'unity, oneness'). Genuine prayer, which is an outgrowth of a need (in the case of the

mortally ill, a vital need) and is not therefore purpose- or goal-oriented, has the nature and function of communion. It restores the inceptual unity or oneness; the absorption of the suppliant in prayer is an immersion into the natural unity of everything in this state at that moment. The individual is, as it were, extinguished and forms a true unity with the hundreds of others who are united with him in prayer (Gebser 163).

Artaud's theatrical program can be likened to prayer understood in this manner (as analogous, not identical), in the sense that in prayer one accedes to the metaphysical, gives oneself over to the expression of (or communion with) the inexpressible or unrepresentable (because trans-temporal and trans-spatial).

This ends up giving a kind of deconstructionist coloring to a famous line from *I Corinthians* 4:7: "For what hast thou which thou hast not received?" All possibility of prayer (when engaged with genuine *belief*) is granted in advance by the (believed) existence of unity, of God as the structural principle of Being. The major difference is that Artaud (and the Derridean theory of deconstruction partially inspired by his work) wants the actor/spectator to enter the "communion" of theatrical practice in order to *discard* what has been received (ungratefully, rebelliously) to the extent that it does not accord with the *present community*. Here, ultimately, is Artaud's modernist twist on Romantic sublimity: a program to develop a taxonomy of ways that human expression achieves some indication of the inexpressible. This is also why, perhaps, Barnett Newman once wrote that Edmund Burke's writing on the concept of the sublime "reads like a Surrealist manual" (Newman 137). Sublimity, Surrealism, and Artaud's Theater of Cruelty are all key figures in the modernist aestheticization--that is, secularization and profanation--of the Divine Creator.

In most exemplary versions of what's often called European modernism, all forms of human experience are in "disrepute." The great scandal of convention passed over everything like a monsoon and drenched the European *Spiritus Mundi* in a new disgrace, the stigma of illusion. Art was the modern form of this scandal, but it also blurred boundaries with politics, rhetoric, and technology: the spectacular totalitarianisms, the proliferation of agit-prop and manifestos and slogans, and the births of all 20th century networks, corporations, and communal enterprise. The "postmodern" cliché that "Art" is fully absorbed into the market of Late Capitalism ignores its inverted truth, a gradual reformation of economic and political realities that strives toward artistic perfection.

Artaud's claim that "the idea of theater is probably the most gravely afflicted" of all the "successively falling" forms is prescient, but not for the reasons Artaud imagined--and that is the crux of his inability to realize his Theater of Cruelty as a successful mode for theatrical productions (Artaud 155). Few other modern artists' enactments of failure are as noble (*extraordinary*) as Artaud's, because his is a failure that takes on the form of an Annunciation of what it is not and cannot be. Imagined as the "total" art form, Artaud's theater was an inchoate notion precisely because this *totality* required the "disrepute" of theatrical forms to evolve into a version of performance, of spectacle, and of audience that barely even understands its relation to the theater of the past, if it understands it at all.

The current theater needed to become the Unconscious of the Future via Sublimation of the Past, which is precisely what Broch's concept of the "earthly absolute" becomes when blended with Benjamin's theorization of the "collector"--and of the two as united in Sontag's active employment of the "aesthetic sense" as a faculty for nourishing the capacity for ethical or moral judgment. Artaud knew this, more or less: "Theater is the one thing in the world most

impossible to save. An art based entirely on a power of illusion which it is incapable of obtaining has no choice but to disappear” (Artaud 155). Artaud seems to imagine himself existing at a time when the aesthetic sensibility is on the verge of being entirely lost--and he may not have been wrong. But even this was merely the coming-to-consciousness of a reality that already existed, unacknowledged, in the networks of community: there is nothing uniquely *more* theatrical about contemporary life than in any prior era. But the stakes have changed, and the aestheticization of experience has expanded exponentially. Now, one must work to *prevent* this totalized notion of theater from dogmatically taking hold.

The Ethical Negativity and Exuberant Anguish of Aesthetic Knowledge

A major precursor to Artaud’s sensibility, the Comte de Lautréamont envisages the Sadian total transgression (*you* have full rights to *my* body, if *I* have full rights to *yours*) as the source of “the greatest happiness the mind can conceive,” because it is a mutually negating act of pure, non-finite freedom. In the same vein, he launches into a series of image-associations starting from that of an “infuriated” dog escaped from captivity, bound by no constraints of reason or knowledge, and experiencing the anxieties of mortality and impotence, becoming an abstract expression of an anguished consciousness: “their necks swell horribly and one by one they commence to howl, like a child crying from hunger, or a cat wounded in the stomach up on the roof, or a woman about to be delivered of a child, or a plague victim dying in the hospital, or a young girl singing a divine melody” (Lautréamont 13). The dog’s howl, as it functions for the text of *Maldoror*, actually *is* the child’s cry, the cat’s wound, the woman’s labor, and the victim’s disease. But it is *also* the beautiful voice, so it is not just pain but longing, a basic phenomenal description of *desire*.

It responds to everything. (It is essentially the Freudian-Lacanian drive.) The dogs that howl this way, apparently (but not actually) “mad with rabies,” represent a danger to all who cross their paths. They do not have any conventional sympathies, allegiances, or pity. They are even a danger to each other (like the way betrayal functions as the *fully realized crime* in Sartre’s interpretation of Genet: to turn on oneself or one’s own tribe transgresses the last convention of preservation). But Maldoror understands that this relentless violence is not a blind sadism or evil (as conventionally understood): “[The mad dogs] do not behave thus out of cruelty. One day my mother, her eyes glassy-looking, said to me: / ‘When you are in bed and you hear the howling of the dogs in the fields, hide yourself beneath your blankets, don’t make a jest of what they are doing: they have the insatiable thirst for the infinite, like you, like me, like the rest of us human beings with our long, pale faces. I will even permit you to stand at the window and see this spectacle, which is rather magnificent.’ / Since that time I have respected the dead woman’s wish. I, even as the dogs, feel a yearning for the infinite...I cannot, I cannot satisfy that hunger” (Lautréamont 15)!

Transgression becomes philosophically active when it moves from its relation to the moral to its enactment of the ethical, the Nietzschean transvaluation of values. Lautréamont indicates the modernist twist on the notion of beauty that is perhaps both most obvious and most elusive. Beauty is a factor of power over the real. After a description of the sublime indifference of the ocean’s strength and rhythm, Maldoror reflects that in the face of such superiority he is compelled to bestow “all my love.” In a parenthetical aside, he adds what could very well be a slogan of all politically revolutionary aspirations of late modernism: “none may know how much love is contained in my aspirations towards beauty” (Lautréamont 25). The violence of this claim comes from the implicit requirement that his “fellow men,” on whom he reflects sadly, are

impediments to the achievement of this beauty. In its sublimity, it is unclear whether the Ancient Ocean is the “vengeance of God” or the “Prince of Darkness,” whether the force of Nature is good or ill. This is the moral sense reduced to the brute fact of the real, which has no moral sense, the “earthly absolute.”

Later, applying Artaudian aesthetic principles to the critical tasks of the philosopher, Jacques Derrida’s writing is also often an attempt at conveying this emptiness at the heart of expression and of reality. In some sense, one might call the work of Derrida a kind of decadent philosophy, analyzing to death the concepts of a dying culture; a mind embroiled in the abstract romance of philosophical discoursing, the seductiveness and slippage of a Meaning that forever pulls away. It is, in many ways, a *stylization* of philosophy.

