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# Barbara Carnevali, "Social Appearances: A Philosophy of Display and Prestige." Trans. Zakiya Hanafi

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**Barbara Carnevali.** *Social Appearances: A Philosophy of Display and Prestige.* Trans. Zakiya Hanafi. Columbia University Press 2020. 304 pp. \$120.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780231187060); \$28.00 USD (Paperback ISBN 9780231187077).

This provocative volume looks back to the tradition of great sociological treatises by the likes of Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, and Hannah Arendt and, with undisguised ambition, aims to join them on the shelf reserved for the canonical and the indispensable. Not for Barbara Carnevali the ‘intra-academic or intratextual polemic’ (xvi). Her sights are set higher and wider. Her chosen target is nothing less than the ‘conceptual apparatus’ prevalent in the academic philosophy of ‘Western, late-modern society,’ the pernicious, ‘pathological’ (she uses the term repeatedly) insistence of modern philosophy on rejecting appearances as shallow and fake, as opposed to the true, the authentically real. In a world in which ‘self-representation and self-display are mass behaviors, when politics seems increasingly dependent on media spectacle and staging, when social and economic dynamics are intensely, explicitly aesthetic and connected more than ever to sensibility, taste, publicity, fashion, and lifestyles’ (xi), ethicists and social philosophers remain in thrall to the ‘the ethics of authenticity,’ which ‘urge us to emancipate ourselves from the burden of our social image *so that we are able to be ourselves*’ (45) (italics in the original, as in all the quotes to follow). Carnevali identifies Plato, St. Augustine, and most especially Jean-Jacques Rousseau as the principal originators of this worldview, which has been absorbed and refashioned again and again by Enlightenment liberals, religious conservatives, Romantic poets, Marxists, critical theorists, existentialists, and on and on.

This ‘Christian-Rousseauian myth of authenticity’ (83) has fostered an ‘intellectual attitude marked by moralism and denial’ (xi) which is, in Carnevali’s telling, ethically and philosophically misguided. Misguided, because ‘appearance is a given and in no way can it be eliminated from social life’ (31): ‘None of us has direct access to the inner states of others – to their thoughts, desires, and emotions. None of us can present ourselves directly to others without resorting to a sensible mediation’ (3). As Arendt put it: ‘Without appearance [...] there would be no individuation or political action, and therefore no possibility for a properly human life as such’ (60). Those who deny this fundamental, all but self-evident truth, and, as Carnevali carefully documents, they are many, ‘conceive of human beings not for what they are but for how they would like them to be, and [...] thereby turn their backs not only on understanding but also on acting effectively in their reality’ (xii).

As an alternative she proposes ‘social aesthetics,’ a purportedly new philosophical outlook inspired as much by thinkers such as Arendt, Georg Simmel, and Pierre Bourdieu as by artists from Marcel Proust and Luigi Pirandello to Federico Fellini and Andy Warhol, which seeks an ‘immanent understanding [...] which explains the world of social appearances precisely qua appearances, by considering them as sensible entities that count and act fully rather than as inessential and ephemeral “foams” of movements occurring in a deeper sphere of reality’ (xiv). Social aesthetics proposes a radically different way of understanding the social world, one that ‘eschews the use of dualism’ between the superficial (and therefore fake) and the authentic, and instead conceives of human interactions at all levels ‘in terms of aesthetic *mediation*’ (134). The forceful and, to my mind, legitimate criticism of the sacrosanct notion of authenticity, coupled with the sheer scope and ambition of Carnevali’s intellectual project, of which this book is but a first rung, deserves the attention of ethicists, sociologists, and political philosophers.

A wider audience is unlikely, as the prose is too demanding for lay readers. Carnevali is not shy about deploying academic jargon, though her explanations are clear and her argumentation straightforward. Her style is unrepentantly opinionated. She likes measuring thinkers against each

other—as in ‘Plessner has always shown a diffidence towards immediacy equal only to that of Hegel or Derrida’ (79)—and has a penchant for the definitive proclamation—Rousseau’s ‘moral metaphysics of authenticity’ and Karl Marx’s critique of capitalism are ‘the two most powerful critical paradigms of modernity’ (81); a passage from Emile Durkheim is ‘the most explicit and fierce indictment against the aesthetic that has been formulated in the history of social theory’ (98). Here and there, she adorns the writing with a poetic flourish: the human face, for instance, is ‘a wax tablet on which are engraved the signs of experience and the layers of life, in which the flight of time becomes visible and concrete, fragile in its nudity, isolated in its peculiar position’ (36).

The book is divided into three sections, each composed of five chapters, every one of which is an essay in its own right, with a specific and clearly stated focus. Structurally this works well in that it allows the reader to jump around and find novel ways to connect the torrent of ideas, principles, and theories put forward by the text. On the other hand, it leads to quite a bit of overlap and repetition among the chapters.

With the first section, the author throws down the gauntlet. It is time to take appearances seriously, to place aesthetic concerns and analysis on par with those of politics, ethics, or economics: ‘*there can be no shared life without spectacle*’ (7). ‘The metaphysics that starkly opposes reality and appearance,’ in other words, ‘do not apply, there are no transparent signs or voices devoid of phenomena, there are no people without masks’ (31). Carnevali’s preferred method is to work through existing texts. From Arendt she borrows the concept of ‘appearingness’ (6), from Adolf Portmann that of ‘aesthetic reflexivity’ (8). Her understanding of ‘medial surfaces’ and ‘the freedom of the mask’ is derived from Hegel (24). This is not to say she does no theoretical work of her own. From her engagement with her predecessors she sagaciously outlines a conception of social images for which the ‘specific mode of being is flow – the flight of phenomena, with all its instability and inconstancy’ (34), and whose ‘fundamental attributes’ of ‘publicity, objectivity, estrangement, and alienability’ (42) can be identified, analyzed, and evaluated.

