Lyotard and the Sublime Unconscious of Education: Communicative Capitalism and Aesthetics

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INTRODUCTION

Within the body of research addressing the relationship between education and capitalism, and in particular how pedagogy can generate alternative social relations, very little attention has been paid to aesthetics.[1] Moreover, within explorations of the aesthetic realm and its possible anti-capitalist tendencies, little attention has been paid to questions of education and pedagogy. There is a missed opportunity here for a more robust articulation of the relationship between anti-capitalist pedagogy and aesthetics that would enrich both sides of the dialectical coin. In this brief article, we would like to propose that, underlying certain differences in emphasis, aesthetic and pedagogical issues pertaining to the *representation* of capitalism and its opposition intersect in relation to the aesthetic question of the sublime. To think through the relationship between the aesthetics of the sublime and the political and economic dimensions of anti-capitalist pedagogy, we will find new resources in the work of Jean-François Lyotard, whose own pedagogy of the ineffable offers ways in which the sublime can become a resource rather than an obstacle for educators.

THE QUESTION OF THE BEAUTIFUL VS. THE SUBLIME

The sublime has become an increasingly important contemporary aesthetic category. While the concept of the sublime can be traced all the way back to ancient Greek philosophy and the work of Longinus, in the modern era, Kant's discussion of the sublime has become as fundamental as it is con-

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troversial. But before we can appreciate Kant's analysis of the sublime and how it is related to the political (and pedagogical), we first have to take a short detour through his understanding of the beautiful.

According to Kant,[2] there are essentially three kinds of aesthetic judgment. While differing among themselves, they are all nevertheless aesthetic because they rest on subjective grounds. Judgments of the agreeable, the beautiful (taste), and the sublime thus find their justifications in feelings rather than in objective properties of things or rational concepts. Pleasure in the agreeable is based on desire/need and is therefore particular to individual cases.[3] Because it is personal, agreeableness cannot be universalized, and in this sense, agreeableness is in the eye of the beholder. A simple example of this would be that no one is ready to assert the universality and necessity of an individual sexual perversion. Indeed, we are not inclined to discuss such perversions in public without the disclaimer "I know it's not for everybody, but it turns me on." There is no claim that personal preference should be accepted by everyone, nor is there any desire to *argue* for one's judgment.

Here, Kant makes another distinction between the beautiful and the good.[4] Pleasure in the good, like the agreeable, is based on desire. We desire the good because it will somehow improve our lives or make us excellent. Agreeableness and the good are concerned with pleasure and with some kind of *interest* in the object. Yet there is a key difference. Unlike the merely agreeable, the pleasure from the good comes from the application of a concept of what something is intended to be. For instance, a teacher is a good teacher if she has the properties that conform to the concept of what a teacher ought to be. To be an excellent teacher gives practical satisfactions (meaning, a satisfaction that improves one's quality of action in accordance with a certain standard).

Now we can turn to Kant's reflections on the beautiful.[5] Like the agreeable and the good, the beautiful is subjective. For Kant, the beautiful is the sensation of a harmonious resonance between the imagination and the understanding and, therefore, is not found in the objective properties of things. Yet, unlike the agreeable and the good, the pleasure from the beautiful is not a satisfaction based on desire or on respect for a law or standard. Two implications follow. First, judgments of taste are free. They are free in the sense that they do not need to obey the body (and its desires or needs) or the law (and its conceptual standards of practice or acceptability). Second, judgments of taste are disinterested, in that I do not need to have my desires fulfilled or achieve congruency with a set standard in order to feel a beautiful pleasure. For these reasons, the "I" in "I think *x* is beautiful" is not a personal I (despite the fact that it is still subjective) but rather takes on a universal dimension. This "I" could *and should* be anyone at all who is capable of making aesthetic judgments of taste. Indeed, it would be more appropriate to simply state "*X* is beautiful."

