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A Phenomenological Critique of 20th Century Aesthetics

Although the autonomy of the aesthetic realm was a consequence of enlightened *modernity*, 20th century aesthetic discourse was widely dominated by the subject-centred, instrumental rationality of positivist *modernism* which conceived aesthetics as an unreliable source of knowledge, unworthy of rational inquiry. This development not only reinforced the process of aesthetic alienation, but brought about the reification of the aesthetic object.

The paradigm of positivist rationality, which is principally based upon the methodology of empiricist natural science, has for a long time been conceived as the only reliable basis of objective knowledge. Consequently, it is no surprise that from the point of view this understanding which favoured scientific knowledge as the only respectable mode of human rational activity with the conviction that only objective phenomena is worthy of inquiry, “aesthetic experience”, as a phenomenon not based upon objective facts but subjective judgments, appears to be a precarious field. As Susanne Langer remarked, “.. every serious epistemology that has regarded mental life as greater than discursive reason, and has made concessions to *insight* or *intuition*, has just so far capitulated to unreason, to mysticism and irrationalism.” From the point of view of positivist epistemology, the study of aesthetic concepts such as art, artistic truth, insight, intuition, deeper meaning etc., appears to be “.. a dangerous-looking sector .. for the advance of a rational spirit.”¹

This understanding of art and aesthetic experience is based upon a narrow conception of knowledge which limits the role of human rationality to the generation of a mode of knowledge that is essentially discursive, cognitive and instrumental. Conceiving the relation between the knower and the known basically in terms of subject-object duality, it limits human understanding to an act of cognition and reduces man’s interaction with reality to a set of abstract technical operations. Implicit in this model is an instrumental conception of knowledge that already presupposes the principle of domination. The universe, i.e., the object of scientific knowledge, is construed as an abstract totality of neutral objects that can be manipulated by the human subject through a series of scientific procedures such as observation, classification and experimentation. In Horkheimer and Adorno’s terms, instrumental reason, by subsuming all particulars under one all-embracing formula, liquefies qualitative differences between beings as well as the differing value spheres of human knowledge.² From the point of view of instrumental reason, differing value spheres such as art and architecture, culture and society, and even the human subject itself may all become objects of scientific abstraction in the same way as a natural phenomenon becomes an object of physical science.

Actually positivism’s scientific bias that undervalued aesthetic discourse was based upon a misinterpretation of Enlightenment’s rationality which in fact consisted of three autonomous domains, namely science, morality and aesthetics. Each of these value spheres had their own independent inner logic and criteria for justification so that neither one would impose its standards over the other. The delimitation of aesthetics as a rational field of inquiry was first issued by Kant. In his Critique of Judgment, Kant identified aesthetics as an autonomous sphere of knowledge, the creative employment of a rational faculty of the human mind deserving equal respect and value with science and practical knowledge, although its mode of generation and conditions of validity are different. Although aesthetic judgments are singular and rest upon a subjective a priori principle that do not entail a *concept of the object* and therefore, are “.. incapable of becoming a constituent of knowledge”, nevertheless the grounds of their possibility must be universally and necessarily valid for all men. Kant maintains that, unlike scientific objectivity, in aesthetic judgments *objectivity* as such is only implied in a validity claim that demands the consent of every one. A principle of inter-subjectivity, which already presupposes a condition for the possibility of dialogical rationality, therefore operates in aesthetic judgments.³

Contrary to Kant’s formulation, positivist epistemology which was based upon a partial interpretation of theoretical rationality developed as the dominant epistemological model imposing its own standards of scientific validity on all other spheres of human life. The reduction of human rationality to a predominantly discursive mode of reasoning appropriate for science brings about an impoverished view of human understanding within which questions related with art and architecture either have no place, or come to be considered as reliable

¹ S. Langer, 1967, *Mind; An Essay On Human Feeling*, John Hopkins Press, Baltimore, 1982: 92.

² M. Horkheimer and T. W. Adorno, *Dialectic Of The Enlightenment*, Continuum, New York, 1989.

