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Culture: Two Theses and Deathworks

Abstract: This brief essay seeks to unpick an overly unitary conception of culture in order to open up thought about culture as a complex negotiation and reflection of the ambivalence of the human situation. Following a passage in Pascal this ambivalence is identified as our situation between the angels and the beasts. Culture looks towards the angels and is the pursuit of *something else* than the materiality of our beastly, animal existence. First of all, culture is *metaphysical* in as much as it provides meaning. Second, culture is *excessive* in as much as it is the practice of something else. However, these aspects of culture are challenged by the unchosen social circumstances in which cultural production and reception takes place. Where then are we if the metaphysical and excessive can be no longer assumed?

Keywords: aura, culture, excess, inauthenticity, kitsch, metaphysics

‘Man is neither angel nor brute’, Pascal said. We are somewhere in the middle, aspiring towards the former but more often acting the latter¹. To be human is to be between the material *this* and an imagined, aspired *something else*. To be human is at once *this* and *other*. Where the one aspect dominates to the detriment of the other there is a more or less fatal diminution of the human.

The social is an edifice built on the beastly. It consists in the institutionally and common-sensically reinforced power-relationships of interdependency through which material needs are satisfied. It constitutes the *this*. Meanwhile, and to continue with the terms of Pascal, the cultural looks towards the angels. It consists in the *praxis* of the *other than this* through imagination and aspiration towards *something else*. This imagination and aspiration is expressed in and through relationships and productions situated within the social *this* but intimating possibilities beyond it. Put another way, the social *totalizes* and the cultural *universalizes*.

The *something else* of culture is *historically contingent* and *experientially transcendent*. It is *contingent* because it is the aspiration towards the other than *this*, and it is *transcendent* because it is aimed at the *other* than this. The *something else* can take either of two forms. It can be *metaphysical* or it can be *excessive*. There is absolutely no necessary connection between the metaphysical and the excessive,

¹ B. Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. W.F. Trotter, London 1931, p. 99.

although their differences are glossed by the very word “culture”, since it implies family resemblances where there are not necessarily any at all. Furthermore, and perhaps most obviously, there is an inherent conflict between the material *thisness* of the social, understood as the circumstances of the satisfaction of needs, and culture, understood as the imagination and aspiration of *something else*.

The discussion therefore resolves upon the dynamics of the conflict in the contemporary circumstances. The analytic task meanwhile is to keep the two forms of the *something else* quite distinct and to avoid collapsing them into some general category of “culture”. Such a collapse would lead to the misrepresentation and misunderstanding of a complex picture. I offer this paper as an *essay* to stimulate consideration of these issues². It is *deliberately declarative* in tone and content.

In this essay I am concerned to open up questions and I am quite disinterested in any move towards “certainty”. This is a world in which there is far too much certainty and asking questions, and working out what questions to ask, is a far more important task for us. The paper offers two theses about culture, and therefore about the *something else*, in our contemporary circumstances. The final part of the paper looks to the *deathwork* as a way of questioning the situation stated in the preceding theses.

Thesis 1: On metaphysics and aura

“We run carelessly to the precipice, after we have put something before us to prevent us seeing it”, Pascal said³. The precipice, to which we are all running, is death, and the very need to make this point rather proves the truth of another of Pascal’s maxims. He is talking about ‘man’ and says: “to be happy he would have to make himself immortal; but, not being able to do so, it has occurred to him to prevent himself from thinking of death”⁴.

These maxims encapsulate the conflict between the beast and the angel. We die because we are beasts, but how is this inescapable and eternal truth confronted? How is it turned towards the angels? Is it turned towards the angels?

The greatest task of culture is to enable a confrontation with death. Culture makes death *something else* than the dull fact of the end of a material, beastly, life. This is the purpose of metaphysics. More precisely, metaphysics humanizes the beastliness of death through its occupation of a position between the beasts and the angels. It does this through the address of three great questions to the materiality of the beastly. The very questioning of the beastly fact of death transforms

² T. Adorno, ‘The Essay as Form’, trans. Bob Hullot-Kentor and Frederic Will, *New German Critique*, 32, Summer 1984, pp. 151–171.

³ B. Pascal, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

it into *something else* than a merely material occurrence. Metaphysics asks where we come from, what we should do and, importantly, what happens to us when we die?⁵ Of course various answers have been offered to these questions, but the answers have three qualities in common.

