

TOUCHING MATTER IN ART: TOWARDS A ‘MATTERIST’ AESTHETIC WITH FRA ANGELICO, VERMEER, LUCEBERT, DE BRUYCKERE, AND MOREAU

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Drawing on examples of works of art by very diverse artists as Fra Angelico, Vermeer, Lucebert, De Bruyckere, and Moreau, I aim to show that the specific ways in which artworks yield aesthetic experiences cannot be properly understood without recourse to the peculiar (and all too often neglected) presence of *matter* in the work of art. In this paper I sketch the contours of what a ‘matterist’ aesthetic fundamentally needs to involve. Unlike ‘significant form’ (Bell & Fry), matter in art is (or so I argue) necessarily related to *presence*, *finitude* and *contingency*. Touching matter resists communication through determinate concepts. It *constrains* the production and receptivity of beauty and coherent meaning, and not so much addresses our faculty of understanding as it touches and stimulates our imagination and our ‘soul-flesh’, i.e., what Lyotard calls *l’âme-chair*. This ‘passibility’ to touching matter (which is not passive) neither presupposes nor procures any dialectic reinstalling of transcendental subjectivity, and resists appropriation by argumentative rationality and rhetoric. On the contrary, it points to a path that necessarily lies always before us: the path out of techno-science’s obsession with consensus, information and superficial entertainment towards a communality in and through (aesthetic) affects, which testify to our inevitable human finitude.

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In the history of philosophy of art form has played a crucial part as the *locus* of meaning and artistic value. Matter, on the contrary, has hardly received any attention, despite the emphasis philosophers such as Aristotle put on the relevance of it to understand organic nature and the world. In this paper I argue that this is an unforgivable mistake and I suggest that a ‘matterist’ aesthetic is required to properly appreciate the value of art. Such a ‘matterist’ aesthetic rightly acknowledges not merely the *presence* of matter in art and aesthetic appraisal, but also (or so I argue) ultimately enables us to affirm the finitude of our corporeal, material existence.

Beauty, Form, and Aesthetic Common Sense. In the philosophy of what is arguably the greatest modern philosopher, Immanuel Kant, in his epistemology as well as in his theory of beauty, *form* occupies a central role. Kant is interested foremost in the transcen-

dental conditions of knowledge, and these are indeed *formal* constraints. Matter belongs to 'mere sensation': it is what the subject receives from the outside world and offers merely the material with which the subject forms or 'moulds' proper representations, i.e. objects of knowledge. Pure beauty, too, is connected with the form of the object: the form is the correlate of the subject's disinterested feeling of pure pleasure, which is grounded in the free yet harmonious 'play' of the faculties of imagination and understanding, which are in turn transcendental, hence formal capacities and not psychological let alone physiologically identifiable or material entities. This Kantian formal approach gave the impetus to numerous formalist theories of art, such as Clive Bell's and Roger Fry's.

More importantly, Kant also postulates an aesthetic 'Gemeinsinn' or common sense (*sensus communis aestheticus*) to account for the universal communicability of the feeling of the beautiful, and this is, again, a formal postulate and not an empirical, material entity. The aesthetic *sensus communis* is even, strictly speaking, not a sense: it is not an empirical entity, but a transcendental Idea (or 'ideal'). The judgment of beauty (or of 'taste', as Kant calls it) is not based upon desire, it does not 'know' its goal, yet it is purposive and thus pleasurable: it offers a peculiar pleasure that Kant terms 'Wohlgefallen', which is not satisfaction but pure liking. This 'Wohlgefallen' is fully disinterested – a pleasure which is neither the fulfilment of a lack nor the satisfaction of a desire, need or 'will'. It has nothing to do with the (conscious or unconscious) goals of desire. Beauty cannot be the object of desire, it simply occurs or not. Beauty – natural beauty not artistic beauty – is 'purposive but without purpose', as Kant notoriously puts it. It is as if the mind (the *Gemüt*, not *Geist*) discovers that it is capable of more than merely knowing and desiring. The *Gemüt* discovers its own 'non-intellectual' capacities when faced with beauty. Kant writes that the faculty of aesthetic judgment 'quickenes the cognitive powers' and can give rise to all sorts of empirical and intellectual interests but is not in itself intellectual: beauty (or taste) 'can be called a *sensus communis*', which is to be sharply distinguished from common understanding, and is a universally shareable feeling, i.e. 'a sense shared by all of us (*eines gemeinschaftlichen Sinnes*)' (*CJ*, § 12, 5:222; § 40, 5:295). This is of paramount importance, for this clearly suggests that there cannot be a transition from 'sensus communis' to 'intellectus communis'. The pleasure we take in beauty is purely reflective, based on universally communicable feeling. The pleasure of beauty cannot possibly be planned, calculated or predicted: that is why it cannot be reduced to perfection (*Vollkommenheit*). Miss Beauty elections have nothing to do with beauty.