Indeed, in one of his best books, *The Post Card*, Derrida gives form to this “abstract romance” and makes explicit his ideal eroticism of thinking. In Derrida, particularly in explicitly aestheticized writing like *The Post Card*, one finds again a mixture of the references cited earlier from *Salò*, the major touchstones of bourgeois inheritance in the 20th century--Baudelaire, Nietzsche, Dada/Surrealism, Psychoanalysis--as well as a call-back to the form of *Les Liaisons dangereuses* through its epistolary structure; and to *Elective Affinities*, in its yearning for a moral style of intellectual love. It is not just an aestheticist but a *libertine* philosophizing, a re-appropriation of decadent aestheticism but without the nihilism. As one of the letters in *The Post Card* reads, written from one Abstract Mind to another:

What counts then is that it is still up to us to exhaust language, and reason swerves (and we forget everything that we say, an archive bigger than the world would be necessary for it, no place would be capable of it, no imagination which still would stop itself at Himalayas of books, of dossiers, of cassettes, or of electro-encephalograms, [...] this

irrepressible quibbling, the apparatus of this court of justice permanently in session (we never should have, you see, it never should have happened to us), with eloquent asperities, an amorous rhetoric that recoiled before no genre because it believed itself saved by love--and it was, but all the same--and this attorney general's poetics, this courtroom Orphism which refined the argument to the point of the most delirious overbidding, the most comic transfiguration--and then ecstasy. [...] And it is indeed to someone else that we address *ourselves*, and in order to tell him something else, in the close game that we will have played; and that will be played with us for we have lost it, don't you think, and both of us I hope. The others too. We have never been right, nor vanquished anything. It is so sad, to be right I mean. And then I believe that in the end we have never been able to lie to each other. *Mais si, mai si*, listen to me, listen to us (Derrida 56-7).

Sontag's work is not so different from Derrida's, in terms of how it values literature as an ideal and how it understands the degenerative allures of metaphysical ideas, but it conscientiously avoids the language of a way of writing (the rhetorical traditions of "systems" philosophy) declared dead by the philosophical writers she most admires: primarily those, like E.M. Cioran, Walter Benjamin, Elias Canetti, and Roland Barthes, each of whom both inherit and evolve a Nietzschean relation to thinking and writing that dispels dogma and received ideas.

If philosophy and art, in their bourgeois essences, attained their moments of high decadence beginning in the late 19th century (in the various modernisms of art and thought), then this decadence likewise produced the conditions for their fusion. The future of what used to be called art must be sought under another name that refers to a newly opened terrain of aesthetic activity expanded beyond the boundaries of that dead, late-bourgeois concept. Creating "art" and

being an “artist,” just like writing “philosophy” or being a “philosopher,” cannot be or mean the same things anymore. This is precisely what Sontag described (quoted in a prior section) as the “new sensibility” that actively engages “the aesthetic” as a field of knowledge.

Secularizing the Sacred as the Transcendent Temptation of Knowledge

Gregory Bateson refers to this process--the natural evolution of concepts--in his theorization of an “ecology of ideas,” wherein “the larger ‘pattern which connects’ mind and nature [read: Broch’s “earthly absolute”] must [...] be ‘mental,’ because once a pattern in nature or culture is established (through the process of discrimination and/or learning), it contributes to its own determination (positively or negatively) and hence to its evolution or disintegration.” This theory is an attempt to conceptualize the dialectic of change and continuity across time. Out of this theory, Bateson develops an “epistemology of the sacred, professing that it offers a way of thinking about mind and nature as an ecological system that successfully replaces mechanistic metaphors of understanding with more aesthetic ones” (Eicher-Catt 3-4). Understanding mind as an “ecological system” is precisely what is intended in the unification of Broch’s “earthly absolute” and Benjamin’s “collector” into the figure of the artist-thinker who actively engages the aesthetic sense.

Deborah Eicher-Catt notes that Bateson’s terminology subjected his theory to accusations of sentimentality and romanticism that maintain outdated metaphysical assumptions, making use of “the sacred” in order to artificially unify fragmented existence. But she argues this view misunderstands Bateson, who should rather be seen as engaging the fact of fragmentation dialectically with “the possibility of unified discursive formations (ideologies) that powerfully shape our ways of thinking and being in the world” (Eicher-Catt 4). Bateson’s “circular

causality,” or his “recursivity and reflexivity,” updates a Hegelian sense of dialectics wherein the self-relating negativity of the pure subject reflects on and posits its own presuppositions from the materials of past experience. His concept of “the sacred” refers to the interplay between the world of objective nature and the mind that reflects upon it (and itself) in order to change it as well as maintain it.

Where Bateson importantly breaks with a Hegelian model, Eicher-Catt looks to the American “phenomenological semiotician” Charles Sanders Peirce for a related precursor of a similar break. Peirce’s science of signs attempts to conceptualize how human consciousness engages with and creates ideas that operate effectively in and on reality. Interactions between “beings” and “phenomena” are not conceived oppositionally or dualistically, but as integrated relational aspects of a unified process. Mind--in this sense distinct from how Hegel conceives Spirit, in the same sense that the “earthly absolute” is different--refers to the *totality of this process*, not to a single part of it. All engagement with the world begins from the “feeling” that emerges from an interaction between consciousness and a sign/phenomenon. And “feelings” are not a set of “bodily visceral reactions” but rather “highly abstract principles,” according to Bateson (Eicher-Catt 5).

These principles precede any purposiveness toward which consciousness directs itself, and thereby these principles of “feeling” refer as well to what Kant termed “aesthetic ideas.” These feelings or aesthetic ideas affect how consciousness applies itself toward action, and the action that follows is an “event,” not dissimilar in Bateson’s conception from Alain Badiou’s more famous use of the term. Habits are what hold onto the knowledge learned from these events and apply them to the future. For instance: I can predict that, in the future, I will continue to not enjoy direct contact between fire and my skin. And what applies to a habit applies also to an

aesthetic idea once it is reflexively habitualized as part of an “official” culture; or, when it is fully commodified and assimilated to the set of *what’s in the world*.

Therefore a sensibility like “Camp,” once habitualized, must give rise to something else in order to remain part of the living process of Bateson’s ecology. This is what “going beyond” Camp means in the context of *Pink Flamingos*, by effectively undoing Camp’s innocence and its sense of superiority. In Peirce’s terminology, “Camp” as Sontag related it is an example of new sign-creation in the history of Mind, even if Sontag didn’t invent the sensibility itself. But now, the event of a consciousness relating affectively to “Camp,” as the phenomenon/sign it encounters objectively (as in, say, Sontag’s essay), necessarily produces new feelings and new knowledge. First, “Camp” enters reality dialectically through a tender conception of sincere artifice and self-alienation, but this very tender conception then becomes the object of thought and produces a new feeling which, while remaining tender, recognizes the need for violence inherent in the process of de-inhibiting the mind and preventing the totalitarian threat of kitsch.

Mind is not a passive receiver of signs and limited only to the total set of already-existing meanings (as some simplifications of post-structuralist thought would have it). Mind is both receptor and active arranger, collector, of meanings. And from their collection and arrangement new meanings emerge; the basic lesson of modernist poetics, exemplified in Surrealism. Detachment from context is the beginning of Kantian disinterest, and so the concepts administered by the theory of so-called “postmodernism” were founded already in Kant’s subject of transcendental apperception (as an update of the already thoroughly “postmodern” *Cogito* that doubts every context of experience except the relational capacities of experience itself). This moment of necessary disinterest--the point of the “earthly absolute”--is the domain of the transcendental aesthetic, which Kant already fully understood and indicated in his *Critique of*

Judgment, only Broch externalizes it as the perceptions and effects that the “earthly absolute” receives and projects, the Kantian subject itself becoming only a void in space-time.

But Kant included a major duality within the aesthetic realm by differentiating beauty from sublimity. Beauty, properly, is the truly disinterested moment of the aesthetic experience--the mind absorbed in appearance, in form--but in the Sublime, self-interest returns by the fact of the aesthetic experience outstripping the relational mental capacities of the Subject. In contemporary thought, Kant’s notion of “disinterest” has gained the morally negative aspect of bourgeois indifference and boredom, and this is indeed what it becomes in *l’art pour l’art* and in what Sontag calls Camp taste or stylization. But Sontag claims this disinterest nonetheless remains both the foundation of thought as well as its perennial apathy or decadence.

