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Preserving the Subject

Immanuel Kant founds his artistic theory on the model of the aesthetic genius who creates art works that can be universally declared to be beautiful. In order to qualify as genius, the artist necessarily possesses both formal training, which is learned, and innate originality, which cannot be taught. Interestingly, Julia Kristeva parallels this model with her use of the symbolic and the semiotic. This paper will examine the correspondence between Kant's notion of the artistic genius, and Kristeva's theory of art, and the differing implications of each position. Kant's system is based upon a unified ego which can conclusively judge the status of an art work. Kant seeks to universally classify certain art works as beautiful, and founds this universality of judgment on the biologically predetermined talent of the genius. Kristeva rejects Kant's hierarchy of the genius and prioritizes the subjectivity of the creative process, rather than the beautiful status of the art product. Kristeva's fragmented subject re-engages with the symbolic through art to recapture meaning that has been lost due to the overwhelming universal. The universal status of both the work of art and the talent of the genius are denied, and lose their importance. The priority, for Kristeva, is to allow the artist to escape the totalizing universal of the symbolic, while simultaneously recognizing its importance in the constitution of the subject.

Kant's Artist as Genius

In the *Critique of Pure Judgement,* Immanuel Kant bases his aesthetic theory on the definition of the artist as genius. The aesthetic genius creates fine art which incites the imagination and understanding to free play, without the use of concepts. The beautiful object promotes a subjective universal response to the work. The reaction to the work is subjective because it concerns the feelings and does not involve concepts, but universal because the response will be the same for all, provided that one has not developed poor emotional habits. Exclusively, the genius alone is able to create the objects that promote the universal judgment of beauty in the viewer. However, the artist does not contribute personally to the work, or seek to com-

municate to the viewer. The genius' contribution is restricted to actualizing the beautiful and is guided by this telos.

Kant's genius is composed of two determinative aspects. The artistic genius must possess taste, which is the formal training that orders the work. This technically trained skill structures the art work and provides the means by which the artist can produce the beautiful product. However, the more fundamental aspect that defines the artist as genius is inborn originality. Kant describes this talent as »...the innate mental aptitude (*»ingenium«*) *through which* nature gives the rule to art.«[1] Because the beautiful does not have a concept, the genius' originality also cannot fall under a concept that can be explained or taught. Consequently, the artist does not understand the process of creation or where the ideas that guide the work arise from. Kant believes both aspects, originality and skill, are necessary for the success of the genius. Mechanical art lacks originality and cannot be considered fine art because it is merely technical skill and is spiritless. However, this technical skill is needed because the genius cannot guide the originality towards the beautiful without it. The genius' works serve as models of creativity to other artists, but these works cannot be merely copied or imitated. They can only point the way towards what an art work should be like. Individuals must find their own expression of this ineffable talent, if they possess it. Kant stresses that genius is rare because innate originality belongs only to a few.

Symbolic and Semiotic

Julia Kristeva asserts that there is more to aesthetic theory than restrictive definitions of the artist, or the art work they are able to produce. In order to understand her aesthetic thought, it is necessary to address her overall project. Kristeva founds subjectivity on a psychoanalytic model, and although psychoanalysis may be problematic, its difficulties are beyond the scope of this paper. Kristeva believes that initially, the infant is unable to conceptualize itself as different from its mother. In the mirror stage, the child recognizes its separateness, but this is based on the illusion that it is independent, when in actuality it is still dependent on the »mother« or the primary caregiver for survival. In the thetic stage, the child begins to actively use language, and external objects are now posited as different from the child and are thematized. The child can conceptualize the difference between itself and outside objects and language verbalizes this difference. Although the child

[1] Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952) 168.

is always already in a world of language, it is here that the child uses it for the first time to express personal needs to the mother who is now recognized as separate. The symbolic, or what Kristeva calls the law of the »father« becomes actively a part of the child. The symbolic is not only language, but the cultural norms and laws of society.

However, the symbolic is not totally adequate because the engagement with the formal structures of language cannot express all that one needs to say. Kristeva believes there are preverbal rhythms and gestures in signification which she names the semiotic. Through the semiotic, affect and bodily drives are present in language. Although ineffable, the semiotic is what drives language, while the symbolic provides the formal structure. The symbolic and the semiotic are both modalities of the same signifying process which together make up signification. The semiotic, however, is not sublated into the symbolic, but transgresses the symbolic and breeches it, rather than posits itself. Kristeva describes this as the semiotic splitting the thetic or as an explosion of the semiotic in the symbolic, and she insists this is not a Hegelian sublation. »It is, instead, a *transgression* of position, a reversed reactivation of the contradiction that instituted this very position.«[2] Instead of a synthesis, the expression of the semiotic is a disruption and a splitting of the symbolic. The semiotic exceeds the symbolic, and both aspects are needed for signification.

