

Don't fight it: the embodiment of critique

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Abstract

This article examines the ethic of 'institutional critique' as a problem for arts 'work' vis-à-vis the political by making links between institutional critique and a Hegelian inspired subjectivity. Moving away from this Hegelian insistence on redemptive knowledge, or knowledge as a process of 'becoming', which inscribes the end of institutional critique itself, I examine the conditions of critique without the figure of the institution to predicate action upon, or more pointedly when critique becomes the institutional figure. Central to this is how we are to understand the work of knowledge (critique) within such a configuration, when recognizing either the possibility or the impossibility of absolute knowledge is not a required precursor for agency, but instead we are faced with knowledge without these grounds, as techne.

Keywords

institutional critique

knowledge

law

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subject

tragic

Implicit to the question of how art ‘works’ or functions lies a greater ethical demand; that we should understand and recognize the parameters, characteristics and consequences of such a labour. This demand to recognize the ‘work’ of art, inherited as much from Enlightenment liberalism as Marxian theory, has meant that what the artwork ‘does’ vis-à-vis the social has often been understood as a disappointment to or a problem for political action, transformative politics or even social reform. When caught up in the dilemma of this question we have to assume that art is unhelpful to understanding political agency, but also key to it. Here we see a faith in the idea that art does ‘something’, but further to this, the concept that knowing what art does will help us to make it (and I refer to both art and politics here) ‘better’. In this way this question points us to assess the problem of art’s political limitations and the limitations of our own knowledge of it. Now, we could say that asking ‘any’ question assumes a lack of knowledge. But what becomes interesting about this question is its philosophical rather than political make-up. Here we are invited to acknowledge that this question is, first of all, rhetorical in nature; and, second, that paradoxically it assumes a freedom from this rhetorical condition.

This is especially the case when we examine the expectations of this question and the form it takes, where we see a forced separating out of politics and culture. Here, culture is judged and analysed from an assumed space of political groundedness that is apparently untainted by culture and all its problems of disorganization, the fickleness of interpretation and plurality. In this way, the act of judging culture assumes our distance (and freedom) from it – our ability to rationalize, organize and know. The core configuration of this question therefore risks identifying politics as organizational, systematized and knowledge based and culture as its antithesis. Here, knowledge is simply not available or is even

undermined by culture and if culture is to do any political work, then it needs first assessing, understanding and then organizing. This leaves us already with the problem of how to ask the question of the critical function of culture or art or, even if the question is worth asking regarding the work of art, when we can see that asking the question produces its own rhetoric; manifest on the one hand as oversimplified and problematic distinctions between culture and politics and on the other hand as a fairly unhelpful description of the work of knowledge.

Despite this very complex relationship between aesthetics and politics, it has become fairly easy to agree that if art does any work it would be situated within the notion of its critical agency, art's disruptive power to antagonize norms, that in the most orthodox and problematic sense because we understand them to be powerful, we also understand them to be institutional and stable. This predication on critique as the work that the artwork does is sharpened further when we consider the task of institutional critique. This is something that has been the mainstay and ethical problem for art throughout modernity where in a most orthodox avant-gardist sense, say, through Dada and later, Situationism, we see the generation of an oppositional aesthetics of disintegration, temporality and spontaneity. Such an aesthetic was identified with a politics of antagonism and revolt where art was to enforce its connection to the social and political, where it was to link up with life and to efface this apparent distinction between culture and politics – to go to work.

In keeping with this legacy, if critique has any work to do in contemporary culture, it would seem that this is to evaluate its self-condition: to question its own viability. Now the question of art's social effect is turned upon itself by itself. Therefore, if art is seen to worry itself over its own agency or critical potency then it is doing its critical work. In this sense,

critique as the artwork's work has become increasingly and problematically discussed in terms of crisis or the struggle to overcome the entrenched dialectic of the institution/subject and founded upon a strange form of self-analysis based upon a definition of its own limitations. Accordingly, if the artwork can know itself then it is free for political agency. Indeed at the point of this self-knowledge the artwork then affects its political work. However, what remains problematic is to see how 'knowing self' then links up with, or is even made equivalent to, political effect.

