Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Contemporary Directions After Susan Buck-Morss

Raquel Figueira

Clouds gather visibility, and then disperse into invisibility.
All appearances are the nature of clouds.
John Berger (1985)

Introduction

In 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', Walter Benjamin (1936) traces the development of reproductive technology and what he saw as the demise of the aura of the work of art. He argues that the emergence of technological reproduction resulted in an upheaval of tradition whereby art is no longer underpinned by ritual or uniqueness, therefore suffering a displacement of its social power. The dominance of reproduced images coincides with an orientation of reality toward the masses: an audience that Benjamin sees as distracted. Film and photography are now capable of operating as tools for political manipulation and play an important role in what he comes to call the 'aestheticization of politics' – a fascistic tendency that gives the masses a voice through spectacular aesthetic expression. The essay leaves us with a haunting proposition: to counter the fascistic aestheticization of politics, communism's response is to politicise art (1936, p.38).

Over 50 years later, philosopher and intellectual historian Susan Buck-Morss (1992) picks up where Benjamin left off with 'Aesthetics and Anaesthetics'. Writing in the early nineties, the relevance of Benjamin's thought has not waned. The sensory alienation he affirmed as an everyday reality in modern life is increasingly prevalent in 'a period when politics as spectacle (including the aestheticized spectacle of war) has become commonplace in our televisual world' (Buck-Morss, 1992). This sensory alienation is at the root of the aestheticization of politics which, Buck-Morss highlights, 'fascism does not create, but merely "manages"' (1992, p.4). So what do we make of Benjamin's proposition to 'politicise art'? Buck-Morss writes:

Surely Benjamin must mean more than merely to make culture a vehicle for Communist propaganda. He is demanding of art a task far more difficult – that is, to undo the alienation of the corporeal

> *sensorium, to restore the instinctual power of the human bodily senses for the sake of humanity's self-preservation, and to do this, not by avoiding the new technologies, but by passing through them.* (1992, p.5)

It is at this inceptive moment that Buck-Morss uncovers Benjamin's radical disruption of the constellation of art, politics and aesthetics which had defined the tradition of modernism up to that point. Halfway through his final thought, she says, he explodes this constellation in such a way that 'it changes the entire conceptual order of modernity' (1992, p.5).

Buck-Morss unpacks this statement by tracing the etymological evolution of the term "aesthetics" which, she observes, underwent a complete reversal of meaning over the course of the modern era. From the ancient Greek word *aisthitikos* (that which is "perceptive by feeling") to an application, primarily, to art and cultural forms – 'to the imaginary rather than the empirical, to the illusory rather than the real' (1992, pp.6-7). She points out that the common thread between all the different ideological iterations of the term, which she says 'bounces like a ball among philosophical positions', is the myth of autogenesis – best encapsulated by Kant's male, sense-dead warrior, threatened by the homoerotic sensuality of the 'Age of Sensibility' (1992, pp.7-9). Challenging this myth, Buck-Morss proposes investigating the development of the human sensorium itself, drawing a parallel between the development of anaesthetic techniques and fascism's capacity for social control. The technological advancements in the surgical setting, she shows us, enable a cultural shift with potentially devastating consequences.

Buck-Morss' rich exploration gifts us with multiple routes to reflect on our current time. By looking at its most transformative concepts and linking them to more recent texts, this essay aims to demonstrate the relevance of her arguments today, as seen through a series of thought-provoking approaches from Lisa Blackman, Naisargi N. Dave, Shalhoub-Kevorkian, Paul Gilroy, Max Haiven, and Cressida J. Heyes. Some of these connections are more pronounced than others, in a heterogenous constellation that could grow in many directions. But they all take seriously an aesthetics that goes back to its original meaning – an empirical, bodily, sensorial aesthetics – and the political processes that stem from it, as Buck-Morss has taught us.

I.

