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Feeling the Difference

1. Aesthetics and Difference

In the title of this chapter merge two different problematics. The first is feeling (sentire), which a long tradition going back to the eighteenth century links to aesthetics. The second is difference, around which originates and develops an important current of contemporary philosophy.

The encounter between aesthetics and the thinking of difference is not at all obvious, or easy. In fact, the quasi totality of aesthetic thinking, in its narrow sense (which identifies and is defined as such) is extraneous to the problematic of difference. It derives either from Kant’s Critique of Judgment (1968) or from Hegel’s Aesthetics (1975). From Kant derives the aesthetic of life and the aesthetics of form (the so-called ‘Vienna School’), from Hegel, cognitive aesthetics and pragmatic aesthetics. Generally speaking, implicit in aesthetics is the tendency toward ideals of harmony, regularity, and organic unity.

Essential to the existence of the aesthetic, at least, is the foreshadowing of an end to conflict, of peace to come, of an ironic moment when suffering and struggle are, if not definitively eliminated, at least temporarily suspended.

On the contrary, the thinking of difference is born with Nietzsche, Freud and Heidegger, from a rejection of aesthetic reconciliation. It moves toward the experience of a conflict greater than dialectical contradiction, toward the exploration of the opposition between terms that are not symmetrically polar with respect to one another. This great philosophical event, which in my view is the most original and the most important of the twentieth century, is known under the notion of ‘difference’ understood as non-identity, as a dissimilarity greater than the logical concept of diversity and the dialectics of distinction. In other words, access to the experience of difference marks the abandonment both of Aristotle’s logic of identity and Hegel’s dialectic. No wonder, then, that the thinkers of difference have nothing to do with aesthetics in its narrow sense. In fact, they initiate a new theoretical trend that cannot be reduced to either Kant or Hegel. Their extraneity with respect to the modern aesthetic tradition does not depend at all on exclusive attention to theoretical problems, on disinterest with respect to feeling. In fact, just the contrary is the case. It is precisely from the study of feeling that they were led to put aside post-Kantian and post-Hegelian aesthetics as epigonic and tardy.

In fact, it is doubtful that the notion of ‘difference’ can be considered a true concept analogous to ‘identity’, around which revolves Aristotle’s logic, or ‘contradiction’, around which revolves Hegel’s dialectic. Rather than within the horizon of pure theoretical speculation, its sphere (or at least its point of departure) is precisely in the impure one of feeling, of unusual and disturbing experiences, irreducible to ambivalent and excessive identities, which has characterized the existence of so many men and women of the twentieth century. The thought of difference has found its inspiration precisely from this type of sensibility that entertains close relations to psychopathological states and mystical ecstasies, drug addiction and perversions, handicaps, minorities, aboriginals, and ‘other’ cultures. In other words, it is a question of feeling that has nothing to do with exigencies of completeness and reconciliation, which characterize modern aesthetic thinking.

This explains the suspicious attitude toward aesthetics of many founding fathers of the thinking of difference. Nietzsche considers aesthetics an aspect of the naïve optimism of tragic experience. Freud believes that aesthetics deals with topics that correspond to a positive state of mind such as the beautiful and the sublime, overlooking those aspects of feeling that are characterized by negative states of mind, such as the uncanny. Heidegger believes that aesthetics is part of Western metaphysics, namely of a thinking characterized by the forgetting of Being. Similarly, the French thinkers of difference (Blanchot, Bataille and Klossowski) inaugurated an approach to literature and art that has nothing to do with aesthetics. Even the Italian philosopher Michelstaedter, who could be considered the most important manifestation of this trend in Italy, is resolutely hostile to Croce’s aesthetics.
2. Bliss and Text

It is only recently that the thinking of difference has confronted explicitly aesthetic problematicss with Derrida (1978) and Deleuze (1983). My inquiry, however, takes its starting point from a work published previously by Roland Barthes, The Pleasure of the Text (1973). It contains an inquiry on feeling that goes well beyond both ancient reflection on pleasure (Plato’s pure pleasure or Aristotle’s desensitized pleasure), and the modern one linked to eighteenth-century aesthetics and the idea of disinterested pleasure (Kant).

