

Interactions and Identity: Between Kant and Bergson

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This article is concerned with exhibition structures that claim to explore alternative notions of interaction and identity. It interweaves exhibitions and philosophies in order to locate the possibilities and problems that exist in each. It explores two specific exhibitions: *The Dark Monarch: Magic and Modernity in British Art* (Tate St Ives, 2009-10), which the article claims deploys a Kantian philosophy, and *Touched* (Tate Liverpool, 2010) that it asserts is influenced by a Bergsonian philosophy. The article interrogates the assumption that these curatorial practices and philosophies are distinct in their aesthetic and political operations. It attempts to ascertain whether they do in fact pose different curatorial methodologies that produce alternative interactions and identities.

Kantian Curatorial Strategies

Kant's theory asserts that human subjects have *a priori* knowledge within their understanding, which is prior to any experience and interaction with the empirical realm. Kant's *a priori* is a kernel of knowledge within conscious beings that grounds all interaction with materiality. Therefore, Kant's subject can only ever know the world subjectively, as opposed to objectively, and an understanding of the thing-in-itself is impossible. Kant states this in his *Critique of Pure Reason*:

We have intended, then, to say, that all our intuition is nothing but the representation of phenomena... What may be the nature of objects considered as things in themselves and without receptivity of our sensibility is quite unknown to us.¹

This article identifies the exhibition, *The Dark Monarch: Magic and Modernity in British Art* at Tate St Ives in 2009-2010, as deploying a Kantian curatorial conceit. The co-curator Michael Bracewell, in an on-line presentation, asserts that the exhibition is a Gothic enterprise. Bracewell claims that even though science constantly develops human knowledge, art's cultural value is always secure because of its concern with the magical.² This assumes that human consciousness can only ever be subjective, as well as maintaining that there is a limit to knowledge. In this sense the subject's finite knowledge produces an exteriority that can never be co-opted and this is what affirms a material mysticism. On the Tate St Ives website description of *The Dark Monarch* it is stated that although:

Often viewed as counter to Modernism, the careful juxtaposition and selection of works on display suggests that these products of illusion and delusion in fact belong to modernity.³

It is therefore suggested that the curator's claim, that

1. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (New York: Dover Publications Inc, 2006), 5

2. Tate Website. "Michael Bracewell: The Dark Monarch," last visited November 12, 2011, <http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/video/dark-monarch>

3. Tate Website. "Michael Bracewell: The Dark Monarch," last visited November 12, 2011, <http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/video/dark-monarch>

modernism and reason actually produce mysticism, is deployed so that the exhibition can enable the audience to conceive of their limited knowledge. This reiterates the belief in the Kantian *a priori*, as the exhibition employs the Kantian concept that the subject can never know things-in-themselves. However, the exhibition extends this subjective foundation and limit to create a mystical material realm (images and objects), as it frames artworks as always remaining illusive and enigmatic. Bracewell's emphasis on a Gothic enterprise also echoes Kant's aim to secure a consecrated place for philosophy. Through his theory of the *a priori* knowledge Kant tries to preserve a place for philosophy and reason within the ever-increasing empirical realm. The concept of limitation is deployed by the curators in a similar vein to Kant; to secure a sacred place for art in the face of realism. Kant and *The Dark Monarch* aim to assert a purely subject-centered reality, as well as demarcating the limits of this subjective knowledge. This is so that philosophy (in Kant) or art (in *The Dark Monarch*) can claim to be a transcendental foundation for this subjective knowledge. Both projects claim to be the meta-system for all other forms of knowledge and assert that philosophy or art are the only ways to communicate the subjective limitation of knowledge. However, *The Dark Monarch's* claim for both a Kantian subject and art's existence as a meta-knowledge is problematic. *The Dark Monarch's* mysticism asserts that the subject can only ever know his or her own perception of materiality. Image production, whether artistic or curatorial, is therefore only ever projected by the viewer or will elude the viewer. Therefore, the meta-knowledge of art can only ever have a negative operation, which is to define the limits of the subject's knowledge. The mystical image functions to serve the subject and is, therefore, rendered as not having any power in-itself.

