

The Changes of Theory and the Perspective on/of Value

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Résumé: *À partir de la description du climat du capitalisme éducationnel actuel, le texte déroule deux mouvements: d'une part, on remarque le statut menacé de la valeur esthétique et des disciplines humanistes et aussi leurs mutations et d'autre part, c'est un plaidoyer pour une résistance nécessaire (et éthique), légitimé par une médiation sur la façon dont la valeur et le domaine des arts sont un facteur déterminant dans la définition de notre identité.*

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Opening Remarks

The concept of value is an essential one, because it constantly repositions all the fundamentals of theory. It implies the mechanisms, the judgments and legitimations, the entire geography of positions that characterize the aesthetic experience, the act of interpretation and the very existence of the humanities. It is thus a *radical* concept, both in the sense of a root (its mutations reflect and produce mutations at all the levels of theory) and in the sense of having an effect outside the aesthetic space. Any discussion around it should refer to the entire contemporary theoretical field (at least implicitly). The time that we call present shows us that the aesthetic value, which we have grown accustomed to call autonomous and which we have succeeded in the past to define through various methods, is under siege. Against it an entire paradigm seems to be at work. At least we are allowed to speculate that it proves to be a fierce opponent. Resistance in its name (even though not necessarily for the sake of its autonomy) seems to be, once again (similar to Kantian times), an ethical responsibility.

Resistance to Value

The idea of resistance to value, beyond the possible connection to Paul de Man and his vision of what theory is (most likely an important and valid connection, one that would also stress the idea of the resistance of value to value, but this is not our topic here), manifests nowadays more like a loss of trust in humanism and its vague (from a pragmatic perspective) concepts: spirit, liberty, responsibility, etc. The autonomy of value is not regarded as credible, because it cannot be proven. The capitalist system in the cultural and educational areas needs clear data, concrete measures that could

counterbalance its fear of being subverted. The only way in which capitalism could deal in the past with an autonomous value was represented through various scientific theories applied to arts, the triumph of one form of structuralism or another. Such theories have now lost their appeal. In a political field based on lobbies, the aesthetic value remains either a bourgeois feature (through which several privileges are protected) or a subtle, yet ferocious feature of Western imperialism. It all depends on the political position from which the observer judges our times.

The way in which art could be integrated and understood (and also protected in its autonomy) within a global capitalist system, a market economy, and a system of education that has continuously become a mimetic form of this economy inside which the spiritual autonomy of the teacher is reduced, if not completely erased, through the obligation of his performing in a strict and pragmatic universe of careers and publications – all this depends essentially on how we understand the concept of value.

The Contemporary System and the Changes of Theory. The Autonomy of Value as a Problem

In an epoch and a paradigm in which the hybrid subject seems now to be the norm, the purity and autonomy of the aesthetic value can no longer be defended. The plurality of dimensions implied, the intersection of multiple factors, the importance of the evolution and the mutations of history impose a detailed and cautious (as each theoretical step is always prone to misunderstandings that we must take into account) redrawing of the understanding of value. I would like to believe that there is another option apart from trying to prove the necessity of an autonomous aesthetic value or simply subordinating it to other things. Traditionally, it was regarded as essential in order to justify the autonomy of an entire field of knowledge and also to allow a configuration of human existence within a humanist horizon that affirms liberty and responsibility.

It is fit here to remind ourselves that the autonomy of the aesthetic comes from the Kantian process of finding the fundamentals of a transcendental ego, universal and pure (outside any interests), which, by judging beauty in complete autonomy, will so much more be capable of ethical judgments. In other words, for Kant the aesthetic field (positioned as pure) is important as a necessary (demonstrative and legitimate) link in the chain that leads from theoretical reason (the intellect) to practical reason. Universality without the concept of the judgment of taste (a link in the process of legitimation of a practical reason that also works outside the concepts of theoretical reason) is possible because the subject that upholds and positions the judgment, by renouncing its peculiarities and contexts, has access to a de-particularized and thus stable subject. It's important to note once again that Kant goes beyond the classic and rational way of understanding the objectivity and solidity of value through essentialist explanations or through positioning value as being given along with other characteristics

of objects. The subject/ego is the center of the Kantian process, even if at times it is a disrupting one.

