

REVIEW

Cecilia Sjöholm. *Doing Aesthetics with Arendt: How to See Things*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2015, 219 pp. ISBN 978-0-231-17308-7

Cecilia Sjöholm's book provides an appreciable interpretive essay on Hannah Arendt's philosophy focused on sense experience. In many respects Sjöholm's account is meant to be provocative, especially in its focus on a possible (however 'hidden') Arendtian 'aesthetics' and in framing questions like the power of art in its relationship to politics, and the aesthetic premises of public encounter in current experience (including political).

In order to make Arendt's thoughts 'relevant for us today' (p. ix) and 'to trace a coherent line in Arendt's considerations of art and aesthetics, in and through the scattered remarks on aesthetic experience and art in her published works, notes, and letters' (p. ix), Sjöholm adopts a twofold strategy. On the one hand, she claims that *aesthetics* as related to *perceptual* experience is able to embrace Arendt's phenomenological and political understanding of 'appearance': 'Arendt's aesthetics inquires into the particular nature and function of perception and sense experience [...] Her stress on appearances introduces sense-perception, embodiment, and appearance – in short, what we could call *aesthesis* – as aspects of the public sphere' (p. 3). On the other hand, Sjöholm focuses on art – whose well-known connection with politics, according to Arendt, is due to the fact that 'art belongs to and takes part in the public sphere' (p. 2) – stressing its crucial place in Arendt's philosophy, on the score of its narrative, critical, and performative agency: 'Art cannot be exhausted in its objecthood, in relation to a subject. It belongs to the field of plurality, situated in a field of shared perspectives, usages and impacts' (p. 33).

Taken together, these two strategies shift Arendt's reconfiguration of the political and new understanding of the public sphere into a kind of sensible-performative scenario, where plural identities and embodiments are paired alternatively with somatic agency and art's politics of visibility and representation.

The first chapter stresses the ontological status of plurality as constituted by the manifold nature of the sensible: 'what Arendt calls the public sphere is a fundament to appearances of aesthetic as well as political significance' (p. xii). Sjöholm shows in detail how aesthetic dimensions contribute to defining many of Arendt's political arguments about plurality, freedom, and community, and how modern totalitarianism and antisemitism have historically been hindering practices and discourses based on such political ideas.

Interestingly, Sjöholm notes that there was ‘no involvement on the part of Arendt in the philosophy of aesthetics of her time’ (pp. 1–2). Moreover, the author shows how many of Arendt’s remarks about disenchantments and false consciousness pervading late capitalist civilization could be considered in the light of the Frankfurt School’s analyses (p. xiv). Actually, Arendt not only ignored, for instance, Arthur Danto and Clement Greenberg (as was, we would add, to be expected), but she intentionally disregarded Marcuse’s and Adorno’s critical theories, which in the 1950s and the 1960s were providing a consistent discursive frame for emancipatory aesthetics and politics. These ‘omissions’, which Sjöholm brings usefully together, have a rather different weight, however, in the economy of Arendt’s thought. It would be worth going into them thoroughly and to eventually understand them as inherent to her own position.

The second chapter of Sjöholm’s book deals with Arendt’s definition of art as a ‘thought-thing’, the value of which extends well beyond its material duration, occupying a crucial place in Arendt’s philosophy:

Stressing the element of thought in art, Arendt indicates the importance of the abstract and the conceptual, stressing the value of autonomy, imagination, and spontaneous acts of creation. At the same time, the thing belongs to the world of appearances and comes inserted into a perceptual field that negates, or at least negotiates, the belief in autonomous creations. (p. 49)

As a form of reification, art brings thoughts into the object world, Arendt says in an almost Hegelian manner.¹ For its peculiar ‘permanence’, the work of art is in contrast with commodification, and brings Arendt’s reflections on art closer to Adorno’s criticism of ephemeral entertainment art, which is typical of the culture industry: ‘it conditions an open horizon in which action is made possible’ (p. xiii). Here Sjöholm stresses how a work of art presents a particular form of agency: action, thought and speech are replaced by books, music, and visual images. Art, she claims, ‘then helps re-erect and relocate public space’ (p. 27).