The aesthetic common sense is, moreover, a 'sensus communalis', a sense of universal communality. It should not be confused, however, with empirical communities, the public, the audience or 'culture'. *Pace* Hannah Arendt, the 'sensus communis' is not an empirical, anthropological notion. Beauty is not part of 'culture', it is not a pleasure shared in and through culture. So we are not talking about historical and social communities that evolve through time. Beauty is not part of an Odyssey, a project or programme. The pleasure of the beautiful does not announce nor predict anything; it has no ulterior purpose. It is neither enjoyment nor intellectual satisfaction. The universal communicability of beauty means that, although the aesthetic judgment is tied to the singularity of the

form of the object that procures pure pleasure it still *requires* to be shared by all. Contrary to mere agreeableness, which is a private matter (we do not all like spinach or oysters...), beauty demands to be universally shared. And the unison (*Einstimmung*) required by the judgment of beauty is, as it were, a singular choir of voices, offering a kind of euphony (and not the 'euphoria' all too common in our hysterical times); it is a kind of transcendental 'coenaesthesia' (as Lyotard says), which, as it were, precedes all diachronic evolution and cultural development. It is not a harmony but a 'proportion' of nuances, timbres, chromatisms.

Without developing these points any further, which nevertheless seem to me to be of the utmost importance to contemporary philosophy of communication, I would merely like to emphasise again that the basis of this conception of beauty and the idea of its non-discursive communicability and 'sentimental' communality is necessarily correlated with contemplating beautiful *form*. In § 14 of the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant makes it crystal clear that the immediate communication of beauty – the sublime is an altogether different case – is necessarily based on form, which for Kant excludes even colour, timbre, and so on.

Now what interests me here is the astonishing fact that in Kant's aesthetics – as in practically all ancient, mediaeval, and modern aesthetic theories – form is central and matter is repressed. Matter does not belong to the realms of harmony and beauty: it cannot offer disinterested pleasure, since it attracts, defies, haunts us. The attraction we may feel for the timbre of a singular soprano voice or a certain shade of yellow in a Vermeer or Van Gogh painting, or the orange colour hues of a particular sunrise, is not shareable *a priori*, not universalisable without concept. For, according to Kant, first of all, imagination and understanding can only harmonise because the faculty of understanding can recognise form but is at loss if confronted with formless matter, with what Kant calls 'Un-Form' (non-form), but which finds its place in the realm of the sublime (*das Erhabene*) and not in the territory of beauty. Secondly, beauty is not charm and, although we often mistake charm for beauty, only the latter is universally shareable, as it is based on imaginative reflection upon the formal composition of the aesthetic object.

Touching matter. However, I should like to disregard the intricacies of the sublime – which I have discussed extensively elsewhere – and the charming, and focus now on the question of matter and especially on the possibility (or impossibility?) of developing an aesthetic of matter. Of course, matter plays a crucial part in several well-known philosophical theories, such as Democritus, Lucretius, Leibniz, Bergson, to name just a few. But it is generally marginalized or even completely absent in most aesthetic theories and philosophies of art. (Notable exceptions are Bataille, Deleuze and Lyotard.) Nevertheless, *pace* Kant and other formalists, I am strongly convinced that if we want to understand and somehow come to terms with the peculiar ways in which art (and certainly contemporary art) communicates, then we necessarily have to take recourse to matter and materiality, and the way these insist, subsist and resist any Platonic or dialectical idealization of art and aesthetic communication. Communicating through *aesthesis*, is communicating through matter and materiality, which also implies through sensibility and corporeality. Not mere

sensuality, but what Merleau-Ponty calls in *The Visible and the Invisible*, ‘the reflexivity of the body, the fact that it touches itself touching, sees itself seeing’, which is ‘not the thought of touching or seeing, but vision, sensing, the mute experience of a dumb sense’, i.e., resisting any Hegelian totalisation.¹ This way of socialising the sensible is syn-aesthetic and inter-corporeal, it is a way of ‘valuing solidarity in affect’.²