First, metaphysics resolves upon a referent which is held to be independent of the material *this*. The referent — which in theological terms invariably goes by the name of the Deity — is held to be the source of meanings, greater and invariant relative to what thus become the provisional and variable meanings of material life and, by extension therefore, the social itself. The meanings issuing from the referent are compelling precisely because of the unique qualities invested in them. Metaphysics stands as the project of the discernment of the meanings issuing from the inferred referent⁶.

This leads to the *second* quality of any metaphysics. In as much as these meanings are held to come from outside of the material and social *this*, it is necessary for there to be agencies — and agents — of presence. In this way the *something else* is situated into the *this*. The referent and its properties are merely speculative fiction if not made present within the *this* from which it is otherwise held to be independent. These agencies and agents — such as religious and secular churches and priests — *fix* the presence of meaning and in so doing invest it with a quality of unique timeless authority. Where the *fixing* comes undone the agencies and agents claim an authority to decide the dispute (although whether the authority claim is respected by the other disputants is an entirely different question).

But meaning is not just fixed once and for all. It has also to be *reproduced*. This leads to the third quality of metaphysics. Cultural texts such as paintings, films, music, present and re-present the experientially transcendent and unique meanings issuing from the inferred referent. The reproduction of meaning can only happen when three conditions obtain. First, the producers of the texts must have the *intention* of carrying out a work of reproduction. Second, the audience for the texts must have the *discernment* to identify the traces of meaning. Third, and bringing the two preceding conditions together, the reproduction must be *timely*: it must be able to speak of the meanings issuing from the inferred referent in ways relevant — present — to and for the times (this is the *praxis* of *midrash*⁷). Only in this way can the *something else* be imagined by men and women who are historically situated in *this*.

These three qualities of metaphysics can be understood as a conveyor belt. Depending on where one is standing the conveyor belt either stretches down from the

⁵ The encounter of metaphysics and sociology starts with Weber's exploration of the Protestant Ethic; see: M. Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. T. Parsons, London 1930.

⁶ The theme of the inferred referent is inspired by the argument in L. Kolakowski, *The Presence of Myth*, trans. A. Czerniawski, Chicago 1989.

⁷ F. Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative*, Harvard 1979.

angels to the beasts, or up from the beasts to the angels. In both cases questions of meaning are addressed and given some sort of answer. But all of this is dependent on the relationships and institutions of the material world. Meaning requires, first of all, the capacity to imagine metaphysics and an inferred transcendent referent which is unique in relation to the flux of *this*; second, inferences of the timeless and unchanging require the presence over time of mediating agencies to connect the inferred referent and the material world; and finally the continued relevance of metaphysics depends upon the timely reproduction of meaning.

Metaphysics, and therefore meaning, is *auratic* when the conditions of referent, mediating agent and reproduction are all met. When the conditions are met meaning is both *present* and *unique*. I am of course using the word *aura* after Benjamin but his key point was about how aura has been jeopardized by the technologies of reproduction⁸. This is precisely what has happened with metaphysics.

The difficulty for metaphysics lies in the condition of reproduction. Reproduction is carried out by material agents who are, by virtue of their very materiality, situated in the relationships of interdependency. In substantive terms, the agents of reproduction are required to sell their production in the market place in order to satisfy beastly needs. Consequently the texts they produce are pulled *within*, even if they are not explicitly made *for*, the force field of the cultural industry. The culture industry is the unchosen circumstance in which the work of cultural production and reproduction takes place in the contemporary historical moment. As such the unique is replaced with the familiar and the fixity of presence is replaced with the transience of circulation in the market place. Metaphysics becomes a selling point rather than meaning. Where metaphysical claims are made in and through the culture industry they necessarily lack aura and are, instead, possessed only of what Adorno called a “jargon of authenticity”⁹.

To allude to Adorno once again, in this circumstance death becomes *naked*¹⁰. It is nakedness the culture industry allows us to see without shame and with a smile or, worse, utter indifference. The culture industry distracts us all from thinking about death and, in as much as the culture industry is antithetical to the unique and to the present, it even goes so far as to deny the possibility of thinking about death as something else than a dull material occurrence — *it just happens*. Perhaps the clearest statement of the fate of metaphysics is to be found in a single work of art. In 1987 Andres Serrano for the first time exhibited his photograph *Piss Christ*. A small plastic crucifix is submerged in a sea of Serrano’s urine (Serrano’s photograph is of course an expression of the contemporary cultural disregard of Christianity. But it is also something more: it is a testament to what has befallen authentic metaphysics).

⁸ W. Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. H. Zohn, London 1973.