³ I. Kant, 1790, *Critique of Judgement*, Oxford University press, London, 1973.

sources for knowledge only when they adapted themselves to the positivist paradigm thereby becoming instrumental. The instrumentalization of aesthetic phenomena in this way robs them of their actual aesthetic qualities, as these qualities become objects of theoretical abstraction, that can be observed, measured, and expressed in terms of concepts. An obvious example is the instrumentalization of architecture by *Functionalism* which conceived architectural design in terms of a set of objective parameters measured against a set of performance standards, such as efficiency, in a process quite similar to the designing of a technological object. ⁴ Similarly, the aesthetic language of architecture was formulated as a set of objective visual parameters to be used as criteria for the assessment of user perception. ⁵

Post-Positivist Criticism

Beginning with the second half of the 20th century, positivist rationality has been under serious attack from a variety of positions, (such as phenomenology, structuralism, critical theory) all of which criticize its dualistic conception of reality and strongly power-centred historical bias that dominated modern culture, in Heidegger's words, the technological viewpoint which posited the world as a "standing reserve" for the surveillance and manipulation of a dominating subject. ⁶ Conventional hierarchies and oppositions such as that between subject and object, the Cartesian split between mind and body began to be rigorously questioned. Starting from fundamental questions related with man's concrete existence in the world, phenomenological criticism was particularly directed to the damage positivist reductionism and abstraction had done to man's life by dissolving its qualitative unity.

A significant aspect of the post-positivist paradigm is *dialogical rationality*. Contrary to the positivist paradigm which presupposes the total detachment of the human subject from the object of knowledge, dialogical rationality conceives them as participants in a dialogue. And, instead of the positivist notion of objectivity, dialogical reason operates on the principle of intersubjectivity. A dialogue initiates thinking through an act of interrogation, its principle mode of reasoning is dialectical which leaves room for inconsistencies and contradictions. ⁷ This kind of knowledge presupposes a model of reality that is not definitive, certain, final and fixed, but open to further interpretations; it is knowledge with meaning that is always in a state of becoming. Potentiality, development and change are its fundamental principles. The paradigm of dialogical rationality corresponds to a phenomenological understanding of reality that is not a mere collection of facts but a rich and dynamic world of qualitative entities, where meaning builds upon the creative and critical acts of those who participate in its continuous reconstruction. As Habermas contends, dialogical rationality rejects any ontological separation "... between language and the things spoken about, between the constitutive understanding of the world and what is constituted in the world" ⁸ and in this way resolves a central problem of phenomenology: the difficulty of bringing together the description of human experience as it is lived and that as it is theorized about under a single conceptual framework.

Gadamer, a student of Heidegger, extended dialogical rationality to the field of aesthetics, particularly to the question of how works of art communicate meaning, and how this meaning contributes to our self-understanding. Considering aesthetics as an hermeneutical science, Gadamer argues that the experience of art, as well as of architecture, entails knowledge, which is "a mode of knowledge of a unique kind" equally respectable and no less rational than scientific knowledge, albeit essentially different from it. ⁹ According to Gadamer, Kant's notion of subjectivity in aesthetic judgments, and his definition of aesthetic experience as pure and

⁴4. Various attempts to develop scientific design methods which became quite popular during the 1960's⁴ reflect this attitude which conceived architectural design principally as a problem-solving activity. See, for example, C. Alexander, *Notes On The Synthesis of Form*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1964; and C. Jones, *Design Methods*, 1970.

⁵5. See, for example H. Proshansky, W. Ittelson, and L. Rivlin, *Environmental Psychology*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York, 1976.

⁶6. M. Heidegger, (1953) "The Question Concerning Technology", D. F. Krell (Ed.), *Basic Writings*, Harper Collins Pub., New York, 1992.

⁷7. See M. Bookchin, *The Philosophy of Social Ecology: Essays On Dialectical Naturalism*, Black Rose.

⁸8. J. Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1987: 319.

