

The Art of Revolution¹

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“The Revolution, in any case, will always risk falling back into the old rut, but as an event whose very content is unimportant, its existence attests to a permanent virtuality and cannot be forgotten. For future history, it is the guarantee of this continuity of an approach to progress”.

– Foucault echoing Kant

What is Revolution?

Towards the end of the 20th century, Foucault revisited a question that Kant addressed towards the end of the 18th century, the timeless but always timely question concerning the nature of revolution.² To ascertain whether or not there is guaranteed progress for humankind, Kant insists upon the necessity of a sign. A sign of what, you might ask. A sign of the existence of a cause – a permanent cause that has guided humanity on the path to progress throughout history. This sign has to show that things always have, always will and always do serve human progress. Put differently, to qualify as a sign it has to be rememorative, prognostic and demonstrative in nature. Kant locates this sign of humanity’s certain progress in *revolution*. According to him, however, revolution as an event having the value of a sign does not “reside in grand gestures or major infamous acts committed by men following which what was great among men is rendered small, or what was small is rendered great, nor in ancient and brilliant buildings which disappear as if by magic while in their place others rise in some way from the depths of the earth. No, nothing like that”.³ What is at stake in revolution is neither the reversal of empires or

¹ Published in 2007 in *Revolution is Not a Garden Party*. (Eds.) Maya & Reuben Fowkes. Manchester: Manchester Institute for Research and Innovation in Art and Design (MIRIAD), Manchester Metropolitan University, pp. 66-71.

² Foucault, M. (1983). “What is Revolution?”, in Lotringer, S. & Hochroth, L. (Eds.)(1997). *The Politics of Truth*. USA: Semiotext(e), pp. 83-100.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 91-92.

fortunes, nor great catastrophes causing the disappearance of established states or powers and the appearance of new ones. Rather than in great events, the sign of progress is to be found in events that are much less ostentatious, much more inconspicuous.

But is a revolution not by its very nature a resounding event? Is it not the event par excellence that deposes the powerful, empowers the weak, reverses fortunes and statures thereby dissolving what appeared to be most durable? According to Kant, it is not the revolutionary drama and denouement itself that makes for its significance. What constitutes its rememorative, demonstrative and prognostic value is the way in which the Revolution “turns into a spectacle... the way it is received all around by spectators who do not participate in it but who watch it, who attend the show and who, for better or worse, let themselves be dragged along by it”. The revolutionary cataclysm cannot possibly serve as any kind of proof of progress. For how progressive is an event that merely inverts things, an event that one would not want to repeat if given the opportunity? Paradoxically, “[i]t matters little if it succeeds or fails”.⁴ The outcome has nothing to do with progress and the Revolution certainly does not stand the test of Nietzsche’s Eternal Return of the same. As an enterprise not fit for recurrence or even a single repetition, the Revolution cannot in itself be considered as the sign that there exists a cause capable of sustaining the constant progress of humanity throughout history.

Beyond the Revolution, the sign of progress is to be found in what happens all around the Revolution, in the heads of the spectators – those who do not participate in it, neither as the principal actors nor as active agents. It is the fervour evoked by the revolutionary spectacle – its visual impact – that constitutes the sign of humanity’s moral predisposition. This moral predisposition in turn determines their political fate for it becomes manifest in the right of all people to choose the political constitution that suites them and that safeguards them against war.⁵

Revolution in Kant therefore becomes a sign of progress therein that it testifies to a predisposition in human nature, a “faculty of progressing”. It is this will for revolution rather than the revolutionary enterprise itself that constitutes the art of revolution. It is an

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

art because it is the Revolution as a visually striking display that awakens us from our dogmatic slumber, that evokes the passion for justice, against war.

The Revolutionary in Art

So if the art of revolution consists in exploiting the spectacle rather than the cataclysm, then the revolutionary in art would consist in effecting that “primordial feeling” that insures humanity’s continuation along the path of progress. Is this the role of art in revolution? Is this what makes art potentially revolutionary? Does the art of revolution hold the key to the revolutionary in art? Or perhaps it is suggestive of the fact that artful revolution is necessarily artistic. Foucault not only taught us about the imbrication of power and knowledge but also that this “politics of truth” can only be resisted from within. Moreover, he proposed the aestheticisation of existence as a means to secure increased freedom for the individual in an age of ever-proliferating controls and regulations. To constantly reinvent oneself, to recreate your subject identity differently entails a transgressive sensibility, challenging and subverting those forces that pre- and overdetermine what we are and what we can do. Continual self-transformation – life as art and art as a way of life – therefore becomes a necessary condition for retaining a semblance of freedom amidst one’s embeddedness in power. It will be ethical therein that it facilitates a generous responsiveness towards those excluded by oppressive regulations, and political therein that it safeguards against domination and oppressive regimes. Art as life and life as a form of art is revolutionary in that it seeks to undermine the insidious working of power by opposing it with a creative counterstroke.

Foucault is renowned for his conception of power as an all-pervasive field of enabling forces defining every aspect of our existence. This mobile network of acting and reacting relations implies that power and resistance go hand in hand. If the workings of power are no longer countered by the necessary resistance, the mobile dialectic becomes stultified and congeals into domination. Power is therefore not inherently bad but dangerous. From this perspective, the present hegemonic neo-liberal architecture of our socio-economic and political existence is revealed as the crystallization of danger, the petrification of what needs to remain fluid if there is to be freedom, movement, life in any meaningful sense of the word. How to resist the often invisible and always insidious meshes of such an interlaced, ever proliferating, and all-inclusive network-power? Today even Foucault’s turn to art as revolutionary means finds itself falling prey to the wholesale aestheticisation of our lifeworld, the neo-liberal “commoditisation” of cultural

and artistic production. The usurpation of creativity by capitalism is succeeding in extending the long arm of neo-liberal power even into our enclaves of resistance. The cat awaits the bird in its nest it would seem.