The fundamental crux of Barthes’s discourse is in the connection between pleasure and the literary work. But he submits both notions to a deeper transformation, shifting both pleasure and the work of art from the logic of identity to the experience of difference. Beyond pleasure he discovers bliss (jouissance), beyond the work he discovers the text. Bliss is a feeling that goes beyond the distinction between pleasure and pain, but also incorporates what is unpleasant, boring and even painful. It implies the loss of the subject, the disappearance, the fading, says Barthes, of personal identity, the abandonment of every cautious and prudent calculation of gratification.

Bliss is an excessive experience that interupts as lightning in individual consciousness striking it and maiming it. The attempt to overcome the hedonistic character of pleasure had already been accomplished by traditional aesthetics through consideration of the tragic and the sublime, but in Barthes’s view of bliss there is something more than just the tragic and the sublime. There is the fact that bliss is an erotic experience, strictly connected to sexuality. Barthes repeatedly underlines the perverse character of bliss, namely, its being extraneous to any imaginable finality and launched toward an infinite and insatiable search for the new. But bliss can also be manifested under the aspect of an excessive and manic repetition, of a compulsion to repeat that subverts and annihilates conventional signification through mimetic and obsessive reiteration, as when by dint of repeating a word we perceive it only as mere sound. Similarly, in Barthes’s notion of bliss is also included a series of characteristics that belong, on the one hand to licentiousness, on the other to masochism; on the one hand to the flagrant effervescence of fashion, on the other to the disturbing sexuality of suffering.

Thus, bliss seems a mixture of frivolity and death instinct. This is how Barthes liberates aesthetic feeling from that ascetic and sublimated dimension that seemed so essential to it, finding it a place in contemporary experience. Or, as he himself writes, he gave the old category of the aesthetic a slight twist that removed it from its regressive, idealistic background and brought it closer to the body.

A similar strategy is applied by Barthes in the shift from the notion of work to that of text. But what does it mean, feeling the text as body? Through what perversion can a work of art become text? The first condition of this shift is its liberation from its ideological aspect. As long as the work is simply considered the bearer of an historical, political, cultural, or psychological meaning, we conceive the work in its identity, as a product endowed with a logical and moral identity. The entry of the work in the problematic of difference breaks up its object-like completeness. That is, it is no longer an object entirely determined by its author such that it cannot be minimally scratched by its fruition. In fact, the reader continues the generative activity of the author in a process without end. This does not mean, however, that the text is dissolved in communication or that pre-eminence is given to the reception of its production. In fact, the opposite is the case. The text is irreducible to a dialogue among subjects, it is somewhat intransitive, atopic and paradoxical. Barthes compares it to cloth not because it covers some hidden meaning, but because it also extends its plot to it. In other words, nothing escapes the text. It is extraneous to the dialectical logic of the dialogue, both to the interface and to the collision of discourses. The text is autonomous and independent of the subjectivity of those who speak and those who listen, those who read and those who write. This is a shift of considerable importance for aesthetics: the passage from ‘I feel’ to ‘one feels’. The whole range of emotions and sensibilities is displaced in the neutral space of the text. If masochism, as we have seen, is the perversion of pleasure, fetishism is the perversion of the work. The fetish is a kind of animation of the inorganic, a coincidence of abstraction and materiality. In fact, the text seems to Barthes something that feels, desires, enjoys.

