



Between the Toy and the Theatre: Reading Aesthetics in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*

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I. Introduction

Of Freud's forays into aesthetics, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) is not the first text that comes to a critic's mind. Despite its notable status in the Freudian oeuvre—one that is as much a result of Lacan's treatment as it is of the text's famous difficulty—*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is rarely invoked as a text that exemplifies Freud's most important contributions to aesthetics. One perhaps thinks instead of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, which Georges Didi-Huberman clamorously declares to have “smashed the box of representation” (2005, p. 44) or Freud's essay on the uncanny and its masterful reading of Hoffmann's “The Sand-Man,” which would be suitable, if it were not for Freud's dispiriting announcement there that aesthetics is not a native branch of psychoanalytic investigation. “It is only rarely,” writes Freud, “that a psychoanalyst feels impelled to investigate the subject of aesthetics even when aesthetics is understood to mean not merely the theory of beauty, but the theory of the qualities of feeling. He works in other planes of mental life and has little to do with those subdued emotional activities which, inhibited in their aims and dependent upon a multitude of concurrent factors, usually furnish the material for the study of aesthetics” (1920, p. 1).

Such a declaration, of course, seems nonsensical to any contemporary reader of Freud, who knows his penchant for mining ancient Greek theatre and classical art for clinical purposes, and who can recall the traditions of critical inquiry—from Marxism to deconstruction—that situate the Freudian legacy as a primary interlocutor for aesthetic questions (not to mention the traditions of artistic practice that saw a kindred spirit in Freud's attention to the fragile scaffold of both consciousness and culture). All the same, it is worth noting that Freud did not consider aesthetics to be the proper domain of psychoanalysis, despite the frequency with which aesthetic examples furnish his oeuvre. Defining Freud's contributions to a philosophy of aesthetics thus remains the task of posterity—less to justify the rightful contact between psychoanalysis and aesthetics than to insist on the fecundity of Freud's texts to still yet grant new avenues of inquiry into art and aesthetic experience.

Even so, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* remains an unlikely choice. Aside from a brief discussion of tragic theatre, it says little about aesthetics and proceeds to put forth Freud's account of the death drive as an organizing principle of both organic and psychic life. And yet in the essay on the uncanny, the writing of which coincided with the completion of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud expressly links the pleasure principle to aesthetic considerations:

it does occasionally happen that he [the psychoanalyst] has to interest himself in some particular province of that subject [aesthetics] and then it usually proves to be a rather remote region of it and one that has been neglected in standard works. The subject of the ‘uncanny’ is a province of this kind. It undoubtedly belongs to all that is terrible—to all that arouses dread and creeping horror...As good as nothing is to be found upon this subject in elaborate treatises on aesthetics, which in general prefer to concern themselves with what is beautiful, attractive and sublime, that is with feelings of a positive nature, with the circumstances and the objects that call them forth, rather than with the opposite feelings of unpleasantness and repulsion. (1997, p. 1)

While Freud’s description of the neglect of “unpleasantness and repulsion” in “treatises in aesthetics” does not betray a particularly intimate knowledge of philosophical aesthetics, most obviously those “treatises” authored by Immanuel Kant, Freud clearly means to establish a distinct path of aesthetic inquiry for psychoanalysis separate from that of philosophy (1997, p. 1).¹ The problem with philosophical aesthetics, argues Freud, is that it fails to give account of anything *beyond* the pleasure principle. Even the sublime belongs to “feelings of a positive nature,” which, despite Freud’s clumsy conflation with the beautiful, rehearses Kant’s assessment of the sublime as ultimately mastered by the powers of reason: “in our aesthetic judgment nature is judged as sublime not insofar as it arouses fear, but rather because it calls forth our power...” (2000, p. 145). While Kant clearly states that “satisfaction in the sublime does not so much contain positive pleasure as it does admiration or respect, i.e., it deserves to be called negative pleasure,” we might take cue from Freud’s confidence that philosophy has not actually ventured to theorize the entirety of aesthetic experience (2000, p.129).