⁹9. I am thankful to Emel Aközer who introduced me Gadamer's work.

immediate had created an unbridgeable gap between the art work and real life. The concepts of “aesthetic consciousness” and “aesthetic differentiation” thereby developed mainly refer to the mode in which an art work is aesthetically experienced in a context detached from reality through a process of abstraction distinguishing the purely artistic nature of the work from its “extra-aesthetic elements, such as purpose, function, the meaning of its content. .. By disregarding everything in which a work is rooted (its original context of life, and the religious or secular function which gave it its significance) it becomes visible as the *pure work of art*.”¹⁰ Gadamer, while giving credit to the autonomy of the aesthetic value in pure abstraction that enables a particular work of art to be “raised to the universal” by transcending mere immediacy, seeks to overcome the consequences of the total detachment that has made the art work a museum object. “To do justice to the truth of aesthetic experience” he maintains, “the experience of art must not be side-tracked into the uncommittedness of the aesthetic awareness”.¹¹

20th century aesthetic discourse should be greatly indebted to the radical critiques of Heidegger and Adorno. Both thinkers made invaluable contributions restoring aesthetics to its proper place in contemporary thought. For Heidegger, aesthetic experience assumes central importance not only as the primary mode of man’s engagement in the external world, but as a meaning generating activity that contributes to his self-understanding. For Adorno, on the other hand, autonomous art, by virtue of its freedom from any form of theoretical abstraction and conceptualization, stands as the only uncontaminated realm that could resist commodification in the capitalistic society.¹²

Alienation and Reified Visuality

An aspect directly related with the impact of positivist rationalism on modern aesthetic culture is the emphasis on a predominantly ocularcentric mode of visuality that privileges the sense of sight. Martin Jay describes this hegemonic visual model as “Cartesian perspectivalism” identifying it “.. with Renaissance notions of perspective in the visual arts and Cartesian ideas of subjective rationality in philosophy.”¹³ According to Jay, (in the history of painting) this development (the perspectival revolution) was directly related with the “abstraction of artistic form from any substantive content” whereby the erosion of the narrative function of the painting in favour of its figural function finally led “to the increasing autonomy of the image.”

Cartesian perspectivalism was thus in league with a scientific world view that no longer hermeneutically read the world as a divine text, but rather saw it as situated in a mathematically regular spatio-temporal order filled with natural objects that could only be observed from without by the dispassionate eye of the neutral researcher.¹⁴

The aesthetic culture of modernity is widely conditioned by this model of vision. Complicit with the subject’s will to mastery, vision becomes a spatial instrument of power providing for control and surveillance from a distance - the context appropriate not only for the colonization of nature, but of other societies. The instrumentalization of sight, combined with the bourgeois ethic and the capitalistic logic of the modern world, finally brought about the commodification of art. Martin Jay contends, referring to John Berger, that “it was ... no accident that the invention of perspective virtually coincided with the emergence of the oil painting detached from its context and available for buying and selling.”¹⁵

The privileging of the sense of sight to the detriment of other senses has robbed the experience of art of its unifying qualitative significance. Thus, in the sterile atmosphere of the museum and the gallery, works of art become display objects in total detachment from real life, to be looked at and contemplated but never touched. The deficiency in the experience of aesthetic qualities such as material, texture that can only be revealed through

¹⁰10. H. G. Gadamer, 1960, *Truth And Method*, Sheed and Ward, London, 1981: 76.

¹¹11. *ibid*: 87.

¹²12. T. W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, Inc., London, 1986.

¹³13. M. Jay, “Scopic Regimes of Modernity”, H. Foster (Ed), *Vision and Visuality*, Dia Art Foundation, Bay Press, Seattle, 1988: 3.

¹⁴14. *ibid*: 9.

¹⁵15. *ibid*: 9.

the sense of touch, is already part of the habitual process in modern everyday life where men no more retain a sense of direct engagement in physical realities. In this context, architecture, as an art directly embedded in everyday life, constitutes an important case with respect to this fundamental problem. In an article discussing this issue, Richard Sennet argues that the current civilization's efforts to reduce resistance in the daily environment for the sake of practicality, convenience and functionality, brings about a weakened sense of connection to reality, which ultimately serves a political end:

A well-ordered regime of power produces dematerialization; indifference to one's surroundings is one way in which domination is consummated. Architecture becomes complicit in that domination when designs for clarity and ease of use ... 'tape over' human conflicts rather than open up physical possibilities for visceral resistance, commitment and expression. The dulled 'sense of touch' encodes a regime of power.¹⁶

In a different context, discussing the critical value of the aesthetic in modern society, Adorno had argued that only successful art as the realm of "sensuous particularity" could resist the levelling tendencies of instrumental reason, authentically expressing the ambivalences and contradictions, that is, the negative truth about society.¹⁷

The rendering of architecture as an object of mere vision in a merely visual field inevitably leads to its reduction to a reified image in total detachment from its experiential significance in its real life context. The architectural image that dominates much of journalistic media today thus becomes a commodity fetish. In discussing this point, Kim Dovey remarks that much of the current architectural practice and discourse runs along "a new politics of the image", a kind of "depthless imagery" that has become an end in itself replacing the substantial content of architectural reality.