The second section is a series of superb explorations into the history of ideas regarding the aesthetic dimension of the social. Carnevali is generous and fair-minded, equally willing to give voice to arguments she disagrees with and to criticize those she borrows. My favorite essay is ‘Two Baptisms and a Divorce’ (chapter 10), which tells the parallel stories of aesthetics and political economy, ‘the most original and innovative fields of knowledge produced by the Age of Enlightenment’ (112). Though seemingly ‘the two most distant and antagonistic disciplines in the system of knowledge’ (114), they are ‘basically sister disciplines’ (112). ‘To lay the foundations of a new paradigm,’ as Carnevali intends to do, ‘we will have to make an effort to go beyond [their] oppositions, specifically by defining the common *logic of the senses*, or *sensible logic*, in which both economics and aesthetics have their roots’ (115).

The third section promises ‘a plan of social aesthetic’ (127), a ‘formal, minimal a priori approach that can be adapted to a large variety of forms according to the characteristics of specific contexts’ (133-134). Each of the chapters here explores a different aspect of aesthetic sociability—‘social taste’ (chapter 13), ‘aesthetic labor’ (chapter 14), ‘prestige’ (chapter 15). As the book winds down it becomes clear that the parts will not be brought together into a whole, internally consistent system. This, again, is understandable, since Carnevali means this volume to be the first word on social aesthetics, certainly not the last.

The question becomes, then, whether there is anything of actual use in these pages for understanding real-world contexts. There is reason to worry that the tools Carnevali develops are not sufficient to escape baseless conjecture and pre-judged stereotype. Overly simplistic assessments of ‘late modernity’ abound. ‘In contemporary democracies,’ she declares, ‘the media and advertising

only appear to be free from state control; in reality, they operate under the false mask of “consensus” and collaborate on the total communication of the communicative sphere’ (89). This may have been true in the days of ‘Must See TV,’ but does anybody, looking at the 21st century media landscape, see state-controlled consensus? Or take her overarching sense of how individuals in Western societies approach their own appearance: ‘We no longer seek to appear in a way that conforms to our rank and social category; instead, we want to express our singularity and individual difference: this is the reigning sensation, legitimized and nurtured by individualistic ideology’ (188). At the very least, this diagnosis requires unpacking and careful engagement with large swaths of recent sociological and anthropological literature that instead reveals our current society to be rife with conformism and class signaling.

These missteps in turn raise alarm about the most baffling quality of the book: its almost complete disinterest in the society it supposedly helps us understand. Carnevali claims to have originally conceived of this project in ‘the mid-2000s’ (xiv), and promises ‘a philosophical understanding of social aesthetic phenomena that feeds the needs of our society and our times’ (174). By ‘our times,’ however, she seems to mean the early- to mid-20th century. Her examples of artists ‘whose works have celebrated the ambiguous spell of the social spectacle’ include Proust, as well as ‘F. Scott Fitzgerald, Truman Capote, Federico Fellini, and Andy Warhol’ (64). Her ‘unparalleled’ icon of ‘eccentric subjectivity’ is David Bowie (227). Her paradigm of ‘rebellion against the alienating power of the social image’ is Marilyn Monroe (226). The most recent film she alludes to is *Serpico* (25), starring a young Al Pacino and released in early 1974 (Carnevali, according to the Internet, was born in 1972). She comments on ‘the media worship of celebrities’ in which stars are treated like ‘the Gods of Olympus’ onto which ‘are projected all the perfections of which the miserable earthly existence of real individuals is deprived’ (85), which sounds more like a description of the Studio Era in Hollywood than our own time. TMZ and the despicable paparazzi long ago dragged celebrities down from their pedestals. Nobody expects a book originally published in 2012 to discuss Donald Trump or the Covid-19 pandemic, but for an Italian intellectual to expound about media-driven imagery in the modern world and not once mention Silvio Berlusconi or La Cicciolina is, well, baffling. Carnevali’s disdain for contemporary politics and culture, particularly popular culture, is palpable. She often sounds like an extraterrestrial researcher cataloging the strange mores of Earthlings when she awkwardly brings up ‘today’s glossy magazines’ (62), or ‘the posters that populate the bedrooms of teenagers’ (39), or ‘a child who collects baseball trading cards’ (40). When, at last, at the very tail end of her manuscript, she drops a mention of *Mad Men*’s Don Draper (207), it is hilarious in the worst unintentional way.

Finally, it bears noting that Carnevali’s sidelining of the ethical and political repercussions of her outlook is, at the very least, in need of clarification. Her goal, she claims, ‘is to refound a new theory of social appearances that is not only philosophically solid but also politically responsible’ (82). But that is not at all what she seems to have in mind when she proposes replacing Arendt’s ‘aesthetic public sphere’ with the viewpoint of social aesthetics, which relies on ‘a more idiosyncratic, absolutely nonuniversalistic conception of taste,’ one which features ‘the dynamics of sympathy and antipathy that subliminally determine what will be defined in this book as a social sensibility’ and in which ‘taste has a much less noble political role’ (148).

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