To be sure, power can only be resisted from within. The art of revolution, in this context, depends on the extent to which the revolutionary potential of art can be maintained despite the usurpation of the aesthetic by precisely those powers it seeks to resist. The art of revolution would consist in harnessing strategically positioned points of resistance that would open up more possibilities for thought and action as opposed to the perpetuation of global capitalism's suffocating hold and the further attenuation of our freedom.

The art of revolution as conceptualised by Kant in terms of the spectacle rather than the actual cataclysmic event seen against the backdrop of Foucault's analyses of power and the all-pervasive present usurpation of the aesthetic by the powers that be and its resultant neutralisation as revolutionary means necessitates a revaluation of art. How can the aesthetic retain its revolutionary potential? How does art relate to revolution understood as the evocation of a feeling – that primordial feeling that insures the progress of humanity?

Radical Passivity

This primordial feeling that is also an ethical injunction is reminiscent of Levinas's phenomenological analyses of what happens when faced by the needy other. As we know, the moral of Levinas's philosophy is the necessity to take responsibility for the other person. Levinas claims that taking care of others in need is not a free, rational decision but a fundamental responsibility that is inherently part of being human. When we encounter an orphan begging on the street our responsibility to help him/her is not a question of rational deliberation but an unavoidable duty that is pre-consciously felt. We are passively obligated before we can actively choose to help. This "radical passivity" is therefore not at odds with our altruistic duty but the necessary condition for ethical action. Levinas believes that we can only act once we have become re-sensitised – awakened through a kind of paralytic shock – paralysed into action, as it were. This paralytic shock is produced when the face of the other person turns to me and addresses me. Levinas argues that the needy other incapacitates our normal selfish

ways and this radical passivity enables us to recognise our inherent responsibility towards others in need.

What happens in radical passivity might be best explained in terms of George Bataille's fascination with the photograph of the torture of a Chinese man. The image depicts a man being dismembered and disembowelled while being kept conscious with opium. This is betrayed by the expression on the sufferer's face – at once ecstatic and intolerable. Bataille became obsessed with this image in which ecstasy and immortal pain collide. The horribly demented violence of the image, the suffering undergone by the vulnerable other, caused him to become extremely upset. It distressed him so much that he became delirious, distressed to the point of immobilisation.⁶ This obsession is the “substance” of Levinas's ethics: involuntary fascination, arresting paralysis that overcomes conscious thought. “One does not merely observe a scene here. For, when the other person is drained of all substance, when his reality *is* his erosion... then the borders between stage and audience are suspended and we are ‘involved’, ‘elected’, ‘singularized’. The paralysis of the subject is an uncontrollable rapport with the other person that absolves all proper difference between Same and Other... an intimacy more profound than sympathy or empathy”.⁷

Passivity in the radical sense is therefore a paradoxical notion: it precedes the passivity-activity opposition and functions as necessary condition for activity or agency. It is passive with regard to *itself*, and thus submits to itself as though it were an exterior power. Hence, radical passivity harbours within itself *a potentia* – a power or enabling force. In this sense, passivity evokes passion – not knowledge, not the rational realisation of responsibility but pre-conscious passion, what Levinas also refers to as “the primordial feeling”. Precisely by virtue of being a feeling, this encounter with the Other is not only an outward dynamic but also has an inward impact on the subject itself.⁸ For Levinas, this movement of descent into the underground of the I spells the ethical redefinition of the self. In other words, the ascending intentionality of feeling, the direct and intense contact with the Other is linked with a descending movement into the

⁶ Bataille, G. (1986). *De tranen van eros*. Nijmegen: SUN, p. 244.

⁷ Wall, T. C. (1999). *Radical Passivity. Levinas, Blanchot, and Agamben*. New York: State University of New York Press, p. 54.

⁸ Levinas, E. (1987). *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. Alphonso Lingis. Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, pp. 62-62, footnote 4.

subject itself. Insofar as the “blind, bare contact” with the Other is a primordial feeling – a “jolt, a shiver, a spasm”⁹ – this contact likewise brings about a fundamental change in the subject itself.

Now, even though Levinas never developed this line of thought and even proceeded to diverge from it, he nevertheless provides us with the essential clue to unravelling the enigma of our art-revolution dialectic. If the art of revolution resides not in its violent drama of upheaval but in the effect and affect evoked by the spectacle then art could be instrumental in revolution if it could effect such a powerful affect. “Can things take on a face?”, asks Levinas. “Isn’t art an activity that gives things a face?”¹⁰ If art has the power to give things a face, i.e. the power to evoke that primordial feeling, a paralysis that paradoxically enables effective action – action that informs the will to revolution, not the revolutionary drama itself but the moral responsibility to insist upon an appropriate political constitution that protects against war – then art has the power to be truly revolutionary!

⁹ Levinas, E. (1996). *Proper Names*, trans. Michael B. Smith. Stanford California: Stanford University Press, p. 114.

¹⁰ Levinas, E. (1951). “Is Ontology Fundamental?”, in Levinas, E. (1998). *Entre nous*, trans. Michael B. Smith & Barbara Harshav. London: The Athlone Press, p. 10.

