The aesthetics of crisis

Art in arrested democracies

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Is there a chance for self-transformation, and above all, social transformation, in a crisis that is not suffered but co-created? Brian Holmes says there is. The key here is aesthetic experiences, where the breakdown of the dominant economic norm opens up a pathway toward some kind of autonomy.

A large body of research in the social sciences shows that about once every forty years industrial capitalism is disrupted by a major crisis, in the course of which structural elements of the social order undergo slow but fundamental change. The 1930s were marked by that kind of crisis, like the 1970s. Today we are again experiencing a major crisis of capitalism. [1] There is much to be said about the present situation, but here I want to focus on the experience of crisis, or what I’ll call the aesthetics of crisis. So I’m going to ask some very subjective questions. How does the crisis feel? What kinds of changes does it bring into one’s orientation and sense of self? What kinds of affects does it generate, and how do they circulate among other people? How is the crisis expressed and transmitted? What are the cultural consequences of these expressions? These questions don’t have right or wrong answers. They are ethical questions, requiring each of us to ask about the meaning of intimate experiences which are very different in each country, at each class level and for each person.

Now, to speak of aesthetics is to speak of art. Yet what I’m looking for can’t be reduced to the art object. Instead, I’ll refer to what Raymond Williams called “structures of feeling”. By that phrase he meant an emergent set of attitudes, of likes and dislikes, enthusiasms and hesitations, insights and constitutive blindnesses that allow people to recognize each other as participating in a shared present, as being on the cusp of something that only they can fully grasp and bring into being. Williams writes: “We are talking about characteristic elements of impulse, restraint, and tone; specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought; practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and interrelating continuity.” [2]

What he’s talking about is something so subtle and uncertain that one can well imagine it
takes an artwork to even point to such things, and to conjure them up in forms tangible enough to discuss. The aesthetics of crisis is therefore about the forms through which an emergent process of social change becomes perceptible and sensible. By knitting together a certain atmosphere, a range of images, a sequence of rhythms, a set of situations, presuppositions, conflicts and hopes, an artwork can evoke an incipient structure of feeling for a particular group at a particular moment, or for a whole generation.

Everyone knows the feeling of potential you can have before an artwork or a performance that seems to be expressing what’s on the tip of your tongue. In Turkey recently, during the Gezi Park demonstrations, a structure of feeling was enacted by the performance artist Erdem Gündüz, who became known as the “standing man”. After the violent repression of the protests, he just stood there in public, stopped still, arrested, unmoving. Everyone could sense the potential of resistance he embodied. Soon his performance was adopted and transformed by thousands of people, who stood in public, reading. Reading Franz Kafka, for instance, under the gaze of the police.

So we’re talking about aesthetics as a structure of feeling, for a group and especially for a generation. But I’m going to throw in a twist. I’m going to ask about the moments when structures of feeling break down, so that what we sense is not their presence but their absence, their emptiness, their futility. What’s more, I want to suggest that there is a structure of the breakdown itself. This broken structure must somehow be given by the dysfunction or collapse of society’s most overarching law. In the case of the capitalist democracies, that law is economic.

Strange as it may seem, there are people from other generations who have thought about exactly these issues. Like an American Marxist you may never have heard of, James O’Connor. He lived through the crisis of the welfare state in the 1970s and analysed it as a collapse of legitimacy. [3] Then he went on to investigate some of the lasting consequences. His key insight was that capitalism – a system based on the production, sale and consumption of commodities – tends to make its subjects treat themselves as things, as ownable objects.

O’Connor’s reasoning went something like this: if the ordinary commodity is a polished, expensive, shiny thing whose possession grants its owner prestige and social power in the eyes of others, then why not value one’s own identity in precisely the same way? Why not invest in it, improve it, cherish it, display it like a prized possession? Why not expect from a fine identity a prestige and power like that of rolling up next to a friend in a shiny BMW sports car? Why not reify yourself, in short? Why not treat yourself as a thing? In this case, the individual would always be driven by the secret anxiety that this reification is not good enough. The individual would continually strive to prove the self’s value, to put the self’s prestige to the test, in order to overcome the limits of that shiny but also somewhat tarnished thing. A crisis, for the individual, is the moment when this goal of perfect self-reification clearly becomes impossible to fulfil.