Kristeva's use of the symbolic and the semiotic are connected to her definition of the subject as a decentered, fragmented being whose borders are always uncertain. Initially, the self is not posited until there is a recognition of the otherness of the »mother.« The subject is tied to a relation with another, which eliminates a fundamental unity to subjectivity. Subjectivity is gained through the recognition of the otherness of the »mother«, but it is a subjectivity based upon a loss. There is a gap between the oneness of the ideal relation with the mother, and the recognition of the split into a separate individual. The separation itself is also based on an illusion because the child has years of dependency left with the mother. Because the subject is founded on a relation with an other and because this relation is initially based upon a fabrication, the center of the subject is always in question. Language is engaged to communicate the needs of the subject who is no longer in union with the mother, but language also reflects the fragmentation of the self. The self is made up of an aspect which is always already part of a society of laws and language, or the symbolic. However, there is particularity and uniqueness to the self that language cannot contain and the uni-

[2] Kristeva, Julia, *The Portable Kristeva*, ed. Kelly Oliver (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), *Revolution in Poetic Language* 55.

versal rules cannot incorporate, which is the semiotic. Kristeva suggests that the self is composed of both universal and particular aspects and the exact borders between them cannot be established.

The oppositions in Kristeva's thought, the universal and the particular, the objective and the subjective, the mind and the body, the symbolic and the semiotic are always intertwined and cannot be separated or exist without the other. »Because the subject is always *both* semiotic *and* symbolic, no signifying system he produces can be either 'exclusively' semiotic or 'exclusively' symbolic, and is instead necessarily marked by an indebtedness to both.«[3] The subject is manifestly all these oppositions and it is unclear as to where the borders actually lie. Kristeva states:

> The *subject* is not simply an inside facing the referential outside. The subjective structure, understood as a specific articulation of the relationship between speaking subject and Other, determines the very situation of reality, its existence or nonexistence, its overturning or hypostasis. In such a perspective, ontology becomes subordinate to the signifying structure that sustains a given subject in its transference upon the Other.[4]

Confusion concerning the location of the borders of inside and outside can lead to various psychological problems which expression or communication can alleviate. Art, for Kristeva, has to do with the relationship to language and how the subject negotiates the blurred borders of one's make-up.

Kristeva's aesthetic theory is intricately connected to the relationship between the symbolic and semiotic. In *Revolution and Poetic Language*, Kristeva explains »though absolutely necessary, the thetic is not exclusive: the semiotic, which also precedes it, constantly tears it open, and this transgression brings about all the various transformations of the signifying practice that are called 'creation'.«[5] The artist's relationship to the symbolic in the thetic stage may not be firmly established and the symbolic can lose its meaning because the semiotic fails to be expressed. Particularly with poetic language, but also with other forms of art, the semiotic ruptures and restructures the symbolic. Poetic language transgresses the symbolic, and creates something new. The artist is then able to re-engage with the symbolic and recapture meaning, but only through creating a new relationship to language. Art is not the only remedy for the fragmented self which must signify. Kristeva believes psychotherapy and religion also provide alternative

[3] Kristeva, *The Portable Kristeva, Revolution in Poetic Language* 34.

[4] Kristeva, Julia, *Tales of Love*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987) 274.

[5] Kristeva, *The Portable Kristeva, Revolution in Poetic Language* 50.

ways to express the conditions of a misrelation in the thetic stage. Unlike psychotherapy, aesthetic creation does not resolve the subject's condition, but provides the opportunity for catharsis, and has a political potential in its ability to transgress and transform the symbolic, or the cultural norms and laws that rule society. Two conditions of the thetic stage associated with an artistic temperament are what she calls melancholy/depression and abjection, but it must be stressed that art is not the result of a psychological problem specific to an individual, but the result of the universal condition of fragmented subjecthood.

Art as Universal vs. Art as Individual

Because creativity occurs through the signification of the symbolic and the semiotic, a striking parallel can be made to Kant's system. Even though the two theoretical positions do not perfectly map on to one another, there is general agreement towards the factors which constitute creativity. Forced to align with Kant, Kristeva's symbolic corresponds to the formal technical training of the genius that is necessary to create beautiful objects. Kant's formal rules that structure the art work correspond to Kristeva's laws of the symbolic. The innate originality of Kant's genius aligns with the semiotic. Although the semiotic is not innate for Kristeva because it is always already bound up with the symbolic, it is ineffable, like Kant's originality, and it gives the spark to the work of art that Kant describes as the soul of the work. Kant's genius as partly rule-governed and partly beyond rules, mirrors not only Kristeva's use of the symbolic and the semiotic, but also Kristeva's model of creativity which needs both particular and universal aspects that are grounded in the individual subject. Creativity for Kristeva comes about due to an inability to understand the self. The formal rules of the symbolic are the universal laws of a system which all individuals are bound up in and must use in order to engage with their society. The semiotic and Kant's originality are the ineffable particularity distinct to the individual. Kant's originality differs from the semiotic in that it only belongs to a few, and what it can accomplish is based on a universal notion of the beautiful, limiting the power of the individual. The rhythms and gestures that Kristeva speaks of, are always already within the structures of the symbolic, but retain their radically particular nature.