Crucially, this account of political agency as self-consciousness forgets or ignores the more complex condition of culture and politics that I have sketched out above. Instead, what we see happening in this ethics of institutional critique is the desire to know art's work where this knowledge of self prepares a ground of cultural knowledge, from which to form a more direct symmetry between culture and politics. In institutional critique art takes on and shares the work of politics. It becomes art's social responsibility and mark of political consciousness. Therefore, and following this logic, asking what value art has or what work it does produces an institutional critique, where art is not only the subject of the demand but also its own Grand Inquisitor. It is through this process that art seeks to redeem and also prove itself in the political field: its value and its work. According to this, it is thought that if we can recover a critical culture we can also redeem our social freedom.

In countless rehearsals of the condition of critique, by artworks and art writing, we can see that institutional critique revolves around an anxiety over culture and its social effect. Here, the culture of art worries itself about critique and professes this in artworks that take on the vernacular of parody and engender the artwork as self-deprecating joke, and/or we see the artwork as weak outsider. All not only draw attention to their own triviality in the

face of this demand of effect, or recognizable and direct action, but also hold onto the notion of art as political redeemer. Often in a formulaic anti-realism, critique centralizes its incapacity for distinguishing itself from what we understand to be the normativity of dominance, or its own apparent banality – what we like to call the institution. However, and simultaneously, this type of institutional critique remains central to gauging, producing and understating art’s potentiality in the social sphere.

Given this set of problems, this article examines further the ethics of institutional critique as a problem for art’s work by making links between institutional critique and a Hegelian inspired subjectivity. Moving away from what I identify as a Hegelian insistence on redemptive knowledge, or knowledge as a process of ‘becoming’ within theoretical–critical models, I examine the conditions of critique without the figure of the institution to predicate action upon, without a politics of recognition, or more pointedly when critique becomes the institutional figure itself. In this way my text considers the ways in which we can think through culture and politics without rationalizing a distinction between the two or making one instrumental to the other. Central to this is how we are to understand the work of knowledge (critique) within such a configuration where either the possibility or the impossibility of absolute knowledge is not a required precursor for agency, but instead we are faced with knowledge without these grounds, as ‘techne’.

Oedipus – the subject and the law

Quite a familiar way to understand institutional critique is to see it as an act of decision-making that results in some emancipatory moment of self-knowledge. Integral to this is that subjective freedom is usually defined in opposition to an institutional or normative power;

here both the protagonist and the institution together form the complex and tense conditions necessary for the experience of freedom. An obvious example of this Hegelianism is Sophocles's play *Oedipus the King*. In the play Oedipus lives his life blind to the hidden powers over him, yet of course, in the climactic moment of the play he tears out his own eyes in a literal and symbolic moment of defiance to the Gods that have, as unseen and omnipotent forces up until that point, controlled his destiny. In the moment of self-mutilation Oedipus 'defines himself', he achieves autonomy and he attains self-knowledge. Oedipus, in this case, lives out institutional critique to the max. Tearing out his own eyes is a big NO to the institution and a big NO to authority. Most significantly, this is the moment when Oedipus realizes that he has been part of the institution all along – as one with it. His violent act of defiance wipes the institution away and all that it stands for. This is Oedipus's big refusal to an external authority and at the same time, Oedipus's moment of realizing self. In this tragic and violent moment where the intervention of the Gods allows him to apparently split himself in two, between the ethical order of knowledge and the political order of praxis, we are shown violence in its most spectacular and sensational form.

By reading Oedipus in this way, we can see that it mirrors quite clearly the orthodoxy of institutional critique. However, what Oedipus's action also tells us is that if this is institutional critique, then it is in fact antisocial, symbolic and representational, expressed in an aesthetic category of the tragic. It is pure affect. Therefore, Oedipus's violence of institutional critique is played out as tragic autonomy. This is because his freedom occupies a space that seems to be above the political and a moment of self-knowledge as transcendence is written as self-victimization. This knowledge purchased from a God's eye view, is utterly reliant upon the institution that not only offers Oedipus a

God's eye view of his own life but also offers him a God's eye of the afterlife in Hades. Rehearsing this a little, we see that if we are to understand subjective freedom as a predicate of institutional critique, then both are founded upon self-knowledge. Significantly, this self-knowledge is defined as understanding one's constraints as a means to get freedom – who is the institution and who is not? Oedipus's moment of self-knowledge is based on the recognition that the Gods were inseparable from, and thus immanent to, all of his life choices up until that point. However, he is able to understand this condition only in the moment when these faculties of ethics and politics become separated, when the Gods 'choose' to make themselves manifest. In this violence of separation we see the dramatic, spectacular, violent and 'feel-good-factor' of becoming – a transcendental violent pleasure, where Oedipus is offered the knowledge of his own limitations, a knowledge that he cannot refuse, but which he goes on to refuse anyway. I will talk about his stubbornness later, but for now we can see that in this moment knowledge and power are concretized in a dialectic of the Gods and the subject, the transcendental and the normative, which hesitate in the suspended violent tension which prevents each fully becoming the other.

