

The Extensions of Many: Seminars of Media Aesthetics, 1: Introduction

An unedited version of the introductory talk to the seminar series 'The Extensions of Many: Seminars on Media Aesthetics' organised by the Bergen Center for Electronic Arts (BEK) and Monoskop and held at Hordaland kunstsenter in Bergen, 4 March 2015.

In order to introduce the debate about aesthetics let me first attempt to identify more broadly the condition in which the aesthetic ought to be grounded today.

One of the central questions implicated in aesthetics and a question to be asked here first is: *who* is looking and listening? Who is the judge in aesthetic judgment? More than two centuries ago Immanuel Kant casted a long shadow over any answer to it by grounding his subject of perception, of judging beauty and the sublime, in a man ideas about whom originate in his own mind while he is as well the only one who can know this. Following Kant, man has become full of himself. Essentially, he fooled himself into becoming full of himself.

The incubator for keeping alive *this* idea of man have ever since been the humanities and social sciences. Studying his language, behaviour, morals, creativity, his nature, human sciences led us to establish him as the main hero of history in the making.

A.i

The story of man, of man the great, man the genius, man the ruler, has been contested in and out academia for a while now. We have been kept reminded that this narrative diminishes, if not erases the role of women, kids, collectives, social movements and other agencies. Eventually, even though first in the role of those who had suffered and were forgotten, they begun entering the stage of history in its plays and games of identity and roles whose variations are boundless.

A.ii

Parallel to identity politics and civil rights debate there has been another strand of thought dismantling a pedestal from below the white heterosexual Western Christian healthy adult male.

Many researchers began turning to mathematics and natural sciences for metaphors and models to describe elusive forces shaping the fate of man. And so the concepts of the vibrating matter (the interconnectedness of all stuff), the spacetime (the immanent dependence of time on space and vice versa), or the uncertainty principle (the impossibility of precisely locating and measuring speed of the smallest particle), began shaking the ideas about the spirit who until then had only his body and mind to loose.

The dreamworld have been pushed to the foreground as a theatre of suppressed desires of dreamers. Structured patterns have been pursued as abstract diagrams ruling our speech, thought and mating. Figures of machinic processes have been adopted to describe the role social institutions such as family, school, church, prison or clinic play in disciplining, normalising and imprinting a certain idea of man in the subconscious.

A.iii

Besides dissecting his identity into many and subjecting them all to abstract norms the idea of man have been undermined from yet another, materialist perspective.

Whatever we may try to understand, the process of communication is always conditioned by techniques of articulation. Knowledge can hardly be replicated from one embodied mind across others simply because language, images and sounds are the stuff in between and tear us apart.

A.sum

The humanities and social sciences in the long 20th century began seriously dispute the role of man as primary force of history. Despite that, man persists as their greatest wonder of the world and their central object of study. Let us now identify more specifically the grounds on which can we start rethinking the aesthetic from the perspective of fluid identity, subjected to abstract forces and with its articulation framed by techniques it adapts to.

B

When earth scientists of the Anthropocene tell us that man is now the primary geological force, driving the planet to its doom, what idea of man is in operation here? They rarely point fingers at anyone in particular. Humanities and social scientists are slowly beginning to produce answers. However, blaming capitalism and its immanent logic of profiteering may not be enough. The man with his many faces, with his soul usurped by relentless forces of the market hires an established scientist to publish a study proving that things have always been this way.

Our question remains—who is looking and listening.

I will mention three movements of thought giving us not only hope but also methods and conceptual frameworks to rethink the aesthetic—among many other things—today. They all seem to emerge in the 1980s although for a long time they didn't seem to have much in common with one another. What we may clearly recognise today is their ongoing effort to undo the anthropocentric way of relating to the world.