Later on (in the last decades of the 19th century and the first decades of the 20th), the justification for autonomy is explained through multiple factors. First, in the early Modernist context of fascination for the scientific model and the evolution towards a pragmatic society, in order to remain a field of knowledge, as stable as the scientific ones, a field that could uncover truths about human life, more stable and clear than in Romantic times, art needed its autonomy. Philosophy as metaphysics, although suffering its first defeats around these times, still imposed the need for an organized, logical and economical knowledge (full of well-defined categories and types that reduce the complexity and so the possibility of plurality of meanings and interpretations, perceived as unstable, confusing and unworthy of rational attention). In this context, art and aesthetics needed to find a way that could be understood as both organized (scientific) and pure (autonomous). Psychology and, a bit later, existentialist theories entered this scene, either reducing the powers and charisma of art or reinforcing them through various means. The epoch was complex and is worth a longer study, but here we are mainly interested in what has been lost, between Kant's world and our own.

The concept of subject has suffered multiple adaptations and adjustments. After being deconstructed, almost erased in some cases, it is nowadays brought back but in a strongly modified formula. Its wounds and fractures cannot be simply healed or negated. A hybrid (in cultural theory) or a risky and radical position (in late Derrida or Žižek or several French authors), it brings about an implosion that disseminates without control all the things that in the past depended on it. Amongst them, the problem of value. Value itself becomes a hybrid, and that severely affects its autonomy and consequently the entire system that was or is connected to art nowadays (education at the front of it).

Humanism as the horizon of legitimacy of Western culture has also been under siege. It is either perceived as a suspect illusion (Habermas did try to talk about the unfinished project of Modernity but that seems now mostly a melancholic and in itself problematic vision). Ethically, humanism is still regularly brought on the contemporary scene as an argument, but the efficiency of this, inside a world globally devastated by capitalism, is also very limited. At best, humanism is now a neuter term, kept outside all the conflicts and transformations. As such a certain dose of scepticism is attached to it and as a result, the connection between art and humanity loses its power. In a world now controlled by the laws of capital, art either surrenders and plays along or it is simply marginalized. There is probably a humanist retreat at work; maybe humanism is getting prepared to fight back at some point, but it is certainly in no central position in our times. The failures of real communism have also heavily affected the ideas of community, ethics and value.

Western society has found ways of integrating (some) minorities and theories, in order to reduce their violent potential and also to the benefit of capital. Postcolonialism, feminism, queer theory, etc. have all been ingurgitated by capital, but at a cost. The pragmatic and economic drive have severely affected the autonomy of the aesthetic value and integrated arts and humanities into other disciplines, mainly scientific and/or

political ones. There seems to be no position nowadays from which art and humanities (and thus theory) can retaliate or fight back. We can only find them disseminated in the bureaucracy of institutions, regulated by criteria of quantity and profit, political correctness and multiculturalism that in reality reduce differences to a controlled interplay on a stage that they are not allowed to define in any way. The autonomy of education within capitalism is often affirmed, but it functions as a farce, as the autonomy of someone who has no power, instruments or methods to bring about change in any way.

Along all this history, succinctly presented here, the loss of autonomy has been regularly perceived as a crisis. Husserl talked about this, and so did Adorno and other philosophers. Left-wing politicians or authors have tried to reconnect art to its human values, to rekindle its emancipatory and even revolutionary powers, while right-wing politicians and academics have continued their process of reducing art to a set of clichés that have no possibility of disturbing the circulation of capital.

In many ways, the battle seems lost. Or maybe we are just caught inside a self-limiting configuration of reality.

The Movement of Forms. The Place and Substance of Value

We will now approach the problem from a different perspective: perhaps more important, but certainly much more difficult, tackling value directly. What is its *place*, what is its *substance*?

We will leave aside the two extremes between which tradition has moved: value as an objective quality of things or acts/experiences and value as a subjective judgment/impression. We need to understand, if possible, value in the act of mutation. A comparable perspective was already adopted by Russian formalism and later by hermeneutical theories, theories of reception and some of the poststructuralist ideas.

We could go as far back as the Hegelian system, even if, in its dialectics, mutation has the main role of legitimating the integration of history within reason and knowledge. The idea of necessity applied to history and to the mutations of form and mentality has nevertheless disappeared as the distance between Hegel's thought and our times grew. The repeated failures of an understanding of value as objective are supplemented by those of a dialectical understanding of value (in which mutation in itself equals value – from modernist ideas that stress novelty and difference to reception theories that impose the use of aesthetic distance). The movement and mutation of a form no longer hides, in a phenomenological strategy of visible and invisible, value. Presently, mutation exposes the announced absence of value, the void, the illusion that takes the *place* of value, it reflects its quality of *trace*. Considering mutation in itself as the perfect definition of value was a(n) (essentially Modernist) way of trying to accept and adjust to the idea that history modifies, a way of taming a temporality that could not be controlled either through objective or subjective means. The emptying of the *place*, in the sense that dialectics and traditional methods fail to establish it, to fill it with a rigid and recurrent identity, could lead to relativism. This is indeed the mainstream perception in the capitalist world. It is also why, on the basis of a lack of understanding and more