Modernity saw natural science and philosophy part ways, thus separating the study of the human body from that of human culture and history like 'two hemispheres of a "split-brain" patient' (Buck-Morss, 1992, p.12). Buck-Morss argues, however, that if we are to think of experience, we can't possibly isolate human biology from its environment. This, she contends, is a flaw of the limited and artificial conception of what is traditionally known as the human nervous system. She states:

> *The nervous system is not contained within the body's limits. The circuit from sense-perception to motor response begins and ends in the world. The brain is thus not an isolable anatomical body, but part of a system that passes through the person and her or his (culturally specific, historically transient) environment. As the source of stimuli and the arena for motor response, the external world must be included to complete the sensory circuit.* (1992, p.12)

Buck-Morss calls this circuit the 'synaesthetic system': a sensorial system in which external sense-perceptions come together with internal images of memory and anticipation (1992, p.13).

> *This synaesthetic system is "open" in the extreme sense. Not only is it open to the world through the sensory organs, but the nerve cells within the body form a network that is in itself discontinuous. (…) In the networks between nerve bundles everything "leaks".* (1992, p.13)

So, Buck-Morss is gifting us with a framework where, first, our bodily senses connect to our images of memory and anticipation, and second, everything leaks. This framework becomes a critical foundation for Buck-Morss' explorations of (an)aesthetics. But before focusing on her investigation of this surprising relationship – that of aesthetics and anaesthetics – I would like to mention some of the contemporary thought in which I see her notion of a synaesthetic system finding kinship.

In the second edition of 'The Body – The Key Concepts', Lisa Blackman (2021) takes the position that 'bodies are never singular distinct entities bounded by the skin, but rather they always extend and connect to other bodies, human and non-human' as well as to practices and processes which produce different ways of enacting what it means to be human (2021, p.2). Like Buck-Morss, she argues that we need to move beyond the binary thinking that separates the biological and the social, and consequently the body from the mind (2021, p.8). One of the problems with this body-mind dualism, Blackman states, is the assumption that thought is voluntary, often perceived as will, taking place in the mind separately from the fixed and involuntary processes of the body (2021, p.8). Is that so?

Blackman uses the commonplace experience of 'feeling moved by a film but finding it difficult to say why' (2021, p.9) as one of many examples that challenge this dualist thinking. I would like to consider a more pertinent type of experience, one we could say has become commonplace in contemporary society, but also that has acquired an increasingly critical role. I am talking about the experience of witnessing.

> *So little does aesthetics have to do intrinsically with the philosophical trinity of Art, Beauty, and Truth that one might rather place it within the field of animal instincts.* (Buck-Morss, 1992, p.6)

In a reality where we're faced with injustice on an everyday basis, witnessing has become paramount to the advancement of social justice movements, as we have seen recently with the global reckoning of Black Lives Matter. As Naisargi N. Dave (2021, p.145) poignantly says, 'the cameras that recorded George Floyd's killing – as well as his final words – and the eyes that did not see the murder of Breonna Taylor in the bedroom of her home, demonstrate the importance of bearing witness'.

Inspired by Buck-Morss, we could say that our capacity for witnessing relies on our instincts, that is, our senses, not just in terms of what we can see, hear, smell, but of what we feel – in our gut. In an interview with Grant H. Kester, she says:

> *Ever since I can remember, my critical sense was nourished by bodily sensations – tense muscles, clammy feet, shoes too tight, breath too tight, holding back wanting to laugh – or to scream. (…) Cultural meanings are sensed bodily as being wrong. Just plain wrong. How else are people capable of social protest? If we were in fact always, already produced by our respective cultures, how could it ever come into our mind to resist them?* (Kester, 1997, pp.2-3)

Buck-Morss goes on to mention Adorno's Negative Dialectics where he speaks of the solidarity we feel with victims of socially organized violence, even when that violence is justified in our culture's terms (1966, cited in Kester, 1997, p.3). She argues that the senses constitute a form of critical cognition, and that this sensorial knowledge should be trusted politically. 'It is empathy rather than sympathy, because it is capable of producing solidarity with those who are not part of our own group' (Kester, 1997, p.3).