The third chapter explores, as announced in the Introduction, ‘the aesthetic dimension of realness’, a feature that in Arendt ‘has a direct political implication’. In her reading of Kant’s *Critique of Judgement*, Arendt also ‘elaborated a possible aesthetics, becoming deeply involved in questions of sensibility and in reflections on the five senses’ (p. xiii). Sense-perception, the way in which ‘we see things’, can intertwine an apologia of sensibility with the question of judgement, and *sensus communis* has to properly be read, according to Sjöholm, as a sense of realness:

The link between political and aesthetic judgment [...] has been frequently commented upon. The aesthetic character attached to Arendt’s notion of judgment, however, has

¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 169–70.

gone largely unnoticed, though she herself often insisted on it. Aesthetic judgment helps form perception. It helps perceive of a context as having depth, weight, and sensorial substance. (p. 69)

The discussion which comes forth in the fourth and fifth chapters is dedicated to Arendt's encounter with particular works of art, tragedies, and comedies, and is a close study of it, through a selection of *oeuvres* that Arendt had variously dealt with. In these last two chapters the parallelism between Arendt's idea of political action and performative arts refers to the common goal to produce appearances based on lawgiving and performative actions. 'Tragedy points to the conditions under which forms of life become visible and empowered [...]. Tragedy, Arendt argues, makes memory political, calling on silenced representations to reappear' (p. 109). What comes to light is mainly 'the dialectics between invisibility and appearance, intimate space and public space, and thinking and acting' (p. 112), assuming beforehand that visibility stands for 'the sensible aspects of public space' (p. 111).

The fourth chapter discusses Arendt's notion of tragedy starting from the claim that 'Arendt resorts to tragedy to illuminate how art makes visible various kinds of life' (p. 106). According to Sjöholm, 'the fact that freedom is not only about action but also about the representation and reflection of lives' (p. 106) opens interesting perspectives on Arendt's understanding of historical-political events such as assimilation, marginalization, exile, and disobedience. In ancient myths about the foundation of states, such as the story of the Exodus and Virgil's story of Aeneas' journey to Rome, as well as in the tragedies of Sophocles, Arendt found, Sjöholm maintains, many suggestions for entering into the political and prepolitical production of the space of 'colonizing movements' and 'founding laws' (p. 124) – and not only for describing how in certain situations human beings are forced to act in fateful ways, without 'a bannister' supporting deeds and choices.

This also sheds light on an important difference from Heidegger: 'what separates Arendt from Heidegger is that she looks at the Greek conception of culture not from the perspective of the violence of metaphysics but rather from the restraint of the law', as staged for example in the stories of Oedipus and Antigone (p. 116).

In the fifth chapter we are reminded of Arendt's reflections on Chaplin's cinematic art, Kafka's novels of escape, and antisemitism as opportunities to rethink, through the performances of tragic and comic characters, historical phenomena such as the refugee condition, citizenship, colonialism, antisemitism and racism, 'interwoven in the great web of agencies that make up the fabric of plurality' (p. 152). Chaplin's laughter in particular – in films like *Modern Times* and

City Lights – is depicted by Arendt as a ‘social progressive’ remedy against experiences of marginalization within a society; his character also ‘incarnates her hopes for a new future for a persecuted minority’ (p. 147).

Both the fourth and fifth chapters are well documented, and the exegetical overview of the fragmentary writings about aesthetic subjects does not leave unanswered more general questions about how to understand the value of these writings in their political implications.

Summing up, art in its aesthetic-political significance seems to be the starting point and the final outcome of Sjöholm’s investigation. However, as the ‘double’ title also suggests, the aesthetics that is the subject of the review (that is, Arendt’s ‘hidden’ aesthetics) is related not to art alone but also, indeed above all, to perception, to the senses, to ‘seeing’ things.

This creates a sort of double track, two tracks that are kept parallel throughout the book, with the initial doubt over whether aesthetics here is meant as philosophy of art or philosophy of *aisthesis* and perception, very soon clarified by explanations showing the author to be inclined towards the latter. In the author’s intention, the two levels should actually find a common ground in the sphere of appearing – which Arendt considers strictly plural – where finally the perception of art and the perception of any object or phenomenon or living being must appear at the level of a shared scene. On this basis Sjöholm’s book makes a point of a corresponding multi-focused discussion of the ontological aesthetic (sensible) plurality to which the constitution of the public sphere is referred. This choice deserves attention.