often a lack of reading the texts of the so-called postmodern authors (especially French ones), fears could arise and accusations were made that these authors facilitate the capitalist understanding and its impositions and restrictions on culture. On the other hand, the pragmatic reaction (more to the right than to the left) assumes that it can mend the situation through political negotiations and a new type of order. Universities for example, in the Romanian space but not only, tend to integrate the idea of value in a strictly capitalist equation: the way careers are made possible, the orientation and mutation of education according to the demands of the market economy, the financial criteria, the lack of trust (only texts and research published in certain accepted journals is considered valuable), redefining entire fields of knowledge or even eliminating them, etc. – all these moves are a testimonial to the profound anxiety towards any other way of regulating and valuing education that are not ready to be integrated in a circuit of numbers and bureaucracy. Global capitalism assures its own protection by controlling all mutations according to its own rules. We have abandoned a world based on reason, spirit and human creativity for one ruled by economic structures and the possibility of profit.

These should not be the only options left. Mutation no longer simply equals value. Pragmatic understandings of value should also not become our only mechanism, when the traditional ones are in a profound crisis. We should go back and meditate, first of all, on a few questions. What does a movement of form that escapes the control of an evaluative discourse mean? It is a form that we cannot define according to a presumed interior essence?

It's inevitable that we should abandon the idea that a control in strict and final terms is possible. The search for a law that would always regulate the movement of forms should be over. Similarly, the hope of predicting mutations and behaving accordingly is equally suspect. Literary criticism, for example, always inclined to predict, to judge, is just a reflection, an organizing voice of a social and historical place. It organizes, it even delineates the place that it needs in order to function. This place and its constant drawing, its fragile contours and everything that it implies should be part of any judgement. Not understanding this, pretending that this place and its plurality do not exist is as suicidal as considering that it is the only source of value, that it somehow dictates everything. History has tried both. It is time to give up this search of purity and rigid control.

The effect of this giving up is not however, as it might appear to the eyes of certain authors from the last decades, historical relativism. What is abandoned is not the possibility of value. Of history. Or even identity. The past and the present function as effects of a complex interaction. They are the effects of form-moving, of the dynamics of understanding, of the surprises (even shocks) of creation. They don't have an identity prior to this interaction and they do not control each other. Interpretation is not, at least when it functions and does not simply pretend that it functions, a power structure. This is still the field of arts, under siege as we have noted in the paragraphs above. The hermeneutics of the '70s hoped that the interaction of all these factors could be understood as a kind of negotiation in which identities adjust to each other. The Santiago

School of the '90s, traversing fields as diverse as neurology and aesthetics, maintained that identities are produced by mutations, relations, etc. Between the hope of strict control of positions and their dialogue (a geographical theory, let us say) and one that opens and diffracts understanding in a never ending process (deconstruction), there might be an attitude that borrows from each of these positions, while still offering the chance of a reality that works, that can be conceived and acted upon in conformity to an understanding of value. Multiple forms of control meet each other. They negate, traverse, modify each other. Understanding them from a single point of view (a privileged eye) is an illusion. Their interaction can however be understood to a degree that is important enough to permit intervention. Action. Ethical and/or creative action.

Understanding Value. A Proposition.

1. We can state certain things at this point. Observations, but also affirmations. They are inevitably partial. They act as a bridge between two theoretical positions. In other words, it is just a testing of the weaving process of understanding, an experiment or an exploration. Here they are:

Aesthetic value is (no longer) outside history.

It is not objective.

It is not subjective.

In its perception and constitution, a few factors cannot be erased: the history of mentalities, the mutations of paradigms, the dynamics of forms, the genealogy of definitions that are relevant to a certain present time.

Beyond these affirmations that could describe the visibility of our theoretical times, we can add that we seem unable to escape the *specter* of value or even a spectral value. One cannot fully alter the *place* or the substance of a concept, in a gesture of reiteration, of a priori purity. A concept is always a palimpsest, just like any theory is entangled (with)in the fabric of distinctions, caught in the inevitable fabric of the other theories. In this way, the idea of a genealogy of a theory, of a concept (such as that of aesthetic value) can be retraced through a geometry or pictural geometry of specters. The aesthetic value does not simply cease to exist, does not vanish within the perimeter of the cultural theories that overlook it. Captured as defendant, it practically restates its force and energy, proving itself a motif of the fight. A theory can only insist upon other threads of the fabric, but within this fabric which finds the specter, it signals towards it inevitably, ceaselessly and with no final solution.