O’Connor did not have to invent these ideas of the reified self; they were already there in American society. In fact, they were codified in the doctrines of the ad industry. The institution of advertising had analysed the role of possessions in establishing the status hierarchy, and it was actively teaching people how to add value to themselves by the
purchase of accessories (that’s the message of the famous book by Ernst Dichter, 
*Strategy of Desire*). What O’Connor did was to retrace the failure of self-commodification 
during a crisis, when the price of one’s assets suddenly plunges, and the economy that 
once brought you your cash value suddenly freezes. At such a moment your thing, that is, 
your self, suddenly loses its shine and starts to appear dull, ugly, flaccid, or even 
worthless, grotesque, abject. This was seen again recently in American society just before 
and during the Occupy movement: thousands and thousands of jobless people facing a 
crisis of personal worth. At the same time there is at least a chance for a critical 
reflection and a displacement or a reinvention of value, which encourages an 
understanding and a care for the relations of interdependency and reciprocity that can 
sustain a human being let down by the market. And at that point, a new structure of 
feeling can emerge. O’Connor expressed this process extraordinarily well, in a passage 
written some thirty years ago:

The frenzy of accumulation; the fear that it will come to an end in a huge crash or 
an environmental or military catastrophe; the unbelievable excesses of late 
capitalism worldwide – these bear witness to the obsessive-compulsive quality of 
the inner soul of capital. If we could become its inner eye, if we could transport 
ourselves into its inner soul, if we could hear the relentless beat of accumulation, 
we could experience as well as know the madness of this obsessiveness – this 
world where capital and money are a religious and aesthetic experience, and 
where power is a moral category. When we examine ourselves, we find capital 
within our own souls. We too rush through the present; we race for some victory – 
or toward some unknown destination; we are governed by unlimited desire; we 
stumble and fall from identity into the abyss. We create our own personal crisis, 
as capital creates its own crisis. [4]

What’s fascinating in this text is the parallel movement of self and society. While reading, 
we feel the way that a human personality can mirror itself in the growth of capital, so 
that abstract economic functions – automation, transnationalization, financialization – all 
become exterior reflections of an inner empire condemned to an ultimately suicidal 
process of expansion and conquest. Then comes the suggestion that the key to our own 
most intimate fate will be revealed by the examination, not of our own psychology, but 
instead, of precisely those abstract functions. This is the condition of heteronomy: the 
realization that we are under the control of something else, of another norm, another law. 
We are alienated: we do not even govern our own personality. Such a realization opens 
up a profoundly ambiguous possibility, which is the idea that like capital, we could create 
our own crisis. To say this possibility is ambiguous means that it could go at least two 
ways. Either we mimic and repeat the crisis of capital, or we seize the moment to create 
a fork in our own road. This ambiguity of the self-created crisis is the predicament of the 
individual in capitalist society.

Is there a chance for self-transformation, and above all, social transformation, in a crisis 
that is not suffered but co-created? Could a new and more promising structure of feeling 
emerge from the arrested disaster of the present? I think it could. But to know it could, 
one would have to touch the possibility, to encounter it concretely at work in the self and 
in society. One would have to participate in aesthetic experiences where the breakdown 
of the dominant economic norm opens up a pathway toward some kind of autonomy: a
pathway of the self, or *autos*, creating its own law, or *nomos*. To displace or reinvent the value of one’s own life in the midst of crisis, one would have participate in creating a new territory, a new norm and a new law, since these three things – territory, norm and law – are the basic ideas contained in the Greek word *nomos*. How can a collectivity become autonomous? How can we achieve a state of self-government? And how can we avoid being tricked by the simulacrum of self-government – which is what we have today in the capitalist democracies?

Let’s work all this out with the concepts of a forgotten Franco-Greek philosopher, Cornelius Castoriadis. He was a central figure of May 1968, but today, few people bother to read him. Perhaps because he did not make ambiguous things easy. He tries to understand how the individual can have an effect on the society that created that individual. He tries to understand how the radical or instituting imaginary can cut through the existing system of norms, or what he calls the “imaginary institution of society.” He realizes that human life is not merely about ideas or representations. It is also about affects, about feelings, and about the intentions or potentials for action that affects provoke. He situates existence within a socio-historical magma of received ideas, affects and intentions, and notes that the minimal requirement for any society to go on existing is that the individual psyche should be able to make meaning out of the emerged part of that vast socio-historical magma whose surface is present-day culture. Now you can almost touch the aesthetics of crisis. What kind of breakdown or revolt is likely to happen if we cannot fulfill the deepest ideas of our society amidst the surface conditions of our present historical moment? How does such a breakdown, or better, such a revolt occur?