B.i

When Donna Haraway published her *Cyborg Manifesto* in *Socialist Review* some thirty years ago it was in part a provocation to ecofeminists who were positioning women in alliance with nature and against technology. Rather than operating in binary oppositions and fragmenting their force among numerous feminisms she urged for considering creating coalitions based on affinity instead of identity. She said that

“[G]ender, race, and class cannot provide the basis for belief in ‘essential’ unity. There is nothing about being ‘female’ that naturally binds women. There is not even such a state as ‘being’ female, itself a highly complex category constructed in contested sexual scientific discourses and other social practices. Gender, race, or class consciousness is an achievement forced on us by the terrible historical experience of the contradictory social realities of patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism.” (1991: 155)

An attitude following this and other contributions from feminist, postcolonial and also animal rights movements gives way to new approaches to thinking the man by admitting other species like animals, plants and microbes more autonomy from humanist values in their agency in the world, in their ‘worlding’. Haraway later advanced the concept of companion species, arguing that for example the process of domestication of dogs can be approached as reciprocal. The discourses of posthumanism, New Materialisms, animal studies and critical life studies with scholars in the United States, Netherlands and elsewhere have opened up new ways for avoiding the human exceptionalism while building upon various traditions of identity movements.

B.ii

The same year as the *Cyborg Manifesto* appeared, Friedrich Kittler published his Habilitation, *Aufschreibesysteme 1800/1900*, 5 years later translated into English as *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*. Kittler was a literary theorist and his scholarly allies were scattered across Germanophone academia. Their break with the then dominant theoretical traditions of hermeneutics and the Frankfurt School was a break away from the idea of “so-called Man.” Kittler’s theory radicalizes Foucault’s arguing that the idea of man as autonomous, self-determined human subject performing responsible acts and producing meaningful texts emerged around 1800 as the effect of changes in reading, writing and language acquisition on the background of bureaucratization of institutions of the modern state and the consolidation of the nuclear family. Identifying with his inner voice he acquired a conception of himself as the authorial subject. But as soon as 1900 there arrived new technologies of articulation and storage such as gramophone, film and typewriter, and the idea of Man as well as any idea found themselves conditioned and mediated by techniques outside full human control. As Geoffrey Winthrop-Young summed it up,

“[T]his does not mean that computers are artificial human brains, or that they digitally shape specifically human ways of thinking. Rather, they optimize certain patterns of information processing that were also imposed on human beings but subsequently were mistaken to be innately

human qualities. Where subjects were, there programs shall be—because programs were there in the first place.” (2000: 397)

This would be French poststructuralism at its best. There is much more to say about Kittler to do him justice; we will hear more from Knut Ove Eliassen who is going to talk about him and the Berlin School on our third seminar and who is also translating his “Aufschreibesysteme” into Norwegian as we speak.

Parallel to or following Kittler there are other streams conceptualising non-anthropocentric and media-based ontology such as cultural techniques, media archaeology (Wolfgang Ernst) and general ecology (Erich Hörl).

B.iii

A third tradition of thought relevant for our discussion begins with the publication of *Mille plateaux* by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in 1980. Its impact, not least also of its English translation as *A Thousand Plateaus* in 1987 by Brian Massumi, is for us interesting to follow in the UK. The University of Warwick, in the mid-1990s a site of the second largest philosophy department in the country, became for a short period home to a milieu of young theorists of assemblages, abstract thought, cyberculture and mysticism, called Cybernetic Culture Research Unit. Undoing anything stable, essential and identical into its processes of differing and unfolding, in the next decade some of them found their ontological grounds in the process-oriented philosophy of radical empiricists such as William James and Alfred North Whitehead. So the scholars such as Matthew Fuller, Steve Goodman or Luciana Parisi have been advancing theories of interaction among complex objects such as media systems and algorithms of which human flesh is only one site among many.

B.sum

This is not to be understood as ‘finishing’ the man. This project is rather about questioning *the idea* of man as essence, the human exceptionalism, and treating human as measure of all things.

Posthumanities, cultural techniques and algorithmic thought are a few among various approaches to tackle these issues, offering us ontological grounds for thinking man and object in the domain of aesthetics as in others today.

C

Their smallest unit of analysis is the relation. Accordingly, the notion of medium which we have chosen as a guide in our series, exhibits similar properties. Why it is more relevant for us now

is because on the one hand it is well established in aesthetics and art theory, and on the other it also carries the semantics of communication networks and engineering, inviting us to extend our vocabularies.

I will continue in my introduction in two weeks.

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