First of all, Arendt’s account of the perceptive dimension of the aesthetic as constituting a sense of the real is, as Sjöholm points out, actually influenced by Merleau-Ponty: ‘Quoting Merleau-Ponty, Arendt regards the dynamic between exposure and protection as a function of plurality’ (p. 16), ‘grounding it neither in reason nor in nothingness but in differentiation’ (p. 18). In *The Life of the Mind* the reference of the dimension of appearing to the need of self-display of the living being makes the latter the distinctive feature of the ‘public realm’ which, as Sjöholm rightfully points out, is a trait of Arendt’s late philosophy which is seldom highlighted. As a matter of fact, in *The Life of the Mind* Arendt points out that the plurality of appearances has to be understood in the context of the living being’s instinct to appear as such, so that, to a certain extent, appearance coincides with the visibility of lives: every living organism is dominated by ‘the urge toward self-display.’² The public dimension here is linked, according to Arendt, directly to ‘life appearing on Earth’, expanding engagement with

² Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 1 (San Diego, CA: Harcourt, 1981), 21.

the 'public realm' by giving rise to diversification and mutual spectatorship for all living beings, and not only human beings. Not only does *polis* now stand for 'the space of appearance', 'where I appear to others and others appear to me',³ but so too does 'earth' itself.⁴ Sjöholm moves from this shift in Arendt's way of describing 'public' appearance to (rightly) contend that every human cultural and political differentiation, any gesture to enact a difference, has to be cast against the background of a sensible (aesthetic) differentiation that primarily enables the acknowledgement of a real thing or living being. But she also (wrongly) jumps to the conclusion that 'there is no essential bond between "human" and "freedom" in Arendt's writings' (p. 105).

On the one hand, therefore, Sjöholm correctly underlines that in her late works Arendt gives more and more space to the plurality of the living – though she describes the phenomenon as a 'vitalist' turn in Arendt's thought (which strikes me as quite a questionable assertion). On the other hand, however, she arbitrarily infers that Arendt's plurality is sensible *in itself* and as such it 'is the condition of politics' (p. 19). This leads to a deliberate narrowing of the political content of Arendt's concepts of plurality and of sense of community to the assumption of their basically *sensible* meaning. Sjöholm's conclusion, whereby Arendt's ontology of plurality is grounded in reality as 'an effect of the manifold of appearances' (p. 17), sounds therefore rather strained. In the same way that for Arendt 'appearances speak to the senses', the more specifically political appearances could eventually speak to a further 'sense', an intuition of the world as '*perceptual* commonality of *sensus communis*' (p. 100). As a matter of fact, Arendt constantly specifies in a political sense the faculty of really 'seeing things' from different perspectives, whose 'simultaneous presence' guarantees 'the reality of the public realm'.⁵ Arendt does not describe it, however, as a simple sensible impression, but rather as a sort of 'doxastic' precondition for the construction of a common world. In such a world, 'the test of reality' does not always lie in the actual public presence of others, 'but rather in the greater or lesser urgency of needs'⁶ whose existence can only be testified to from specific 'positions' (and opinions). For Arendt, the political specification of 'appearance' entails in the first place an ability to form an opinion in a sense that is not restricted to one's own interests; it is the *dokei moi* which is definitely not reducible to an impression of the senses, as suggested by Sjöholm (p. 14). It rather means to be able to take on as many possible positions as there are in the real world, to reduce

³ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 198.

⁴ Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 1 (San Diego, CA: Harcourt, 1981), 187. Arendt mentions here 'the infinite plurality which is the law of the earth'.

⁵ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 57.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 56.

the arbitrariness, violence, narrow-mindedness of one's own position. These positions correspond to an equal number of perspectives, and finally require the exercise of the faculty of political judgement. It is worth noting that Arendt's 'appearance' and aesthetic 'how to see things' as phenomena that give way to the reality of the public realm are directed to finally focus the attention on the *doxa* and the judgement, and can therefore never be resolved into their sensible elements – vision, smell, touch, and taste (p. 45). Sjöholm does not seem to be willing to concede the relevance of Arendt's explicitly distancing herself from Plato's devaluation of opinion nor of the aesthetic-political value taken on by the *doxa* in Arendt's thought and its pivotal role in the definition of an ontological level of plurality.⁷

Sjöholm's strained interpretation of this question appears more evident in the third chapter. Reviewing Arendt's political reading of Kant's *Third Critique*, she assimilates Kant's aesthetic judge – whom Arendt views as representative of specifically political claims, since he or she judges based on a contingency and in view of the free communicability of the judgement – is assimilated to a percipient who has in common with his or her fellow beings a sensible knowledge that defines exactly the domain of what is here referred to as the 'aesthetic'.