For if the sublime results in a “more powerful outpouring” of the vital forces of life, and a reveling in the superiority of reason over a horror which threatens to engulf it, then indeed Kant too stops short of theorizing that which might lead reason and aesthetic judgment to disastrous ruin (2000, p. 129). In the Kantian system, even the negative or ambivalent pleasure of the sublime results in a strengthening of reason, and it is so precisely because the sublime “raises the imagination to the point of presenting those cases in which the mind can make palpable to itself the sublimity of its own vocation...” (2000, p.145). Even if it outstrips our capacity to think it, the sublime forces us to recognize this limit. In doing so, we understand that reason can nevertheless still master “that idea as law” (2000, p.141). Horrifying as it may be, therefore, the sublime still ultimately produces “admiration,” (2000, p. 129) rather than “creeping dread” (Freud, 1997, p. 1). Pursuing those more catastrophic experiences of displeasure thus falls instead to psychoanalysis, which under no obligation to remain wed to the notion of pleasure or the “sublimity” of reason now spiritedly volunteers to take the proverbial underground path to Hades (2000, p. 145). In other words, even as Freud distinguishes the epistemological project of psychoanalysis from that of aesthetics, he positions

¹ Examples of “unpleasantness and repulsion” are legion in aesthetics, most notably in eighteenth century German Enlightenment aesthetics (a tradition with which Freud would have certainly been familiar). In addition to Kant’s analysis of the Sublime in the *Critique of Judgment* (1790), see, for example, Lessing’s commentaries on disgust and repulsion in his 1767 text, *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*.

psychoanalysis as willing to go where aesthetics dares not. Transforming the field of aesthetics by introducing those specific encounters with displeasure that remain, at heart, *unmasterable*, it is here that Freud opens aesthetics—and art—to the question of trauma (Iversen, p. 5).²

Seeking a theory of aesthetics in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, which famously theorizes both the problem of trauma and the domain beyond the pleasure principle, is then not as unusual as it might seem. The historical proximity between the essay on the uncanny and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* likewise suggests that the methodological relationship between aesthetics and psychoanalysis was of significant interest to Freud during this period. As art historian Margaret Iversen rightly argues, a whole field of aesthetic theory thus owes its origins to what Freud began in 1919-1920, not in the least because it was Lacan's attention to *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* that first allowed him to articulate trauma as the fundamental kernel animating the subject, and so too allowed the plethora of critics—from art history to film studies—to mobilize Lacan for a new theory of the visual (2007, p. 2, 6, 9).

But while I agree with Iversen's turn to *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* for a theory of aesthetics, my own essay argues for still yet a different genealogy than what Iversen identifies as the critical legacy owed to Freud's testing of Kant. Rather than sourcing a theory of aesthetic pleasure or displeasure in the text's attention to the problem of trauma, I argue that *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* produces an aesthetic *ontology* of the subject, one which both confirms and breaks with a strand of humanist thought running through German aesthetic philosophy that separates the human from the animal in its capacity for aesthetic production, which is to say, the unique human capacity for *mimesis*. As Derrida argues in his 1975 essay, "Economimesis," Kant bears responsibility for this ontological configuration, one which subsequently repeats itself in Freud's account of mimesis in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. In turning to "Economimesis" as the guide for this interpretation, my essay seeks to read the Kantian history of Freud's analysis in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* differently than Iversen—and other scholars—have already identified. As I show, the analysis of *fort-da*, perhaps the most well-known of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*'s chapters, importantly

² For Iversen, the Kantian tradition is thus crucial to understanding the trajectory of modern aesthetics. Even though Kant does not argue for subjective experience of pleasure (i.e., as an affect), Iversen argues that our tendency to associate art with beauty and pleasure is still a result of the Kantian legacy, and while Iversen notes that Freud's theory of pleasure is "quite different from Kant's notion of the mind's free play," she argues that Freud's departure from feelings of a "positive nature" also owes its gestures to Kant (1-2). Similarly, Ruth Ronen's *Aesthetics of Anxiety* (2008), pursues a "post-Kantian aesthetics" that moves beyond a simplistic opposition between Kant and Freud, and opts instead for demonstrating that "the significant implication to be drawn from the psychoanalytic interest in art is that the repertoire of classic aesthetic concepts is permeated by unconscious formations that point to the fact that aesthetic experience is not to be simply defined by the positive side of things" (8). For Ronen, Freud's work is indeed already implicitly at work in classical Enlightenment aesthetics, most notably in Kant, when the relation between pleasure and beauty is forced to confront the existence of negative aesthetic experiences (i.e., the Sublime). For the purposes of this essay, however, my interest in the relationship between Kant and Freud is limited to Kant's concept of mimesis, not Kant's theory of aesthetic judgment.

concludes with a brief reflection on the relationship between children's imitative play and adult versions of such play in the realm of art, most notably in tragic theatre. By opening his chapter with the question of childhood development and ending with the mimetic principles of imitative art, I argue that Freud situates his analysis of Ernst at the halfway point between the clinical and the aesthetic. Thus, *fort-da* is both a theory of the subject *and* a theory of mimesis, one that indexes the creative forces latent in psychic life while also unveiling the Kantian logics governing Freud's analysis of Ernst.