⁹ T. Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity*, trans. K. Tarnowski, F. Will, London 1973.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

The difficulty of metaphysics in the unchosen circumstance of this historical moment leaves us standing, laughing happily, urinating over the precipice of our own humanity.

Thesis 2: On excess and kitsch

“The last proceeding of reason is to recognise that there is an infinity of things which are beyond it. It is but feeble if it does not see so far as to know this”, Pascal said¹¹. If this is right and if the maxim can be applied to contemporary culture, then it must be adjudged as being often feeble indeed.

The aspiration towards the *something else* makes culture *excessive* in relation to the social relationships of the satisfaction of needs. Although culture, and the aspiration towards Pascal’s angels which it represents, is necessary for us to be fully human, it is *not* necessary from the point of view of the satisfaction of material, beastly, needs. Or rather culture is only necessary to the satisfaction of material needs where it is fully implicated within the relationships of interdependency and produced as a market commodity. It is very possible to live a material life without any aspiration towards, or even imaging of the possibility of, *something else*. Such a life would be bereft of dreams and entirely within the totalized relationships and imaginations of the social *this*. It would be without any sense of the possibility of things being *other than this* and therefore it would stand as a diminished kind of life, one scarcely human in the full sense. But such a life reduced to the beastly and material alone would still be viable. This is the lesson of the “wolf children” who appear in mythology and, indeed, history. Culture then is *excessive* precisely because it exceeds the *totality* and the *totalization* of the social *this*. Culture is *universalizing* and therefore both *critical* and *world-opening* in relation to the familiarities and safe certainties of *this* (for a beautiful exploration of the critical and the world-opening see Wolff 1989. If only more sociologists wrote and thought like Wolff!). Consequently it is actually a threat to the *this*.

Such an understanding of culture is emphasised in Milan Kundera’s argument about the importance of the novel. The novel, he says, shows how things are not as simple as we have been led to believe. The novel, according to Kundera, complicates a world — what I am calling a *this* — which looks towards quick and easy answers. Instead, it raises questions and is, thereby, an aspiration for *something other than this* without ever being so arrogant or foolish as to declare in what the *something else* might consist. After all, to define the *something else* is to refute its very status as *other than this* and, moreover, it is to give just one more answer to a world already possessed of too many of them¹².

¹¹ B. Pascal, op. cit., p. 77.

¹² M. Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, trans. L. Asher, London 1986.

Relentless pursuit of the critical and world-opening threat invariably leads to material poverty on the part of the producer of cultural texts. Inevitably therefore, and since cultural producers are situated in unchosen circumstances in which beastly needs can only be satisfied through commodified market relationships of consumption and production, the hegemonic tendency is for the *excessive* to be *repressed*. Where this tendency is pursued with enthusiasm it can lead to material wealth. This is the lesson of the career of Jeff Koons¹³. The *excessive* disappears in Koons's work, unless his keen pursuit of personal wealth is itself to be interpreted as a kind of performance art of the excesses of commodity capitalism (which despite hints in the 1990–91 *Made in Heaven* series of pornographic images of himself and his then wife Ilona Staller, it is almost certainly not). It tends to be happy to profit from staying within the totality of the *this*. The prime exhibit in this regard is the gaudy statue *Michael Jackson and Bubbles* of 1988. Here the only admissible *excess* is one derived from the culture industry and commodification. This is an *excess within totality* not opening towards universality, and consequently it is also *inauthentic excess*. The same charge of inauthentic excess can be laid against the work of Damien Hirst, the cultural producer who has learnt the lessons taught by Koons better than anyone else.

Where cultural production takes place according to the requirements and demands of the culture industry, *any* intimated *excess* is *always* inauthentic. Any *excess* is, instead, *kitsch*. This is because it involves a repression of cultural production to totalization and this can only result in a distortion, if not destruction, of the universalizing ambition of culture as the aspiration and imagination of the *something else*. *Kitsch* can be defined as the condition in which cultural production *imitates* the previously produced aspirations towards the universal but does so *solely* to serve *totalizing* ends such as profit, commodification and political power. *Kitsch* is therefore dangerous because it appears to intimate the universal when, in fact, it firmly slams shut the prison doors of the *this*¹⁴.

¹³ For a comprehensive and very well-illustrated introduction to Koons, see A. Muthesius, *Jeff Koons*, Cologne 1992.