For this reason, when we judge something to be beautiful, we are committed to the claim that everyone should also judge the object to be beautiful.[6] Aesthetic judgments are universal (no exceptions) and necessary (it must be the case). It is important to note that Kant has put his finger on a very real phenomenon here. There have been times in our lives when we have been prepared to defend our judgments of taste from attack and to assert that we regard others as wrong when they do not agree with us. Unlike the agreeable, where we simply throw our hands up and say, "Well you like what you like and I like what I like" and go our separate ways, in judgments of the beautiful, an argument ensues wherein each party attempts to convince the other of the rightness of a certain judgment of taste. Indeed, we are sure many of us have had the experience of being *shocked* when someone does not agree with our taste. This indicates that we have *presumed* that there is something universal in our judgment, something that is not reducible to the agreeable. There is a sense of purposiveness in the object yet, unlike the good, we cannot put our finger on what that something is or what specific purpose an object teleologically fulfills. The judgment must remain subjective (thus lacking a concept of reason to guide it) even in its claims to universality. Judgments of this kind are paradoxically, *subjectively universal.*

For the purposes of this article, there is one other small point to mention about Kant's analysis of the beautiful. As stated, when one states "*X* is beautiful" one is assuming *everyone* can and should agree with the statement. The individual believes others ought to agree with his/her judgment of taste because the attending pleasure is free (and thus not bound to personal desires or needs, nor beholden to any law or standard that can be measured). But the individual cannot bully anyone into agreeing with this judgment of taste, nor can he/she reason anyone into agreeing with it. The result is a community that must give respect to every judgment of taste equally. This is a community that is open and pluralistic because no one can prove or disprove that such and such is a real judgment of taste (i.e. that it is pure, disinterested). A beautiful community is a participatory democratic community open to everyone. Opinions must be weighed equally, and there can be no guarantees for any judgement beyond the community itself.

We will come back to the political implications of Kant's theory of an aesthetic community in perpetual dispute, but now we are finally set to turn to our central topic: the sublime. Kant divides the sublime into two basic varieties. The mathematical sublime is defined as something "*absolutely large*," that is, "*large beyond all comparison*."[7] Usually when speaking of the size of things, we make either an implicit or explicit comparison. For instance, when we say things like "that man is tall!" we usually mean that he is tall compared to other men. Yet, when referring to the absolutely large, we do not make any comparison, meaning the thing is large in and for itself ("The universe is vast"). The dynamically sublime refers to a magnitude of power (rather than size). Here we can think of vast storms raging, or of the power of the atomic bomb. In both cases, the subject feels terror at being overwhelmed by something so vast that it cannot be properly measured or calculated. And, different from a judgment of the beautiful, the sublime has (at least on the first pass) no sense of purposiveness. Indeed, there is a profound feeling of contra-purposiveness that forces us to ask the question, "Why did that hurricane have to happen?" Or, when staring up at the universe, "It all seems so meaningless and empty … " In both cases, there is a sense of *pain* attached to the sublime. We are finite, and there are forms and forces out there that we cannot hope to represent through our fallible, precarious senses.

Yet this is not the end of the story for Kant. While the sublime first gives the impression of contra-purposiveness in which we feel our sense of finality through our failure to grasp something as a whole (and thus make sense of it), there immediately emerges a second feeling. The failure of the senses to represent the immensity of the sublime leads us to contemplate the nature of reason itself, and its ability to think the world beyond the senses and the imagination. Thus, the sublime gives way to the supersensible realm of reason and critical self-reflection on the mind's autonomy from brute, material existence. Whereas the aesthetic community argues endlessly about what is and is not beautiful, the sublime community — faced with that which is unfathomable — pauses to reflect on its own conditions of possibility.

THE POLITICS OF THE BEAUTIFUL AND THE SUBLIME

In this section, we would like to make a political leap from Kantian reflections on the beautiful and the sublime to more contemporary political issues and ideas. This move is not as farfetched as it might at first appear. Indeed, scholars ranging from Friedrich Schiller,[8] to Hannah Arendt,[9] to Joseph Chytry[10] have linked Kant's description of aesthetic judgments with participatory democracy. For instance, Arendt argues that the judgment of the beautiful can be a paradigm for a non-possessive, non-consuming political society and a shared world characterized by unrestrained communication. While there are many merits to this line of inquiry, in the rest of this article we would like to take pause and offer a possible criticism of the links between the beautiful and progressive politics.

As outlined above, the aesthetic community argues about what is and is not beautiful. Because all positions are subjective yet claim universality, all are equal, all are included, and the debate appears endless. There is a constant circulation of criticism, verbiage, opinions, and commentary. In this sense, the beautiful forms the aesthetic background of liberal democracy and drives the economy of what Jodi Dean refers to as communicative capitalism.[11] Communicative capitalism pinpoints the contemporary convergence of democracy and capitalism, a convergence that hinges upon the development of networked communications. New forms of communication technology increase the possibility of democratic participation and discussion by bringing more people into conversation with each other. Anyone with access to a computer or a smart phone can start a blog, Tumblr, or Twitter account, gain followers, and state their opinions on any debate. We can comment endlessly on others' posts, on news stories, and more. We can post about or file complaints with private entities or government offices across the globe in an instant. Dean argues that, rather than "leading to more equitable distributions of wealth and influence, instead of enabling the emergence of a richer variety in modes of living and practices of freedom," networked communications coincide "with extreme corporatization, financialization, and privatization across the globe."[12] Not only has this increased participation increased the coffers of the global elite at the expense of the global poor, Dean contends, but it has done the important ideological work of erasing the antagonism that is fundamental to political organization. The circulation of ideas, memes, blog posts, and so on contributes "to the billions of nuggets of information and affect trying to catch and hold attention, to push or sway opinion, taste, and trends in one direction rather than another."[13]

