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Aesthetic Description as Performative Act. On Re-Figuring Spatial Loss

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Abstract

The aim of my paper will be to present some critical considerations regarding the relations between the notion of *aesthetic description* and what is known as *performative act*. By establishing a relation between the two, in terms of an analogy between the aesthetic and the performative, I will elaborate an argument regarding the aesthetic and performative properties of the body as an artwork and more broadly as a historical and material configuration. Understanding the aesthetic and the performative entails a certain refutation of conventional modes of causality along with the specification of an aesthetic domain of experience and the difference between causality and finality. My basic point is that what I call *aesthetic description* can be seen as a performative act. For the sake of my analysis, I will address a phenomenological idea of the body based on Judith Butler's relevant contributions. For the larger part of my analysis, and under the aim to set an appropriate framework for unfolding my argument, I will rely on the way Jacques Rancière approaches two cases of aesthetic description. First, Winckelmann's description of a statue known as the Belvedere Torso in his *History of ancient art*. Second, Schiller's respective approach of a statue known as Juno Ludovisi in the 15th letter of his *Letters for the aesthetic education of humanity*. In both cases, there is the working of an aesthetic freedom exercised by the aesthetic categories of free play and appearance. In fact, these two categories are foundational for what Rancière calls the aesthetic regime of the arts in an attempt to capture the artistic and aesthetic phenomena that do not obey an imposed, in historical and cultural terms, harmony between *poiesis* and *aisthesis*. The overall aim of my approach will be to draw the basic lines of a method that entails the use of description as a performative-spatial tool that can in turn engage, in aesthetic and creative terms, with processes of reparation, reconstruction and re-design of impartial and ruined spaces.

Keywords: Aesthetic description, performative act, re-figuring spatial loss, Jacques Rancière, Judith Butler's phenomenological idea of the body, Winckelmann's description of the Belvedere Torso

Judith Butler's Phenomenological Idea of the Body

The starting point of my analysis will revolve around the idea of the body from a phenomenological point of view, relying primarily on Judith Butler's relevant contributions. From a methodological standpoint, the phenomenological approach is characterised by an emphasis on description, a radical enquiry that attempts to liberate itself from prejudice and a priori metaphysical premises. In *The phenomenology of perception* Maurice Merleau-Ponty states that "Phenomenology involves describing, and not explaining or analysing" (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p. ix). In Merleau-Ponty there is as well a critical typology of the body; there is the body as a physical object and then there is "the body from the point of view of the self" or "one's own body." This multiplication of perspectives opens the path for understanding the body as being and moving within sensory fields that interact with the body along several dimensions. Merleau-Ponty's endeavor is to approach the body as a "historical idea and not a natural species" (p. 198), as an expressive and dramatic medium.

In her early writings, Butler relies on these ideas of the body in Merleau-Ponty and the subsequent extensions provided by Simone de Beauvoir in the *Second Sex*. Of particular importance for our analysis is the relevant description of the body as "a field of possibilities that are taken up and actualized in various distinctive ways" (Butler, 2020, p. 175; Beauvoir, 1953, p. 38). This description operates in Butler's approach as a linking and transitory point between the phenomenological and the performative. Of course, Butler's aim is to support the idea of an openness in gender's constitution. However, for the sake of our analysis, the convergence of the phenomenological and the gender-performative can provide us with a description of the body that could serve as a model for an aesthetic approach. In this context, of particular importance is the following passage:

To understand the construction of gender (...) *is necessary* (...) to delimit the field of historical possibilities which constitute this gender, and so to examine in details the *acts* by which these possibilities are appropriated, dramatized and ritualized. For Merleau-Ponty, the body is a "place of appropriation" and a mechanism of "transformation" and "conversion", an essentially dramatic structure which can be "read" in terms of the more general life that it embodies. As a result, the body cannot be conceived of as a static or univocal fact of existence, but, rather, as a modality of existence, the "place" in which possibilities are realized and dramatized, the individualized appropriation of a more general historical experience (Butler, 2022, p. 175).

The performative aspect of description, that is, description as a performative act, is that if a body, if a historical object is constituted in one way, then, through description it can be constituted in another way. In order to do so, we are implicitly accepting that we can contest the representational model, the purposiveness of the organicity-model. But here, we have to make a few distinctions. The body as an artwork, which is the case for us, does not always coincide with the body as physical entity.

