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Review Essay

PAINTING'S DOUBLE

Peter Murphy

A review of Andrew Benjamin, *Disclosing Spaces: On Painting* (Manchester: Clinamen Press, 2004)

Of the endless billions of images our brains register in a life-time, only a handful stay with us. They haunt our imagination, in ways that are almost unaccountable. These constitute art. While we recognize them intuitively, we are hard pressed to explain them or to explain why most of the images we see or hear make hardly any impression on us at all. No amount of special pleading on behalf of any of these orphaned images makes barely any difference either. Ask record pluggers or any of the vast army of arts marketers. Even the most neglected great works will find a place belatedly in the pantheon, while most of what pretends to art invariably ends up in oblivion. So what is it that makes that tiny handful of images that we recognize as art, and that abide with us through life, art after all? Why that handful, and not others? Why is art so unjust in favoring so few? Andrew Benjamin is one of those rare critics who has some very illuminating things to say about this matter. His close observations of artworks yield some exceptional insights. He can explain why certain works function as art in a way that most works aspiring to that status do not. In other words, he explains the cruel selectivity of the artworld.

SIMULTANEITY

Edward Hopper's *Nighthawks* (1942) is a case in point. It is an icon of American painting. Flick through any hefty tome on American art and *Nighthawks* is one of a handful of works that always stands out. Most of Hopper's other paintings are not nearly as good as this one. *Nighthawks*, though, is fabulous. The question, however, is why, and Benjamin provides a superlative explanation of the painting's poignant quality. He patiently unravels

the uncanny two-in-one nature of the work. There is firstly the matter of the painting's relation to photography. *Nighthawks* is an after-effect of the medium of photography. It is not photographic, yet, as Benjamin notes, it has a relation to photography. It frames the urban field photographically. This gives the painting a double character as a painting that contains a photographic shadow. It has a photo-like quality, yet it is a painting that does what the artless snap shot tries but fails to do. Anyone who has taken a snap shot has attempted to capture a moment forever. Yet when the photos are looked at later, the sought-after sense of that moment is usually missing. This is because, as Benjamin points out, what a routine photo tries but always fails to do is to capture the simultaneity of a moment.

In a photographic art image, like Jeff Wall's *The Stumbling Block* (1991), the reason for that failure becomes clear. Wall's image combines together two separate temporal moments into one moment. The first is a walker who stumbles. The second, artistically compressed into the same moment, are other passers-by who respond to the stumble. This creates, as art typically does, an uncanny double—in this case of time that is out of joint. As Benjamin notes, Wall creates an impossible union of two things—a stumble and its being responded to in an identical instant. The same kind of uncanny artistic unity is repeated on several levels in Hopper's *Nighthawks*. The effect of this is memorable. This is because it creates a simultaneity that gives the painting its slightly surreal feel. At the bar in the diner are seated an intimate couple and another person sitting in solitude. The resulting relations of anonymity and intimacy, as Benjamin observes, are held together in an image that is defined by the moment and yet, in being held together, open up the relationality beyond the moment. This kind of doubling does not stop there, either. *Nighthawks* contains multiple double relations of this kind. It unifies a series of oppositions, and it is this large number of uncanny internal relations that give the painting its superb haunting quality.

Nighthawks is composed of two frames. One is of the general urban landscape, and the second is of the diner. As Benjamin notes, these are not organized as a figure on a background, but rather as figure on figure. The conventional opposition of figure and background is overcome in the painting, and is transformed into relationality. What, in other cases, might have been an urban background becomes, in Hopper's painting, a figure in its own right. The inky blue blacks and dirty greenish grays of the street serve as counterpoint to the illuminated diner with its sliver of yellow interior and its welcoming green base. The leathery red of the diner bar and the semi-lit building frontages across the street knits the two figures together. Figure one and figure two are echoed in the picture's play of warmth and coldness, anonymity and intimacy. These contrary elements function in symbiosis like Jeff

Wall's image of time one and time two, the stumble and the impossible simultaneous response to it. They exhibit the relationality of art. Relationality is Benjamin's term for the simultaneity of time, event, action, sound and word. It involves the coexistence of opposites. This is the core nature of art. It is also the nature of what is evocative and unforgettable in general human experience. All such experience, in its most interesting moments, is undecidable. It is enigmatic. It occupies an uncanny space between motion and response such that both co-mingle in mysterious, almost inexplicable, ways. Each maintains its individuality but both are knotted together in an enigmatic union. Meaning wells up from this kind of undecidable encounter.