In short, *communicative capitalism is modeled on Kant's aesthetic community.* It might at first appear that communicative capitalism is predicated on judgments of the agreeable and/or the good. For instance, it might appear that all choices within communicative capitalism are simply personal preferences, thus prioritizing the individual self as the autonomic unit of political and economic organization. Or, it might appear that communicative capitalism equates its judgments with that of the good — a good that is derived strictly from financial logistics (the market decides what is best and what is right). Although both of these observations are right in a certain sense, the real heart of communicative capitalism is the subjective universalism of the beautiful. Thus, the fundamental claim is: "Capitalism is the best possible economic system." This is the most basic form of subjective universalism in that it does not rest on any objective criteria or economic law (indeed, material conditions would suggest precisely the opposite), and yet it is taken to be a universal truth to which all rational individuals should agree. Hence the disinterestedness of economists to any individual choices (let alone the sublime suffering induced by such a system). The choice for capitalism is an *aesthetic choice* through and through in that it takes a certain pleasure in its self-referential justifications, which appear to be "natural" and thus "universally inevitable" features of human social evolution even if rational arguments to support this claim are lacking.

While such a community constitutes itself through endless communication, it is also predicated on an excess that it does not communicate: economic inequity. The political question becomes, how to conceptualize this excess beyond the beautiful? Such a question is also pedagogical: Can one teach an excess that defies communication, that defies figuration/formalization?

TEACHING THE SUBLIME EXCESS OF CAPITALISM

If philosophers of participatory democracy have turned to Kant's theory of the aesthetic community to theorize politics, those on the left have a different origin point: the sublime. The sublime appears throughout contemporary Marxist, neo-Marxist, and post-Marxist literature. Thus, for Fredric Jameson, the closest representation of the global juggernaut of multinational capitalism is that of the immense computer networks of the postmodern "technological sublime."[14] Indeed, the whole problem of postmodernism for Jameson is one of an "aesthetic of cognitive mapping," which is also a "pedagogical political"[15] question concerning new modes of representation that will allow subjects to once again position themselves within the dizzying relays of capitalism. If multinational capitalism is a sublime excess, so too have forms of opposition taken on sublime dimensions. For Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, the democratic insurgencies of the rhizomatic multitude are monstrous in the sense that the monster is a "figure of sublime disproportion and terrifying excess, as if the confines of modern rationality were too narrow to contain their extraordinary creative powers."[16] The multitude — both radically inside and outside of multinational capitalism — is the "ontological sublime,"[17] both in terms of extension (it lacks definitive boundaries) and in terms of intensity (it surges forward with explosive creative power). Likewise, David Panagia argues that the politics of radical dissensus calls for a sublime critique of beauty.[18] Whereas the former emphasizes the excesses of dispute, dis-identification, and unrecognizability, the latter focuses on consensus, identity, harmony, and inclusion within an imaginary order that cannot accommodate difference without effacing it. In short, representing capitalism and its oppositional forces demands a political and pedagogical aesthetic of the sublime.

Such a project has many hurdles to jump. First, if the sublime is experienced as overwhelming, this sensation is a pedagogical problem. How can we create educational conditions that do not lead from a sensation of overwhelming dread to that of the freedom Kant suggests? Second, if the sublime is truly a formal aporia, then what are the pedagogical forms that figure the sublime totality of capitalism and multitude without toppling over into yet another mode of communicative capitalism? In short, what is an aesthetic-pedagogical logic that would prevent the sublime from becoming yet another form of the beautiful? Here we suggest a return to Lyotard might be necessary, but with fresh eyes concerned with his writing on pedagogy.[19]