It is, however, in the philosophy of art of the eighteenth-century German philosopher Herder, and especially in his intriguing treatment of sculpture in his *Plastik*, that we can find a eulogy of matter and full recognition of its aesthetic potential. Contrary to Kant, who insists on *form* as the sole occasion for the pleasure of pure beauty, Herder develops an account of sculpture that resists this exclusive attention to form. Interestingly, this attention to the aesthetic potential of matter is accompanied by a critique of so-called ‘oculocentrism’ in European aesthetics and, more specifically, a revaluation of the hand and the sense of *touch* in aesthetic experience and appreciation. In sculpture, matter is central: not, however, as passive receptacle that receives a form and thus becomes meaningful, but as sheer activity; matter is, as Aristotle already insisted, essentially *dunamis*, i.e. dynamic and energetic. In the 19th century, Schopenhauer identifies matter as the will become visible. As Andrew Benjamin³ observes, sculpture captures and reflects light. Light falls on a cheek and is moving and in marking this movement *the eye becomes a hand*. Here we find one way to show how the density, the activity, the persistence and resistance of material qualities address not the eye in its distant, contemplative, retinal mode but in (what Riegl and Deleuze have termed) the *haptic* mode of the eye: the eye, as Herder says, is ‘exploring in the dark (*im Dunkel*)’.⁴ Countering a Platonic and Christian aesthetic of light and illumination, Herder offers a materialist aesthetic that is concerned not with enlightening us with spiritual messages, but is an endless exploration of material sensibility, and that is a matter of darkness and night, for ‘it goes on feeling as it were indefinitely’ (ibid.). Hence to be able to properly acknowledge the aesthetic value of matter we need to develop what I would like to call (with a hint to Diderot’s *Memories of the Blind*), a *blind aesthetic*, i.e. an aesthetic doctrine interested in the dynamics of matter. One crucial element is exploring the subtle ways in which artists struggle with the toughness, the unruliness of matter. For matter cannot be mastered, not by the eye that tries to capture its endless dynamics nor by the hand touching its materiality. It is always and necessarily elusive, for it is by definition what resists being captured not only by concepts but also by images or percepts. The aesthetic quality of the workings of matter is often one of *intensification*, it is delightful rather than pleasing, closer to sublime ravishment than to the pleasure of easy beauty. Unlike form, matter never pleases. To be able to

¹ H. Parret, ‘Communiquer par *aisthèsis*’, in H. Parret, ed., *La communauté en paroles. Communication, consensus, ruptures*, Liège, Mardaga, 1991, p. 197.

² H. Parret, ‘Communiquer par *aisthèsis*’, p. 198.

³ See A. Benjamin, ‘Endless touching: Herder and sculpture’, *Aisthesis – Pratiche, Linguaggi e Saperi dell’estetico*, 3/1 (2011), p. 73-92, by which the following is inspired.

⁴ A. Benjamin, ‘Endless touching: Herder and sculpture’, p. 86.

‘experience’ – if one can call it that – the material qualities of the *sensoria*, a peculiar mental state is required, a mental state which is hard to attain. As Lyotard argues, for matter (or, rather, what he calls ‘immaterial matter’) to be perceived or received, *a state of mind without mind* is required. Matter can never be presentified (through percepts or concepts, etc.), it is sheer *presence*. Matter cannot be objectified, Lyotard says, for it can only ‘work’, occur (or perhaps one should say ‘matter’) if and when the active faculties of the mind are suspended, when *animus*, the male side of our mind, does not dominate. The mind cannot possibly be exposed to the ‘presence’ of matter unless it suspends its ordinary activities and its intellectual categories.