In his essay 'Oedipus as Figure', Phillipe Lacoue-Labarthe writes on Hegel's interpretation of Oedipus:

Hegel sets out to demonstrate how the subject or Spirit gradually emerges, moment by moment, from its non-knowledge (ignorance, superstition, magic, confused religions and all the forms of the non-knowledge of the self), wrests itself away from or escapes the materiality that submerges it, gradually wins its own essence (which is to be knowledge, intellection – and self knowledge) by freeing itself from its sensory and corporeal servitude, and succeeds in accomplishing and realizing itself as such. (Lacoue-Labarthe 2003: 15)

Looking at this Hegelian Oedipus we can see that institutional critique is problematized because, apart from the climax of the play, Oedipus has been unable to differentiate his own actions from those of the Gods. Or to put it more accurately he is totally ambivalent to the nature of this structure. And as I have already outlined, when he finally is able to access this tragic knowledge, Oedipus ends up in the realm of critique as aesthetic spectacular, as if in retreat from the lived world. His Godlike knowledge which makes him all-seeing is entangled literally and symbolically with his useless earthly blindness. Clearly, the problems Oedipus faces are problems we share when we think about doing institutional critique; his opposition to institutional power seems violent and superficial at the same time, not only because it settles in an aesthetic order, or because he spends most of his life oblivious to the institution that shapes his destiny and thus largely is unable to put it into question, but also because the two aspects of identification that are required here – that is the subject and the law – are simply not available when it comes to our practical attempts to adopt this as a model for critique.

To underscore this problem, it becomes clear that a critical theory that seeks to rehabilitate or even do some institutional critique first of all has to identify the institution. The consequence of this is that institutional critique institutionalizes itself because it fantasizes about what the institution looks like, as it also fantasizes about its opposite, about what critique looks like. It is when critique is understood as an institution in itself that institutional critique really gets going.

The act of critique as a moment of self-knowing, and therefore self-definition at the face of the institution is something that we are accustomed to in art practice. It has been a familiar trope of dialectics throughout modernism and has attempted to be recaptured in past

decades in art practice through a politics of recognition in Frankfurt School revivals.¹ Such interest in a model of dialectics now has a sharper point for consideration, where, borne out of this failure to discover the institution that seems to shape our lives, we find that this ‘urge to critique’, or the failure of our desires to transcend normative powers in itself defines the ‘institutionalization of critique, critique becomes the normative’, due to its indefinability. Thus critique becomes our tragic irony; we know its limits and we still believe in it. What arises here is what we understand to be the crisis of art practice, built upon this foundational problem of identification and differentiation.

Having witnessed this move from institutional critique to the demand that we must now understand the institution of critique itself we face a starker problem. If we cannot recognize the institution in the first place, i.e. the institution that we intend to critique, and we know that our desires to lock onto a concept of the establishment are forever thwarted, then how can we understand comprehensively, the notion that critique is in itself an institution? How do we get to this point of recognition? This question already seems to do away with the concept of institutional critique. However, strangely, rather than give up on

¹ One tendency to identify a crisis at the level of critique was solicited in the early 1990s through the theory of New British Art and Philistinism. This theory from Dave Beech and John Roberts took up Frankfurt School dialectics and grafted an aesthetic of crisis on such artists as Bank, and the yBA. By arguing that artworks accessed the philistine ‘other’ in themselves. These artworks were given the status of critical in an orthodox sense, since they were seen to highlight their own limitations as an aesthetic of violent self-victimization and self-impoverishment in the face of the condition of their institutionalization. See Beech, D. and Roberts, R. (2002), *The Philistine Controversy*, London: Verso Books.

for a survey of these ideas as well as Roberts (1996), ‘Mad For It! Bank and the New British Art’, *Everything Magazine*.