The qualities of lived experience in the built environment, based in use value, become secondary to the quantities of exchange value. The significance of place in people's lives is often reduced to the signification of meaning through a collage of formal imagery, a 'text' to be decoded or read rather than an integral part of a world in which we dwell and act. ... Through this process lived experience itself becomes subject to commodification and reduced to its image.¹⁸

The whole culture industry, with its predominantly visual media, operates in this fashion, and architecture is no exception. However, architecture, as the setting of everyday life, can play the principle role in resisting the reification of lived experience. Although, as Tafuri remarked, there cannot be a critical practice of architecture but only architectural criticism¹⁹, I will argue that it is possible that a responsive architecture can definitely help the development of a heightened aesthetic consciousness which improves man's connection with reality. According to Sola-Morales, minimalist architecture, i.e., an architecture of minimal signification which deliberately avoids the clutter of extra-aesthetic elements, has a potential to resist an atrophied sensibility of modern life.²⁰ Such an architecture creates an aesthetic condition that is open to further interpretations and imaginative reconstructions, that demand the active involvement of the experiencing person. "Drawing on the elementary data of the external world", minimalism "proceeds not from the idea but from the experience". It is, therefore, phenomenological rather than metaphysical.²¹

Phenomenological Significance of Architecture

¹⁶16. R. Sennet, "The Sense of Touch", *Architectural Design*, Vol 68, No 3/4, 1998: 20.

¹⁷17. T. W. Adorno, 1986.

¹⁸18. K. Dovey, "Place/Power", *Architectural Design*, Vol 65, No 3/4, 1995: 37.

¹⁹19. M. Tafuri, 1990. *Architecture and Utopia*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass.

²⁰20 Solà Morales Rubio, I., *Differences: Topographies of Contemporary Architecture*, MIT Press, 1997

²¹21. in reference to Rosalind Kraus, *ibid*: 86

Merleau-Ponty, in his analysis of perception, had emphasized the role of the active, involved body in all human knowledge. ²² Fredric Jameson, in reference to Merleau-Ponty, discusses the value of the phenomenological approach in architecture as “a response to spatial alienation and an attempt to restore non-alienated experience to the modern industrial city.”

The phenomenological view of architecture is Utopian, in so far as it promises to restore or to resurrect, from within the fallen body of the modern city-dweller, with clogged and diminished senses, therapeutically lowered and adjusted feelers and organs of perception, maimed language and shoddy standardized mass-produced feelings, the glorious Utopian body of an unfallen being, who can once again take the measure of an unfallen nature. ²³

As an art of everyday life, architecture has phenomenological significance, setting up the concrete, material context of immediate experience. There is hardly any artistic practice that corresponds with everyday life so directly such as architecture, and it is no mere coincidence that Heidegger used architecture as a principle metaphor for understanding man’s mode of being in the world. Phenomenology, in the most general sense of the term, refers to the recovery of the unity of human experience by overcoming the alienation resulting from the separation between consciousness and the external world. Rejecting any separation between action and knowledge, mind and body, it proceeds from the idea that everyday existence in the world involves participation and engagement. An architecture of phenomenological significance is one that emerges from the circumstantiality, particularity and singularity of an event, which are qualities that make up the uniqueness of everyday experience independent of any theoretical discourse, any traditional or historical reference, any grand narrative. The experience of architecture incorporating not only visual, but auditory, tactile, and kinetic qualities, offers a unique possibility for restoring man the unity of his perceptual capacities that have been atrophied in modern life.

²² M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Humanities Press, New York, 1962.

²³ F. Jameson, “Is Space Political?”, Cynthia C. Davidson (Ed), *Anyplace*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1995: 203.