Reaching back in time, Kant’s pair of the Sublime and the Beautiful expresses the true dialectical nature of “the aesthetic sense,” as Sontag later calls it. This indifference is always the truth content of the aesthetic, and genuine thought exists only on the basis of willed disinterestedness--as an exercise, a thought experiment, a necessary self-negation. According to Benjamin, this disinterested contemplation of the “collector” allows for “a view which takes in more, and other, than that of the profane owner [of objects] and which we would do best to compare to the gaze of the great physiognomist” (Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* 207). For the collector, each object is a point of access to reality (to Heideggerian worlds), and represents various possibilities of experience or understanding, much like a linguistic word gives access to knowledge: “It must be kept in mind that, for the collector, the world is present, and indeed ordered, in each of his objects. Ordered, however, according to a surprising and, for the profane understanding, incomprehensible connection. This connection stands to the customary ordering

and schematization of things something as their arrangement in the dictionary stands to a natural arrangement” (Benjamin *Arcades* 207).

Here is a key precursor to the later Derridean notion of the meaning-traces contained in words, both as residue of historical use and open sign (empty receptacle) of possible futures. The basic insight of the arbitrariness of the signifier is that the signifier is linked irrevocably to the Kantian transcendental subject as the receptacle of meaning, intuition, perception, experience. The *concept* is the objective correlative of the *subject*. It is thus also related to Arthur Schopenhauer’s “pure subject of cognition” as exemplified in his idea of the artist. For Schopenhauer, art is the “work of genius,” and genius is the “capacity for maintaining a purely perceptual state, for losing oneself in perception, and for withdrawing from the service of the will the knowledge which originally existed only for this service. In other words, genius is the ability to leave entirely out of sight one’s own interest, one’s willing, one’s purposes, and thus to discard one’s own personality for a time, so as to remain *pure subject of cognition*, the clear eye of the world” (Kossler 193). Schopenhauer’s “clear eye of the world” is precisely Broch’s “earthly absolute.”

At any given instant, the word as much as the subject is a container of reality, the light against which the world reveals (or unconceals) itself at a glance. This instant is what Sartre called the “*fatal instant*”:

The instant is the reciprocal and contradictory envelopment of the before by the after.

One is still what one is going to cease to be and already what one is going to become.

One lives one’s death, one dies one’s life. One feels oneself to be one’s own self and

another; the eternal is present in an atom of duration. In the midst of the fullest life, one has a foreboding that one will merely survive, one is afraid of the future. It is the time of

anguish and of heroism, of pleasure and of destruction. An instant is sufficient to destroy, to enjoy, to kill, to be killed, to make one's fortune at the turn of a card (Sartre, *Saint Genet 2*).

Read in this light, Benjamin's philosophical method is akin to a materialist existentialism, where the history of the object-concept is no different than the history of the subject of consciousness, and each instant of the *object* experiences the subject's very same "dizziness of freedom." And fate is a *choice* of meaning, a position one takes with regard to experience and the position one gives to the objects of experience. Each object contains an entire "world order, whose outline is the *fate* of [the collector's] object" (Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* 207).

Here is also the relationship between Benjamin's "dialectical image" and Derrida's trace-concept: both speak to the essential irony of things that is fully an experience of the subject and does not in any way belong to the real aside from this transcendental perception. Benjamin basically presages *Of Grammatology* when he writes that "[i]t would be interesting to study the bibliophile as the only type of collector who has not completely withdrawn his treasures from their functional context" (Benjamin *The Arcades Project* 207). The deconstructionist critic is the bibliophile of meaning-curation in the archive of consciousness, collecting the various interpretations and intertextual connections of recorded cognition. This has become the normative scholarly attitude (new media archaeologies, etc.), but in its norm it does not retain the Benjaminian fate imbued by the collector in its proper existential sense. When Benjamin speaks of fate, he speaks of essence in the sense of things *coming to a head*; essence as the contents of freedom in its decisive (fatal) instant, the instant of what Broch would call the "earthly absolute."

But this "essence" is incomplete and is in fact granted to the object by the choice of the "collector" in providing its meaning in their collection. In much the same way as the temple sets

itself against the cliff-rock and “unconceals” a world in Heidegger’s “The Origin of the Work of Art,” perhaps *the* text of modernist aesthetic theory, the object in the collection receives its meaning from the very World the collection itself creates for things. “Heidegger’s ontology of the artwork is an ‘event’ ontology, not a ‘thing’ ontology,” writes Robert Pippin. This means that “an artwork is not, qua artwork anyway, a thing but the ‘event’ or happening of a kind of truth. [... And] the truth ‘happening’ in the work is not any sort of correctness or adequacy but is true in the way an action can be said to ‘truly’ manifest who a person *really is*, his true being, and possibly the world expressed in his action.” Thus, “the opposite of truth in *this* sense is not falsity but fraudulence” (Pippin 101-2). In other words, the opposite of truth in a Heideggerian sense is kitsch.

The work of art is an *act* partially in the sense that it *acts on* the beholder; it constructs the possibility of entering into a “mimetic” experience of Heidegger’s process of unconcealing. It is not so much the revelation of a “truth” as the *revelation of this revelation*; the very process of truth-revealing is built into the aesthetic action of the artwork. The artwork is the product of a meaning-making activity, and so the artwork as “event” or “action” is as open to interpretation and possibility as an event or action in daily life, and these interpretations or possibilities are likewise not limited in any way to the intentions of the artist-actor.

The Still Relevant Distinction Between the *Auteur* and the *Metteur En Scène*

This is, for instance, how Sontag positions Jean-Luc Godard as a pivotal figure in film history, the first to really cultivate the author-function in the cinema in its properly modernist mode. Godard is one of the examples of “radical will” collected in her second volume of essays. And a “radical will” is also a style, marking the volume’s continuity with how she defined

“style” as “will” in 1965. Godard constructs his own authorial presence as a “first-person” narrator creating a *cinematic presence* more-so than a series of unique films to be viewed as “masterpieces” (Sontag, “Godard” 152).

And in this Godard follows Artaud’s variation of the Surrealist sensibility. Within this cinematic presence, “each film is, in some sense, a fragment--which, because of the stylistic continuities of Godard’s work, sheds light on the others.” Because of this uniqueness in constructing an unadulterated sensibility as his cinematic presence, Sontag claims Godard as “indisputably the most influential director of his generation.” And this is so also because Godard’s cinematic presence is not a stable brand, that it asserts itself in its consistent flouting of conventions (including its own) rather than establishment of a stable branded sensibility: “One goes to the latest Godard prepared to see something both achieved and chaotic, ‘work in progress’ which resists easy admiration. The qualities that make Godard, unlike Bresson, a culture hero (as well as, like Bresson, one of the major artists of the age) are precisely his prodigal energies, his evident risk-taking, the quirky individualism of his mastery of a corporate, drastically commercialized art” (Sontag, “Godard” 149-50).

Godard occupies a middle ground between the two poles of aesthetic sensibility, the reflective or contemplative (the austere) and the epicene. These two poles are represented in all great cultural achievements in the 20th century, according to Sontag: “The great culture heroes of our time have shared two qualities: they have all been ascetics in some exemplary way, and also great destroyers.” From “this common profile” emerge “two different, but equally compelling attitudes toward ‘culture’ itself.” One is the “disdainful attitude toward high culture and the past,” represented by Marcel Duchamp, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and John Cage. At the very least, this type of figure maintains “an ironic posture of ignorance or incomprehension”

(Sontag, “Godard” 150). (Sontag examined this attitude in her great essay “The Aesthetics of Silence.”) This ignorance, this incomprehension, is a refusal of presumption; a refusal to be caught offering “wisdom,” in the classical sense of sophistry. To “have something to say” is old hat, expressive of the idealized self and its atomized assertions of sovereignty. Rather, in a proper Wittgensteinian mode, one should *have something to show*. Wittgenstein’s aestheticization of philosophy is like-wise an incorporation of the body (at least as a metaphor); because philosophy becomes an act of *pointing*.