institutional critique, a theory protracted through Enlightenment rationalism instead grounds the dialectic move; that to recognize the limits and problems of critique through an interface with the omnipresence of critique as an institution is critique ‘par excellence’. Therefore, and to go over this point once more, the confusing thing about this is the basis of the dialectic itself. When we can no longer differentiate between what we might call ‘critical’ and ‘institutional’ languages, and as such critical languages are as much an institution as the languages they seek to dismantle, we see the same critical method remains in place that claim they can do this nevertheless. Here, critical theory tries to understand and excavate the issue of its own practices as institutional in order to access a real freedom beyond it. This is a requirement to situate a ‘hard critique’, produced through understanding the deeper constraints in our activities that lurk omnipotently beneath the aesthetic fabric of daily experience. Accordingly, we must recognize the institutional nature of critique in itself to think again about freedom.²

In the next few paragraphs what I want to retrace in more depth are the problems that arise from critique that seeks to identify the institution, namely that this is a tragic discourse. This is how the failure and weaknesses of institutional critique in the first place problematically embed critique as an aesthetic category of the institutional.

² Andreas Fraser’s essay ‘From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique’ (2005) *Artforum*, September, pp. 278–33 makes an interesting attempt to witness the overcoming of the dialectic between the subject and the institution. In the essay she writes ‘the institution is inside of us and we can’t get outside of ourselves’ (282). She concludes with the notion that self-criticism as a mark of institutional critique ends up defending the institution of critique, and paradoxically it is this self-institutionalization where art receives its power (283). Despite this embodiment of the institution within subject-centred agendas, where we cannot tell the difference between the institution and the critiques of it, and perhaps ‘because’ of her attempt to foreground a positive response to the ‘institution of critique’, Fraser still grounds her work on a politics of recognition where we are to acknowledge our self-institutionalization. Here, the artwork acts out a process of recognizing and regaining the tensions in these dynamics of the subject and power. Therefore, although ‘we are the institution’, and ‘we can’t get outside of ourselves’, in order to do some critique, the institution is problematically reinstated in a set of tense theatrical relationships; it inhabits us in a psychoanalytical sense, underscoring its power of horror and a dominance that does not forgo the power of rule.

Institutional critique as tragic discourse

So far I have defined a theory of institutional critique as a Hegelian model, where critique is tied to freedom, and freedom is understood as achieving knowledge in an absolute sense. This process of critique as we have seen it causes us quite a few problems because it fixes critique around a recognition of an other that is conditioned upon the self. Here, lack of this recognition is zeroed in on as a point of recognition itself as a theory of lack. Duly, this process of theorizing critique institutionalizes critique as both critique and the institution are aestheticized as ethical paradigms. The problem according to this model of critique as institutional critique is that we know it; it is genre specific, spectacular and somewhat trivial. It also acts as if it can, just like Oedipus, take the higher and impossible moral ground above these conditions from which to understand just who is the boss.

It is also clear that this need to aestheticize the institution, whether this is the subject or the law, emphasizes an ‘inability’ to hold the normative in our grasp – it emphasizes how blind we are to a concept of constraint, it focuses on a tension between impossibility and absolute knowledge as an epic configuration – whether this is at the level of self-constraint as immanent or constraint as transcendental. In other words, we cannot recognize the institution of critique although we say it is a condition of agency – and as such the desire to fix meaning upon this recognition becomes its own problem. What is doubly tragic about this blindness to either the institution as an omnipotent force and critique as an embedded institution, or what Michel Foucault would term, critique, as ‘the attitude’³ of postmodern

³ Michel Foucault discusses this in his essay ‘What is Enlightenment?’ In Paul Rabinow (ed.) (1984), *The Foucault Reader*, New York: Pantheon, p. 50. In Foucault’s lecture, he cites his project as inherited (surprisingly to some) from a Kantian notion of rationalism. Here Enlightenment critique is embedded even transformed, it is an ethos. Foucault writes ‘criticism is no longer going to be practised in the search for formal structures with universal value but rather as a historical investigation into the events that have led us to recognise ourselves as subjects of what we doing thinking, saying. In that sense criticism is not transcendental,

culture is that dialectical critique tries very hard to connect up with this blindness, in effect ‘to see again’. It tries the impossible: to force something like a stand-off between the Gods and Oedipus, all from a very human position, and then to condition this failure as equivalent to a stand-off with oneself. In this way, we can acknowledge that the institution is now not ‘out there’, but instead is embodied, engrained, immanent to our actions. And, so it goes, if we can only recognize the ways in which critique or our agency, our very subjectivity, is institutional, then we can free critique and ourselves from institutionalization, to reinvigorate our implicit relationship to freedom and autonomy and to retrieve these tensions between the subject and power. ‘We are Oedipus’.