PHILOSOPHY AS A SUBLIME PEDAGOGY

In a series of lectures delivered to first-year students at Sorbonne University in the fall of 1964, Lyotard asks, *why* philosophize? [20] By asking *why* philosophize, and not *what is* philosophy, Lyotard foregrounds the disruption inherent in philosophy, which is an act and not a discipline or thing. Whereas to ask *what* philosophy is would be to pin it down, proceeding on the assumption that philosophy *is* a particular thing, to ask *why* philosophize "bears within itself the annihilation of what it is questioning."[21] In this sense, philosophy, like the sublime itself, is not bound by a question of form. It is rather immeasurable (always appearing where and when it is not wanted) and dynamic (always exceeding any attempt to bridle its powers of critical reflection and creative speculation). For everything philosophy demonstrates or reveals, it hides something, renders something else obscure or oblique. We philosophize because we desire, because our lives are ruled by "the *yes and no*:" "even when we are at the heart of things, of ourselves, of others, of time or of speech, their reverse side is constantly present to us."[22] Desire names the hinge that constantly swings back and forth between unity and separation.

Philosophy is wisdom only in the sense that wisdom "is never sure of itself, is always lost and always needs to be found again."[23] To put it simply, there is always a surplus to the world, and philosophy is both the passion for and production of this surplus. By engaging in philosophy, we bring the world closer to and farther from us, understanding the surplus while producing new surpluses. This is so because "speech changes what it utters."[24] Lyotard gives the example of being in love. It is not the case that love is brought into being only when the couple declares their love for each other, but neither is it the case that this declaration changes nothing: speech captures and produces.

Lyotard specifically addresses the teaching of philosophy in a letter to Hugo Vermeren, which was published as part of a collection initially titled, *The Postmodern Explained to Children*.[25] While this title may convey derision and contempt for the "postmodern debate," it is actually quite sincere and serious. Childhood is an important theme that recurs throughout Lyotard's opus. Childhood names the state in which the human is also inhuman, is not yet integrated into the established community of speakers and knowers. Whereas the adult knows, has mastered language and the world, the child has no such pretences. The child knows things for which it does not have words, knows that there is more to know, is never quite satisfied with the answers received, and won't hesitate to interrupt anything with relentless questioning. There is no concern in childhood for efficiency, rationality, or performativity. The child doesn't really *want* to know: it wants to want to know, or, it desires desire. It should be clear, then, that childhood is not at all a stage in a linear development of the human, just as the postmodern is not something that comes *after* the modern, a fact that is often lost on critics.

Childhood is like philosophy, or at least how philosophy *should* be. Rather than being grounded in rationality and striving towards systematizing the world, philosophy is an act of asking, listening, of interrupting, and letting oneself be interrupted. "Childhood," he writes to Hugo, "is the monster of philosophers. It is also their accomplice. Childhood tells them that the mind is not given. But that it is possible."[26] Childhood is monstrous in its embrace of excess and its rejection of the desire for concrete knowledge. That it is a monster and an accomplice to the philosopher means that it is not a state within a successive path of development, being neither the progenitor nor offspring of the philosopher; "it is what, in the midst of man, throws him off course … it is the possibility or risk of being adrift. We always begin in the middle."[27] That one must begin in the middle means that there are no prerequisites or foundational understandings necessary for the course of philosophy. Consider the act of reading, through which we learn that "reading is never finished, that you can only commence, and that you have not read what you have read. Reading is an exercise in listening."[28] Philosophical reading presupposes that there is *always* something else there, something that will resist articulation. In this way, philosophy as an act of listening doesn't entail achieving understanding at all; it rather entails *forgetting*, but a particular type of forgetting, which Lyotard, drawing on psychoanalysis, calls anamnesis. In the clinic, anamnesis is a practice wherein the analysand engages in free-play association, and from this the analyst picks up on recurring signifiers and themes. This is usually done when helping the analysand work through a repressed event. Through anamnesis the patient is taken hold of by the unknown, thereby allowing themselves to be guided by the unpresentable.

Lyotard's pedagogy, at its base, entails teaching one to be open to alterity, to be seized and held by the monstrous childhood of thought. The characteristics that Lyotard ascribes to such an educational process include "patience, anamnesis, and recommencement"[29] and "anamnesis, discomposure, and elaboration."[30] We see, then, a contradictory movement of discovery, articulation, and loss, with all phases of the educational process happening simultaneously.