So, an example: the logically predictable box office disappointment of *Space Jam: A New Legacy* in 2021 allows for a new application of Heidegger’s concept of a “world” or a “world-picture,” as well as a contention that the worldlessness Jameson ascribes to the postmodernist aesthetic is best viewed as a negative and not a positive feature of a work of art--a testament to its failure *as art* and not some new cultural norm. Worldlessness is an attribute of kitsch, going all the way back to Eliot’s criticism of Edward Young, where “otherworldliness” serves as a precursor to Jameson’s use of worldlessness or “depthlessness.” Jameson’s theory of postmodernism, then, applies only to a particular kind of corporate (mass) attitude toward the marketability of representational signs wherein the lack of appeal (aesthetically, experientially) is precisely the work’s worldlessness, the palpability of greed in the absence of an organizing sensibility.

Space Jam visualizes and narrates what the “metaverse” concept really and effectively *is* in the aesthetic program of corporate artworks: the storehouse of kitsch; or better yet, the refuse of culture from which it tries to glean corporate profit rather than aesthetic knowledge. LeBron James, himself a highly prized corporate commodity--literalized in his transfiguration to a cartoon representation and subsequent forced participation in the fight against artificial

intelligence, imagined as a basketball game played by competing corporate avatars--flies through a series of worlds, each defined by a particular brand of cultural icons and fictional characters. When he crashes onto the first world, his outline in the earth is the Nike logo, to express a joke that is also a tragic reality: James's body is a corporate trademark. Visited first is the world of *Looney Tunes*, and the iconic (that is, still lucrative) Bugs Bunny then accompanies James on a journey through other "worlds" to acquire his dream team, The Goon Squad, to beat the Big Bad Algorithm. (It is really an attempt to *perfect* the algorithm, on the part of the corporate body behind Space Jam itself.) A stop in Metropolis for Superman, Gotham for Batman and Robin, and then the whole DC Universe (Aquaman, Batgirl, The Green Lantern, The Flash). The various *Looney Tunes* characters enter the live-action universe of *Mad Max*, followed by *Austin Powers*. Ultimately, the film's narrative pauses for an extended collage-reel of corporate holdings, for the sole purpose of relishing in the mere fact of brand recognition as corporate power, all the way from *Casablanca* to *Rick & Morty* to *The Matrix*.

This kind of power is also one of the targets in Pasolini's film. A scene in *Salò* finds all the beautiful youth dressed up, separated by gender, and blankly awaiting the mock wedding ceremony to be performed by the fascists. Dressed in garish and comically slipshod drag as brides, the fascists ascend a stairway to meet the blasé group and are incensed by their lack of enthusiasm. One of the fascists begins shouting: "It's funereal! These parasites are doing nothing for the party! Yell with joy! Do as you like, but laugh!" And then another fascist joins in: "Go on, idiots! Show how happy you are! Go on, laugh!" Zeroing in on a terrified young boy, they command: "You! Why aren't you yelling for joy? Go on, sing! Laugh! Split your sides! You don't laugh!?" Two of the young women express a desperate, melancholy physical affection with a soft caress on the cheek and a kiss, thus breaking the fascists' rule against expressions of love,

and inciting further anger. Expressions of idiosyncrasy, of deviation from the desire of the fascists (that is, the desire of the Lacanian big Other in its totalitarian mode) are immediately labeled as perversity in this sublimely perverse world.

This scene recalls Kundera's description of Sabina's aversion to Soviet kitsch, as epitomized in the May Day parade of smiling citizens presenting themselves for the reviewing stand of Communist officials: "Whenever [Sabina] imagined the world of Soviet kitsch becoming a reality, she felt a shiver run down her back. She would unhesitatingly prefer life in a real Communist regime with all its persecution and meat queues. Life in the real Communist world was still livable. In the world of the Communist ideal made real, in that world of grinning idiots, she would have nothing to say, she would die of horror within a week." *Salò* can be read as Pasolini's way of presenting an expression of that horror, and attempting to make it a visceral experience akin to John Waters's shock effects in *Pink Flamingos*--only far less joyously, less hopefully.

After further protestations by the fascists that the gathered youth enjoy themselves, one of the women (the one who plays the piano accompaniment during the scenes of erotic storytelling and later kills herself at the sight of the film's final violences) runs over to one of her companions and begins to act out a comic scene in a desperate attempt to liven up the room. Pasolini's choice for the dialogue the two women perform indicates the polemic force of the scene. It is a quotation from a contemporary 1970s Italian film, and therefore explicitly relates the consumerist culture of Europe to the enforced enjoyment of the fascist ceremonies taking place in the film from the mock wedding, to the brutal rapes, to the banquet of shit. As John Waters said about *Salò*, "it is about the pornography of power." And here, Waters uses "pornography" in precisely the same sense that Sontag used it in court when testifying in support

of Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures*. And it is also in this sense that one should read *Space Jam: A New Legacy*, as a snapshot of an insidious pornography of power, an allegory for the process of convincing the masses to consume shit.

Contrariwise, the popularity of someone like Quentin Tarantino--or even the fact that Disney incorporates the "name" status of their hired directors in the marketing of the Marvel Cinematic Universe--speaks to the practical desirability of the artist-function for the best marketability of narrative art. The "auteur theory" thus remains relevant, both as a theory of artistic production *and* as a strategy for popular success, whereby one can manufacture the "author-function" artificially via branding. Thus the *Star Wars* franchise, conceived as a brand, is a corporate entity lorded over by its creator, George Lucas; but its desirability for Disney resides in the possibility of retaining (as legal tender, so to speak) the stamp of its recognizability--and marketability--long after Lucas dies. It is this ultimate absence of any particular sensibility in a brand that marks a product as kitsch, thus making the *actual* notion of a sensibility expressed in an artwork (*i.e.* Tarantino, but not the Marvel directors) a concrete mode of resistance to cultural homogenization, which Bataille equates with the totalitarian goals of fascism. The modes in which Tarantino and the Marvel directors shore up tropes and references from past art are entirely distinct (in no way equivalent under a banner of so-called "postmodernism"), equivalent to the difference between Benjamin's "collector" and the producer of kitsch. In this sense, the notion of the "auteur" can retain the adversarial stance it actually and originally had in a figure like Godard, whose auteurism Sontag branded as a style of radical will.

Successfully branding a "cinematic universe," of which *Star Wars* is a just one exemplary case, now serves to replace the old artist-function, though Disney then uses the commissioned "auteur" to diversify the appeal for each narrative strand of its Marvel Cinematic Universe,

giving each a distinctive “authorial” stamp by championing and publicizing the relative creative control of their directors. Most prominent among these “auteurs” are (keeping in mind that the original *Cahiers* critiques who coined the term would call them *metteurs en scène*--that is, painters of pretty pictures but not *really* artists): Taika Waititi, Sam Raimi, Jon Favreau, Ryan Coogler, Chloé Zhao, and Peyton Reed. Conversely, some random contemporary “auteurs” working in the genre of highly commercial cinema would be: Quentin Tarantino, Spike Lee, Jane Campion, Martin Scorsese. Both the *auteur* and the *metteur en scène* of contemporary culture make *use* of kitsch, but only the *auteur* transforms it. Ultimately, though, every corporate holding can become the seed of a universe, the seed of a brand (or re-brand). *Space Jam: A New Legacy* presents a startlingly palpable view of the morass of kitsch available to the major corporate archives of cultural capital (*i.e.* cultural kitsch). The term “cultural capital” should then be reconceptualized to refer to the very real ownership of semiotic Signs and Icons. This is ultimately the scandal of intellectual property itself.

Aesthetic Knowledge as Transcendence

Benjaminian “fate” is finally the fate of the world *for consciousness*, and Benjamin’s collector is as much the anecdotal figure he describes as an allegorical image (in Benjamin’s idiosyncratic sense) of consciousness as its most abstract Brochian *mythos*, where it is both the individual consciousness of perception and the World-Historical consciousness of Spirit in its various guises across times and cultures. Through the collector, the sense of fate receives the full weight of subjective anxiety in existential freedom, because the fate of objects and the fate of humanity are one and the same.