What I would like to draw out here is the tragic dimension of this delineation of agency. And to do this I have to go over two points: (1) in order to recognize an institution in itself we have to recognize its normativity, its ordinariness, even when we know that there are no grounds available to do this; and (2) because critique as an opposition to authority becomes common currency, we can no longer recognize the institutional authority that we wish to put into question because they use that language too. Recognizing such norms or institutional qualities is simpler in theory than in practice, for as soon as we are asked to describe ‘the institutional’ as something that is consistent or the comprehensive nature of the institutional ‘per se’ we get into hot water. In this way, the need to define the institution mirrors an old metaphysics and connects up with the desire for transcendence. Taking a phrase from Lacoue-Labarthe, where ‘transcendence ends in politics’⁴ and thinking

and its goal is not that of making a metaphysics possible: it is genealogical in its design and archaeological in its method.’ I am not going to debate Foucault’s relationship with Kant here, but Foucault’s use of Kant points us to recognize the point at which critique is mutually historicized, traditionalized and yet remains alive and well in postmodern discourse.

⁴ Phillippe Lacoue-Labarthe (1989), ‘Transcendence Ends in Politics’, *Typography, Mimesis, Philosophy*, London: Harvard University Press, p. 298. Although this text discusses the (metaphysical) Nietzschean and

back briefly to my earlier comments on the aesthetic qualities of our Hegelian Oedipus, it becomes more clear that the politics that we end up with are tragic. This is because when we ask: How exactly is this recognition made? How do we split our pathological beliefs from our rationalizing mind to attain knowledge of self? How do we recognize ourselves as the (bad) dominating power that we want to dispose of? Just how do we attempt to rid ourselves of critique as the mark of our own predication for normativity? The answer is that we do not and we cannot.

Critique as practice

In his book *Doing What Comes Naturally*, Stanley Fish writes about this structure of critique as dialectic model as redundant since any move towards such ‘ends’ demands an impossible split between reason and belief in order to act upon our desires. Fish writes:

It is often claimed that reason itself is what is left when belief, preconception, and prejudice have been set aside or discounted, but reason cannot operate independently of some content – of some proposition or propositions made up of definitions, distinctions and criteria already assumed – and that content will reflect some belief or attitude that will inform whatever reason dictates. (Fish 1989: 518)

In terms of this impossibility to orchestrate a rationalizing and conscious moment, he asks the rhetorical question ‘Just how does one distance oneself from oneself? With what part of oneself can one be tentative about oneself?’ (Fish 1989: 517) For Fish, the subject is constrained to the political, knows it retroactively, but is prevented from knowing it ‘ultimately’ or ‘absolutely’. And because this knowledge is not available it is not useful. As

Kantian influences regarding Heidegger’s thought, it states the point that is equally adequate to this discussion, ‘Why would a problem of identification, not be, in general, the essential problem of the political?’ (p. 300) This is a question that remains appropriate to this ‘will to critique’ whether it is conceived as Nietzschean or Hegelian.

the neo-pragmatist, self-consciousness, then, for Fish, is a retroactive metaphor, and it has no connection to the ultimate or tragic moment of (traumatic) knowledge that the orthodoxy of philosophy describes as freedom. Indeed philosophizing about ‘essence’ or the conjuring up of authorities (especially if this is ourselves) as a means to experience freedom is a formal pleasure, one that serves little use for good political practice. Fish goes on to remark upon contingency without self-consciousness: ‘You may know in general that the structure of your conviction is an historical artefact, but that knowledge does not transport you to a place where those convictions are no longer in force.’ (Fish 1989: 524) Here we can now identify that this demand to see our own blindness, to ‘recognize’ the embedded nature of critique, is not only unhelpful but there is no such normativity or consistency to be found. As such, attempting to rescue reason as a means to extend critical agency paradoxically shows this desire to rationalize as the pathology it is.

Now this is where it gets interesting. Fish talks about there being no place where those convictions are no longer in force. And, he does not mean that these strong, historical and normative convictions are the sole property of the dominating order – of the institution. Rather, these convictions are used by us all and they are not as normative as we assume. Therefore, to say that there is no place of power that is free from these convictions means that we are always already using and are subject to the force of the rhetoric of power. Fish disposes here of the need for a self-policing rationalism positioned in dialectical thought and the notion of a neutral ground upon which to perform critique. However, rather than identify this lack of neutral ground as being the place where tragedy begins, because Fish does not hinge agency or critique upon attaining self-consciousness, the subject is free for adversarial combat according to appropriate conditions.