Since Sjöholm asserts that Kant's common sense must be brought back to a 'sense of the real', she posits that a shared perceptive experience absorbs in itself any aesthetic-political level of judgement and even the dimension of Kant's 'common sense' that Arendt reinterprets as 'communitary sense'. The coincidence of the aesthetic and the sensible should not, however, be put forward as the only explanation of Arendt's notion of appearance, as Sjöholm requires. Nor should common sense – which is worldly and politically acquired, according to Arendt, through an exercise of imagination leading to experiencing an 'enlarged mentality' oriented to the construction of the world as a public sphere – be reduced to 'a common sense of realness', construing judgement itself to be 'about the way in which we see things' (p. 73).

Arendt's theorization of 'common sense' is actually rather difficult to hold firmly as a coherent and univocal position. Throughout her writings she seems to give 'common sense' two main meanings: first, a sensorial 'accordance' aiming to grasp reality as something 'given' to the senses and, second, a 'communitary sense', emerging from open-minded opinions and deeds. Because each of these meanings applies in different contexts (the prepolitical and the political), it is inappropriate to put them on the same level, and to

⁷ See Elena Tavani, *Hannah Arendt e lo spettacolo del mondo: Estetica e politica* (Rome: manifestolibri, 2010), chap. 4.

consider – as Sjöholm does – sensorial accordance as a proper sense of community.

On the topic of Arendt's notions of 'common sense' as related to perceptual experience it would be useful here to mention briefly Alfred North Whitehead, to whose analysis of common sense and sense-awareness in relation to natural events and happenings Arendt refers several times.⁸ In the present context what matters most is that Arendt stresses the 'worldly' feature of common sense as a counterpart of science, and the necessity of a strict consideration of what is *actual* in experience. Arendt, moreover, takes up Whitehead's definition of the 'thing perceived' as a thought-object to be considered as a complex construct, 'more than a simple sense presentation'.⁹

Many references to Kant's reflective judgement in the third chapter of Sjöholm's book consequently appear too heavily mediated or oversimplified. Even Kant's *sensus communis* is presented as based 'on sense perceptions', and on Arendt's part *sensus communis* is supposed to imply 'a sensible creation of the real' (pp. 84–85). It seems to me that it would first of all be necessary to avoid oversimplifying complexities of meanings when referring, for instance, – as Sjöholm does – to Kant's Third Critique as an 'aesthetic inquiry' (p. x) or focusing on 'aesthetic freedom' (p. 22) in its prepolitical implications without any attempt to compare it with Arendt's political categories. On the one hand, therefore, it would be difficult to maintain that the criterion for aesthetic judgement, indicated by Kant in the principle of its communicability, would be rooted in the universality of sense perception and not in a sharable capacity, starting from a particular judgement on a specific object or circumstance, to set new standards, to extend 'exemplarily' its possible validity.¹⁰ On the other hand, Arendt herself emphasizes the importance of Kant's discovery, in the *Critique of Judgement*, of 'the capacity of an "enlarged mentality" that enables men to judge'¹¹ as 'the faculty to judge *particulars* without subsuming them under those general rules which can be thought and learned until they grow into habits that can be replaced by other habits and rules.'¹² The suggested transition from aesthetic judgement to

⁸ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 283, 296n.

⁹ Alfred North Whitehead, *The Aims of Education* (New York: New American Library, 1949), 110, 128, 131; see also Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 57, and *Denktagebuch*, vol. 1 (Munich: Piper, 2002), xxii, 42.

¹⁰ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. James C. Meredith, ed. Nicholas Walker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), § 22, 70.

¹¹ Hannah Arendt, 'Truth and Politics', in *Between Past and Future* (New York: Viking Press, 1968), 241.

¹² Hannah Arendt, 'Thinking and Moral Considerations', in *Responsibility and Judgment* (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), 188–89.

political judgement revolves around the imagination seen in the 'new role' identified by Kant in the *Critique of Judgement*, that is, in its being embodied in experience itself in its 'most common' forms. Its relevance lies exactly in the circumstance that such a judgement cannot be subsumed under a general rule, and Arendt rightly detects the essence of taste in the capacity to see things in their particularity, but also aiming at a wider, 'impartial' perspective. These ideas, however, *do not seem to be* confirmed in Sjöholm's description of Arendt's appropriation of Kant's reflective judgement that, we read, 'can be a judgment of taste, through which we determine qualities of beauty and pleasure' (p. 75). What the judgement of taste appeals to is 'an imaginary community' (p. 84): 'taste [...] appears *as if* everyone must judge a sensible apprehension in a certain manner' (p. 78).