Thus the contrary statement to Sontag's entirely polemical "against interpretation" is the equally and simultaneously true "interpretation *matters*." One cannot overestimate the stakes in the decisions regarding abstract speculative thought: "[It is o]f vital interest to recognize a particular point of development as a crossroads. The new historical thinking that, in general and in particular, is characterized by higher concreteness, redemption of periods of decline, revision of periodization, presently stands at such a point, and its utilization in a reactionary or a revolutionary sense is now being decided. In this regard, the writings of the Surrealists and the new book by Heidegger [*Being and Time*] point to one and the same crisis in its two possible solutions" (Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* 545).⁴⁰ In this statement, one must read Benjamin's awareness of Heidegger's proximity to the very same idealizations of earth and origin that birthed Nazism; and the Surrealism as the overarching modernist sensibility that Sontag makes of it, rather than a particular movement.

Fate is then also what Benjamin refers to as the "eternally selfsame," because it is the empty possibility that recurs equally in every perception of objects (hence the importance of Nietzsche's "eternal recurrence" in his *Arcades Project*).⁴¹ But this minimal difference between Heidegger and the Surrealists hinges on what Benjamin understands as the "imagistic" version of history. It helps to consider Heidegger, hypothetically, as if he were a Surrealist when he writes: "All research [...] is an ontical possibility of Dasein" (Heidegger, *Being and Time* 41). Replace

⁴⁰ In another draft of this same set of statements, Benjamin emphasized the "decision" of this crossroads as one between "its reactionary or revolutionary application. In this sense, one and the same phenomenon is at work in the Surrealists and in Heidegger" (Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* 857). The overlapping of the notions of "decision" and "phenomenon" are here illustrative of the character of fate that Benjamin ascribes to the relation of meaning and objects. But the differences between the Surrealists and Heidegger are in their "nuances" rather than "great contrasts," and these nuances are what matter: "What matter are never the 'great' but only the dialectical contrasts, which often seem indistinguishable from nuances. It is nonetheless from them that life is always born anew" (Benjamin *The Arcades Project* 459).

⁴¹ Fate as the "fatal instant" is also the meaning of "origin" in Benjamin's thought, and it connects perfectly also to Jean Gebser's use of the same term, quasi-contemporaneously, in *The Ever-Present Origin*.

“research” with its Surrealist variation (the research into radical juxtapositions), and the connection between the two makes perfect sense. For Heidegger, human consciousness experiences meaning because of time (or because of negation, if it were Hegel) and so part of its Being is defined by “historicality.” The ability to compare one moment to the next, one perception to the next, or one object to the next is the precondition for understanding History at all (as a concept as well as a particular narrative). Part of the nature of this self-consciousness Heidegger calls Dasein is the way it experiences itself always in relation to a kind of pastness that must be determined, interpreted, posited as such in order to move into the future:

“[Dasein] *is* its past, whether explicitly or not. And this is so not only in that its past is, as it were, pushing itself along ‘behind’ it, and that Dasein possesses what is past as a property which is still present-at-hand and which sometimes has after-effects upon it: Dasein ‘is’ its past in the way of *its* own Being, which, to put it roughly, ‘historizes’ out of its future on each occasion. Whatever the way of being it may have at the time, and thus with whatever understanding of Being it may possess, Dasein has grown up both into and in a traditional way of interpreting itself: in terms of this it understands itself proximally and, within a certain range, constantly. By this understanding, the possibilities of its Being are disclosed and regulated. Its own past--and this always means the past of its ‘generation’--is not something which *follows along after* Dasein, but something which already goes ahead of it” (Heidegger, *Being and Time* 41).

Benjamin’s “dialectics at a standstill,” or the “dialectical image,” is a rejoinder to this conception of Heidegger’s, as an ability to achieve a state outside this existential situatedness. This dialectical image is also what Hegel indicated in his *Lectures on Fine Art*: “The inner shines in the outer and makes itself known through the outer, since the outer points away from itself to the

inner” (Pippin 21). What makes this dialectical is that the two senses of “inner” are not identical. The second “inner” awaits the conception of the “outer” and does not exist at all before this aesthetic encounter with the “outer” that gives birth to it.

For Sontag, “the aesthetic sense” primarily means the *ability* to learn about the world by discerning the aesthetic aspect of things. Photography became the exemplary medium through which she made this point, being the primary subject of her final book (along with war, mediated through photographs), but her observations about photography are really aimed more generally at the aesthetic sense and the aesthetic aspect of reality. In an essay written as the forward to a book of photographs called *Italy: One Hundred Years of Photography* (1988), Sontag begins by discussing how the aesthetic differences between the first and last photos in the collection account for a parallel set of differences in the historical realities represented by the dates of their productions. In 1884, the earliest of the photographs presents a “large conservatory of the Italian Horticultural Society” and is grounded as an index of that historical existence, probably taken by one of the society’s members (Sontag, “One Hundred Years of Italian Photography” 216).

Last in the book is an aerial photograph presenting the entirety of Europe from above, “a picture not so much taken as arranged, by professionals, aided by computers” (Sontag 216). Neither photograph is particularly “Italian” (meaning the collection may take “Italy” as a structuring theme, but this does not mean anything like “Italianness”), nor is either a unique specimen from its time. What marks the real difference between the photographs “is not *what* we see but *that* we can see it,” and so the aesthetic essence of each photograph is reducible to the *representational capability* that it signifies. In making this distinction, Sontag is updating the critical argument made in 1964’s “Against Interpretation” championing form over content. The “what” of the photograph is its content, recognizable and describable with ready-to-hand

concepts. But the representational capability of the photograph, the fact of its *thereness*--“*that*” it is--points to the real aesthetic difference between the images viewed as art, which means to view them using the aesthetic sense. And this aesthetic difference is importantly not a function of subjective artistic intention, in the Romanticist version of that idea, but a fully abstracted Subject Position representative of the aesthetic attributes of a time-period, a moment in history.

One of Sontag’s primary theses, implied throughout her writing life, is that “art” refers to any medium through which reality reveals its aesthetic arrangement, the sense of a Heideggerian world. Each photograph represents something that could not exist *before* (relatively speaking) its capture. For instance, the aerial photograph at the end “is an example of something that can be seen only in the form of a photograph, and could only be photographed (thanks to the existence of other, allied technologies) now” (Sontag 216-17). But an important difference emerges from one of the two photographs’ similarities, the fact that neither contains people. In the first, however, taken at the conservatory, “one easily imagines people reinserted in this place, milling about in it,” because “it is very much a human, historically specific world.”

However, the lack of people in the book’s final photograph has a different meaning. One of the chief aesthetic differences between the earliest and most recent time-periods contained in the book is that “the world of the aerial photograph is a world of things beyond the human scale from which people are necessarily absent. Here the human, the historical fact has no place” (Sontag 217). Through this difference, the sense of sublimity alters from its Romantic grounding in the difference between the Particular and Universal Subject. The anonymity of the 1884 photograph, in terms of who took it, represents the dominant ideological supremacy of the individual citizen-subject conceived as a particular instance of the Abstract-Universal Subject of the Enlightenment--whereby the impossible totality asserts its sovereignty over the finite and

anguished subject. (Indeed, there's a bit of Jonathan Edwards in Kant after all.) Let's call that the old sublimity. But the subject-position of the final photograph steps beyond the finite. It incorporates a multiplicity and represents a formerly impossible simultaneity of subject-positions united, technologically, into one. In this final view, "history is annihilated in favor of geography" and "the accents of time are made irrelevant by the scale of this uniformly marked distribution of space" (217). Sublimity is now the absence of time, which equates it with Broch's emendation of the Kantian subject as completely alien to any *a priori* apprehension of time. It is the "ego nucleus" itself, the "earthly absolute," in both its singular emptiness and its infinitely full proliferations and permutations.