As Schopenhauer argues, perceiving something aesthetically requires suspending the ordinary way of capturing objects. It involves exposing oneself to the qualities of the object, and being absorbed by the perception of it. According to both Schopenhauer and Lyotard, and I follow them wholeheartedly in this, aesthetic experience is a matter of susceptibility rather than interpretation, of surrendering oneself rather than trying to master the qualities of the aesthetic object. One is *touched* by the object in its materiality, shocked by the singular, incomparable quality of the sense of an aroma, the taste of a juice, the acidity of a lemon, a nuance of a colour in a Veronese painting or a Venetian sunset. This is obviously not passivity: it requires attention, mindfulness, and concentration. But in aesthetic contemplation we suspend our desire to understand by means of concepts or master the object intellectually. Lyotard uses the interesting term *passibilité* (*passibilité*) in this context to emphasise that the state of mind required for this is ‘beyond’ activity and passivity. And Schopenhauer refers to the aesthetic state of mind as being will-less, which means that our mind no longer operates in the service of our *personal* desires, needs and concerns. We are not merely passive, but experience some sort of suffering for which our mind will never be fully prepared. Matter does not address the *animus*, it does not need it. It has no ultimate destination or addressee, but still insists, subsists and touches our ‘soul-flesh’ (*âme-chair*). By using Lyotard’s nice term ‘soul-flesh’ I want to insist on the difference between the Platonic-Christian idea of the eternal non-bodily part that is supposed to survive after our body has decayed and the soul-flesh, the *anima minima*, that awakens only when we are touched by the *sensibilia* around us, thus when colours, fragrances, timbres, nuances, modulations, and so on sensuously *move* and *touch* us. This does not take us back to the realm of Kantian formal beauty, on the contrary. As Lyotard rightly suggests in an exquisite passage in his *Postmodern Fables*:

Aesthetic feeling is also the affection which ‘the subject’ – or rather: the body-thought (*pensée-corps*), I shall call it: *anima* – feels when it experiences something sensorial. Be it true or false, *aisthèsis* immediately modifies *anima*, moving its disposition (its *hexis*) towards well-being or ill-being. ... *Anima* exists only as affected. The sensation, whether pleasant or ghastly, announces to *anima* that it would remain inexistent and inanimate if it were not affected by something. This *anima* is nothing but the awakening of a capacity to be affected, and this capacity remains unused if a timbre, a colour, a fragrance is lacking. ... *Anima* does not affect itself, only the other affects it. Here, to exist is not identical with the existence of a consciousness related to its noematic correlate or of a

permanent substance. To exist means: being awakened from the nothingness of being unaffected by something sensuous. An affective cloud floats by for a while and spreads its nuances for a moment.⁵

Indeed, *anima* exists only when touched, pushed or forced by an *aisthèton*, which alarms and pierces our body-thought, simultaneously awakening slumbering *anima*. Without the materiality of the sensations or ‘sensoria’ there would not be any aesthetic awareness, experience and appraisal altogether. Only the qualitative affection and even affliction of our soul-flesh, of *anima* by sensory impressions can momentarily suspend its lethargy.

Without ‘affective clouds’ touching our soul-flesh, there would not be *anima* – and hence there would not be aesthetic pleasure. Even the beauty of natural forms – to refer again to Kant’s *Analytic of the Beautiful* – would not be possible without the material *presence* of the sensoria that affect us, and touch as well as transform our ‘soul-flesh’. I insist on calling what Lyotard terms *anima minima* ‘soul-flesh’, to clarify that it has nothing to do with mysticism or pure spirituality. Although bordering on the supersensible (what Kant calls *das Übersinnliche*), it is clearly material or, rather, ‘matterist’ and not mystical. It leads to an aesthetic ‘before’ form, to an aesthetic not of formal presentation but of ‘material presence’.⁶