Butler has argued for an expansion of the phenomenological theory of constitution so as an act would entail both the constitution of a meaning and the performance or enactment of that meaning. So, if we are to accept that the body according to Butler is a set of possibilities, then this leads to a twofold observation: (a) the perception of a body, by an external spectator, is not dictated by “some manner of interior essence,” (b) the concrete expression of a body “must be understood as the taking up and rendering specific of a set of historical possibilities” (Butler, 1988, p. 521).

From the point of view of my argument, description can be seen as a particular kind of agency, that is, as a process that renders such possibilities determinate. A similar correspondence could be established between the concept of the dramatic on the one hand and the aesthetic category of free play. By the concept of the dramatic, Butler means, “that the body is not merely matter but a continual and incessant materializing of possibilities” (Butler, 1988, p. 521). The body is considered as a plastic entity that can be modified by that “I” in relation to that body. But on the other hand, for the body being a historical situation, that is, a set of historical conventions, it is possible to re-draw its basic contours, to design a new embodiment according to novel lines of temporality. What can be named as style in the vocabulary of Sartre or Foucault, is actually a performative act of ascribing to oneself, via strategies of performative acts, certain features of a stylised being. And what is important to maintain from Butler’s approaches is the way she performs certain extensions and modifications to Edmund Husserl, Merleau-Ponty and George Herbert Mead’s phenomenological theory of acts and precisely the way she provides an enlarge interpretation to the processes and operations of constitution. Her reading of social conventions via the lens of social temporality can function as a model for reading artistic conventions via the lens of historical temporality. Thus, the performative appears as a constitutive force that can be deployed in the differences opened by history and in broader terms, by time.

In this context, causality and ontology are structured as well articulated differently. Both of them are open to the performative, they can be seen as guiding but not definite structures that can be mediated and re-constituted via act of descriptions that converge with acts of writing and re-writing. Accepting that causality and ontology are conditioned by history, time can be considered as a diagrammatic author, a force that traces inscriptions in a surface, that cut-offs parts creating thus the conditions for a new reading, a new performative description. A

convenient bottom line is the idea that causality and ontology, in their historical understanding, are matters of fiction, not in the sense of an alternative to reality but rather, as the complex of relations that are not yet materialised, being part of a formal discourse. Butler reflects this situation by referring to Gayatri Spivak and more specifically to ideas of operational essentialism and false ontologies (Butler, 1988, p. 529). An operational form of essentialism, a kind of a false, or equivalently in apparently negative terms, of fictional ontology, is actually a conceptual surface that summarises on the one hand, the formality or necessity of a structure or a body, and on the other hand, the awareness that it is about a process of reconstruction based on actions of performative descriptions and repetitions.

Rancière's Free Play of the Aesthetic

In Jacques Rancière works of art there are topographies of new possibilities connected to a mode of experience that refers not only to qualities of a work of art but also to qualities that do not belong to it. The manifestation of what is art along with what is not art, that is, what it wasn't destined to be part of the work of art, is a kind of a "free appearance," an experience of the free play of the aesthetic. To illustrate this point, Rancière refers to the Roman statue known as the Juno Ludovisi, stated by Schiller at the end of the 15th letter. It is about a goddess. However, the working of time, the play of its temporality, the distance between, on the one hand, its initial purpose and state and, on the other hand, its current becoming and loss of certain attributes, amount to a situation where the goddess "wears no trace of will or aim." It is about a configuration that emerged freely, out of any intention or planned action: "The statue thus come paradoxically to figure what has not been made, what was never an object of will. In other words: it embodies the qualities of what is not a work of art" (Rancière, 2015, p. 117).

In this case, "free appearance" is the appearance of what has not been aimed at as art. It is free in the sense that,

it ceases to be a suspension of the oppositions of form and matter, of activity and passivity, and becomes the product of a human mind which seeks to transform the surface of sensory appearances into a new sensorium that is the mirror of its own activity (Rancière, 2015, p. 118).

From this point on, the aesthetic as well as the aestheticisation process can be seen in relation to operations of framing and constituting a world defined by a specific content given to the art-life axis. In other words, there are different scenarios where aestheticisation acquires different meanings depending on the politics of aesthetics, that is, on the presuppositions associated with the constitution of a community, the coordinates of a common world, the framing of a new collective *ethos*. From this re-contextualisation of the "free appearance" emerges a new ground as well for the free play, or in this context, for the aesthetic play. Thus,

aesthetic play becomes “a work of aestheticization” and correspondingly, art, in this aesthetic regime of the art, is art “to the extent that is something else than art. It is always ‘aestheticized’, meaning that is always posited as a ‘form of life’” (Rancière, 2015, p. 118).