¹⁴ These remarks about *kitsch* are indebted to Herman Broch's essay in G. Dorfles, *Kitsch: The World Of Bad Taste*, New York 1969; see also H. Broch, *The Sleepwalkers*, New York 1985. These contentions, I propose, also apply to the management of emotions and the immaterial labour so strongly emphasised in contemporary capitalist relationships. When a shop worker (for instance) smiles at me and says something off a script we are both entrapped in *kitsch* totalization and totality. The only difference is that I can leave the shop whereas the worker has to perform exactly the same intimations of emotional authenticity over and over again, lest she lose her job. Then again, as soon as I enter another shop I too am entrapped once again. For the classic account of this issue see A. Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*, 3rd edition, Berkeley 2012.

With its *inauthentic excess*, *kitsch* cultural production is not *world-opening*. Rather, it is *world-doubling*¹⁵. It is *world-doubling* because it imitates without question the objectivity of the things of the *this* (witness Koons's *Michael Jackson* statue and Hirst's vitrines). There is no imagination of things beyond the *this* and *kitsch* world-doubling productions prevent aspiration and imagination opening up to *something else*, to *other than this*. Culture is consequently circumscribed and is little or nothing more than a means of the confirmation and consolidation of *this*. It is an aspect of the common-sense reinforcement of the hegemony of the *status quo*. The *something else*, the *other than this*, is repressed and refuted. Such cultural production is, to recall Pascal, *feeble*.

Kitsch cultural production, *world-doubling* cultural production in other words, can be adjudged to be feeble because it *stops thinking short*. This way of putting the matter comes from Adorno. In a conversation with Horkheimer he castigated what he called "reproductive thinking" for stopping short of admitting the possibility of thinking otherness. By the work of reason, to think *this* is at the same time to admit of the possibility of thinking the *other than this*. Yet world-doubling cultural production denies the *other than this* and, in so doing, puts reason itself inside the ever-doubling and imitative hall of mirrors of now *totalitarian totality*. The result is "general stultification" or, as Horkheimer put it, "a few clichés"¹⁶. There is no concession to the universalising infinite which reason thinks when it thinks without being stopped at the prison gates of totality. This is precisely the condition anticipated by Pascal. It is also the condition mirrored in the *kitsch* art of the likes of Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst. It is *our* hegemonic condition.

Without the recognition of the possibility of the infinity of things, we are more beast than angel.

Conclusion: Deathworks

This essay opened with an ontological claim: we humans are somewhere between the beasts and the angels. Our beastly aspect is resolved through the *social* relationships of interdependency by which material needs are satisfied. The social constitutes the *this*. Our angelic aspect is expressed through culture as the imagination and aspiration for *something else than this*. The paper then proceeded briefly to outline two theses:

¹⁵ T. Adorno, M. Horkheimer, *Towards a New Manifesto*, trans. R. Livingstone, London 2011. For an expansion of some of the theme of world-doubling see K. Tester, 'Sociology: The Active Catastrophe', *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, 2016, pp. 399–412.

¹⁶ T. Adorno, M. Horkheimer, *Towards a New Manifesto*, p. 3–5. I am *using* themes from Adorno and Horkheimer, not offering an exegesis. I am *thinking* with them not *doubling* them.

Thesis 1: Culture asks *metaphysical* questions which make death meaningful as more than a beastly material event. However, the contemporary social situation is uncongenial to metaphysics because the technologies of the reproduction of metaphysics are destructive of *aura*.

Thesis 2: Culture is *excessive* in as much as it is the aspiration and imagination of *something else*. However, the contemporary social situation is uncongenial to excess because it is repressed by the relationships of production of the culture industry.

Conclusion: the contemporary relationship between the social *this* and the cultural *something else* is unbalanced from the point of view of the equilibrium implicit to the ontological claim which was made at the beginning of the essay. Consequently, the contemporary situation is uncongenial to the possibility of a fully and properly human being.

Can the ontological equilibrium be re-established? If it can there has to be re-aurization of metaphysics and recovery of the universality of the *excessive* from the totality of the social *this*. And how might those two requirements be achieved? More precisely how can those two requirements be achieved in unchosen circumstances which will not go away just because we might want them to?

Philip Reiff spoke of his final work and life as a *deathwork* and said: “By deathwork I mean an all-out assault upon something vital to the established culture. Every deathwork represents an admiring final assault on the objects of its admiration”¹⁷.