Sontag offers a few different readings of this basic aesthetic difference, which may or may not be attributable to the anthologist of the photograph as a narrative intention. Perhaps it points to "an acknowledgment of the Euro-destiny of Italy, its demise as a distinctive culture and absorption into the homogenizing system of greeds created by multi-national capitalism." This would be one shift in historical arrangement between the time-periods of the two photographs that their aesthetic differences also express. And this reading exists regardless of whether the anthologist only intended it as a "perhaps overemphatic way of decreeing a closure for the collection"--that is, the reading exists even if the arrangement was produced somewhat arbitrarily. The "aesthetic sense" does not access subjective intention but only aesthetic reality in its expressive form--the form of the "syntactical structure" theorized by Broch as the basis of language wherein expression creates a simultaneity between subject and object.

Broch's theory of language is like Sontag's theory of photography: it wrests consciousness from time and makes possible an otherwise impossible simultaneity. But even the critical intent speculated above forgets the real sublimity of the aesthetic sense, which is its

“open-ended” lack of form. As an aesthetic object, the photograph is as empty of content as the human subject conceived as the “earthly absolute,” a pure medium, and the eye that falls on a photograph is the simultaneity of one medium viewing another. Their ability to converse relies on what Sontag calls the “aesthetic sense,” the access point whereby meaning transfers from one medium to the other. And it is precisely the “worldlessness” of the latter image that marks the new stamp it provides to sublimity: the “otherworldliness” of Eliot conceived as a *loss* of world that does not necessarily lead to the achievement of a new one.

Jameson’s postmodern morass is a conceptualization of subjectivity conceived without World; the literalization of Hegelian Spirit imagined as one enormous and uncatalogued archive. But what is missing from this worldlessness is precisely judgment, discrimination, and valuation. These ideas are expressed in Benjamin’s concept of the collector, which Sontag takes up in relation to the artist-thinker. Sontag’s novel, *The Volcano Lover*, is an exploration of this Benjaminian idea concerning both an actual historical collector, Sir William Hamilton, and Sontag’s own poetic variation on the aesthetic, intellectual, and ethical implications of the collector’s discriminating judgments as contained in the novel’s first-person ruminations as well as the individual characters. In the latter part of the novel, the focus switches from men to women. Because up to this point, the figure of the collector is primarily a privileged tyrant in the mode of civilized “connoisseur,” epitomized in the imperialist figure of Sir William Hamilton: “Did he ever have an original thought, or subject himself to the discipline of writing a poem, or discover or invent anything except his own pleasures and the privileges annexed to his station” (Sontag 418). It is really a question posed, generally, to the history of European civilization condensed onto the figure of this disinterested aesthete, Broch’s “aestheticizing literary man.”

But the novel ends with the voice of a forgotten female poet and revolutionary, Eleonora Fonseca Pimentel, who reiterates the force of judgment *against* the *status quo* as the ideal mode of the artist-thinker standing firm in its convictions--its *positions*--however inconvenient for whichever tribe of thought. Sontag intersperses her own voice into the voice of Pimentel, and the “I” is both of them throughout, even if it happens briefly and retroactively (positing its own presuppositions), in the same way that *Luther is Esch* in Fuentes’s variation on the aesthetic mode in Broch’s *The Sleepwalkers*. The “author” is nothing but the “earthly absolute” constructing its mental-sensorial collection and forming its judgment:

I will not allow that I was moved by justice rather than love, for justice is also a form of love. I did know about power, I did see how this world was ruled, but I did not accept it. I wanted to set an example. I wanted not to disappoint myself. But I was afraid as well as angry, in ways I felt too powerless to admit. So I did not speak of my fears but rather of my hopes. I was afraid my anger would offend others, and they would destroy me. For all my certitude, I feared I would never be strong enough to understand what would allow me to protect myself. Sometimes I had to forget that I was a woman to accomplish the best of which I was capable. Or I would lie to myself about how complicated it is to be a woman. Thus do all women, including the author of this book. But I cannot forgive those who did not care about more than their own glory or well-being. They thought they were civilized. They were despicable. Damn them all (Sontag, *The Volcano Lover* 419).

The Function of a Mythologized Mind as a Communal and Individual Project

Photographs, for Sontag, are exemplars of a Kantian disinterested consciousness in its dual form. They objectify the aestheticization of the world, but they also represent the ease by

which consciousness turns reality into kitsch. The best example is probably the stock photograph, gleaned from a vast archive of photographs collected and intended for use as expressions of abstract aesthetic denotations masquerading as valuations: happy married couple, happy interracial married couple, happy homosexual couple, happy interracial homosexual couple, or--to recall Kundera's renditions of kitsch--"children running on the grass."

Benjamin claims that a work of art is by definition somewhat dead because it is an objectification of a particular aesthetic orientation of consciousness. If it were taken for a "true representation," and thereby an actual access to reality, then it would not be a work of art. It would be "mere semblance," or delusional simplification. There is indeed "life" in the work of art, but it is a *recorded* life, like a photograph, "petrified and as if spellbound in a single moment." Just as anything is given pathos as a photographic token of lost time, the work of art achieves beauty by holding fast a way of being-in-the-world or a mode of paying attention to experience. The fact of its deadness--the deadness of the aesthetic representation--produces what Benjamin terms "the expressionless," approximated also in Roland Barthes's concepts of the *punctum* and "the neutral." In a photograph, this "expressionless" aspect is the source of its token pathos, the fact of the event, person, or object captured as no longer being there; as being intrinsically ephemeral, irretrievable except as an aesthetic *attitude* available only via an embodied contemplation.

But its deadness also "defines its truth," in the sense that the expressionless quality in the "death mask" aspect of the photograph (this being Sontag's term) nonetheless expresses the notion of an actual *possibility of being* that the representation lays hold of and "immortalizes." What is beautiful is precisely this *possibility of being* that is captured, to the extent that it appears only in *this* representation, its particular coordinates and constellations. To the extent that it

remains beautiful through the changing contexts of time, its aesthetic view is “vindicated” as an object of desire for a more general human consciousness and experience than even that of its initial articulation. It thus retains a “critical violence” that prevents it being mistaken for a cozy delusion of accuracy or absolution with respect to life or knowledge; it is rather an “objection” to life as it subsists or persists in contradiction to its ethical possibility.

The humanistic gives way to both the embodied-biological *and* the mythical-algorithmic world conceived together; the world of Mind wherein the *human* consciousness is only one many-faced part of a larger signifying network aiming for salvation but directed at kitsch. Only a consolidation and truly communal--which is not to say unified or unitary--application of the aesthetic sense in all its spheres, which no longer significantly differentiates between the work of art and the work of science--or, dialectically together, the work of living--can remove the mind from this endless and empty striving after nothing.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Adorno, Theodor W. *Aesthetic Theory* (ed./trans. Robert Hullot Kentor). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.
- . *Minima Moralia* (trans. E.F.N. Jephcott). London: Verso, 2005.
- Arendt, Hannah. "Hermann Broch: 1886-1951." *Men in Dark Times* (trans. Clara and Richard Winston). Harcourt & Brace, 1968.
- . *The Human Condition*. University of Chicago Press, 1958.
- . "Walter Benjamin: 1892-1940." *Men in Dark Times* (trans. Harry Zohn).
- Artaud, Antonin. *Antonin Artaud: Selected Writings* (trans. Helen Weaver; ed. Susan Sontag). University of California Press, 1988.
- Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space* (trans. Maria Jolas). Boston: Beacon Press, 1994.
- Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (trans. Richard Howard). New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010.
- . *The Neutral: Lecture Course at the Collège de France, 1977-1978* (trans. Rosalind E. Kraus and Denis Hollier; eds. Thomas Clerc and Eric Marty). New York: Columbia University Press, 2005.
- . "The Photographic Message." *Image, Music, Text* (trans. Stephen Heath). New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978.
- Bataille, Georges. *Manet: Biographical and Critical Study* (trans. Austryn Wainhouse and James Emmons). New York: Skira, 1955.
- . "The Psychological Structure of Fascism." *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939* (trans. Allan Stoekl; eds. Allan Stoekl, Carl R. Lovitt, and Donald M. Leslie, Jr.). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986.

