

## Surfaces



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## BOOK REVIEW

**ANDREW BENJAMIN:  
*ART, MIMESIS AND THE AVANT-GARDE***

Thomas Huhn

**Andrew Benjamin, *Art, Mimesis and the Avant-Garde: Aspects of a Philosophy of Difference*, (London & New York: Routledge, 1991).**

Andrew Benjamin is a polymath aesthete. The twelve essays collected here under the title, *Art Mimesis and the Avant-Garde*, serve as a tantalizing display of the range of topics across which he writes with sustained insight. Benjamin is not only one of the most prolific of contemporary writers of aesthetic theory and criticism, he is also among the very few whose essays and books are consistently lucid, intriguing and penetrating. In the collection at hand, which consists of pieces written over the span 1986-90, are four essays on painters: one each on Lucian Freud, Kiefer, Malevich, and R. B. Kitaj. This is art-writing of a very high order: Benjamin has all the assets, and none of the deficits, of a critic with an exceedingly astute eye.

Because this eye is so well complemented by a wealth of theoretical knowledge, one is tempted to describe Benjamin's writings on art as the product of an informed, theoretical eye. His essay on Lucian Freud, for example, moves quite convincingly from evocative, concise descriptions of four of Freud's self-portraits to the crisis of modernity and the redemption of the avant-garde. What is most important to note in this movement is that the paintings are not reduced to vehicles for the transport of some ethereal, aestheticizing theories. That is, paintings are not illustrations of theoretical concerns; they are instead best deciphered as themselves the formulation and posing of certain problems. As Benjamin puts it on the opening page of the Freud essay: "Representation involves presence. It gives presence to what had hitherto not been presented." (page 610). Representation, in short, is pervasively ontological. So it is that in the introduction to the essays their trajectory is described as follows: "The *topos* in question concerns the attempt to rework and thereby to readdress the philosophical task in terms

of the centrality of ontology." (page 1) With Benjamin's informed eye, paintings no longer remain merely an occasion for viewing anomalies within representation -- and thereby theories of representation -- they become instead the performances of profoundly resonant ontologies.

What appears throughout the collection of essays as their most striking achievement is the way in which the ontological formulations of artworks are turned back upon the interpreter. Paintings no longer simply address or provoke a viewer, they demand and entail an interpreter; one might say they ontologically posit an interpreter *within* the frame. In the essay entitled, "Present Remembrance: Anselm Kiefer's *Iconoclastic Controversy*," which consists of a sustained meditation on a single painting by Kiefer -- the *Bilderstreit* of 1980, Benjamin interprets central figures within the painting as "signal[ing] the necessity that emerges when history, memory and tradition can no longer be thought within representation and mimesis; that is, within the very terms that tradition demands that they be thought." (page 83) The painting prompts a kind of impossible representation, and hence deeply divided interpreter -- an interpreter struggling to be *present*. The task of the interpreter thus becomes, in front of the Kiefer painting, what Benjamin calls "present remembrance," which is to say an attempt at unity and affirmation not premised upon tradition (which is only an affirmation of sameness) or a subjectivity linked to tradition by memory of the past. And yet it is just the irrecoverability of a certain brand of subjectivity and a certain traditional origin (and origin of tradition), which opens the possibility of a demand by the artwork for a new subject: "The irrecoverability attests to the possibility of interpretation where the presence of an irrecoverable origin entails that in the practice of interpretation the figure is no longer reducible to an event that is outside. The inside and the outside both figure within the frame." (page 83) Though Benjamin makes no explicit reference to Kant, one cannot help but read his work in the tradition of Kantian aesthetics, where the question of the constitution of subjectivity is the key figure within any exploration of aesthetic judgment.