In this way we can begin to determine a non-tragic attitude and a lack of anxiety around critique in general and institutional critique in particular. This is not so much a ‘forgetting’ of the idealism of transcendent knowledge, but rather a comprehensive understanding that such philosophizing has reached its terminus, and furthermore that doing this type of philosophy simply continues to define this point. Here there is no tragic irony, and this is not replaced with ambivalence, but rather a de-theorized explication of contingency. We are the institution, so we deal with it. We define it as we define ourselves. This does not mean that there are no powers greater than us, but neither does it mean that (1) we are consistently dominated by them, and (2) that domination is such a bad thing anyway. And this is because the dream of absolute knowledge and the horrors of absolute power are effaced at the level of action, the processes of our work.

Now returning to Oedipus we can see another figure. Lacoue-Labarthe describes how this Oedipus is based around a use of knowledge: ‘Oedipus has nothing to do with the subject (self-consciousness), or in other words with knowledge (theory) as subject; but it has everything to do with knowledge as *techne*.’ (Lacoue-Labarthe 2003: 17)

Crucially, this describes something almost like a Nietzschean-style rule of self-preservation, a ‘Promethean refusal’ of anything outside of the self or even it underscores that there is only the self and that this is only made up of ‘desire and self-sustained knowledge’. This is a question of how Oedipus’s immortality is related to his earthly and self-interested concerns – ‘a man without God’. Here, the institutional realm of the Gods that has been invisible to Oedipus throughout the play is now returned to this level of invisibility because Oedipus decides it so. Because he does not see it, it does not exist.

Oedipus's ultimate decision to act 'with knowledge' can be seen in the final scene of the play where Oedipus blinds himself. A palace messenger recounts the scene:

He rips off her brooches, the long gold pins holding her robes – and lifting them, looking straight up into the points, he digs them down the sockets of his eyes, crying, 'You, you'll see no more the pain I suffered, all the pain I caused! Too long you looked on the ones you never should have seen, blind to the ones you longed to see, to know! Blind from this hour on! Blind in the darkness – Blind!' (Sophocles 1984: 237)

The momentous act, as portrayed by the messenger, seems to concern itself with the tragedy of Oedipus's circumstance. However, this tragedy is distinctly 'human'. It does not deal with the world of the Gods, but describes a griping bitterness and complaining mingled with a selfish feeling of being forsaken and, of course, the absolute horror of the act itself. Instead of following the orthodoxy of the classical maxim of the heroic, whereby it is 'better to die than to lose one's honour', Oedipus says that he has no wish for suicide as he would see his mother and father again in Hades.⁵

Here re-reading Oedipus we can see that his refusal of the higher knowledge of an afterlife and the Gods is not one discreet moment of knowledge in the play. In fact, throughout the play Oedipus is the action hero. He gets things done – he solves the riddle of the Sphinx and manages to successfully rule a kingdom. Oedipus is all right without his Hegelian affliction – the need to split the self between the ethical institutional order and the political in order to recognize oneself in the face of a mystical authority – and so are we. As such, to be haunted by this spectre of the institution, as a spectre of an immanent

⁵ For an account of Oedipus's self-interest, from tragedy to farce, see Alenka Zupanec (2000), *Ethics of the Real, Kant, Lacan*, Verso, pp. 175–81.

Hegelianism, needs to be understood as the aesthetic and political problem that it is, and not as its violent promise of the unknown absolute.

The embodiment of critique

In this way we could say that art inhabits critique as much as critique inhabits art. It is art's great myth, its abstract and foundational thought. However, having taken sides with our Nietzschean notion of knowledge as *techne*, we can underscore that art's relationship with critique and duty, critique as autonomy in the postmodern condition is not about establishing critique as an end in itself; rather, critique is art's condition. This sentiment of 'means as ends in themselves' is also channelled through Lacoue-Labarthe's essay. Here, our Hegelian Oedipus who settles freedom upon absolute knowledge of self as 'determined other' lives on precisely due to this Nietzschean-style refusal of absolutes. It is here in Oedipus's 'afterlife' on earth, where knowledge and desire are conditioned intimately through the embodiment of the 'passion for knowledge'. The figure of Oedipus no longer desires knowledge as an externalized goal, but instead knowledge itself produces the mechanics of a desiring subject: the figure of *techne*. What is most provocative about this post-Hegelian subjectivity is that it has come through and witnessed absolute knowledge in a grand face-off with the institution. In effect this overcoming or passing over of knowledge in the absolute creates an afterlife of critique – a post-institutional critique or a post-absolutist critique that remains critical and active without the representationalism of a dominant self as other.