Bergsonian Curatorial Strategies

Bergson appears to propose a way out of a subject-centered reality by challenging his reader to give up their conscious projections and embrace their unconscious intuition. The Bergsonian subject must strip themselves of their consciousness and embrace their intuition so that they can experience the quality of material. In *Time and Free Will* Bergson states:

Probably animals do not picture themselves, beside their sensations, as we do, an external world quite distinct from themselves, which is the common property of all conscious beings.⁴

Bergson suggests that human consciousness separates itself from its surroundings by merely experiencing materiality in its quantity. Consciousness can't help but perceive relations between objects and orders them so humans, unlike animals, cannot experience materiality in its quality. Bergson asserts that his theory of duration, or pure time, enables the subject

4. Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will* (London: Elibron Classics, 2005), 138

to experience the pure quality of the things-in-themselves. Duration exists within materiality so, by embracing their intuition, subjects can tap into the material's duration and hence communicate with the thing-in-itself.

Bergson therefore appears to be de-centering the subject to allow materiality more communicative power. The exhibition that is identified as employing a Bergsonian model is *Liverpool Biennial: Touched* at the Tate Liverpool in 2010. The curators state that:

The theme of *Touched* will be explored by artists who are concerned with the idea of making the intangible and invisible be seen and touched.⁵

The exhibition employs the Bergsonian premise that there is a purer communication between things. This purer communication is veiled by human consciousness, as the latter produces an artificial and unnatural reality. In order to interact with Bergson's pure real, which is veiled by conscious reality, subjects are required to strip themselves of their consciousness and intuit or touch the objects. As curator, Lorenzo Fusi's investment in the Bergsonian notion of duration or pure time, as a way to experience the quality of the thing-in-itself, is also shown through the chosen artworks. The works are largely performance based or require the viewer to interact with the object. The exhibition therefore pictures duration as opening up a material continuum within which subjects can have a purer communication with materiality.

However, rather than de-centering the subject, in order to reach a purer communication with the things-in-themselves, both the exhibition and Bergson project the human psyche into materiality. In order to affirm that there is a purer communication between things the exhibition and Bergson both assume that the real consists of an infinite intelligence. This ubiquitous intelligence acts as an amniotic fluid, which envelopes all materiality and enables all forms, whether subjects or objects, to register each other and interact. In *Time and Free Will* Bergson states:

... digging below the surface of contact between the self and the external, we penetrate into the depths of the organized and living intelligence...⁶

However, the depths of Bergson's organized living intelligence can only ever be the subject's own perception. Artworks that employ duration are used by the curators of *Touched* to incite the viewer into an intuitive state, which then supposedly enables him or her to have a purer communication with materiality. This is intended to allow the subject to tap into a supposed real that exists beneath conscious reality, but stripping back from consciousness just produces another form of that very same subjective consciousness. Therefore, Bergson and *Touched* promote a form of pan-psychism, as the subject's consciousness has actually been projected into the world around it. The image is framed as having a negative function, as it can only ever facilitate the subject's communion with his or her own consciousness and cannot have any power in-itself.

Unlike *The Dark Monarch*, which employs the Kantian

theory that the subject's knowledge is finite, the Bergsonian exhibition *Touched* perceives the subject's consciousness as infinite. However, both philosophies and exhibitions produce a limited and negative conception of the image's power because the viewer's interaction with materiality is framed through a subject-centered axis that impoverishes the image. This is problematic for those curatorial strategies that believe Kantian and Bergsonian philosophies produce distinct aesthetics and politics.

Repercussions for the Curatorial

Both the Kantian and Bergsonian curatorial strategies locate a subjective core at the centre of reality and so they actually limit and reify the field of identities. They do not pose alternative interactions with materiality or alternative identities. Through concentrating on the effect of the exhibition, both curatorial strategies utilise the exhibition structure and its artworks as a means-to-an-end. The image is impoverished, as it functions as a vehicle for an ideology that instructs the viewer's interaction with the world. The subject is, therefore, also impoverished because the curators and artists exist within the same systemic conditions as the viewer. The curators and artists cannot transcend their subjectivity in order to forge new interactions and identities, so the exhibitions remain conservative. The exhibitions are conservative because they conserve existing aesthetic and political paradigms by limiting the power of the image, as well as subjective mobility. Therefore, exhibitions should be curated as an end-in-themselves and should not limit themselves by pre-determining their effect. For if an exhibition pre-determines its interpretation, meaning or interaction it can never produce alternative subjectivities and identities.

5. Tate Website. "Liverpool Biennial 2010: Touched," last visited November 12, 2011, <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-liverpool/exhibition/liverpool-biennial-2010>

6. Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will* (London: Elibron Classics, 2005), 136

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