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Ethical Militancy

The Workings of Aesthetics

Neofelis

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Introduction

Ethics and aesthetics

The ethical emerges in situations involving dilemmas.

While the verb *prattein* is focused on a goal and the accomplishment of an action, and while *poiein* has to do with the work on an object, with producing and making, Aeschylus' use of *ti draso* and *dran* – in the sense of “to commit something,” “wanting to do something” – opens up a dimension in which the activity of the act is itself in play. [...] Bruno Snell has insisted that *dran* in Aeschylus' *Oresteia* is always related “to the overcoming of tarrying and indecisiveness” and that it marks the beginnings and the decisions to act. [...] [I]t undoubtedly connotes that vestibule of acting in which the decision and the inception of an action are themselves put into question. [...] Orestes' tarrying may contain a madness of decision, an eccentric moment in which not only the deed but also the world in which it is to be realized are suspended. Tarrying touches on the joints and sutures that keep this world together, or not: it is a crisis in the conception of the world and its order, a crisis of the system of judgement.¹

Drawing upon Orestes's situation in relation to the necessity of killing his mother Clytemnestra in Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, philosopher Joseph Vogl defines the space and time *before* the decision as a topos of

1 Joseph Vogl: *On Tarrying*, transl. from German by Helmut Müller-Sievers. London: Seagull 2019, pp. 31–32.

tarrying, where the subject faces various possibilities of action. This is the topos where the ethical arises – if every decision and action implies its determination as a political event, then space and time “in their vestibule” constitute the topos of the ethical.

Before exploring this thought further, let me postulate another hypothesis. I would like to argue that this very space of emerging possibilities, which belongs to the ethical, is the space where aesthetics develops par excellence. Many theater theorists have addressed the specific characteristics of the aesthetico-performative space, perhaps most prominently Erika Fischer-Lichte, who defines and analyzes the aesthetic space *in between* as a topos of oscillating potentialities.² Here, at the beginning of my argumentation, let me underline that the aesthetic space that I am interested in – as well the ethical space, as I am going to show – is quite literally a space in between, in that it is the space that derives from the constant interaction between the production and reception of aesthetic expression. Erika Fischer-Lichte, unlike other theorists and philosophers who have explored aesthetic spaces, focuses specifically on this very crucial quality of aesthetic spaces, namely their capacity to be perpetually performative, resulting from the fact that they are the product of the encounter between aesthetic production and its perception.

As something perpetually performative, the aesthetic space shares the qualities of an *event* as something that is in a process of constant becoming.³ In this sense, it lacks any kind of stability and is instead characterized by lability and doubt. Aesthetic expression takes place in and, what is more, constitutes this space full of questions and insecurity. The subject of production as well as of perception is situated, then, not in a space of answers and affirmation, but rather in a space

2 In her seminal volume *The Transformative Power of Performance*, Fischer-Lichte explores this idea in depth and, most importantly, in the sense that interests my argumentation. See Erika Fischer-Lichte: *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*, transl. from German by S. I. Jain. New York: Routledge 2008.

3 I am focusing on this particular dimension of the notion of the event, namely that it is a process. While the English word seems to emphasize the accomplished happening, the German translation *Ereignis* successfully captures its inherent processuality, connecting the event to performativity. See Erika Fischer-Lichte: *Performativität und Ereignis*. In: Idem et al. (eds.): *Performativität und Ereignis*. Tübingen / Basel: Francke 2003, pp. 11–37.

where explications, replies, decisions, and judgements are all pending. The space of the aesthetic is a place to upset the subject and to trouble concepts, affirmations, and certainties.

Critique and the political

Before I continue to specify the correspondences between the space of the ethical and the space of the aesthetic, allow me to diverge for a moment by referring briefly to the field of critique as something that puts forward and even expands the qualities that I have just described. By this, I am implying that there is a fundamental affinity between the functionalities and agencies of the workings of aesthetics and the workings of critique. Here, I am following Judith Butler reading Michel Foucault when she defines critique as “that perspective on established and ordering ways of knowing which is not immediately assimilated into that ordering function.”⁴ She goes on to say that critique according to Foucault has to do with the “exposure of the limit of the epistemological field,”⁵ underlining its unsettling and troubling power when facing established orders. In this sense, critique shares crucial qualities with aesthetics: neither critique nor aesthetics exists in order to propose solutions or to provide answers; instead, they function as upsetting agencies that expose the lacunae and the (im)possibilities of systems and given structures.