In a poetic afterword, Dave (2021) reflects on her ambivalent relationship to witnessing's privileging of sight, and therefore of reason. She defines witnessing as a disciplined staying-put, even when one would rather turn or run away. But 'in contrast to the voyeur, who is also characterized by a disciplined staying-put, the witness does not feel more alive in her own skin: the skin is shed, along with the fiction of the self' (2021, p.144). Therefore, she argues, to witness might be best understood as 'a radical interpenetration of life and death: to exercise a disciplined presence to violence that opens up a death, that then compels a new kind of responsible life in a previously unimaginable skin' (Dave, 2014, cited in 2021, p.144).

For Dave, this critical moment – after which everything changes – is synaesthetic. She cites Clarice Lispector, who writes about an encounter between a woman and a cockroach:

> *Holy Mary, mother of God, I offer thee my life in exchange for that moment yesterday's not being true. The roach with the white matter was looking at me. I don't know if it was seeing me. I don't know what a roach sees. But if its eyes weren't seeing me, its existence was existing me – in the primary world I had entered, beings exist others as a way of seeing one another. (…) The roach wasn't seeing me with its eyes but with its body.* (1964, cited in Dave, 2021, p.146)

This vignette suggests that our synaesthetic system – the whole corporeal sensorium – is what enables us to bring each other into existence, 'leaving an impression not simply on the soul, but on the skin' (Dave, 2021, p.146). In this instance, Dave is drawing from her research on multispecies relations, but if I'm allowed to transpose her thinking to reflect on Buck-Morss' concerns, the connections might be fruitful. Buck-Morss presents the political power of the synaesthetic system as instinctual, a kind of animalistic sixth sense, though one that includes all other senses. When fully functioning, this system is capable of issuing us with a warning in a 'moment of danger' (Benjamin, 1940), shedding our skin (Dave, 2021). The body is thus presented as a 'potentiality that is dynamic and open to being affected' (Blackman, 2021, p.119), a generative force to be deployed politically. We can, then, sense the implications of this system being tampered with, manipulated, by even greater forces.

II.

Benjamin sees modern experience as neurological (Buck-Morss, 1992, p.16). He relies on the Freudian insight that consciousness is a shield which protects the organism against external stimuli. The role of this shield is preventing shock from 'penetrating deep enough to leave a permanent trace on memory' (Buck-Morss, 1992, p.16) – in other words, from becoming traumatic.

The issue is that, Buck-Morss writes, 'response to stimuli without thinking has become necessary for survival. (…) In street crowds and erotic encounters, in amusement parks and gambling casinos, shock is the very essence of modern experience' (1992, p.16). This is further exacerbated in the experience of factory workers who, to protect their bodies from physical harm, coordinate their movement with that of the machine – a mimetic capacity that paralyzes the imagination (1992, p.17).

> *Being "cheated out of experience" has become the general state, as the synaesthetic system is marshalled to parry technological stimuli in order to protect both the body from the trauma of accident and the psyche from the trauma of perceptual shock. As a result, the system reverses its role. Its goal is to numb the organism, to deaden the senses, to repress memory: the cognitive system of synaesthetics has become, rather, one of anaesthetics.* (1992, p.18)

This is Buck-Morss' fundamental proposition. She enables us to look at society through a new lens, whereby modernity reverses our cognitive mode of sensing reality into a system that blocks out reality (1992, p.18). She says: 'it is no longer a question of training the eye to see beauty, but of restoring "perceptibility"' (1992, p.18).

This crisis in perception has fatal consequences. If our synaesthetic system is anaesthetised, it therefore disables our capacity to respond politically, 'even when self-preservation is at stake' (1992, p.18). We're 'no longer capable of telling…proven friend…from mortal enemy' (Benjamin, 1939, cited in Buck-Morss, 1992, p.18). How did we get here?