- . "The Use Value of D.A.F. de Sade." *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939* (trans. Allan Stoekl; eds. Allan Stoekl, Carl R. Lovitt, and Donald M. Leslie, Jr.). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986.
- Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (trans. Bernard Frechtman). Citadel Press, 1976.
- Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project* (trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin). Harvard University Press, 2002.
- . "The Theory of Criticism." *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 1: 1913-1926* (trans. David Lachterman, Howard Eiland, and Ian Balfour; eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings). Harvard University Press, 2004.
- . "Goethe's Elective Affinities." *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 1: 1913-1926* (trans. Stanley Corngold; eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings). Harvard University Press, 2004.
- . "One-Way Street." *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 1: 1913-1926* (trans. Edmund Jephcott; eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings). Harvard University Press, 2004.
- Bernard, Claude. "Observation and Experiment." *Introduction to Great Books (First Series)*. Chicago: The Great Books Foundation, 1990.
- Blake, William. *The Complete Poetry & Prose of William Blake* (ed. David V. Erdman). New York: Anchor Books, 1988.
- Blanchot, Maurice. *The Most High* (trans. Allan Stoekl). University of Nebraska Press, 1996.
- Breton, André. "First Manifesto of Surrealism." *Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood). Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992.

- Broch, Hermann. *The Death of Virgil* (trans. Jean Starr Untermyer). New York: Vintage Books, 1995.
- . "Notes on the Problem of Kitsch." *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste* (eds. Gabriele Mazzotta and Vivienne Menkes). New York: Universe Books, 1969.
- . *The Sleepwalkers* (trans. Willa and Edwin Muir). San Francisco: North Point Press, 1947.
- . "The Style of the Mythical Age." Introduction. *On the Iliad*, by Rachel Bespaloff (trans. Mary McCarthy). Princeton University Press, 2019.
- Brooks, Peter. "Les Liaisons dangereuses." *The Novel of Worldliness: Crebillon, Marivaux, Laclos, Stendahl*. Princeton University Press, 2015.
- Cavell, Stanley. *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life*. Belknap Press, 2004.
- . *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*. Harvard University Press, 1981.
- Chan, Evans. "Against Postmodernism, et cetera: A Conversation with Susan Sontag." *Postmodern Culture*. Boston: Vol. 12.1, 2001.
- Chekhov, Anton. "Rothschild's Fiddle." *The Oxford Chekhov, Volume II, Stories 1893-1895* (trans. & ed. Ronald Hingley). Oxford University Press, 1978.
- Cioran, EM. "Some Blind Alleys: A Letter." *The Temptation to Exist* (trans. Richard Howard). New York: Arcade Publishing, 2012.
- Derrida, Jacques. *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond* (trans. Alan Bass). Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.
- Eicher-Catt, Deborah. "The Logic of the Sacred in Bateson and Peirce." *The American Journal of Semiotics* 19 (1-4), 95-126.

- Elder, Robert K. *The Best Film You've Never Seen: 35 Directors Champion the Forgotten or Critically Savaged Movies They Love*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2013.
- Eliot, George. "Worldliness and Otherworldliness: The Poet Young." *The Works of George Eliot*, Vol. XI. New York: P.F. Collier & Son.
- Eliot, T.S. "East Coker." *Four Quartets*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1943.
- Foucault, Michel. "What is Enlightenment?" *The Foucault Reader* (ed. Paul Rabinow ; trans. Catherine Porter). New York: Pantheon Books, 1984.
- Freud, Sigmund. *The Interpretation of Dreams* (trans. & ed. James Strachey). New York: Avon Books, 1965.
- Fried, Michael. *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot*. University of Chicago Press, 1988.
- . *Courbet's Realism*. University of Chicago Press, 1990.
- . *Manet's Modernism, or, The Face of Painting in the 1860s*. University of Chicago Press, 1996.
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *The Relevance of the Beautiful and other essays* (trans. Nicholas Walker; ed. Robert Bernasconi). New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986.
- Gebser, Jean. *The Ever-Present Origin* (trans. Noel Barstad and Algis Mickunas). Ohio University Press, 1953.
- Hegel, George Wilhelm Friedrich. *Phenomenology of Spirit* (trans. A.V. Miller). New York: Oxford University Press, 1977.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time* (trans. John MacQuarrie and Edward Robinson). Harper & Row, 1962.
- . "The Origin of the Work of Art."

- Hrabal, Bohumil. *Too Loud a Solitude* (trans. Michael Henry Heim). San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992.
- Huddleston, Andrew. *Nietzsche on the Decadence and Flourishing of Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019.
- Jameson, Fredric. *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992.
- . *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1991.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (trans. Paul Guyer; eds. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews). New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- Kundera, Milan. *The Art of the Novel* (trans. Linda Asher). New York: Perennial Classics, 2003.
- . *The Curtain: An Essay in Seven Parts* (trans. Linda Asher). New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2006.
- . *Testaments Betrayed: An Essay in Nine Parts* (trans. Linda Asher). New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995.
- . *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (trans. Michael Henry Heim). New York: HarperPerennial, 1991.
- Lacan, Jacques. *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (ed. Jacques-Alain Miller; trans. Alan Sheridan). New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1978.
- . "Kant With Sade" (trans. James B. Swenson, Jr.). *October*, Vol. 51, 55-75, 1989.
- Laclos, Pierre Choderlos de. *Les liaisons dangereuses, or, Letters Collected in a Private Society and Published for the Instruction of Others* (trans. Ernest Dowson). New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2006.

- Lautréamont, Comte de. *Les Chants de Maldoror* (trans. Guy Wernham). New York: New Directions, 1965.
- Levitt, Lauren. "Batman and the Aesthetics of Camp." *Sontag and the Camp Aesthetic: Advancing New Perspectives* (eds. Bruce E. Drushel and Brian M. Peters). Lanham: Lexington Books, 2017.
- Marcuse, Herbert. "The Affirmative Character of Culture." *Art and Liberation* (ed. Douglas Kellner). London: Routledge, 2007.
- Marinetti, F.T. "The Founding and Manifesto of Surrealism (1909)." *Futurism: An Anthology* (eds. Lawrence Rainey et al.). Yale University Press, 2009, pp. 49–53.
- McLuhan, Marshal. "Medium is the Message." *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994.
- Mitrano, Mena. *In the Archive of Longing: Susan Sontag's Critical Modernism*. Edinburgh University Press, 2017.
- Moser, Benjamin. *Sontag: Her Life and Work*. New York: Ecco, 2019.
- Myrsiades, Linda S. "Theatrical Metaphors in Theodoros Angelopoulos's The Traveling Players." *Journal of Modern Greek Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 1, 2000, 135-149.
- Newman, Barnett. "The Sublime is Now." *Reading Abstract Expressionism: Context and Critique* (ed. Ellen G. Landau). New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005.
- Nowell-Smith, Geoffrey. *L'Avventura*. London: BFI Pub., 1997.
- Pepper, Thomas. "Uncanny." *German Aesthetics: Fundamental Concepts from Baumgarten to Adorno* (eds. J.D. Mininger and Jason Michael Peck). New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016.

- Picabia, Francis. *I Am a Beautiful Monster* (trans. Marc Lowenthal). Cambridge: MIT Press, 2012.
- Piper, Andrew. *Book Was There: Reading in Electronic Times*. Univ. of Chicago Press, 2013.
- Pippin, Robert. *After The Beautiful: Hegel and the Philosophy of Pictorial Modernism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014.
- Ridley, Aaron. "Nietzsche, Wagner, Decadence: Response to Katherine Fry." *The Opera Quarterly*, Vol. 29.3, 2013, 277-281.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology* (trans. Hazel E. Barnes). New York: Washington Square Books, 1956.
- *Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr* (trans. Bernard Frechtman). New York: New American Library, 1963.
- Scharper, Julie. "John Waters creates a version of shocking cult classic 'Pink Flamingos' --for kids." *The Baltimore Sun*. Dec 22, 2014.
- Schiller, Friedrich. *On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters* (trans. & ed. Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L.A. Willoughby). Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967.
- Sontag, Susan. "The Aesthetics of Silence." *Styles of Radical Will*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1969.
- . "Against Interpretation." *Against Interpretation and other essays*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966.
- . "Approaching Artaud." *Under the Sign of Saturn*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980.
- . "An Argument about Beauty." *At The Same Time: Essays and Speeches* (eds. Paolo Dilonardo and Anne Jump). New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007.