2. Let us focus again on the perception of value as mutation, as *fracture*. The primordial structural framework of this perception can be extracted from the modern paradigm and adapted through Gadamer's hermeneutics and through an understanding of the mutation of forms, where form replaces genre as such: where genre generalizes and embraces structures only, form is interested only in the works that are valid from a creative point of view. We are talking about a creative form, one that makes the selection

from the point of view of the movement/mutation. The aesthetic value, within these dimensions, is originality and difference plus influence and creative effect. Furthermore, a historical stability (i.e. a dynamic one) of forms and mentalities is implied. Fragments of time, epochs or paradigms could be defined within a reasonably stable horizon, albeit never a rigid or final one.

Mutations are also subject to continuous reconfigurations. As a consequence, the horizons they help define will never escape mobility, and yet this instability is not a fragility that we should deplore. It reflects our own identity and the dynamics of life. Forms are constantly reconfigured, interpreted from different points of view. Difference is at work, even fracture, fissure or the possibility of radical events. They should not be understood as a way of making a distinction between two stable identities or a way of transforming one into the other. Distinction is hardly possible between the structure of a form and its de-structuring, between law and its undoing (not its breaking). Derrida has extensively written about the work of mourning, undecidable, but present, lacking identity, but still relevant and efficient, without place, but at work, disseminating this work in the ego and the other, through a movement that constantly questions the distinction between the ego and the other.

This is a place similar to the one that aesthetic value holds nowadays. Undecidable, but relevant. Caught at the crossroads of multiple threads, all tensed, all fracturing, and yet all functioning. Theory itself has no *place*, executes no work, leaves no traces outside this value. If there is a place for theory (literary and also cultural theory, more vast than the traditional borders), it could be this very place without place of the aesthetic value. And if the place is without place, if tensions are at work, if specters abound and intersect their voices with what we (still) believe to be ours, an ethics is involved and with it the necessity of acting, resisting, recommencing. An ethics for the other and for the advent of an event made possible by this relation with the other. An other that is not, as Husserl still believed, an ego that behaves similarly to the self and thus deserves my understanding of him as a being endowed with reason. More likely, it is the other as a fracture that brings into visibility forms and their temporary existence. The other as a fracture that tests values (and the way I define them) each time we interact. Among them the aesthetic value, no longer pure and autonomous, but equally not controlled by other values. In touch with them, in community with them, a voice that is both the undoing and affirmation of the other voices.

We are internal to *this* value. We take part in its formation, performing in the same act our own formation. Here again words prove to be slippery and concepts seem to be spectral. Value is related to us, but not at our disposal, it is not ours. Not even through language, intellect or intuition. Its work collects and traverses our internal schizoid being, the fragility of each identity. In an exercise that would go back to humanism (another specter that we cannot erase or liberate ourselves from, because the idea of liberation is in itself fundamentally humanist) we could ask: even if we admit that hierarchies are speculative and violent, this geography of what in the past we called subject (or even Subject), interiority or authenticity and in which we now notice only forms of resistance to ideology and pragmatism, this *position* in which nothing lives or

subsists, haunted, excluded from any systematic equation, and yet vocal, is this position so marginal that it is not worth discussing, meditating upon, allowing it to have a say in our fields of knowledge and in a system of education that would still consider it to be relevant?

3. The question is not merely rhetorical. It does not simply suggest that our field of knowledge has been lost. It affirms as directly as possible that this field needs defending. Capitalism does not allow resistance from within in the sense of correction or adjustment. Its criteria need to be counterattacked efficiently and powerfully. Perhaps it is time for some kind of guerrilla-theory. The kind of theory that will not limit itself to observing how values are redistributed according to political, economical and social needs and principles. The kind of theory that would clearly look doomed to failure each time it is at work, but it would still leave a mark – its practice cannot be erased, its voice will be added to the plurality of those around it, a specter that announces itself and functions as a Derridean promise (the University to come, the democracy to come, etc). Not necessarily a theory to come, but a theory coming as an interpellation and an apostrophe. Our work is in the trace of its work, inside the configuration of its position. To be sure, it is an unstable *position*, offering few certainties or predictions. Nevertheless, as long as we still believe in language and in the identity of a pronoun, this is most likely *our* place.

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