3. The 'Époché' and the Neuter

In the philosophy of the 1970s, Roland Barthes seems to me to be the thinker that has most tried to connect intimately sexual feeling to cultural practices within the framework of the problematic of difference, that is, of experiences that are irreducible to traditional
aesthetic ideals. Perhaps Luce Irigaray alone has made an equally important contribution, following a different path, but not essentially different. Yet, Barthes's thinking remains locked in a fundamental difficulty as neither his notion of bliss nor of text succeed in emancipating themselves completely from subjectivity. Now bliss falls on the side of hedonism, that is, of the idea of extending the boundaries of pleasure, now on the side of eroticism, that is, of the infinity and insatiability of desire. Now, neither with hedonism nor with eroticism is it possible to move beyond the subject. These are paths that lead us back to the side of the aesthetic rather than leading us forward to the path of difference. A similar phenomenon occurs with regard to the text. Barthes's polemic against the institutionalization of the text, that is, against the specialism of theorists and critics, leads him to emphasize the personal, fragmentary and incidental character of his writing, distancing it from philosophy.

This tendency, already self-evident in the autobiographical work *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (1975), intensifies in the later writings, for instance in the posthumous *Incidents* (1987).

Nonetheless there are elements in *The Pleasure of the Text* that run counter to the subject toward a radicalization of the feeling of difference, namely, the critique of desire and the idea of the text as thing. According to Barthes, the infinity of desire, which has seemed to many a guarantee of its philosophical character, in fact only generalizes the delusion. Difference is not absence! As long as I think of the alternative to Western metaphysics in terms of lack, I remain prisoner of a mode of thinking opposites (already foreseen in Aristotle's metaphysics) which is lesser not greater than dialectical contradiction. The second idea of the text as thing, although not formulated explicitly, seems to me to be contained in Barthes's distinction between representation and symbolization (*figuration*).

While the text as object falls entirely within the sphere of metaphysics and traditional aesthetics, the text as thing is within the horizon opened up by the notion of difference. Barthes's *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (1980) can be viewed as a development of this idea.

There are however two other elements that can bring greater clarity and simplicity to these complex and difficult questions: the experience of the *epoché* and the notion of *neuter*. Barthes refers to both but they are never given a major place in his work and yet only through them can sexual feeling and the thinking of difference be united inseparably. Only through them sexuality and philosophy reveal that they essentially belong together. As we have seen, the issue around which Barthes's thinking revolves can be formulated in these terms: how is it possible to go beyond subjective feeling? How is it possible to remove the sphere of sensation, affectation, and emotionality from the tyranny of 'I feel'? How do we arrive at the impersonal 'one feels'? How can one discover an other, different, extraneous territory of feeling where the 'I' and the 'you' finally give way to an experience independent of the 'self'? Western philosophy has known the answer ever since the age of the ancient philosophers.

In fact the Sceptics and the Stoics were the first to introduce the experience of the *epoché*, a suspension of passions and subjective affections. These, according to the Stoics, could be reduced to four: pleasure, pain, desire, fear. The suspension, however, must not be understood as total insensibility but as a non-participating participation, a sober intoxication, a feeling with distance. In other words, as if I were not the one to feel, or, better, as if I were a 'thing that feels' in an impersonal way and without boundaries, without being aware where my corporeal identity ends and the body of another physical entity begins. It is a question, in short, of a feeling that explodes the separation between self and non-self, internal and external, human beings and things.

It seems clear to me that this type of feeling cannot be defined in terms of hedonistic categories. It is a feeling beyond pleasure and pain but also beyond bliss because it refers to an experience which is too spiritual, like ecstasy, while what is essential here is the reference to the mode of being of the thing, to which abstraction can be relevant but not spirituality. Similarly inadequate it seems to me are erotic categories. Erotic desire implies the idea of holding out toward something and, thus, the experience of a loss, while here is a question of availability which, however, is not a true metaphysical presence. There is in the idea of availability a more opaque aspect that goes, on the one hand, toward virtuality, on the other, toward exchange value and money. Finally, this feeling, which is absolutely extraneous to any purpose, both practical and cognitive, cannot even be considered aesthetic, since it has nothing to do with the desexualized sublimation of aesthetic experience.