The crucial point here, is to understand the importance of the concept of life. Can a form of body like that of a statue have a life? Can a fragmented artwork have that sense of liveness? In fact, I will argue that a critical task of the aesthetic description is to give life to its object, to provide a new layering of senses by means of enacting possibilities and the performative use of the imagination so as to render a sense of life. In the representational or poetic regime of the arts, the primacy, according to Rancière, is attributed to an idea of organicity, to an idea of a whole “within which a principle of unity - a principle of proportion and concordance, governs the multiplicity”. In the representational regime of the art, “life is the life of an organism. And beauty is defined by the adjustment of the parts of the organism that makes them concur to same end” (Rancière, 2017, p. 598). On the other hand, the idea of life under the aesthetic regime of the art is performed,

by disconnecting and rearranging the relation between the notions at play in the definitions of the ends of art and the criteria of beauty; this idea of life disconnects the power of the form from the implementation of a concept, the appearance of the beautiful from the perfection of an organism and the use of a thing from its utility (Rancière, 2017, p. 597).

The Aesthetic Description of the Belvedere Torso

Under this light is that we could see the instance of an aesthetic description in Winckelmann’s description of the Belvedere Torso in the *History of the Ancient Art* published in 1764:

Abused and mutilated to the utmost, and without head, arms, or legs, as this statue is, it shows itself even now to those who have the power to look deeply into the secrets of art with all the splendor of its former beauty. The artist has presented in this Hercules a lofty ideal of a body elevated above nature, and a shape at the full development of manhood, such as it might be if exalted to the degree of divine sufficiency. He appears here purified from the dross of humanity, and after having attained immortality and a seat among the gods; for he is represented without need of human nourishment, or further use of his powers. No veins are visible, and the belly is made only to enjoy, not to receive, and to be full without being filled [...] The artist may admire in the outlines of this body the perpetual flowing of one form into another, and the undulating lines which rise and fall like waves, and become swallowed up in one another. He will find that no copyist can be sure of correctness, since the undulating movement which he thinks he is following turns imperceptibly away, and

leads both the hand and the eye astray by taking another direction. The bones appear covered with a fatty skin, and the muscles are full without superfluity, and no other statue can be found which shows so well balanced a plumpness (Winckelmann, 1880, pp. 264-5 cited in Rancière, 2013, pp. 1-2).

There is a history of additions to a mutilated body and an attempt to imagine the action accomplished by the hero. These additions, as in the case of Winckelmann's description, are a way of re-figuring a spatial loss, a writing across a field of possibilities; the missing parts of the statue is the negative field that lends itself to an aesthetic description that performs a space. According to Rancière (2013),

a mutilated statue is not only a statue lacking parts. It is a representation of a body that cannot be appreciated any longer according to two main criteria used by the representative order: firstly, the harmony proportions – that is to say, the congruence between parts and the whole; secondly, the expressivity – that is, the relation between a visible form and a character – an identity, a feeling, a thought – that this visible form makes recognizable in unequivocal traits (p. 3).

The performative arises as a product of an indetermination, of a forced state of inexpressiveness. What testifies the description of the Belvedere Torso by Winckelmann is that “beauty is defined by indeterminacy and the absence of expressivity” (Rancière, 2013, p. 6).

Here, the formula of the beauty can serve as a guiding thread for the re-figuring and reparative action as a performative one. This conception of beauty comes with a new model for vivacity that do not presuppose the effective mobility of the bodies but on the contrary, its indetermination appears to offer more dimension for performative elaboration than the sole dimension of mobility. The disruption of a material-effective formal beauty lays the ground for an undecidable state of expression, a radical form of inexpressivity that acts as a topology of possibilities where the figuration of a living expression is not dictated by a supposed correspondence with formal-organic model of beauty, but, on the contrary, by the activation of an inter-temporal set of forces that performs a never-ending interweaving of elements that do not comply with any sense of organic unity, proportionality or relation of the parts to a formal whole. For Rancière, there is a new form of art announced by the praise for the mutilated *Torso* and this is an art “of the plural compositions of movements freed by the dissociation of form, function and expression”. And within the same gesture provided by Winckelmann, an age is inaugurated; it is the aesthetic age where the artists occupied themselves to the task of,

unleashing the sensible potential hidden in inexpressiveness, indifference or immobility, composing the conflicting movements of the dancing body, but also of the sentence, the surface, or the coloured touch that arrest the story while telling it, that

suspend meaning by making it pass by or avoid the very figure they designate (Rancière, 2013, p. 9).