But even as Freud identifies mimesis as a praxis of the subject, Freud ultimately departs from the humanist ontology he seems to inherit, a departure first signaled by Lacan's rereading of the *fort-da* game. Installing alienation—not mastery—at the heart of the game's logic, Lacan's reading importantly identifies the radical creativity latent in *fort-da*. I thus treat Lacan's conclusion as a gesture toward the game's aesthetic *potential*, even beyond the vicissitudes of alienation. Rather than expressing mastery *or* alienation, *fort-da* might be said to foster a kind of *eros* with the world. Through repetition, *Fort-da* expresses the unmasterable presence of the world as a site of infinite possibility, whose potentiality little Ernst plays with joyfully, and without reservation. In this way, I read *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* as an early theorizing of Leo Bersani's call for an aesthetic subjectivity that would test the limits of identifying art—and aesthetics—as nothing more than the narcissistic scaffold of a subject reconciled to its contempt for the world or the expression of a universal human essence.

II. Fort-Da and Creative Repetition

It is worth summarizing Freud's account of Ernst, an account that comes quite early in Freud's analysis of the death drive and sexual reproduction in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. In contrast to the *Three Essays on a Theory of Sexuality*, Freud decides to forgo what he calls “the dark and dismal subject of traumatic neurosis” (1975, p. 12) in favor of reflecting on “normal” children's play and its relationship to the “economic motive” of pleasure (1975, p.13). Using his grandson Ernst as the primary example, Freud explains that Ernst shared Freud's living space for a few weeks (during which time the boy's mother was often absent) and that he was “not at all precocious” (1975, p.13). Having noticed Ernst's “occasional disturbing habit” of playing a peculiar game, Freud goes on to explain that the game consisted of first throwing objects out of his sight declaring them *fort* (translated as “gone”) (1975, p.13). Later, when it appeared to suit him, he played *fort* with a reel and string, throwing it into his “curtained cot” and then retrieving it, “hail[ing] its reappearance with a joyful *da* [‘there’]” (1975, p.14).

After some reflection, Freud declares *fort-da* to be a game that staged the symbolic conversion of the traumatic “disappearance and return” of Ernst's mother, a game which presents a challenge to Freud because it does not appear to follow the pleasure principle (1975, p.14). While clearly performed with the flourishes of pleasure, the symbolic structure of the game also repeats a trauma—the regular ‘disappearance’ of his mother, a disappearance that Freud notes could not have been “something agreeable” to the child (1975, p. 15). The game thus betrays the pleasure principle in its most elementary and commonsensical expression—that is, to avoid the unpleasurable, whether perceptual, physical or emotional, in favor of the pleasurable. But the pleasure associated with the game also proves to be difficult for clinical interpretation because

Ernst often left out the latter part, which staged the mother's triumphant return, in favor of the sadistic former part. Freud thus infers that the pleasure is not a matter of substituting the pain of the mother's absence by performing the pleasure of her anticipated return (1975, p. 15). In other words, the game is indeed a substitution for the absent mother, but a substitution that introduces a modification: a pleasure that does not correspond to the logical cause-and-effect structure of the trauma. It is this modification that Freud struggles to comprehend.

For Freud, the problem with the game then amounts to accounting for a) its appearance given that it obviously repeats the disturbing scene of an emotional trauma, b) the nature of the pleasure it produces, a return which does not express a one-to-one symbolic correspondence to the original trauma, and c) the axis between the trauma of the repetition and the pleasure of the return. While the axis reveals that the more Ernst repeats, the more he enjoys, it is not clear to Freud why the repetition of Ernst's trauma is rehearsed with such obvious declarations of pleasure. Eventually, Freud concludes that Ernst only accepts the terms of the traumatic repetition because the repetition offers the return of a different pleasure, one which also symbolically repositions him as the one who inflicts the trauma. In other words, Ernst now becomes "master" of the painful crisis (1975, p. 16).