Such a matterist aesthetic must also rehabilitate the significance of the hand, of tactility, of caressing and perhaps foremost of *touching and being touched*, which happens ‘suddenly’, furtively and ephemerally, and requires not so much attentiveness as asceticism, the asceticism which is required not to fall prey to intellectual thought and theoretical considerations. Touching happens all of a sudden, out of the blue; it is not durative as a caress, but remains, as it were, inchoative. The materiality of matter manifests as touch, blow or ‘whack’: it is not as a sustained melody or as a gentle caress; it is a forceful blow, rhythmic rather than melodious. When matter touches us, it disrupts ordinary perception. Whereas caresses aim at fusion, touches aim at minimal conjunction. Caressing aims at awakening the person in her flesh, and revealing the ‘I’ to the other; touching, on the contrary, is rough, disturbing, syncopal, and *pierces* the cavities of the body, as when someone does when she involuntarily blushes, when she is touched by his haptic gaze. It generates chills, it shocks our soul-flesh, and can make us feel miserable. Touches do not gently glide across our body, but abruptly carve into it and manifest its vulnerability by wounding it – a flash of lightning, which makes us shiver. A sublime spasm rendering matter palpable. Such a sublime spasm cannot be as easily communicated or shared as beautiful forms – but its *presence* does make itself felt, by touching us and making us *shudder*.

⁵ J.-F. Lyotard, ‘Anima minima’, in *Moralités postmodernes*, Paris, Galilée, 1993, p. 204-205. (My translation.)

⁶ See J.-F. Lyotard, ‘Conservation and Colour’, *The Inhuman*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1991, p. 150: ‘Far from being mystical, it is, rather, material. It gives rise to an aesthetic ‘before’ forms. An aesthetic of material presence which is imponderable.’

Towards a ‘Matterist’ Aesthetic: a Few Telling Examples. Naturally, matter as such (whatever this may exactly mean), matter in its brute nakedness cannot be perceived nor experienced. Matter needs form. Matter is always ‘immaterial’, as Lyotard says. More importantly, however, is that (*pace* Plato) form, too, is always necessarily embedded in matter. Without matter form would not be perceptible, and it is in works of art that this becomes clearest. Art is necessarily material, and even most (if not all) conceptual art needs some material correlate of our aesthetic experience of it. Let us now turn to some examples in art, to render these all too abstract ideas more digestible and show how artists develop different strategies to cope with the materiality of matter and render its presence visible.

Our first example is a painting of the Annunciation by Fra Angelico. This is, of course, a representation of a well-known topic in Christian iconography: an angel announces that Mary will give birth to Jesus, which is in fact the announcement of the mystery of incarnation. The invisible God will become human, the transcendent God enters into history, into the world of human beings. Numerous artists were fascinated by this topic, for it is no less than the becoming time of timelessness, the becoming visible of what is invisible, audible of what is inaudible, etc.

One could talk hours about this topic and about the way Fra Angelico depicts the event of annunciation. What interests me here, however, has nothing to do with theology or even art history. This is a remarkable piece, for compared to most other paintings of The Annunciation it is strikingly sober. The figures seem static and there is not much visible interaction between Mary and the angel. What is fascinating in this picture is the way the presence of the invisible is evoked. The invisible God, the mystic encounter, the divine annunciation is not represented by any concrete visible signs – hardly surprising, for God and his voice are unrepresentable. Yet, the annunciation is there, somehow... It is made palpable through the materiality of matter, through the whiteness of the wall between the two protagonists. It is invisible, but not visible either: it is not present, it is unrepresentable – yet is visual as *material presence*. Crucial in this respect is the strip of whiteness of the wall of the cloister cell, situated between Mary and the angel. The material whiteness of the wall suggests the presence of the invisible God and the mystery of its announced incarnation. It somehow disturbs and suspends the activity of interpreting, of reading the painting, the gaze of the spectator is interrupted by the back and forth movement from the angel to Mary and back again. The material whiteness of the wall suspends hermeneutic activity, interrupts our reading of the interaction between the protagonists and offers an indexical symptom of the presence of the invisible. It is matter that frees us from a purely retinal engagement with forms and figures. This whiteness is not nothing, for it suggests the presence of the invisible. The divine voice, the announcement, God itself: they are not visible, but the material whiteness is not nothing, so they are not invisible either. Their *presence* is visualized.⁷

⁷ See, for a similar analysis: G. Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, University Park, Penn State University Press, 2005, p. 24-25 and *passim*.