Castoriadis says this: “It is only insofar as the radical imagination of the psyche seeps through the successive layers of the social armour, which cover and penetrate it up to an unfathomable limit-point, and which constitute the individual, that the singular human being can have, in return, an independent action on society.” [5] Seepage versus armour: these are the terms of an intimate conflict between the psychic and the social imaginary. When you consider the armour of society today, it sounds like an unequal combat. What if the revolt just seeped into some dikes or channels or basins or rivers that were already prepared to receive it? What if the institution of society had already imagined the forms of revolt that might arise against it? What if heteronomy, or alienation, were continually ready to don the masks of autonomy, or liberation? Those are typically contemporary questions, the questions of the spectacle society, which Guy Debord might have asked Castoriadis had they run into each other once again, say, in the early 1990s. “Isn’t this totally mediated pseudo-democracy one vast trap enclosing and defining what you call the individual psyche?” Debord would have asked. Castoriadis responds from a greater historical distance, pointing out the requisites of democratic revolution:

Such an action is extremely rare and, at any rate, imperceptible wherever instituted heteronomy prevails – that is, in fact, in almost all known societies. In this case, apart from the bundle of predefined social roles, the only ascertainable ways in which the singular psyche can manifest itself are transgression and pathology. Things are different in the rare case of societies where the bursting of complete heteronomy makes a true individuation of the individual possible and thus allows the radical imagination of the singular psyche to find or create the social means of publicly expressing itself in an original manner and to contribute
perceptibly to the self-alteration of the social world. [6]

What struck me first, when I read that complex passage, were the notions of transgression and pathology. It is precisely in this respect that highly abstract economic analysis and political philosophy become intensely personal. Who has not been accused of pathological transgression, when trying to resist the norms and laws of existing institutions? How many times have I myself been called a nut, a delinquent, a criminal? Yet at the same time it’s clear that I merely seek to fulfil in my life some ideal that originally comes from the history and the society that made me. No doubt like yourself, dear reader, I seek to make meaning in a democratic society. What meaning can I make under present conditions? What meaning can you make under present conditions?

As I was considering all these things, events broke out in France. It was the Charlie Hebdo massacre, followed by the murder of four Jewish people in a supermarket. The brutal and chaotic wars that have been raging in the Middle East for over a decade exploded violently in Paris (which had been my second home for decades). A few days later, millions of people poured into the streets, carrying signs that read JE SUIS CHARLIE. Here was the combination of an intensely personal and an intensely social act, responding to a threat not only against personal safety, but also against the freedom of artistic expression. Did this moment allow “the radical imagination of the singular psyche to find or create the social means of publicly expressing itself in an original manner and to contribute perceptibly to the self-alteration of the social world”? Was this indeed a moment when “society and individuals alter themselves together”, which is how Castoriadis characterizes a democratic revolution? In short, was this an upsurge of self-government?

As prime minister Manuel Valls began a series of statements culminating in the declaration of a French war on terror, I began looking over the history of Charlie Hebdo. It’s a satirical journal of the sixties, originally called Hara-kiri, which was shut down in 1970 for lampooning Charles de Gaulle at the moment of his death. These cartoonists are transgressive heroes of May ’68. What the journal does is to inject a provocative affective analysis into its specific political take on current situations. Shock the people you’re against, for the pleasure of those whom you support: that’s essentially the formula. I read the statements of one of the surviving cartoonists, Luz. He claims that Charlie Hebdo is entirely against symbolism. “Doves of peace and other metaphors of a world at war aren’t our cup of tea. We work on details, specific points in correlation with French humour and our way of analysing things à la française.” He rejects the idea that “we have to be careful what we do in France as someone may react in Kuala Lumpur or somewhere else”. And he says: “If people post our cartoons on Internet, if the media highlight certain of our cartoons, that’s their responsibility. Not ours.” [7]

Despite my sympathy for this man who had just lost a dozen close colleagues in a horrid and unjustifiable massacre, still I was amazed by these declarations. The press is a personal, irresponsible activity? Caricatures of the Prophet Mohammad are not symbolic? France, which sends its army and oil majors into countries around the world, is a hermetically sealed enclave for the exercise of humour à la française? Was this the public meaning – the structure of feeling – of JE SUIS CHARLIE?
I share the disgust felt by millions of people at brutal murders committed in the name of religion within the borders of what used to be understood as a secular country. I also think the massive display of solidarity with victims of violence can be a very positive thing – indeed, a public expression of democracy. Yet the principle statement of this demonstration was a narcissistic one, identifying the self with transgressive irresponsibility, and transforming that transgressive identification into a national gesture. In short, this was a perverse fulfilment of the ‘68 slogan, *l’imagination au pouvoir*. Now, that’s surely not the message that everyone taking part in the demonstrations intended to project, and I am certain that many people are still working to give other meanings to JE SUIS CHARLIE. But there is definitely a symbolic paradox, and indeed a symbolic trap at work – Luz is absolutely right – when personal identification with transgressive political satire becomes a rallying cry for European racism and a “clash of civilizations”. We have already seen the militarization of democracy under the guise of national patriotism and the protection of freedom in the United States. The psyche and the society may be altering themselves together, as Castoriadis would have it, but not in any way that expands the frontiers of democracy.