- . "The Anthropologist As Hero." *Against Interpretation and other essays*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966.
- . *As Consciousness is Harnessed to Flesh: Journals and Notebooks, 1964-1980* (ed. David Rieff). New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012.
- . "Bergman's Persona." *Styles of Radical Will*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1969.
- . "Fascinating Fascism." *Under the Sign of Saturn*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980.
- . "Godard." *Styles of Radical Will*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1969.
- . "Happenings: The Art of Radical Juxtaposition." *Against Interpretation and other essays*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966.
- . "Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures*." *Against Interpretation and other essays*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966.
- . "Notes on 'Camp'." *Against Interpretation and other essays*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966.
- . "On Style." *Against Interpretation and other essays*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966.
- . "On Paul Goodman." *Under the Sign of Saturn*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980.
- . "One Culture and the New Sensibility." *Against Interpretation and other essays*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966.
- . "Outlandish: On Halldór Laxness's *Under the Glacier*." *At The Same Time: Essays and Speeches* (eds. Paolo Dilonardo and Anne Jump). New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007.
- . *On Photography*. New York: Picador: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990.

- . "One Hundred Years of Italian Photography." *Where the Stress Falls*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001.
- . "The Pornographic Imagination." *Styles of Radical Will*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1969.
- . "Regarding the Torture of Others." *At The Same Time: Essays and Speeches* (eds. Paolo Dilonardo and Anne Jump). New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007.
- . "Simone Weil." *Against Interpretation and other essays*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966.
- . "Spiritual Style in the Films of Robert Bresson." *Against Interpretation and other essays*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966.
- . "Thinking Against Oneself": Reflections on Cioran." *Styles of Radical Will*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1969.
- . "The Third World of Women." *Essays of the 1960s & 70s* (ed. David Rieff). New York: The Library of America, 2013.
- . "Under the Sign of Saturn." *Under the Sign of Saturn*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980.
- . *The Volcano Lover: A Romance*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1992.
- . "Wagner's Fluids." *Where the Stress Falls*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001.
- . "Writing Itself: On Roland Barthes." *Where the Stress Falls*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001.
- Waters, John. *Carsick*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014.
- . *Role Models*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010.
- . *Shock Value: A Tasteful Book About Bad Taste*. Philadelphia: Running Press, 2005.

Carsick

Watt, Roderick H. "Das Irdisch-Absolute: The Development of a Theory in the Work of

Hermann Broch." The University of Edinburgh (United Kingdom), Scotland, 1975.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations* (trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker

and Joachim Schulte). Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.

Zizek, Slavoj. *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*. New York:

Verso, 2012.

MUSIC

Anderson, Laurie. "The Dream Before." *Strange Angels*. Produced by Laurie Anderson, et. al.,

Warner Bros., 1989.

Reed, Lou. "Heroin." *The Velvet Underground & Nico*. Produced by Andy Warhol and Tom

Wilson, Verve, 1968.

FILMS/TV SHOWS/VIDEOS

2 or 3 Things I Know About Her. Written and directed by Jean-Luc Godard, France; Anouchka

Films, Argos Films, Les Films du Carrosse, Parc Film, 1967.

Antichrist. Written and directed by Lars von Trier; Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Poland,

Sweden; Zentropa Entertainments, arte France Cinéma, Canal+, Danmarks Radio, Film i

Väst, Svenska Filminstitutet, Sveriges Television, ZDF, 2009.

The Bling Ring. Written and directed by Sofia Coppola; United States, United Kingdom, France,

Germany, Japan; American Zoetrope, et. al., 2013.

“Cardi B - WAP feat. Megan Thee Stallion [Official Music Video].” YouTube, uploaded by
Cardi B, 6 Aug 2020.

The Century of the Self. Written and directed by Adam Curtis, United Kingdom, RDF Television
and BBC, 2002.

Certified Copy. Written and directed by Abbas Kiarostami; France, Italy, and Belgium; MK2,
2010.

Children of Paradise. Directed by Marcel Carné. Written by Jacques Prévert, France, Pathé
Consortium Cinéma, 1945.

Cruel Intentions. Written and directed by Roger Krumble, United States; Columbia Pictures,
Original Film, Newmarket Capital Group, 1999.

Dangerous Liaisons. Directed by Stephen Frears. Written by Christopher Hampton, United
States; Lorimar Film Entertainment, NFH Limited, 1988.

“Dave Chappelle/Black Star.” Monologue, written by Dave Chappelle. *Saturday Night Live*
(S48.E6). Created by Lorne Michaels, United States, Broadway Video; Nov 12, 2022.

Django Unchained. Written and directed by Quentin Tarantino, United States, A Band Apart,
Columbia Pictures, 2012.

Fahrenheit 9/11. Written and directed by Michael Moore, United States; Dog Eat Dog Films,
Fellowship Adventure Group, 2004.

Gossip Girl. Developed by Josh Schwartz and Stephanie Savage, United States; Warner Bros.
Television, Alloy Entertainment, College Hill Pictures, CBS Television Studios, Fake
Empire Productions, 2007-2012.

House of Wax. Directed by Jaume Collet-Serra. Written by Chad Hayes and Carey W. Hayes;
United States, Australia; Village Roadshow Pictures, Dark Castle Entertainment, 2005.

Keeping Up With The Kardashians. Created by Ryan Seacrest, United States; Ryan Seacrest Productions, Bunim/Murray Productions, 2007-2021.

Lost in Translation. Written and directed by Sofia Coppola; United States, Japan; American Zoetrope, Elemental Films, 2003.

Marie Antoinette. Written and directed by Sofia Coppola; France, United States, Japan; Columbia Pictures, American Zoetrope, Pricel, Tohokushinsha Film Corporation, 2006.

Melancholia. Written and directed by Lars von Trier; Denmark, Sweden, France, Germany; Zentropa Entertainments, et. al., 2011.

Nymphomaniac. Written and directed by Lars von Trier; Denmark, Germany, France, Belgium; Zentropa Entertainments, et. al., 2013.

Pink Flamingos. Written and directed by John Waters, United States, Dreamland, 1972.

The Pope's Exorcist. Directed by Julius Avery. Written by Michael Petroni and Evan Spiliotopoulos, United States; Screen Gems, 2.0 Entertainment, Loyola Productions, 2023.

The Real Housewives. Created by Scott Dunlop, United States, NBCUniversal, 2006-present.

Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom. Directed by Pier Paolo Pasolini. Written by Pier Paolo Pasolini and Sergio Citti; Italy, France; Produzioni Europee Associati, Les Productions Artistes Associés, 1975.

The Simple Life. Created by Mary-Ellis Bunim and Jonathan Murray, United States; Bunim/Murray Productions, 20th Century Fox Television, 2003-2007.

Somewhere. Written and directed by Sofia Coppola; United States, France, Japan; Pathé Distribution, Medusa Film, Tohokushinsha, American Zoetrope, 2010.

Spider-Man: No Way Home. Directed by Jon Watts. Written by Chris McKenna and Erik Sommers, United States; Columbia Studios, Marvel Studios, Pascal Pictures, 2021.

Sticks & Stones. Written by Dave Chappelle. Directed by Stan Lathan, United States, Pilot Bay Productions, 2019.

Temptation Island. Written by Aliyah Silverstein and Brendan Wentworth, United States; Fox Television Studios, Rocket Science Laboratories, Banijay Studios North America, 2001-present.

This is Paris. Written and directed by Alexandra Dean, United States, The Intellectual Property Corporation, 2020.

Thor: Love and Thunder. Written and directed by Taika Waititi, United States, Marvel Studios, 2022.