Now, even though *epoché* is a bimillennial notion, Western philosophy has made a modest and timid use of it. We had the cognitive *epoché* of the ancient Sceptics and of modern phenomenology,
the moral *epochè* of the Stoics and Neo-Stoics, but there has never been a sexual *epochè* because in sexuality the rush toward orgasm has always seemed implicit, without any possibility of suspension, except a tactical one directed to prolonging pleasure or increasing desire. Sexuality has always been seen as functional with respect to the gratification or satisfaction of a need, and almost never within a philosophical perspective of research and exploration of unknown territories.

Sexual *epochè* leads us toward a sexuality beyond pleasure and desire, no longer finalized with respect to orgasm but suspended in abstract and infinite excitement, without concern for beauty, age, and, generally, form. In contrast to vitalistic sexuality, based on the distinction between the sexes, and permeated by hedonism and eroticism, we could define an inorganic sexuality moved by the 'sex appeal of the inorganic'. Here the notion of *neuter* plays a pivotal role. Inorganic sexuality, in fact, is beyond the distinction between masculine and feminine. The neuter, however, must not be understood as an harmonic recomposition of masculine and feminine, as a dialectical synthesis of opposites. Just the opposite, in fact, the neuter is the point of arrival of the experience of difference and, therefore, irreducible to unity and identity. In other words, a neuter sexuality is neither sublimated nor neutralized. By abolishing the division between masculine and feminine, it establishes a multiplicity of other divisions giving way to infinite sexual virtualities. In fact, this is the essence of sexuality, namely, cutting (secate), establishing divisions, making differences. But in order to move on this path, it is necessary, first of all, to free oneself from the false difference between masculine and feminine whose purpose is to assert identities and to sanction discriminations.

4. Two Versions of the 'Sex Appeal' of the Inorganic

The *sex appeal* of the inorganic can be thought in many ways. If by 'inorganic' we understand the natural mineral world, neuter sexuality can be nourished by the excitement created by the inversion through which human beings are perceived as things and, on the contrary, things are seen as living beings. I would consider this phenomenon as the 'Egyptian version' of the *sex appeal* of the inorganic, on the authority of a passage from Hegel who attributes to that ancient people the reification of humans accompanied by a sensitization of the environment. In the so-called 'Egyptomania', which in past centuries has constituted a very important cultural trend, is implicit a sexual excitement that is implicit by fetishistic, sadomasochistic and necrophilic aspects, of which *bondage* conjured up by the mummies, is the most well-known and self-evident. Furthermore, if we think that Egypt was also the country par excellence of ideographic writing, we get the connection between sexuality and textuality that Roland Barthes examines in his work.

Another version of the *sex appeal* of the inorganic is the one that refers to electronic and cybernetic technology. It could be defined as the 'cyberpunk version' of the *sex appeal* of the inorganic. Inspired by a will to overcome natural limitations, it asks about the feeling of the *cyborg*, namely, the science fiction character whose organs are replaced with artificial devices (for example, telecameras instead of eyes, antennae instead of ears). This perspective opens up an horizon of the 'post-human' or 'post-organic' type, where the shift of the centre of sensibility from man to *computer* is key. Thus the problematic of 'artificial feeling' is born, whose essential character is to be experimental. The most interesting aspect of this orientation is not to provide a substitute for real sexuality (as in *cybersones*), but to develop neuter sexuality which is anchored on the philosophical experience of the *epochè*. Through it, I perceive my body as a thing, for instance, as a suit, or as an electronic device. In other words, 'artificial feeling' is not a replica of natural feeling, but the access to a different feeling, a different, neuter sexuality, no longer centred on the identity of consciousness but overflowing and excessive. I become an extraneous body, I de-subjectivise experience, I expel from me my organs and my feeling and localize them in something external. I become the difference.