Buck-Morss answers with the history of anaesthetic techniques. From recreational "ether frolics" to surgical anaesthesia, she reveals how the development of this technology has repercussions far beyond the medical field, affecting the social imaginary in such a way that society becomes perceived as an organism – a techno-body 'imagined to be as insensate to pain as the individual body under general anaesthetics' (1992, pp.29-30). Additionally, we see how reality itself becomes intoxicating, with both private and public spaces becoming total environments that flood the senses – *phantasmagorias* – with opulent interiors and shopping arcades forming artificial compensatory realities (1992, pp.22). Buck-Morss elaborates:

> *These simulated sensoria alter consciousness, much like a drug, but they do so through sensory distraction rather than chemical alteration, and – most significantly – their effects are experienced collectively rather than individually. Everyone sees the same altered world, experiences the same total environment. As a result, unlike with drugs, the phantasmagoria assumes the position of objective fact. (1992, p.23)*

In art, too, this phenomenon can be found. For instance, Adorno saw Wagner's opera as a pseudo-totalizing phantasmagoria, the role of which was to hide the alienation and fragmentation of modern existence through a spectacular illusion of unity (Adorno, 1981, cited in Buck-Morss, 1992, pp.24-25). Where might we find similar tactics today?

In an article titled 'The Occupation of the Senses: the Prosthetic and Aesthetic of State Terror', Palestinian feminist activist and scholar Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2017) examines what she sees as the sensory occupation of the colonised by the settler colony in Occupied East Jerusalem. She argues that to fully understand colonial violence, we must look beyond traditional relations of domination and control as expressed by the occupation of territory, to aesthetic phenomena deployed by the coloniser with the aim of invading the realm of experience of the colonised (2017, p.1282).

Without wanting to diminish the importance of physical violence which Shalhoub-Kevorkian poignantly includes in her essay, I would like to focus particularly on her study of aesthetic forms of violence facilitated by cultural events, such as the state-sponsored Jerusalem Light Festival. This festival is described by the Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs as 'a magical, compelling, multisensory celebration of artistic ingenuity' (2014, cited in Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2017, p.1284). As she points out, such descriptions disguise the festival as a cosmopolitan artistic event, allegedly neutral and apolitical. While the walls and buildings of the Old City transform into a distracting spectacle of light and video projections – a mystical and atmospheric phantasmagoria – the realities of Israeli colonisation are obfuscated. 'The Old City becomes like a museum exhibit rather than the living and breathing site of contestation between a settler state and a native population' (2017, p.1285).

Moreover, this type of visual spectacle deliberately reinforces the coloniser's domination over the colonised population in ways that are rather akin to those of fascist regimes. As seen in earlier examples such as colonial Jordan, apartheid South Africa, and Italy under Mussolini, both colonial and authoritarian regimes utilize public aesthetic displays to assert their power (2017, p.1282). In the case of Israeli cultural events, including the Light Festival and regular nationalist parades taking place in Jerusalem's Old City, it is well established that state imagery represents Jewish culture and excludes the Palestinian population (Mayer, 2005, cited in Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2017, p.1282).

Benjamin says that humanity's self-alienation has reached such a degree that it is capable of watching its own destruction with enjoyment (1936, p.38). We can see how the phantasmagoria of the Jerusalem Light Festival provides a 'luminous surface (…) that shimmers like a veil', as in Franz Skarbina's alluring painting of Paris (Buck-Morss, 1992, p.23). Only here the veil is covering, in its glowing and harmonious choreography, a deeply fractured and uneven reality.

These sensory displays of power, Shalhoub-Kevorkian states, ultimately aim to 'render the colonised senseless' (2017, p.1296). Not only the Palestinians are left destitute of visibility, but they also must become numb in order to be able to continue their daily activities in this hostile environment. One could say that for them, 'response to stimuli without thinking' has indeed 'become necessary for survival' (Buck-Morss, 1992, p.16). However, although this anaesthetization is brutally alienating, it doesn't dull the pain of being made invisible. We can see this pain being channelled in ingenious moments of aesthetic resistance by young people reclaiming their place in the city (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2017, p.1295).

> *The one who belongs to the demos, who speaks when he is not to speak, is the one who partakes in what he has no part in* (Rancière, 2010, cited in Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2017, p.1295).

III.