But such mastery, suggests Freud, is only guaranteed by a pleasure that is new, which is to say, a pleasure that is *invented*. The compensatory nature of the traumatic encounter necessitates a substitution for the missing mother, but the necessity of substitution also indirectly catalyzes the creative forces latent in psychic life and brings them into dynamic play. Or perhaps more accurately—to paraphrase Vilém Flusser—the game *formalizes* the hidden affective drama of Ernst's abandonment trauma by representing it as a gesture (2014, p. 6). As Flusser argues in his account of gesture, gesture is a translation of a state of mind into representation. Gesture, therefore, is what Flusser calls *affect*, "the symbolic representation of states of mind through gestures" (2014, p. 4).

Importantly, Flusser argues that the formal expression of mental states by way of physical gestures is fundamentally a matter of aesthetic consideration: "As they appear in symptoms...states of mind throw up ethical and epistemological problems. Affect, conversely, presents formal, aesthetic problems. Affect releases states of mind from their original contexts and allows them to become formal (aesthetic)—to take the form of gestures" (2014, p.6). Gestures thus express the relationship between the subject and affect in *aesthetic* terms. In the case of *fort-da*, the aesthetic force of the gesture lies in its transformation of the mother's absence into something other than claustrophobic trauma, which is to say, into a new pleasure.

The capacity for the new, observes Sarah Kofman, is what distinguishes the relationship between art and affect from all other forms of representation (1988, p.107). Echoing Kofman, Flusser suggests that art is effectively a "frozen gesture" and as such, art, affect, and gesture become indistinguishable in their aesthetic structure (2014, p. 5-6). In his comments on *fort-da* in *Seminar 11*, Lacan likewise confirms the game's relationship to the creative production of the new: "Freud is not dealing with any repetition residing in the natural... Repetition demands the new. It is turned toward the ludic...[t]he adult, and even more advanced child, demands something new in his

activities, in his games. But this ‘sliding-away’ conceals what is the true secret of the ludic, namely, the most radical diversity constituted by repetition in itself” (1998, p.61). As Lacan explains here, *fort-da* is generative precisely because it is a repetition. By repeating the structure of his mother’s absence through representing it in the form of a game, Ernst also creates something in excess of the trauma.

For Lacan, to repeat is thus to *add* to the world. Indeed, the point of the game is that Ernst discovers something *other* than his mother’s traumatic abandonment. By transforming his mother’s absence into play, Ernst thus introduces the speed of a telos, which is to say, he gives himself purpose. In doing so, Ernst opens himself to everything—symbolization, a world, language—while also displaying the creative vitalism at the heart of repetition. The missing mother is the structural absence that organizes the logic of *fort-da*, and thus galvanizes the aesthetic force of Ernst’s game: “For the game of the cotton-reel is the subject’s answer to what the mother’s absence has created on the frontier of his domain—the edge of his cradle—namely, a ditch, around which he can only play at jumping” (1998, p.62). Perhaps not quite a cultural object worthy of the name ‘art’, but still yet more than a crude compensation for a banal trauma, *fort-da* dynamizes the “ditch” of the mother’s absence into aesthetic form. In other words, it transforms the ditch into gesture.

III. Fort-da, Natural Freedom, and Aesthetic Labor

Despite the psychoanalytic scaffolding, Freud’s account of Ernst—and Lacan’s later critique—both bear the signs of a legacy of Enlightenment humanist thought, which begins with Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*, but finds its most intensified articulation in the early work of Karl Marx. This legacy is not the legacy we most commonly associate with the Kantian aesthetic tradition, namely, Kant’s account of aesthetic and teleological forms of judgment in the analytics of the beautiful and the sublime. Rather, I want to suggest that Freud introduces a different concept of aesthetic creation here that also has its roots in Kantian aesthetics, a problematic first diagnosed by Jacques Derrida in his 1975 essay, “Economimesis.”³ Proposing to read the latent politics in the *Critique of Judgment*, Derrida develops a critique of Kant’s aesthetics that forgoes the question of aesthetic judgment and returns to Kant’s concept of mimesis, which rejects the Platonic logic of a false copy (mimesis as illusion) in favor of a logic based on *analogy*. In Kant’s account, the productive creativity of nature and that of artistic genius are analogous, for artistic genius copies nature only by copying its *capacity* for creation:

³ *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* bears another conceptual resemblance to the *Critique of Judgment*, one that is beyond the purview of this essay. Nevertheless, I would like to note that Kant explicitly identifies the judgment of the beautiful and the judgment of the sublime as matched with the forces of life and death: “[the judgment of the beautiful] directly brings with it a feeling of the promotion of life, and hence is compatible with charms and an imagination at play, while the latter (the feeling of the sublime) is a pleasure that arises only indirectly being generated, namely, by the feeling of a momentary inhibition of the vital powers and the immediately following and all the more powerful outpouring of them...” (129). The distinction suggests that *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* also has conceptual foundations in Kant’s account of the dual nature of aesthetic judgment.