Living with what we can term the institution of critique therefore means that we have to take it seriously, and this remains a pressing issue for contemporary culture where

we can identify critique as a force or violence that fuses private and self-interested competition with the rhetoric of moral stability.

Looking further at the embodiment of critique as a natural law links up nicely with what Richard Rorty describes as a process of critique as contestation. And in many sense we could articulate this subjectivity figured through Lacoue-Labathe's Nietzschean Oedipus as close to Rorty's figuration of the postmodern author. In his text *Consequences of Pragmatism* he argues that the author 'simply beats the text into a shape which will serve his own purpose' (Fish 1989: 516).

And of course this notion of self-indulgence would seem to retract aggressively from any notion of art as something that could or should fulfil some ethical duty of anti-institutionalism (liberalism) or to work in the service of its apparent opposite – the passive surrender or the willed consensus to unify with the institution – illiberalism, or worse, the totalitarian horror. The important thing to remember here is that antifoundationalism for both Rorty and Fish is not something that needs to be organized with redemption in mind. Antifoundationalism is not a task, it is what we do. Thinking long and hard that critique is an institution and even seeing the recognition of this myth as a key to revitalizing critical practice in the social domain is a myth in itself. The difference between the idea of a rationalist liberal consensus to destabilize normative codes that expresses an ethics of critique and the notion that what Fish would call 'doing what comes naturally' is that we do not need a universal ethic, because we are always already in the processes of making and therefore contesting meaning.

As such it is clear that critique is not lived out despite these entanglements of critique as an institution, but rather because of it. And the institutionalization of critique is

something that we only recognize as a representationalist account of our own constraint: a perverse drama of constructing ourselves as ‘other’. This problematizes ‘all theories of agency’ and their attempts to connect with our own blindness, in order to know an omnipotent and hidden power, because in effect we are not blind, there is just nothing there to see; I refer to this especially with some polemicist idea of ‘the MAN’ or a concrete assurance and definition of specific questions of power as having universal dimensions. Thinking about critique in such a way makes the categories of passive and active notions of action indistinct, but action is not suspended, rather it becomes central.

To discuss this finally, I want to examine how artworks elucidate critique as an article of art’s faith. I want to argue that our blindness to an omnipotent authority, or our blindness to recognizing ourselves as the embodiment of a normative ethic called critique, is not a problem, because (1) it does not exist as a normative condition once we claim it, and (2) when we recognize this essential state it becomes inscribed within our lives in such a particular way that just like Oedipus we can say no to it. In this way, not fighting what is not there anyway does not make us weak or superficial, rather it leaves us free to get on with matters in hand.

It is here where I can draw upon Donald Davidson’s comments in his essay ‘The Folly of Tying to Define Truth’. It is not hard to think of how I have described our efforts of trying to define critique is similar to the way Davidson discusses an effort to define truth. I can graft one upon the other by simply, and admittedly very crudely, stating that an attempt to define critique as an institution is also an attempt to ascribe critique a truth condition. Davidson writes:

Truth is ... an indefinable concept. This does not mean we can say nothing revealing about it; we can, by relating it to other concepts like belief, cause, and action. Nor does the

indefinability of truth imply that the concept is mysterious ambiguous or untrustworthy.(Blackburn and Simmonds (eds) 1999: 309)

I would like to offer Davidson's notion of the problem of defining truth as something that we can think about usefully when it comes to negotiating our understanding of critique as a condition of both truth and freedom – as something that seems natural to art. Here critique remains indefinable and is retracted from any thought of representationalism or organizationalism in an absolutist sense and therefore does not determine discreet territories of culture and politics because the very locus of instrumentalism – the definition of the institution – is surpassed. Here we can say that the indefinability of any determined knowledge of arts agency or work should not be the subject of our dilemma. Rather through practice critique is central to and played out within our beliefs and actions that locate a passion for knowledge, as will. The question that remains for this type of Nietzschean-style pragmatism is how we settle arguments about these beliefs and actions, but as I have hoped to show here, it is not about institutionalization, because instead of defining the agency of critique it only defines its end.

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