UNDECIDABILITY

I disagree with Benjamin's account of painting in a couple of respects. Both bear upon the undecidability of great art. The first concerns politics. Benjamin rightly supposes that great artworks can be continuously re-interpreted in the same way that genres of painting, and indeed painting itself, can be re-worked. Innovation in art is a function of the continuity of art. This is an important observation. What makes continuity and innovation one and the same is what makes great art works great—the undecidability of these works. Dissenting interpretations of art works, like genre innovations, appear periodically. They challenge critical and productive orthodoxies. Benjamin draws a parallel with politics. Dissent, he argues, is art's politics. Here I disagree. The real significance of art for politics, and politics for art, lies not in art's dissent but in its undecidability. Like Hopper's *Nighthawks* or Cézanne's *Mont Sainte-Victoire and the Viaduct of the Arc River Valley* (1882-1885), politics melds figure and figure, time one and time two, anonymity and intimacy. It is the enigmatic intersection of liberal and conservative, Democrat and Republican, agrarian and industrialist that makes politics interesting. It is this 'parasensus'— and not dissensus or consensus—that is the art of politics. The art of politics is not just a lame analogy. It has real effects in the world. Occasionally, moments occur in political life that possess a kind of enigmatic greatness. Lincoln's appearance on the stage of history is a case in point, Churchill's also. These are not figures of dissensus or consensus but of both simultaneously. Their acts are as difficult to read but as resonant as a great work of art. Endlessly interpreted and discussed, dissented from and consented to, it is their capacity to meld the incommensurable, to bridge Whig and Republican, Liberal and Conservative, and turn background into figure, and abut figure and figure, which lends them a transcendent quality.

A second point of disagreement with Benjamin concerns his desire to set aside the outside of art works. He wishes to call into question the idea of artistic representation, the defining of an image in relation to its outside. He wants us to think of images as determined by internal relations rather than by relations between the exterior and interior of the image. He has a point. The importance of an art work is not what it is 'about' in any singular sense. After all, serious and mediocre artworks are equally 'about' something. Each refers to something outside of itself. It is tempting to say, then, that the outside of a work is inconsequential to its work as art. But that is not quite true. There are millions of images of houses. That does explain why the image of Édouard Manet's *The House at Rueil* (1882) hangs on my lounge-room wall. It is a captivating work in part because of the play of warm-cool color and overlapping symmetries in the painting. Yet, it is a significant work not for that reason alone. For, as Benjamin's own theory of painting makes clear, abstraction ultimately is not separable from figuration. Gerhard Richter's work *Tourist (with 2 Lions)*, a painting of a photograph, underscores the impossibility of drawing an absolute distinction between figuration and abstraction. The artist takes a clear photographic image and blurs it. The blurring is the artistic act of production. The result is a sumptuous abstraction that is like a figure in real life seen through an opaque glass window. The abstracted image on the opaque surface retains a trace of the figure. The figure is transfigured in line and color. The action performed is like that of the aptly-named pop group Blur, whose Beatlesque harmonies and melodies are blurred by the punk guitar of Graham Coxon and the electronic washes of Daman Albarn. The result—such as on the recorded work *13*—is art.

What makes a painting interesting—indeed what makes any artwork interesting—is its capacity to unite oppositions including abstraction and figure but also the oppositions of outside and inside, and of form and subject. It is painting's power of doubling that attracts the human imagination, and that keeps us coming back time and again to the same image. Manet's portrayal of a French country house is irreducibly figurative. Yet, mediocre artists also love to depict country houses. So what is the difference that makes the difference? In the case of serious works of art, the subject portrayed is always double. The central figure of *The House at Rueil* summons up the spirit of continuity and decline, permanence and change, time one and time two, simultaneously. Color, line, and architectonic arrangement all play their part in this. The technique of the artist is superb. Without technique, i.e. the work of the work, the painting would not succeed. Yet without an uncanny subject, it would fail as well. Both are necessary.

Benjamin's supple analysis of Jacques-Louis David's history painting, *The Lictors Bring to Brutus the Bodies of His Sons* (1789), illustrates further why this is the case. His critical analysis shows how the painting works. The technique of the artist is wonderful. David develops something compelling out of the interaction of light and shadow, light and light, emptiness and fullness, and the prompting of the eye as it moves across the surface of the canvas. The artwork endures because of this. But this abstraction is not self-sufficient. The painting's interior has an outside. It does represent. If Pollock represents motion, and Rothko represents stillness, David represents history. History, importantly, is not simply an event recorded like a photograph in a newspaper. Rather it has an ambidextrous quality. To use one of Benjamin's own terms, history is a *hiatus* between events. It is the fulcrum, the pivot point, around which oppositions oscillate. Though historians like to talk about the narrative of history, what is really significant is the drama of history.