Obviously, Kant would deny a comparison with Kristeva's subject. Kant's subject is not fragmented, and the relation between the universal and particular aspects of the self are not founded on a split ego for Kant. Kant's

transcendental unity of apperception gathers the manifolds of intuition and the understanding into a unified self. Although this subject does not know itself in itself, it is still one distinct subject which gathers sensation and understanding together in one location and orders space and time. The unification of the self as empirically real to itself ties Kant's whole picture together. If the self is not unified, Kant's entire phenomenal world is lost.

Subsequently, the product of art between Kant and Kristeva is also different. Kant's genius expresses nothing of the self, while Kristeva's artist expresses the self more fully than anywhere else, except in psychoanalysis. Kant's genius is guided by the object of the beautiful, while Kristeva seeks to express the self through a re-engagement with the symbolic. In *Abjection, Melancholia, and Love,* John Lechte describes Kristeva's view of the art product not as the creation of an object, but more of a process which »...'creates' the subject.«[6] Through the art work, the artist recreates the self by expressing the fundamental contradictions of the constitution of the subject. The art object is not meaningless, because it does express mood and communicates to the viewer who may use the work for the very same therapeutic reasons. However, the priority for Kristeva always seems to be the preservation of the particularity of the individual through the work and the therapeutic and healing function of art. Rather than stress the universal beauty of an object, Kristeva is more interested in preserving the subject.

Despite their difference of approach, both Kant and Kristeva find a social function for the work of art. Kant connects the ability to judge the beautiful with opening oneself up to correct moral feelings. Observing the work of art helps individuals to align themselves with the moral law by promoting appropriate feelings. Kant uses the privileged originality of the artist to justify the universality of the beautiful object and the correct feelings it is able to produce. Why this artistic talent is rare is unexplained. The communal benefit is that we are able to open ourselves to the proper feelings in appreciating the beautiful, which will help us to guide our emotions towards acting morally and within the symbolic law. In this way, art assists the moral realm and supports the universality of the symbolic order.

Kristeva takes an opposite tack on the issue. She sees the ability of art to disrupt the symbolic in its capacity to communicate both the symbolic and the semiotic. The political worth of art is that it saves the individual from being totalized by society. The artist transgresses the symbolic, and in doing so re-engages with it. The individual artist is saved from being abject, or

[6] John Lechte, »Art, Love, and Melancholy in the Work of Julia Kristeva«, *Abjection, Melancholia, and Love: the Work of Julia Kristeva,* eds. John Fletcher and Andrew Benjamin (London: Routledge, 1990) 24.

outside the law, and is able to recapture lost meaning. For Kristeva, individuality and particularity is preserved and expressed in the work of art. Just as the goal of psychoanalysis is not to totalize the individual by telling them what they are like, but to »...help them, then, to speak and write themselves in unstable, open, undecidable spaces«,[7] art fulfills the same function. It helps the individual to build a space of one's own. Kristeva describes each psychoanalytic treatment as unique, and in that sense, as analogous to a work of art.[8] Likewise, the art work is unique and preserves something of the individual coming to terms with a system and world which is always already part of the subject.

The Hierarchy of the Genius

There is a hierarchy implied by Kant's notion of the genius which distinguishes the genius as superior based on innate talent which belongs only to a few. Biologically determined as superior, the genius is able to create beautiful objects provided that he trains and structures his talent. Christine Battersby correctly points out in her book *Gender and Genius* that historically, the notion of genius excludes women. The power in the word »genius« not only determines the status of a work as fine art, but was »...evoked to explain the difference between civilized man and both animals and savages.«[9] Genius exemplified the pinnacle of human achievement. Although the concept of genius changed over time, it was based on exclusion between individuals and never included women. This logic of exclusion asserted the non-genius to be lacking, and especially so for women who never had such a potential.[10] Battersby's main complaint is the term »genius« »...dress(es) up *evaluation* as description«,[11] cleverly hiding its power.