These artistic transformations testify the idea of an aesthetic topology, a field of possibilities in the form of a surface where is possible to convert one body into another. And for Rancière, it is exactly this situation that manifests an aesthetic performativity of the beautiful: "The tension of many surfaces on one surface, of many kinds of corporality within one body, will define beauty from now on" (Rancière, 2013, p. 9).

Aesthetic Description as Performative Act: A Process of Re-Figuring

Understanding the transformative potentials of aesthetic description as a process of re-figuring necessitates an analysis of what a figure is. Thus, in its first sense, a figure could be understood as the outside form of something, the representation of something. On the other hand, and from a graphic point of view, a figure could be seen as a matter of lines. Thus, drawing a figure simply means creating a line or a combination of lines that have the power to produce a certain signification which for its part, is a process of producing connections between a physical or mental entity and its graphical depiction. So, if we are to take in the opposite sense this path, the act of de-figuring is a process of intervening to the mechanism of signification that establishes relations of correspondence between assemblies of lines in the form of figures and meaningful senses (significations). De-figuring thus, can be considered in two ways: as a form of play and experimentation that creates suspension of meaning and indetermination in an aesthetically and perceptually rewarding manner, following the paths paved by Kant and Schiller. And in a more negative undertone, as a process of destruction, as a polemical act against the very ideas of representation and organicity. De-figuration in its broader sense means transformation. On these grounds, re-figuring can be seen as the opposite of de-figuring, as a process of reparation that unfolds from a state of indetermination to a state of actualising possibilities and creating a new sensible fabric out of an existing one, that is, a new distribution of the sensible understood both in terms of density, intensity and allocation in a generic field of senses.

Put in that way, the figure presents a dissensual function in the sense that it does not reinforce the given and somehow evident semantic content of a sensory reality but on the contrary, it performs a dissensus in the form of a semantic displacement and of an interpretation that prevents from a consensus over a definitive and determinate meaning of a sensible reality. The notion of the figure, as presented here, contributes to the refinement of the sensible texture of a sense community and the process of figuration (and re-figuration) is, correspondingly, a process of displacement within a system of relations between similarity and

dissimilarity that enriches a given sense. In the *Emancipated Spectator* Rancière provides the lines for understanding the displacement itself in the notion of the figure:

In its classical sense, the figure combined two meanings: it was a sensible presence and it was an operation of displacement that put one expression in place of another. In the aesthetic regime, however, the figure is no longer simply an expression that takes the place of another (Rancière, 2009, p. 122).

Thus, a process of re-figuring in aesthetic terms does not mean the substitution of one figure for another. It is about a new weaving, that entails performative processes of description and expression, which enables the co-existence of two or more regimes of expression without homogenizing them.

Performative Act as an Aesthetic Idea

According to Kant, an aesthetic idea is “a representation of the imagination that occasions thought without it being possible for any determinate thought” (Kant, 2000, p. 192). This kind of indetermination is produced by the distance between an artistic form, the form determined by the intention of art, and an aesthetic form, the form that is perceived without a concept and declines any idea of intentional purpose. “The aesthetic ideas are exactly those inventions of art that are capable of making this connection between two ‘forms,’ which is also a leap between two regimes of sensible presentation” (Rancière, 2009, p. 131). Rancière tried to think further the *topos* or the art of aesthetic ideas by means of expanding the concept of figure so as to make it, as we have seen in the previous section, “signify not only the substitution of one term for another but the intertwining of several regimes of expression and work of several arts and several media” (Rancière, 2009, p. 131). From this point of view, an aesthetic consideration of the performative act falls into the general description of an aesthetic idea since it is the constitution of a *topos* for the intertwining of several regimes of expression.

But one question that arises here, has to do with a more structural preoccupation. How things can stand together, whether is a matter of surfaces, bodies, or regimes of expression so as to assure an aesthetic effectivity, that is, an aesthetic performative act? Again, with reference to the Kantian analytic of the beautiful, there is a pragmatic dimension intertwined with aesthetic indetermination that Rancière presents under the concept of aesthetic efficacy, that is, “a paradoxical kind of efficacy that is produced by the very rupturing of any determinate link between cause and effect” (Rancière, 2009, p. 64). Thus, aesthetic effectivity as a form of performative act, that is, as a mode of thought and as a mode of experience that can induce changes in a field of senses, is supported by aesthetic efficacy.

As a concluding remark, we could argue that aesthetic description and performative act converge to the idea of a re-figuration of spatial loss through the model of an aesthetic idea,

that is, of the re-figuration as configuration of several regimes of expression, as a dissensual operation that transforms a given form or a body into a new one.

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