It is an intense drama that is evoked in David's history painting. The consul Brutus has signed an order to execute his sons for plotting against the Roman Republic. The bodies have been returned to the family. Structurally speaking, the scene is like Hopper's *Nighthawks*. It is not about one thing but about several things simultaneously. If it was not, it would have long passed into oblivion. There is a series of oscillations in the painting. It depicts Roman antiquity both as a myth of itself and simultaneously as an allegory of the French Revolution. The revolutionaries are dressed as imaginary Romans. Aside from a handful of experts, few people today know enough about Roman or French Revolutionary history to say what the allegory or myth of the painting is 'about'. Yet, even though popular knowledge of antiquity, mythology and revolutionary symbolism has been lost to modern audiences, the painting still lives. In part, this is due to its mastery of the abstractions of light and shadow, light and light, but also, as Benjamin observes, those abstractions allow the painter to successfully evoke—and in effect to represent—the opposition of public and private, intimacy and domesticity. As Hopper juxtaposes the intimacy and anonymity of the American city, David juxtaposes the privacy of family and the public duty of the French revolutionary, and also hints at the more modern contrary pairing of intimacy and domesticity. All of which are social referents outside of the work. It does not require any special knowledge in either case to grasp the outside of the interior of the work. Likewise it is not the absence of an outside, even in the most abstract of works, that explains their power and durability but rather the ambidexterity of what the painting is 'about'. The stillness of Rothko's paintings, after all, is evoked by floating planes of color. It is the uncanny space between stillness and floatation that inflames our imagination. Intimacy and publicity, like

stillness and floatation, exist inside and outside the frame of the painting, and part of the work of a great work is to draw the outside inside, so that viewer is left with the enigma that arises when painting and world, representation and event coincide parasensually.

ART PRODUCTION

Disclosing Spaces is one of the most interesting studies of painting that I have read in a long time. It fluently combines philosophical reflection with critical analysis, without short changing either. Benjamin always begins with specific artworks. His analysis of discrete works is immaculate, and often brilliant. He is very respectful of the individual nature of the paintings that he analyses. He avoids making them exemplars of some Hegelian universal. He starts with particular works, patiently describing the work of each work, and then draws more universal philosophical conclusions from that exacting critical analysis. In doing so, he also steers away from Kant's aesthetics of the observer in the direction of a philosophy of art production. This is an immensely fruitful step. Benjamin is interested in *how* artists create artworks, and his critical analysis is attuned to specific productive techniques—to the artists' use of color, line, and light. From the micro cosmos of technique Benjamin moves to the macro cosmos of significance, which is philosophy's task to elucidate. The meaning of an artwork is its relationality. It is produced by the artist's juxtaposition of figure and figure, light and shadow. Relationality is what lends works their immaterial presence. If illumination and darkness (in their own right) are material, their juxtaposition and contrast is immaterial. It is the enigmatic nature of parasensual accords (such as those of light and dark) and what results from them (immaterial presence) that gives artworks their particularity. When we think of *Nighthawks*, we think not just of 'American art' or 'modern art' but of the ipseity of a distinctive, irreducible and memorable work of art.

Relationality, and the immaterial presence that it invokes, is what invests artworks with significance. This significance, Benjamin suggests, is not immediately recognizable. It takes time for great works to establish themselves. They are aided in that by philosophy and criticism. Art, it seems, is not immediately compatible with life. Philosophy and criticism mediate between art and life. This is necessarily so, Benjamin argues, because immediacy precludes equivocation. To a point this is true. In everyday life, we often have to bracket undecidability, otherwise we could not operate effectively in the world. As Benjamin suggests, art is a function of distance. Because it is one step removed from life, it can imagine the simultaneity of motion and response or the intersection of public and private. The implication is that we avoid simultaneity in everyday life. But do we? I am not sure that the

uncanny is completely removed from everyday interaction. That the snap shots we take disappoint us suggests that their one dimensionality does not quite jibe with our everyday sense which, in certain aspects at least, is multi-dimensional and synesthetic. For the same reason, often great works are immediately recognized by observers—intuitively. Without the viewer being able to explain it there and then, an artwork can impress in the blink of an eye that lasts forever. Now this does not necessary mean that such works when intuited in this way are either socially accepted or conceptually understood. That is a separate matter. Nevertheless, amongst a vast array of images, great art can and does lay claim immediately on the human imagination. Conceptual understanding and full social recognition, on the other hand, takes time. This is Benjamin's labor of time. This time is forever. Great works of art are inexhaustible. They are capable of an endless stream of interpretations. They can bear an infinite range of consents and dissents—without shrinking into irrelevance. The concurrence of figure one and figure two, time one and time two, intimacy and anonymity, public and private, domestic and intimate is fascinating without end.

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