However, Battersby suggests that what is now needed is the ability to see women as geniuses. She seeks to validate female artists and render them visible, but she retains the inherently hierarchical concept of genius and adapts it to be applied to women as well. The sense she retains of the word »genius« is of a person judged against her culture or tradition and Battersby rejects all other definitions of the word as contaminated. »The genius is the

[7] Kristeva, *Tales of Love* 380.

[8] Kristeva, *The Portable Kristeva, New Maladies of the Soul* 217.

[9] Battersby, Christine, *Gender and Genius* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989) 3.

[10] Battersby 3.

[11] Battersby 10.

person whose work (a) marks the boundary between the old ways and the new within the tradition, and (b) has lasting value and significance.«[12] The genius is no longer a type of elite being, but only one who stands out as compared to her culture. The term becomes evaluative instead of descriptive. Battersby claims that in order for a woman's art to be respected, she must be able to be compared with the historical and cultural context in order to situate her within the tradition. She denies a special psychological state or special class of person in tune with the unconscious, but she believes we can still praise and rank women pragmatically.

Even ignoring the pragmatic difficulty of determining talent in one's own age or what the status of an art work has over time, Battersby's definition of »genius« problematically retains its hierarchical structure. Although her view endorses a less exclusive use of the term, it seems to be sacrificing the very problem Battersby is trying to correct. Women would be rightfully recognized for their talent, but the implicit elitism of the term »genius« justifies a supposedly quick and easy categorization of individuals based on their perceived relation to the culture at large. Instead of presenting a continuum of talent that recognizes individuality, Battersby retains somewhat exclusive overtones of the genius that justify an objective categorization, and raises the status of some women while negating the status of others.

Kristeva's artistic theory allows for the possibility of treating art works and artists individually. The conception of art is similar in Kristeva and Battersby in that great art always surpasses the culture, but for Kristeva, the symbolic is disrupted in the instance of art and the culture is surpassed in an entirely different manner. Battersby's »genius« surpasses the established symbolic system of art because of the exceptional nature of the work. At the same time, the »genius« reinforces the present symbolic system and is reincorporated at a higher level. Kristeva's artist ruptures the symbolic, and can actually change it. The symbolic system influences the work because it guides what cannot be said, and must be expressed in another manner, but it does not determine the quality of art in an objective manner. Artists are treated individually for Kristeva. Potentially aesthetic activity is within the reach of everyone because it is an expression of a fragmented self and a signifying system that does not always capture what we need to say. It no longer matters if art work is genius, provided that the person re-engages with society and is in some sense healed, if only cathartically. Good art allows the viewer or audience to partake in this communication, but the value of the art no longer lies entirely in the object produced.

[12] Battersby 157.

Conclusion

Kristeva does not locate art in a hierarchy of genius, but finds the source of creativity to be in the fragmented constitution of the subject. Because of the loss of the mother, and the necessary engagement with the symbolic, one creates in order to work out the problems associated with the thetic phase. Although Kristeva's structure of language as consisting of the symbolic and the semiotic correspond to Kant's twofold definition of the genius, art is not centered in the object. The more important aspect is that the artist is able to re-engage with the symbolic and simultaneously disrupt it. Art is a therapeutic expression of individuality, where, despite the fragmentation and blurred borders of the subject/object relation, something of the individual is preserved. Art provides the same function for the viewer, and in the case of literary work, »...textual experience represents one of the most daring explorations the subject can allow himself, one that delves into his constitutive process.«[13] The importance of the art product as a universal object of beauty drops away, as well as Kant's categorization of the genius as objectively talented. Kristeva ruptures both of these categories in order to provide a therapeutic place for catharsis and healing, and a political space for action.

The implications of Kristeva's theory are important. Kant places the capacity for creativity, in the biologically determined talent of the genius. Innate talent substantiates not only the universality of the work of art and the »genius« of the artist, but bolsters a hierarchy between human beings and places limits on their thought and what they are able to achieve. Kant's universality of art is secured through a predetermined talent given only to a few. Kristeva rejects this approach. Artistic work provides therapy for an individual that is composed of the influence of the universal symbolic realm, but also retains a unique particularity which must be expressed. Individuals are not limited in what they can think, or restricted in the political structures of the symbolic that they can seek to change. However, Kristeva also recognizes the inescapability of the symbolic's influence in the construction of the self. Although the symbolic has positive aspects, the negative aspects of the symbolic are purified through the catharsis of art for an individual who has lost her relation to the symbolic and its meaning. Although Kristeva sees an alarming inability for catharsis in the art that reflects the chaos of our age, Kristeva seeks to preserve the individuality of the subject and promote a political space for change.

[13] Kristeva, *The Portable Kristeva, Revolution in Poetic Language* 54.