We've seen an example in which aesthetics becomes anaesthetics in a local context of colonialist power. It would be relevant to explore how these processes might take shape on a wider scale, for which we can call on Paul Gilroy. In 'Hitler Wore Khakis', Gilroy (2000) emphasises how the dissemination of certain cultural symbols and mentalities was critical for the continuity

of the British Empire. The general public, away from the colonies, was seen as a mass of 'potential colonisers' who would develop a relationship with the imperial project from a distance. In the late nineteenth century, this relationship was facilitated by the circulation of imagery on everyday commodities, enabled by the revolutionary technologies of cheap colour printing and packaging. These, Gilroy notes, became the exciting new vehicles for an imperial phantasmagoria (2000, p.139).

The imagery that materialised this phantasmagoria was a manifestation of the glorified ideals of militarisation and patriotism. Public opinion was manipulated by the methodically seductive portrayal of military adventure as a thrilling, pleasurable and even romantic endeavour, profoundly shaping the popular currency of race and nation (2000, pp.139-141). It is with this focus on the conceptual fantasy of colonialism that Gilroy proposes a significant link between the 'sometimes genocidal brutality of the colonies and the later Nazi genocide in Europe' (2000, p.141). That link is the glamour and passion of their visual cultures. He says of fascism's political style:

> *This style lives on and exerts a powerful pull that can be all the more seductive in situations where the ideology is neither known nor enthused over. In such settings, it becomes possible to separate the uniforms, boots, fires, banners, columns of light, orchestrated crowds, and perfect bodies from the terminal point of their genocidal achievements.* (2000, p.147)

Fascistic communication strategies, Gilroy reminds us, have long been associated with the enhanced power of visuality. We can find in the work of Ernst Junger and Leni Riefenstahl the 'displacement of verbal by visual representation' in which 'the power of the image renders scripture obsolete' (Berman, 1989, cited in Gilroy, 2000, p.156). This displacement is frighteningly evident in Hitler's famous account of a communist demonstration he had witnessed after the First World War, in which he describes how a 'sea of red flags, red scarves and red flowers' enabled his understanding of 'how easily the man of the people succumbs to the suggestive magic of a spectacle so grandiose in effect' (1925, cited in Gilroy, 2000, p.162). This effect is most efficient by exploiting an aesthetic that is both ocular-centric and unifying.

Buck-Morss argues that Lacan's mirror-stage could be read as a theory of fascism. Describing the moment an infant recognises their image on the mirror for the first time, the identification with a bodily unity provokes, in contrast, a fantasy of a "body-in-pieces" (*corps morcelé*) which is then triggered in the adult's memory as a threat (1992, p.37). This experience, Buck-Morss says, is a narcissistic process that gains relevance in modernity as 'precisely the experience of the fragile body and the dangers to it of fragmentation' (1992, p.37). We can, then, see how the unifying aesthetic of fascism is perfectly designed to soothe that perceived threat. From the iconic physical appearance of political figures to visual devices multiplied in monumental scale, fascistic symbols are 'capable of bringing order to a chaotic and threatening world' (Gilroy, 2000, p.152).

Dave cites the poet Ocean Vuong: 'the human eye is god's loneliest creation' (2019, cited in Dave, 2021). One could say that fascism's sensorial hierarchy leaves us all 'like the eye – lonely' (Dave, 2021, p.145). While comparing photographs of Hitler practising facial expressions in front of a mirror with images in Darwin's book 'The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals', Buck-Morss finds that the emotions they match are those of "fear" and "suffering of the body and mind: weeping" (1992, p.39). She states:

> *The juxtaposition creates a synthetic experience that resonates with our own time (…). It shocks us into awareness that the narcissism that we have developed as adults, that functions as an anaesthetising tactic against the shock of modern experience – and that is appealed to daily by the image-phantasmagoria of mass culture – is the ground from which fascism can again push forth.* (1992, p.41)

How can this thinking aid us in our moment of globalised neoliberalism?