Interestingly enough, Foucault associates critical agency with “virtue,” which Butler describes as “a critical relation to [established] norms, one which, for Foucault, takes shape as a specific stylization of morality.”⁶ The word “stylization” introduces an aesthetico-performative aspect that is central to Butler’s but also to Foucault’s argumentation, and points to the fact that

4 Judith Butler: What Is Critique? An Essay on Foucault’s Virtue. In: *transversal texts* (May 2001). <https://transversal.at/transversal/0806/butler/en?hl=What%20is%20Critique%20An%20essay%20on%20Foucault's%20Virtue> (accessed: April 16, 2021).

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

[...] both the transformation of the self in relation to ethical percepts and the practice of critique are considered forms of “art,” stylizations and repetitions, suggesting that there is no possibility of accepting or refusing a rule without a self who is stylized in response to the ethical demand upon it.⁷

The “practice of critique” and the “transformation of the self” are considered “aesthetic practices” in a wider sense, suggesting an entanglement between critique, ethics, and aesthetics as practices of the self/ subject in the process of becoming an “ethical subject.”

The becoming of an ethical subject is not a simple matter of self-knowledge or self-awareness; [...] it is compelled to form itself, but to form itself within forms that are already more or less in operation and underway. [...] But if that selfforming is done in disobedience to the principles by which one is formed, then virtue becomes the practice by which the self forms itself in desubjugation, which is to say that it risks its deformation as a subject, occupying that ontologically insecure position which poses the question anew: who will be the subject here and what will count as a life, a moment of ethical questioning which requires that we break the habits of judgement in favor of a riskier practice that seeks to yield artistry from constraint.⁸

I want to close this brief excursus with this quote about the risks of deformation to the subject engaging in an ethical practice of virtue before I come back to further explore “that ontologically insecure position” into which the subject enters on her journey with the aesthetic and the ethical. Here, I am following a thinking of the ethical as an existential void into which the subject enters in search of the *right* decision. Any decision that leads out of this void is a *catastrophe* because it changes the status of the subject as well as of the world in which it is made. The ethical decision is a catastrophe because it is accompanied by an unease of being, because it unsettles and breaks habits, because it entails a state of being that is caught between the promise of the ethical and its future establishment. The aesthetic and the ethical share precisely this space, in which the subject tries to formulate and give shape to a decision to come, to a state of being that

7 Butler: What Is Critique?

8 Ibid.

is right and truthful. This space is ruled by uncertainty and ambiguity. It does not offer answers, nor does it dictate decisions. The subject decides *beyond* the space of aesthetics and ethics. Her decision leaves their space and enters the sphere of the political, namely the sphere of action and affirmation.⁹

In this respect, I make a distinction between the aesthetico-ethical space and the political space, although they are not separate spheres of being. The aesthetico-ethical space is the place where the subject lingers in a state of transformation and oscillation. This space is the reason why the subject is released as a transformed agent into the world, consequently changing it with her decisions and actions. This book, however, is about exploring this formational and unformed space that prepares the (trans-)formation of the subject and the world. It is this space of possibilities, ambiguities, uncertainties, and openness on which I would like to focus. As we will see, this space has nothing to do with neutrality or indifference, nor with a series of answers from among which the subject must choose (or not). This space has the power to transform, and it does this regardless of the consequences.

Ambiguity and excess

This book proposes the ethical as a melancholic category. It postulates the existence of an (ethical) surplus that remains intact beyond the decision or action. The political does not completely sublate the ethical. The ethical, which leads to the political position, remains in the form of a trace that is located beyond its sphere and perpetually conditions the subject and her world. The remaining ethical surplus is a direct consequence of its never-ending, unreconciled ambiguity.