In other words, a deathwork is a cultural production which draws extremely seriously on what the “established culture” (I prefer to say the *this*) takes to be vital, in order to point to *something else*. This is precisely what Andres Serrano did to the vitality of metaphysics, and what Jeff Koons and his acolyte Damien Hirst did to *excess*. Serrano and Koons and Hirst made deathworks because they assaulted culture on its own terms. Serrano assaulted metaphysics by taking the crucifix extremely seriously as a once-auratic symbol, and Koons assaulted *excess* by totalizing it in the commodity form. In both cases they admired what they attacked, and only attacked what they did admire. Their work is all the more dangerous because it is clever enough to seem to come with a smile alone.

The producers of *inauthentic kitsch* and not culture deny the universalizing aspirations and imaginations of opening *this* to the Pascalian angels. They admit only of the totalized beastly reduced to fundamental ingredients like urine, semen and money. Theirs are the deathworks of aspirations towards *something else*. Yet *precisely here* is the hope, *exactly here* is the possibility of bringing about the deathworks of the *this* which praises these kinds of deathworks. To *think* and not just accept or celebrate the very beastliness of these works, to *think* their drastic

¹⁷ Ph. Reiff, *My Life Among the Deathworks: Illustrations of the Aesthetics of Authority*, Charlottesville 2006, p. 7.

repression of the human to the material, is also to think the possibility of aspiration to be *other than this*. We are not *just* urine, semen and money. Despite themselves these deathworks of metaphysics and excess, these inauthentic kitsch celebrants of the material and the total, provoke the thinking of their other. To think with them is precisely to begin to think the metaphysics and excess they seek to deny. Examples of this kind of thinking with and yet intimating beyond the deathworks celebrating contemporary circumstances can be found most incisively in the films of Michael Haneke (see *Funny Games* in particular). In music the thinking can be found, extremely improbably and quite probably unintentionally (but maybe therefore all the more powerfully), in Lana del Rey's 2015 album *Honeymoon*. This album is perhaps the finest exploration of the boredom and emptiness of commodified culture and it resolves upon a question left hanging like a corpse in the lyrics of one of its songs: "You want more/Why?"¹⁸ In art relevant investigations can be read into Grisha Bruskin's *An Archaeologist's Collection* of partially excavated pseudo-artefacts of the Soviet Union (exhibited at the Venice Biennale in 2015). At the level of *gesamtkunstwerk* cracking open the *this*-ness of contemporary political order, the work of thinking with the deathworks in order to make them *something else* can be seen in the productions and practices of the artists, musicians and dramatists of the Neue Slowenische Kunst and of the Chto Delat group in Russia¹⁹.

To do what these and other cultural producers do, to think with the deathworks and not just accept them — to question their totality — is to participate in the *praxis* of the aspiration and the imagination of the death of the death of humanity.

Kultura: dwie tezy i dzieła śmierci

Abstrakt

Ten krótki esej ma na celu nieco rozluźnić nadmiernie jednolitą koncepcję kultury, by otworzyć się na myślenie o kulturze jako złożonej refleksji nad niejednoznaczną sytuacją człowieka. Podążając za PASCalem, tę ambiwalencję określić można przez nasze usytuowanie pomiędzy aniołami i zwierzętami. Kultura zwraca się w kierunku aniołów i jest dążeniem do czegoś innego niż materialność naszej zwierzęcej egzystencji. Przede wszystkim kultura jest metafizyczna, gdy oferuje

¹⁸ I would go so far as to identify the character of Lana del Rey as one of the most critical and world-opening cultural products and producers of this moment despite its deep implication in the culture industry. Everything about the character and the music is so kitsch and so inauthentic, so denuded of anything metaphysical (except for a reference to T.S. Elliot which is either knowing or inauthentic, it is hard to know), that it opens a massive crack through which *something else* might actually flood.

¹⁹ See *From Kapital to Capital: Neue Slowenische Kunst: An Event of the Final Decade of Yugoslavia*, ed. Z. Badovinac, E. Čufer, A. Gardner, Cambridge, MA 2015; D. Chto, *Time Capsule: Artistic Report on Catastrophes and Utopia*, Vienna 2014.

znaczenie. Po drugie, kultura jest nadmiarem, ponieważ jest praktyką czegoś innego. Dziś jednak te aspekty kultury są kwestionowane przez brak wyboru okoliczności społecznych, w których odbywa się produkcja kulturalna oraz jej odbiór. Gdzie zatem jesteśmy, jeśli nie możemy już dłużej zakładać istnienia tego, co metafizyczne i nadmierne?

Słowa-klucze: aura, kultura, nadmiar, nieautetyczność, kicz, metafizyka

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