Here Arendt is shown to follow an alternative path: 'Arendt, in contrast to Kant, considered taste to be a constitutive moment of corporeal subjectivity. [...] Taste helps define embodied individuals in a social context' (p. 79). The public sphere is defined by shared sensations and different perceptive positions, with 'encroachment upon the sensibility of others' (p. 87). Many of Arendt's categories are immersed in a sensist bath, probably to highlight the 'aesthetic turn' put in place by Arendt in *The Life of the Mind*: for instance prejudice (which Arendt admits as a questionable basis of political judgement) becomes 'prejudgment that installs itself at the level of perception' (p. 87). This treatment is also made responsible for Arendt's 'anti-humanism' (p. 17), based on Arendt's choice not to 'conceptualize freedom on the basis of presumptions concerning humanity', so that 'publicness' can coincide with a sensible differentiation 'that in itself sparks public freedom' (p. 20). This is a scenario where 'aesthetics and art' can finally, 'in a post-totalitarian world', empower 'aesthetic freedom' (p. 22). But the method ends up focusing on only a part of the aesthetic features of appearance and publicness, overlooking what gives appearance as freedom its political form, imaginative resource, and potential efficacy in the first place. It seems to be the case, rather, that Arendt's choosing to enlarge the meaning of freedom, connecting it to the free-display of the living being, makes her claim nearer to Kantian 'cosmological freedom' than to a sort of quasi-ecological proposal, interested in a changing attitude and behaviour towards nature and environment. Quite significantly, in Sjöholm's reading all 'interest in the world' of individuals, considered by Arendt as a specific human urge to construct and change the world with innovative actions, disappears. Anti-humanism is therefore here referred to as a consequence of a biocentric critique of anthropocentrism, while it could more convincingly be ascribed to Arendt's attempts to think anew the human being as a living being – as a phenomenological diversion from the theoretical inheritance of Heidegger's

emphasis (*Letter on Humanism*, 1947) on the necessity of an overcoming of metaphysics. In its multifaceted appearance, life is 'worldly' and innovative as such: there is no need, according to Arendt, to presume that being-in-the-world only characterizes 'das Dasein' as existential (human) being.

It is significant that Sjöholm avoids focusing on the *philosophical* problem of a freedom that in her late writings Arendt *actually* describes as, so to say, 'naturally' based on what the author calls 'prepolitical data of biological life' (p. 130). On this basis, freedom has to be conceived of as not-only-human freedom, as an effect of the action of the living being, presenting, showing, and displaying itself to others; which, however, does not prevent us from considering human action and exhibition as specifically oriented to construction and maintenance of the 'world' – in other words to be *political*. Sjöholm's account of Arendt's reflections on action insists, on the contrary, on the indirect incidence of historical potentialities echoed by narratives and literature. 'Freedom is not only about action but also about the representation and reflection of lives', which 'can be seen with regard to the particular place given to tragedy in Arendt's writings' (p. 106). The philosophical problem of an enlarged notion of freedom becomes *ipso facto* a *metaphorical* problem.

Significantly Sjöholm devotes the two last chapters to the role of tragedy and comedy 'to illuminate how art makes visible various kinds of lives' – that is, makes visible an aesthetic plurality, 'construes a sense of realness' (p. 146), incarnates political hopes (p. 147). Only metaphorically, 'the tragic agent is also a person beyond limits and beyond control, as we can see at the end of *Antigone* [...]. Tragic action in this sense is clearly to be read against the backdrop of political freedom, indicating both its necessity and its destabilizing potential. Action, however, is not the free beginning of just anything, anywhere' (p. 125). This is a strong point, deserving further specific discussion, which, however, definitely dissociates freedom from action, joining the former to a 'horizon of plurality, through which things, objects, laws, and other lives necessarily impinge upon our choices, thoughts and actions' (p. 126). Arendt's views on plurality can indeed refer to narrative practices, but probably without reducing practices and narratives to 'plural sensibilities'. Sjöholm sustains this choice by engaging only selectively with Arendt's texts and developments of her thinking, so as to be able to show the *polis* itself as 'a space of aesthesis, of a multitude of bodies, sounds, movements, and things' (p. 23). The treatment of politics – and aesthetics – on the exclusive level of sensibility and representation, together with the ambition to separate sensible community-based endeavours of all kinds from any political freedom still tied to human action, leads the author to separate Arendt's aesthetics from Arendt's politics.

In conclusion, it is fair to say that the gap the book would like to fill, that is, its aim to reveal Arendt's 'hidden' aesthetics and 'complete' it, risks, in Sjöholm's interesting work, being filled in by depoliticizing Arendt's aesthetics, and thus with an aesthetics that Arendt would never have written.

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