5. Psychotic Realism

Beside the 'Egyptian' and 'Cyberpunk' versions there is a third version of the *sex appeal* of the inorganic that seems to me to be more disquieting than the first two. If one of the essential characters of inorganic sexuality is that of abolishing the borders between the I and the not-I, the proper and the extraneous, the self and not-self, it reveals itself to be very close to madness, in fact, close to that particular type of madness that has been defined as *psychosis*. In fact, a characteristic of psychosis is the identification with the outside
world: I am fascinated with exteriority. I become what I see, feel, touch. In fact, it is as if the surface of my body identifies with the surface of the external world. Most often this tendency assumes a cosmic aspect, for instance, in a classic text of the beginning of the twentieth century, Daniel Paul Schreber’s *Memoirs of my Nervous Illness*, where he describes the process through which the loss of identity coincides with a willingness to become anything, to be everything. Schreber feels that his body does not belong to him any longer. It can become the virgin Mary or a prostitute, a national saint or a woman of the North, a Jesuit novice or a young Alsatian woman that struggles in the arms of a French officer who wants to rape her, or still prince Mogol, or something abstract such as the cause of atmospheric phenomena. This experience is connected to an excitement that soon becomes the only reason for living.26

The worrying aspect of this phenomenon is its spreading to contemporary aesthetic sensibility. In the more advanced artistic trends, the traditional structure of separation between art and the real seems collapsed definitively. A new species of ‘psychotic realism’ is born that collapses any mediation. Art loses its distance with respect to reality and acquires a physical and material character that it never had before: music is sound, theatre is action, the figurative arts have a consistency both visual, tactile and conceptual. They are no longer imitations of reality but reality tout court, no longer mediated by aesthetic experience. They are extensions of the human faculty that no longer have to account to a subject because this is completely dissolved in a radical exteriority.

This artistic trend oriented toward an always more crude realism seems to have had origins in the nineteenth century. Present psychotic realism could be taken to be the point of arrival of naturalism, to which the philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey attributed the claim of grasping reality in an immediate manner, without stopping even before the physiological and the bestial.27 For Dilthey naturalism marks the end of a conception of life and art that began in Europe in the Renaissance. Yielding to mere empirical factuality, inherent in the poetics of reproduction of reality, represents the liquidation of the European philosophical and artistic heritage. Similarly, many years later, the philosopher György Lukács chose naturalism as the target of his aesthetics attributing to it the same characteristics, namely, confusion between art and life, dogmatic mirroring of reality, apologia of the existent.28

Since the era of Dilthey and Lukács, naturalism has further radicalized its characteristics. Precisely during the 1990s, it found a new and exuberant development becoming the most emergent literary and artistic trend. For example, the novels of Bret Easton Ellis29 and James Ellroy30 constitute impressive manifestations of literature’s attempt to perfectly adhere to the most cruel criminal realities.

Psychotic realism also revealed itself in the figurative arts, precisely at the beginning of the 1990s, through an entire series of important international exhibitions31 (Post human, Hors limites, L’art et la vie et Sensation), as well as trendy magazines (Virus in Milan, and Bloc Notes in Paris). Another manifestation of this trend is represented by the so-called artists of the ‘extreme body’ (the Spanish Marcel. Li Antunes Roca, the French Orlan, the Australian Stelarc). These artists engage their bodies in dangerous experiments, directed toward the discovery of new forms of perception and feeling.32

In movies and videos, the poetics of reproduction of a real phenomenon caught in the moment in which it occurs has been brought to its extreme consequences. After all, this is an ambition that the cinema has had since its origins with the Brothers Lumière and which has characterized the entire problematic of the documentary from Vertov to the cinéma-verité of the 1960s, to visual anthropology. In the 1990s this problematic was rethought in a more radical way in some of the films of Wim Wenders and Derek Jarman which constitute an important reflection on the way in which the relation between image and reality is articulated today.