9 In a succinct formulation, theater theorist Nicolas Ridout conceives of this triad as follows: "Ethics does not quite displace either aesthetics or politics. Aesthetic experience becomes the condition of possibility for a particular kind of ethical relationship. The ethical relationship becomes, in its turn, the ground upon which political action might be attempted." (Nicolas Ridout: *Theatre and Ethics*. London: Palgrave Macmillan 2009, pp. 65–66.) See also Antonio Negri: "[...] it is precisely *around the issue of the decision that the political is born.*" (Antonio Negri: *Logic and Theory of Inquiry: Militant Praxis as Subject and as Episteme*, transl. from Italian by N. Holdren / A. Bove. In: Stephen Shukaitis et al. (eds.): *Constituent Imagination: Militant Investigations-Collective Theorization*. Oakland: AK 2007, pp. 62–72, here p. 70, emphasis in original.)

What this book is about:

Preliminary thoughts on an aesthetico-ethical militancy

In this book, I will formulate a theory of ethical militancy based on aesthetic articulation. This means, firstly, that I will not propose any kind of ethical doctrine or dogma that the subject has to obey. On the contrary: I will try to release the subject into a space of the unknown, the unheard-of, the troubling, in order for the subject to position herself. I have already suggested that aesthetics creates the territory that the subject enters in order to, on the one hand, be pushed to position herself, and on the other, to acknowledge that every positioning is accompanied by a loss, be it the loss of a certain set of truths or a situation of self-loss. In relation to ethics, aesthetics must be understood as one step in the process of leaving something behind in order to establish a “new condition.”

The subject is of course free to refuse to participate or to understand – these are decisions, too. What interests me in this book, as I have already pointed out, is the situation *before* the decision, the situation that necessarily leads to a decision, even if this decision is the negation of involvement. In this space *before* the decision, aesthetics and ethics join forces to trouble the subject and to create a situation of unease that requires that the subject depart from a place in which she used to be for another place that she herself must find. The hypothesis I am putting forward is that every aesthetic manifestation involves an ethical positioning of the subject that allows her to function as an (ethico-) political subject. For the subject to become a political subject – and this is, in my understanding, the premise of every aesthetic manifestation – she must trespass on the purgatory of ethical ambiguity.

Aesthetic expression has the potential, as I argue, to lead the subject into ethical purgatory so that she may emerge as a political subject. Theater theorist and philosopher Hans-Thies Lehmann calls the “[p]olitics of theatre [...] a *politics of perception* (*Wahrnehmungspolitik*).”²⁸ The work of aesthetics – and in this case, of performances in particular – is not to exhaust itself discussing and presenting arguments and counterarguments, socio-political problems, or the injustice of the world. The kind of theater that does this is uninteresting and

28 Hans-Thies Lehmann: *Postdramatic Theatre*, transl. from German by K. Jürs-Munby. London / New York: Routledge 2006, p. 185 (emphasis in original).

to a certain point obsolete if one considers the conditions in which contemporary theater exists (see for example mass media and social media). Instead, Lehmann pleads for a theater that responds to these conditions

with a *politics of perception*, which could at the same time be called an *aesthetic of responsibility* (or *response-ability*). Instead of the deceptively comforting duality of here and there, inside and outside, it can move the *mutual implication of actors and spectators in the theatrical production of images* into the centre and thus make visible the broken thread between personal experience and perception. Such an experience would be not only aesthetic but therein at the same time ethico-political.²⁹

Lehmann does not discern between the ethical and the political function of aesthetics; this, however, does not contradict my arguments at all. In the context of this book, what Lehmann calls “the broken thread” takes place within the topos of the ethical as “the experience of a split”³⁰ that the subject has to go through once she enters the aesthetico-ethical space in between. This space in between, where aesthetics and ethics (can) coincide, is the topic of this book.

The next step that I would like to take is to define this aesthetico-ethical space as a topos of *ethical militancy*. Departing here from the famous concept of “militant democracy” coined by Karl Loewenstein³¹ in very specific conditions and referring to the necessity for democracy to arm itself against its enemies, I aim to articulate a theory of *ethical militancy* that comes into play by aesthetic means. Instead of linking the militant stance with the political – which would perhaps imply a violent stance for the subject – the notion of ethical militancy points to the imperative of partisanship within ambiguity. Ethical militancy, instead of clarifying the subject’s position, deepens ambiguity while, at the same time, enforcing the necessity of positioning. The subject entering the aesthetico-ethical space oscillates constantly between the possibilities of catastrophe prevented only by the force of

29 Ibid., pp. 185–186 (emphasis in original).

30 Ibid., p. 181.

31 Karl Loewenstein: *Militant Democracy and Fundamental Rights*, I. In: *The American Political Science Review* 31:3 (June 1937), pp. 417–432.

ambiguity. The subject must become militant – i. e., categorical and dogmatic – despite the absence of resolution and in order to survive as an (ethical) subject.