Another well-known example is Johannes Vermeer's View of Delft, in which patches of yellow colour, made immortal by Proust in his *A la recherche du temps perdu*, persist in their materiality and offer no less than a haunting quality to the painting. This is even clearer and, perhaps even more aggressive, in the odd cloth of paint in Vermeer's The Lacemaker, where a smudge of paint attracts and repels us simultaneously. Once touched by its materiality there is no way back: it touches us 'before' form appeals to us, it disrupts the pure representative qualities of the painting and adds a mysterious quality to the artwork. The smudge of paint representing a thread of lace is at the same time a faint trace or (to talk Peirce's language) an indexical imprint of matter, which confronts with our own materiality, puniness and mortality, and is definitely deeply moving.

A rather different example, but no less intriguing is a painting by the Dutch painter Lucebert (Lubertus Swaanswijk), entitled *The meeting (De vergadering)*, which shows us his fascination not so much with representing an event but with using the materiality of paint to *express* the speed and emotions not just of the characters in the painting, but also of the painter himself when working on the painting and struggling with the materiality of the medium. Here matter adds a kind of brutality but also almost childish pleasure of handling matter (typical of the Cobra movement and so-called 'art brut' – think of Dubuffet, for instance).

The following works that I would like to discuss briefly are by the French symbolist painter, Gustave Moreau, namely his famous *Tattooed Salome* and his *Temptation of St. Anthony*. In the first painting, he emphasises the materiality of the picture by patterning over the depicted scene with thin white and black lines. In his *Temptation of St Anthony* another strategy comes to the fore. The work is undated but is one of his late works. It is a watercolour painting, in which Moreau uses brown watercolour and white gouache spots to suggest the bearded saint and the demons besieging him on all sides. Moreau uses loose brushwork and colour shades to stress the physicality of the painted surface and the struggle with matter when attempting to express immaterial ideas. As Peter Cooke rightly argues, this painting is not merely about the temptation of a saint, but also evokes 'the struggle with matter out of which art arises and the terror of failing to impose form on the forces of material chaos'.⁸ I would like to add that it is also about the *temptation* of the artist by matter. The artist, certainly an idealist artist such as Moreau, was always tempted by matter. He tries to overcome it but in the very attempt of doing so he needs to acknowledge the force of matter and must ultimately yield to it, no matter how 'vile' he considers it to be.⁹ Moreau shows that he is far more than a mystical spiritualist, far more than an artist who wants to express the 'tonalities of an ideal dream'.¹⁰ He is fully aware of the vital importance of the brutality of crude matter and, in this painting, as in his *The Vision*, he suggests in many subtle ways the uncanny presence of matter, and the way in

⁸ See P. Cooke, *Gustave Moreau: History Painting, Spirituality, and Symbolism*, New Haven, Yale University Press, p. 189.

⁹ P. Cooke, *Gustave Moreau: History Painting, Spirituality, and Symbolism*, p. 68; 121.

¹⁰ G. Lacambre, ed., *Moreau: Between Epic and Dream*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, p. 236.

which it not only troubles the artist but is also the unsurpassable precondition and constraint of form, and of artistic beauty and sublimity.

Our final example is a great work by the contemporary Belgian artist Berlinde De Bruyckere, which was exhibited a few years ago at the Venice Biennale. It is called *Cripple Wood*. In a dark room lies a gigantic bark of a mortally wounded tree suggesting the sufferings not just of St Sebastian, the pest saint, whose image is omnipresent in Venice, but of all of us, human and thus mortal beings. Cripple Wood, Dead Wood... But also a gigantic phallus on the point of ejaculating; Eros and Thanatos in one shot. If we look a bit closer, our gaze is shocked by the presence of moribund matter, this tree (this human being) is sweating dark blood, is excreting pestilent sap, dark as death. Again it is the presence of the materiality of melting wax, of gnarled wood that menaces the spectator and disturbs hermeneutic appropriation. This horizontal phallic Saint is material, just as we are. Death and finitude imply matter transforming, becoming liquid or vaporous; this is indeed an icon of the ‘crooked wood of humanity’ as Kant called it, or, rather, of our *crippled* nature...

And when the end is near, we have two basic options: raging against our departure, fighting against our finitude, or letting go and accepting our metamorphosis, our transition into another (material?) realm – that is, by accepting *and* affirming the finitude and materiality of the vulnerable beings that we are. An aesthetic of matter neither ignores nor suppresses our mortality, but somehow cheerfully affirms our finite, embodied, material existence.

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