The most ambitious aspect of Benjamin's project is contained within the first two essays in the collection, "Interpreting Reflections: Painting Mirrors," and "Spacing and Distancing." It is in these that we find a comprehensive and evocative account of what he terms "anoriginal heterogeneity." (One might well pause here to note the Kantian echoes of these two essays; not only are they fundamentally concerned with the question of the generation of a unified experience, so too do they treat, respectively, the temporal and spatial formulations of it.) Benjamin defines his key term as follows: "It is the presence, the actuality of the 'original' dis-unity -- its presence within as well as its constitution of the frame -- that is signalled in the expression *anoriginal heterogeneity*." And, yet more succinctly: "It allows for the presentation of an origin that is not original: the impossible origin, hence the anoriginal." (page 10) It may well be that the history of illusionist painting in the West has as its philosophical corollary the generation of not just an illusionary or virtual space, but more importantly, a subject who strives but inevitably fails to occupy that impossible space. In short,

an original heterogeneity, in attesting to an impossible original, also thereby attests to an impossible site of interpretation, an impossible subjectivity. Benjamin thus also intends his term an original to be projective: it projects the impossibility of a unified experience based upon any supposed original unities or traditions. Tradition, in this light, is something like the belief in continuity, and the inevitability of repetition, flowing undisturbed from a timeless, unified origin.

There are two areas in which Benjamin traces out the most crucial implications of what might be called his aesthetic ontology. One is in regard to mimesis, the other to the conception and role of the avant-garde. Plato's stand against mimetic imitation occurs by way of his complaint that artistic renderings are at a third remove from the reality of the Forms. Hence central to the Platonic tradition is a theory of mimetic imitation which entails an ontology of original unity. If one reconsiders mimesis in light of its commitment to a static ontology, mimesis then appears less as the theory of imitation and more as the theory of a certain *reflection* of ontology. Mimesis, in other words, is a theory of the mirror. And the mirror, we might say, overachieves its task; instead of simply reflecting an ontology, it folds its reflection back in upon itself. As Benjamin puts it: "The inclusion of mirror inscribes the outside within the inside." (page 31) The mirror is thus a kind of overdetermining mimesis that serves to impose a unity upon that which it already, paradoxically, assumes is originally unified.

If it is the mirror, and with it the tradition of mimesis, that serves to instill and prescribe homogeneity, then it is precisely in regard to it, according to Benjamin, that the conception and task of the avant-garde -- as an affirmation of pluralism -- becomes crucial: "Even if all objects of interpretation are an originally heterogeneous and therefore involve interpretive differential plurality, it remains the case that it is still necessary to distinguish between the objects that affirm heterogeneity and those which seek, vainly, to exclude it. It is within the terms set by this distinction that it is possible to redeem the concept of the avant-garde." (page 36) We've come to the politics of interpretation, indeed of aesthetic judgment.

One might well admire the astute distinction Benjamin draws between liberalism and pluralism in his essay, "Pluralism, the Cosmopolitan and the Avant-Garde," and yet still remain uneasy with affirmation. First, the distinction: "Liberalism becomes the attempt to do justice to the irreconcilable [i.e., conflicting truth claims]. Pluralism on the other hand involves the recognition that justice concerns the relationship between the irreconcilable. It demands therefore, a reconciliation to the irreconcilable." (page 139) The term affirmation resonates in two directions: first, it is of course reminiscent of Marcuse's early and influential essay, "On the Affirmative Character of Culture," in which he describes the inevitably affirmative effect of any artwork, regardless its volume of opposition, on the status quo. Affirmation, in this sense, is inexorably regressive, and specifically in the direction of homogeneity. And yet there is another possible resonance from affirmation, depending upon how the status quo is configured. If the status quo is, as Benjamin argues, an originally

heterogeneous, then the affirmation of it is indeed the embrace of plurality. That is, an affirmative artwork or aesthetic judgment is not de facto socially and historically (i.e., temporally) regressive; the value and character of affirmation depends instead upon the nature of the ontology posited and projected by the object or judgment in question. Hence the most avant-garde (i.e., 'timely') works are those that affirm an original heterogeneous pluralism.

Benjamin's project, especially in regard to the conception of the avant-garde and temporality, finds its own resonant affirmation in two further essays collected here that treat Walter Benjamin's notion of aura and his writings on Baudelaire. In sum, Andrew Benjamin's *Art, Mimesis and the Avant-Garde* is to be recommended without hesitation as an exemplary formulation of the most intriguing contemporary aesthetic and social dilemmas.

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