In 'Our Opium Wars', Max Haiven (2018) tells us about how the Temple of Dendur was relocated from Egypt to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York through a UNESCO-facilitated programme whereby the Egyptian government gifted such monuments to nations who helped create the monumental Aswan Dam – a mega-project that would submerge several historical sites in Egypt and Sudan (2018, pp.662-663). The temple now lives in the Sackler Wing, named after the Sackler family, owners of their own contemporary empire: Purdue Pharma, the company that produces and markets the opioid painkiller that ravaged America – OxyContin (2018, pp.663). They are one of the most prominent patrons of the Western artworld, part of an elite of corporations and magnates profiting from artwashing their violently extracted wealth (Evans, 2015, cited by Haiven, 2018, pp.664).

The opioid crisis is one of the largest human-caused public health crisis in American history. Since it started at the end of the twentieth century, more than half a million people have died from opiate-related causes (Haiven, 2018, p.666). Surprisingly, this phenomenon has particularly affected one of the healthiest demographics in the country: white women, whose life expectancy has been declining steadily year after year (McKay 2018, cited in Haiven, 2018, p.666). This is one reason why users have been portrayed as innocent victims (Keller, 2017, cited in Haiven, 2018, p. 667), in contrast to earlier drug crisis like street heroin or crack cocaine, which disproportionately ravaged black communities (Haiven, 2018, p. 667).

Haiven shows how the opioid crisis and the artwashing of the Sackler family are enmeshed in ramifications that stem all the way from the nineteenth century's Opium Wars between China and Europe, of which a legacy of looting and displacement of treasured artifacts,

representing thousands of years of Chinese civilisation, is now made palatable by some of the most popular cultural institutions in the West (2018, p.665). In this context, museums become artistic phantasmagorias allowing the devastating wrecking of civilisations to be re-branded as a contemporary philanthropic endeavour.

In the meantime, the political implications continue unfolding with the tragedy of widespread opioid addiction. Demographer Shannon Monnat reveals that the swing of voters from Barak Obama to Donald Trump was best predicted by counties that had elevated rates of mortality due to drug and alcohol abuse: mostly poor, deindustrialised, and predominantly white (Haiven, 2018, p.668). As Foucault asks, how can power 'let die', if its objective is essentially to 'make live' (2003, p.254)? The answer is in the ability of racism to fragment, to create a caesura within the population (Foucault, 2003, p.254). Foucault says:

> *Racism makes it possible to establish a relationship between my life and the death of the other that is not a military or warlike relationship of confrontation, but a biological-type relationship: (…) the death of the other, the death of the bad race, (…) is something that will make life in general healthier: healthier and purer.* (2003, p.255)

One could say that, while doing nothing to alleviate the suffering of these neglected communities, Trump was capable of giving spectacular expression to their suffering. The caesura he created offered an antidote – a narcissistic promise – to a rather lonely and frail reality.

Like Gilroy, Haiven makes clear that our darkest legacies cannot be separated from the ways our synaesthetic system is manipulated today. From exhaustive political corruption to exhausting exploitation of the workforce, these practices have 'metastasised into an empire of pain of which we are all subject' (Haiven, 2018, p.669). Is there an escape?

IV.

Buck-Morss tell us how the development of general anaesthesia in the nineteenth century provided relief both for the surgical patient and for the surgeon themselves. Whereas before, surgeons had to desensitize themselves from the pain of the patient, now they could operate on a dormant, inert body (1992, p.28). Social perception, under these circumstances, saw a tripartite splitting – with the patient, the surgeon, and the audience in the operating room representing a separation between bodily, agential, and cognitive experience which resulted in an uncanny sense of self-alienation (1992, pp.30-31).

In our time, too, we can find daily experience split in a self-alienating fashion. One could argue that we are somehow tolerating our bodily aches, powering through – but at a great cost. This cost is emotional pain – depression – which we seek to relieve, again, through chemical manipulation of the senses. The need to power through is closely tied in with notions of normativity: as anthropologist Emily Martin shows, drugs for depression, anxiety and psychosis can be seen as 'co-performers', self-managing techniques that enable people to perform cultural norms (2006, 2007, 2010, cited in Blackman, 2021, p.3). Blackman elaborates:

> *Drugs such as Prozac, for example, have been marketed through particular cultural logics. As Metzl has argued, Prozac was (…) marketed as enabling the user to become 'optimistic, decisive, quick of thought, charismatic, energetic and confident' (2003, p.15). After the user's encounter with Prozac they were depicted as 'a generative working member of society, holding fruitful employment in her productive days' (2003, p.153). (…) Biology is thus socialized and given meaning according to prevailing conceptions of normative personhood.* (2021, p.3)

Ultimately, even in a mental health context, the objective is always returning to "normality", more specifically, to work and life as a 'useful and docile body' (Foucault, 2003). In Cressida J. Heyes' 'Anaesthetics of Existence', she articulates an account of 'postdisciplinary time' – the experience of time in our neoliberal reality of amalgamated professional and personal lives, one which requires exhausting multitasking (2020, p.21). This experience, she says, is constructed around 'what has happened, is happening now, and will happen'; in other words, it demands of the embodied subject an accumulation of 'doings', a completion of succeeding achievements that together constitute the passage of time (2020, p.22). However, the lived experience of ordinary life in this context often feels compressed, draining, and 'teetering on the edge of possibility' (2020, p.7). Heyes argues:

> *The response from even the most privileged individuals cannot always be to sit up, pay attention, work harder, work to change ourselves – indeed, this is a mode of subjectivation that neoliberalism itself generates and exploits (Tokumitsu 2018). Sometimes, (…) the only possibility of resistance (or even the only viable response) might be to detach from experience, to evade pain and fatigue, to slow down, and (…) to alter or even to lose consciousness.* (2020, p.7)

So Heyes is proposing as an antidote to postdisciplinary time, a 'time out of time' facilitated by informal anaesthetics (such as alcohol, cannabis and anxiety prescription drugs), constituting what she calls 'anaesthetic time'. These substances have relatively mild effects and provide the subject with a way of 'gently checking out' of temporal experience and the demands of productivity. In fact, under their slow effects, the subject becomes indifferent to the passage of time – 'time drifts', and consequently their anxiety recedes (2020, p.97).

Contrary to postdisciplinary time, anaesthetic time does not contain temporal experience, because it is not occupied with what we would consider an activity.

Heyes points out:

> *To approach the experience of anaesthetic time in its everyday banality is philosophically challenging: it is so boring, so subtle, so routine, and so socially accepted that it barely stands out as an experience at all (…). In this way, anaesthetic time is connected to boredom (…), which, Heidegger famously argues, can, in its most profound form, depersonalize me and make the world seem entirely undifferentiated and irrelevant.*
> (2020, p.105)

But even such a banal experience has gendered and racialised implications. To demonstrate this, Heyes looks at low-end, sweet wines marketed to the busy, multitasking, modern American woman. They promise to take the edge off the end of a hard day, particularly when topped up with a second shift – most likely an evening of housework and childcare. Often advertised as recreational and well-deserved downtime – 'Tuck your kids into bed, sit down and have a glass of Mommy Juice, because you deserve it!' (2020, p.109) – this phenomenon downplays the personal and political struggles perpetuated by these gender stereotypes (2020, pp.109-111). Moreover, it overlooks the implications on women who, due to their race or class, are more vulnerable to social services and police intervention. For women of colour, being at risk of being labelled as a drinker or drug abuser (2020, p.113) is the reality that gets camouflaged by the marketing of this seemingly harmless anaesthetic.

In reflection, although anaesthetic time might provide an escape, even a form of temporary resistance against the depleting neoliberal experience of time, it does not, by itself, constitute a radical pursuit. What it enables is inaction rather than action. 'Perhaps our discomfort is such, however, that anaesthetised peace may sometimes be a necessary solace' (Heyes, 2020, p.124). And yet, it would be important to recognise the fruitful opening it warrants. While in Buck-Morss' essay, aesthetics becomes anaesthetics as a means of social control, Heyes presents us with the recognition that we can alter our own senses in order to escape control. Might we be able to do the opposite, and instead of using this ability to make ourselves dormant, utilise it to re-awaken our senses – not by escaping, but by looking power in the eye?