And yet it is precisely in the cinema that psychotic realism shows its limitations, for two reasons. In the first place, it is difficult to consider the business of brute reproduction of the most crude realities (sex, extreme violence, death) a manifestation of difference. One can hardly deny that gore, splatter, trash constitute a banal version of experiences that are actually known by only a few. The second reason, which seems to me to be more crucial, is that there is no longer any guarantee that what we are witnessing is true. In fact, the possibility exists of manipulating any visual document electronically. Thus, the reality effect that constituted the main cause of excitement of this type of product is lacking. We could say that what has done away with naturalism and cinéma-verité is not morality but electronics.
The notion of *abjection*, elaborated by Julia Kristeva,\(^3\) seems to provide a very acute interpretation of these phenomena. Its essential character is precisely the collapse of the borderline between internal and external, inside and outside. Kristeva’s analysis moves on three levels: psychoanalytical, religious, and literary. According to her, for those who recognize themselves in abjection, the emission of internal contents such as urine, blood, sperm, excrements becomes the only object of sexual interest because it overflows from its subjective identity, from its ‘internal hole’, and, therefore, guarantees it indirectly. Differently from sacrificial religions which tend to exclude any mixing between internal purity and external impurity, Christianity marks a turning point of great fundamental importance because it interiorizes and spiritualizes impurity. Thus, in a certain sense, it introduces abjection in culture and in literature.

Nonetheless, I cannot accept abjection as a solution. We must not forget that the essential aspect of the thinking of difference lies in the effort to map an alternative path to Western onto-theological categories. And it is not difficult to detect in abjection a manifestation of absolute hostility toward the world and the human body, considered as evil. In other words, feeling the difference cannot mean insisting on the most crude and repellant facts. We would end up by falling into the very thing we were trying to emerge from: spiritualism, anti-worldly fanaticism, the most repressive tradition. The poetics of trash and abjection restore indirectly precisely what the thinking of difference is fighting against. If the human being is just garbage, this means that the only one to shine is the transcendental!

6. Toward the Extremely Beautiful

The aesthetics of difference has to look elsewhere in the direction of notions of *neuter* and *epoché*. Once again, it is Barthes who can point the way. First of all, *neuter* does not mean *neutralisation*. In a brief text based on the course he gave at the Colège de France, Barthes explains that *neuter* does not mean the abolition of conflictual data of discourse but, on the contrary, their preservation and indefinite proliferation. Barthes’s aim was to show that ‘neuter’ did not correspond necessarily to the flat image, and depreciated as a result, that *Doxa* has, but could constitute a strong, active, value.\(^3\) In other words, I access the *neuter* when I realize that the opposition put up by current opinion (for instance, between masculine and feminine) is inadequate to describe my experience, not because a possibility of reconciliation has emerged between the two terms, but because a third term has intervened (for instance, the feeling of inorganic sexuality), that is, different with respect to the way in which sexuality has been thought so far. Thus *epoché* does not mean insensitivity or flattening of the facts but simply not being involved in a false conflict (for instance, between masculine and feminine).

Barthes, in describing the feeling of love, left out of consideration the sex of the object at issue and spoke more generally of an *other* (*autre*).\(^3\) Against the intimation of the contemporary world to choose between two contestants, between two factions, between two possibilities arbitrarily posted as antinomies, Barthes vindicates ‘the right to suspend one’s judgement’,\(^3\) by referring expressly to the ancient Sceptics.

To conclude, psychotic realism remains within the sphere of alternative experiences only to the extent to which it understands the real as what exceeds, by definition, banality, the *status quo*, facts. It is mystifying to present ugliness as a type of the beautiful and abjection as an experience to be recommended. It would be like taking coarseness as sincerity or villainy as transparency. Barthes teaches that difference, the text of life, life as text, lives in the *more*.\(^3\) ‘That is why it is a goddess, a figure that can be invoked, a mode of intercession.’