In the face of massive public failures to respond to the implacable unfolding of the present political and economic crisis, those of us who seek a missing democratic meaning are thrown back to our own aesthetic experiences, so different for each nationality, each class position, each individual. In the face of capital’s crisis, you must create your own.

On 16 December 2014, I was invited to a five-mile march in Chicago, from the police headquarters to City Hall. The aim of this march was to seek reparations for the mostly African American victims of police torture in the city where I live. Between 1972 and 1992, forced confessions were extracted from some one hundred men by Vietnam war veteran Jon Burge and other officers. Burge was eventually fired, then finally sentenced to four years from which he has just been released. Meanwhile, innocent men that he and his cohorts tortured still remain in prison. The knowledge of such things takes the commodified sheen off a city. It makes ordinary life unbearable.

One of the co-organizers of the march was the Chicago Torture Justice Memorials collective, which in 2012 had launched an open call for proposals for speculative monuments dealing with the atrocity. [8] The idea of these artists was to create an exhibition by sharing among as many people as possible the act of searching, both visually and affectively, for the absent public meaning of justice in a city whose public administration had practiced torture. In 2012 they had succeeded in distributing the activity of actually producing the exhibition, so as to multiply the numbers of people who would get deeply involved. Now they wanted to go further. They wanted to actually change the law. They wanted the city to formally apologize, to pay compensation to the victims, to offer them psychological counselling as well as free education, and to call upon the police to provide exonerating evidence about the use of torture in obtaining the convictions of people who are still behind bars today – to name only the principal demands.

As we walked through the city, another of the convening organizations, called We Charge Genocide, led the entire group with chants. You could participate in the power of hip-hop by chanting these things. One was addressed to the massive police cordon surrounding us. We said: “Who do you serve? Who do you protect? Who do you torture? We’ll never
forget!” And then there was another, stranger one, chanted very fast, which expressed the feelings of activists, especially black activists, when confronted with the scorn of a society which reduces their expressions to mere foolishness, meaninglessness, even pathology. All together we chanted: “They say it’s a joke / They say it’s a game / They say it’s a joke / They say it’s a game / They say it’s a joke / They say it’s a game” and so on, through the opulent streets of Chicago’s financial district.

Inside City Hall, the absence of justice was flagrant: the mayor was out to lunch, he could not receive our demands. Yet within the official setting, the convening organizations had prepared an elaborate choreography of speeches, testimony from victims and their families, visual displays and participatory rituals. What we were doing there was creating the image of the missing justice: creating an emergent structure of feeling, on a territory which we had made ourselves, with our own bodies, in direct confrontation with the existing order, amid the palpable collapse of public laws and norms. Suddenly word came: another alderman had joined our cause, and the City Council would be forced to vote on the proposal of reparations.

As in the 2012 exhibition, I thought to myself, this is tremendously meaningful. And as in the exhibition, I knew this feeling could only be generated through a kind of participatory theatre. We needed to conjure up the crisis, within ourselves and in public, in order to start the emergent and incomplete process of making democratic meaning.

I don’t think that under present conditions you can expect an entire city or an entire country to do such things. I don’t think problems in the economy will lead us directly to social justice. What’s today called democracy is a trap. That’s the real crisis. To address it politically, in society, first we have to learn to create it aesthetically, in ourselves. Then we need to make that structure of feeling public. And nothing is going to make that easy.

I want to close with one more philosophical reflection. In the early 1990s, after the Soviet Union had fallen and western capitalism was being hailed triumphant, Michel Serres opened his great book *The Natural Contract* with the analysis of a Goya painting. It shows two combatants locked together in mortal struggle – but at the same time, the two are sinking together into quicksand. “Let’s make a wager”, writes Michel Serres. “You put your stakes on the right; we’ve bet on the left. The fight’s outcome is in doubt simply because there are two combatants, and once one of them wins there will be no more uncertainty. But we can identify a third position, outside their squabble: the marsh into which the struggle is sinking.” [9]

The meaning of Serres’ image should now be obvious. But I don’t think it is. As the wars over oil continue in the Middle East, amidst the clamour of racism in Europe and North America, the sound and the fury of the combat drowns out the far more important debate about the burning of the oil itself, and the rising tide of climate change. While we debate the terms of capital’s crisis, already our common world has begun sinking beneath the ocean. War today is the norm, racism is the law and oblivion is the most widely shared existential territory. We live in arrested democracies. An aesthetics of crisis can only emerge from those grounds.

Footnotes
1. See threecrises.org


6. Ibid.

7. Luz, "All eyes are on us, we've become a symbol", *Les Inrockuptibles*, 10 January 2015, www.lesinrocks.com/2015/01/10/actualite/luz-eyes-us-weve-become-symbol-11545347

8. See the documentation of "Opening the Black Box: The charge is torture", chicagotorture.org/#event-opening-black-box-reception


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