Final thoughts

The authors gathered in this essay present us with a paradox: we are anaesthetised, alienated, caught in a web of forces that are captivating and devastating in equal measure; yet we are able to step back and examine those forces, in other words, we can see them. As well as revealing their darkness, Buck-Morss offers the hope of a critical cognition, a potentiality that can be trusted. Today, while we might have lost an art of authenticity, what we have gained is a culture where images circulate in and out of official circuits like never before, exposing the vulnerability of structures of power (Buck-Morss, 2009, p.20).

So, Buck-Morss inspires us to return to the image as a fundamental tool of politics. As we see in later works such as 'Dreamworld and Catastrophe' (2000), 'philosophy isn't illustrated by images but, rather, the image itself produces the philosophy' (Polanco, 2014). As a tool of thought, its renewed power lies precisely in its displacement, disconnected from its original context and 'narrative bubble', where it becomes available to generate new meaning (Buck-Morss, 2009). She says:

> *The promiscuity of the image allows for leaks. Images flow outside the bubble into an aesthetic field not contained by the official narration of power. The image that refuses to stay put in the context of this narration is disruptive.* (2009, p.42)

We're in a privileged position to exploit this movement in our digitised world, with nearly unlimited access to a network of potential disruptors that, in Buck-Morss' words, slide 'almost without friction past language barriers and national frontiers' (2009, p.20). But for this process to come to fruition, Buck-Morss shows, there needs to be a deployment, an accountability – that is, a critical sensibility. 'The task is not to get behind the image surface but to stretch it, enrich it, give it definition, give it time' (2009, p.42).

–

With thanks to Vikki Bell, Professor of Sociology at Goldsmiths, University of London. This essay was submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the MA Sociology (Cultural Analysis) at Goldsmiths and has not been peer-reviewed.

Raquel Figueira (she/her) is an artist, designer and writer based in London. With a background in creative practice and cultural theory, her research focuses on the intersections between politics and aesthetics, ecological relations and sensory experience. She is a graduate of Goldsmiths (University of London) and Central Saint Martins (University of the Arts London), and is currently a Lecturer in Visual Culture at LABASAD (Barcelona School of Arts and Design).

References

Benjamin, W. (1936) *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. Reprint. London: Penguin Books, 2008.

Benjamin, W. (1940) *On the Concept of History*. Available at: https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/benjamin/1940/history.htm

Berger, J. (1985) 'On Visibility' in Berger, J. and Dyer, G. (2001) *Selected Essays*. New York: Vintage.

Blackman, L. (2021) *The Body: The Key Concepts*. 2nd Ed. Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge.

Buck-Morss, S. (1992) 'Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered', October, 62, pp.3-41. Available at: https://doi.org/10.2307/778700

Buck-Morss, S. (2000) *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT.

Buck-Morss, S. (2009) 'Visual Studies and Global Imagination', *Antípoda*, 9, pp.19-46. Available at: https://doi.org/10.7440/antipoda9.2009.01

Dave, N.N. (2021) 'Afterword', *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology*, 39(1), pp.143-149. Available at: https://doi.org/10.3167/cja.2021.390110

Foucault, M. et al. (2003) *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the College de France*, 1975-76. New York, NY: Picador.

Gilroy, P. (2000) 'Hitler Wore Khakis: Icons, Propaganda, and Aesthetic Politics' in Gilroy, P. *Between Camps: Nations, Culture and the Allure of Race*. London: Allen Lane.

Haiven, M. (2018) 'Our Opium Wars: The Ghosts of Empire in the Prescription Opioid Nightmare', *Third Text*, 32(5-6), pp.662-669. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2018.1559169

Heyes, C.J. (2020) *Anaesthetics of Existence: Essays on Experience at the Edge*. Durham: Duke University Press. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478009320

Polanco, A.F. (2014) 'SNAPSHOTS: Images, Crowds, Thoughts. A Conversation With Susan Buck-Morss', *Re-visiones*, 4. Available at: http://www.re-visiones.net/index.php/RE-VISIONES/article/view/101/113

Shalhoub-Kevorkian, N. (2017) 'The Occupation of the Senses: The Prosthetic and Aesthetic of State Terror', *The British Journal of Criminology*, 57(6), pp.1279-1300. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azw066