This book is interested in exploring and analyzing the aesthetic means by which the performances that I am going to discuss push the subject into the tricky situation in which she has to emerge as an ethical subject. Every chapter is essentially dedicated to one concept that is linked to ethics, discussed in its aesthetic articulation within the performance and in relation to the acting/ perceiving subject.

The first chapter explores the space of responsibility created by the practice of repetition. Here, I will discuss three more or less recent performances (*Κακορίζικη* [*Kakoriziki; The Ill-fated*], Manolis Tsipos 2012; *Lyricism*, Manolis Tsipos 2014; *Evros Walk Water*, Rimini Protokoll / Daniel Wetzel 2015) that engage with repetition in various ways and that think about the practice of repetition in relation to the responsibility deriving from this very practice: how do we repeat? In the name of whom (or what) and with what agency? This first chapter will also look at another performance, *Omonoia – The Shape of Circle* (Mass / Mkultra 2019), which works with the (real) space we encounter every day in a very specific manner: how do we engage with a more or less familiar space when it is embedded within an aesthetic situation?

The second chapter analyzes exodus as an ethical escape from unbearable situations. Here, I will focus on performances by the group Nova Melancholia (*Meditation I: Concerning Those Things That Can Be Called into Doubt*, 2011; *Ectoplasms*, 2013; and *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, 2013), which, in my understanding, employ specific aesthetic forms and practices that pave the way for the subject to depart, to escape, or to exit from concrete conditions. In this framework, I will discuss the ethicality of exodus as a practice.

The third chapter presents the process of taking part in a theater workshop, namely the international workshop that takes place every year at Attis Theatre in Athens, organized by theater director Theodoros Terzopoulos and conducted with the assistance of theater director and performer Savvas Stroumpos. I was lucky to be able to participate in this workshop in July 2015. This chapter is the result of my observations and, furthermore, of my presence at a very specific moment during political developments in Athens, Greece. In this chapter, I

will attempt to think about the two temporalities – of the workshop on the one hand and of the city on the other – together, how they interacted, how they engaged with each other, and how they affected each other. I am trying to think, in this context, about an ethical discourse on time(s) as an ethical conflation of “theatrical time” and the “time of the city.”

The fourth chapter explores notions of history and justice on the basis of three performances (*Imagine a Heroic Landscape*, 2019; *Walter Benjamin: On the Concept of History*, 2009, both by Nova Melancholia; and *Κομμώτριες / ΜΕΤΑΠΟΛΙΤΕΥΣΗ. Τζιανγκ-Σιν-Μπιν-Σιν – Φαντάσου την καρδιά μου δική σου* [*Komotries / METAPOLITEFSI. Jiang-sin-bin-sin – Fantasou tin kardia mou diki sou; Hairdressers / POST-RE-DEMOCRATIZATION-ERA. Jiang-sin-bin-sin – Imagine my Heart as Yours*] by Michael Marmarinos, 2020). In this chapter, I will discuss how history (i. e., historic figures and texts, historic events, etc.) is negotiated in various ways in aesthetic articulations. I will describe and analyze the specific means by which history and historicity are brought onstage and suggest ways in which the subject of the present engages with the past.

The fifth chapter constitutes a sort of excursus and explores the idea of applied and / or documentary theater as a counter-ethical approach to issues and subjects. I have titled this chapter *The Banality of Good*, implying an extreme naivety and triviality in the aesthetic articulations carried out in theatrical forms of this kind, which, in essence, result in the neutralization of all ethicality as described and analyzed in this book.

The last chapter, finally, gathers all the aesthetic means that I have identified during the study as ethical articulations and aims to formulate a theory of aesthetic-ethical entanglement. Militancy will be introduced and explored in this context as an apt concept for giving form and gravitas to precisely these entanglements. This chapter also discusses in more detail the place and condition of the ethically militant subject.

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