(UN)COMMUNICATIVE COMMUNISM

If there is an aesthetic unconscious for Lyotard's pedagogy, it is a sublime unconscious. In the face of the monstrousness of the sublime, he posits a form of philosophical education that speaks the ineffable within the effable, the uncommunicative within the communicative, *without* thereby reducing this excess to yet another consumable signifier. Whereas the beautiful acts of participatory democracy always call for recognition through inclusive dialogue and debate, the sublime acts of philosophical education call for misrecognition, interruption, and forgetting. One focuses on the circulation of opinions while the other turns inward to look at the very aporias of thinking itself. While this might be overwhelming, Lyotard emphasizes the need for a pedagogical form of patience with what is hidden, what withdraws, what remains unsaid in the said. Thus, patience emerges as a powerful political and pedagogical virtue for continually returning to the unformed surplus at the heart of all reading and thinking.

We suggest that while Lyotard's philosophy gives us a way to conceptualize the excess beyond the beautiful, his writing offers a pedagogy of respecting and engaging that excess. First, Lyotard acknowledges the communicative capitalist nexus within which he is writing and, rather than denouncing this system (which would merely provide more communicative inputs for the system to process and valorize), he appeases it. For example, Lyotard begins *The Differend* with a preface titled, "Reading Dossier," which provides a succinct summary of the book, clearly articulating its genre, style, problem, thesis, context, and so on. Although it is written seriously, the "reading dossier" is ultimately sardonic, for the idea that one can assemble a case file on a philosophical exploration is absurd. Lyotard provides this dossier, however, for the reader who doesn't wish to actually *read* the text — which would demand the endless process of unlearning and listening — but for those who only wish to communicate about it. For the subject of communicative capitalism concerned only with speed, performance, progress, and conclusions, Lyotard provides the book in an easily digestible form. In doing so, he gestures that what follows is a book that one can only begin to read over and over again.

Another strategy Lyotard deploys to respect the unspeakable excess is, paradoxically, dialogue. That is, Lyotard often stages conversations between subjects (almost always between a "he" and a "she") and, in so doing, refuses any reader the opportunity to discern his particular position. Sometimes, as is the case in the essay, "Interesting?," even the "he" and "she," through whom

Lyotard is writing, acknowledge that there is something other within them that is speaking, to which they have to listen: "There is something or someone in me," "she" says to "he," "who is not speaking 'me,' my language. How can this clandestine host be ignored?"[31] The reader is thus multiply removed from Lyotard, unable to quote any passage in the text to resolutely affirm or negate a discrete identity of the author. Without articulating any denunciations or proclamations, Lyotard's writing takes place in communicative capitalism while offering us the opportunity to enter into an (un)communicative communism. If we patiently listen, this philosophical education can return us to that which is most precious and precarious: the freedom to be indeterminate monsters.

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1 See, for example, David I. Backer, *Elements of Discussion* (Charlotte: Information Age Publishing, 2015); Gert J.J. Biesta, *Beyond Learning: Democratic Education for a Human Future* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2006); Derek R. Ford, *Communist Study: Education for the Commons* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2016). For a discussion of the negative impact of excluding aesthetic questions from critical pedagogy see Tyson E. Lewis, *The Aesthetics of Education: Theatre, Curiosity, and Politics in the Work of Jacques Rancière and Paulo Freire* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2014).

2 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

3 Kant, *Critique*, 5:206.

4 Ibid., 5:208.

5 Ibid., 5:210.

6 Ibid., 5:213-5:214.

7 Ibid., 5:249.

8 Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (Oxford: Claredon Press, 1982).

9 Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

10 Joseph Chytry, *The Aesthetic State: A Quest in Modern German Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

11 Jodi Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies: Communicative Capitalism and Left Politics* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009).

12 Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies*, 23.

13 Ibid., 24.

14 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 37.

15 Ibid., 54.

16 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 2009).

17 Antonio Negri, *Art & Multitude* (Malden: Polity Press, 2011), 26.

18 Davide Panagia, *The Poetics of Political Thinking* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

19 While there is no shortage of educational literature on Lyotard, none of it has focused on this aspect of his thought. See, for example, Stephanie Mackler, "Natality Seduced: Lyotard and the Birth of the Improbable," in *Philosophy of Education Yearbook 2003*, ed. Kal Alston (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2003); A.T. Nuyen, "Postmodern Education as Sublimation," *Educational Theory* 46, no. 1: 93-103; Michael Peters, "Lyotard, Nihilism and Education," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 25, no. 4: 303-314.

20 Jean-François Lyotard, *Why Philosophize?*, trans. Andrew Brown (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013).

21 Ibid., 18.

22 Ibid., 26.

23 Ibid., 36.

24 Ibid., 78.

25 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1988/1993).

26 Ibid., 100.

27 Ibid., 101.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid., 105.

30 Ibid., 107.

31 Jean-François Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993/1997), 62.