What is art? Kant seems to begin by replying: art is not nature, thus subscribing to the inherited, ossified, simplified opposition between *tekhne* and *physis*. On the side of nature is mechanical necessity; on the side of art, the play of freedom. In between them is a whole series of secondary determinations. But analogy annuls this opposition. It places under Nature's dictate what is most wildly free in the production of art... [it is] the secret source of *mimesis*—understood not, in the first place, as an imitation of nature by art, but as a flexion of the *physis* (Derrida, 1981, p. 4).

This analogy issues through the mouth of poetic genius, which achieves its highest form of creative value when it most “resembles” that of nature in its free and purpose-less creations (1981, p. 9). To accomplish this, the poet—or artist— must produce their works without being paid for it—that is, they must produce differently than those who make things for money. To accomplish this reading, Derrida turns his attention to two seemingly minor comments on salary in the *Critique of Judgment*, both of which appear in the section “On art in general.” The first distinguishes the work of art from that of “remunerative art,” which as Kant explains, is “regarded as labor, i.e., an occupation that is disagreeable (burdensome) in itself and is attractive only because of its effect (e.g., remuneration)” (2000 p. 183). The second comment expands the first by explaining that free art “must [also] feel itself to be satisfied and stimulated (independently of remuneration) without looking beyond to another end” (2000, p. 199).

In Derrida's account of Kant, art thus imitates nature, not because it dutifully copies nature's product in an act of fraudulent mirroring à la Plato, but rather because in freely producing without a concern for salary or purpose artistic genius recasts the original creative force of nature as its own. Derrida explains: “Pure and free productivity must resemble that of nature. And it does so precisely because, free and pure, it does not depend on natural laws. The less it depends on nature, the more it resembles nature. Mimesis here is not the representation of one thing by another... [i]t is not the relation of two products but of two productions” (Derrida, 1981, p. 9). In turning to the problem of political economy, Derrida thus identifies a uniquely Kantian account of mimesis, which breaks from the Platonic tradition by defining mimesis as a productive *power* modeled on that of natural creation in its distinction from labor that receives payment. Hence, Derrida's provocative neologism, “economimesis,” which identifies the dialectical flow between logics of political economy and those of mimetic creation absent of economic cause.

Derrida's discovery—and here is its importance for the Freudian case—is that in Kant's account of the relationship between nature and art, the creative power of mimesis is rooted in alienation from nature. Even as human creative labor is modeled on that of nature, this is only the case because the human is separate from nature and thus cannot locate its telos in the meaningless creations of nature that betray nothing of their purpose or meaning (1981, p.15). As such, art is what humans make *in lieu* of a meaning given from the external world, which remains untouchable and unreachable. Nature—like Ernst's mother—is site of nostalgic loss, which is mourned *ad infinitum*. But it is a productive loss, one through which the human derives impetus for a life of creation, which is to say, a life of objects. In Kantian aesthetics, art thus takes on a special

ontological value: it expresses, as praxis, the singular condition of a human existence that is free, fallen from nature, and alone in the world but for the creative results of its productivity.

In tracing Ernst's compensatory strategy in response to his mother's abandonment as a gesture of creation, I want to argue that Freud's account of *fort-da* retains something of the Kantian concept of mimesis. Ernst, in effect, is a microcosm of the aesthetic subject imagined by Kant, an aesthetic subject who pursues—and expresses—its human freedom by its aesthetic gestures. Indeed, the crux of Derrida's intervention is to identify Kant's revision of mimesis as a fundamentally *humanist* one, which relies on separating the free human from the natural animal on the grounds of its artistic production. Animals, bound to the necessity of instinct, are not free and thus do not create art, even if their creations resemble art. To create art in the Kantian scheme, suggests Derrida, one must practice in total freedom—without the telos bound up in working for a salary. As noted, Kant states that free art must receive neither money nor suffer from the disagreeable consequences of pursuing art for the sake of salary. Only then can art resemble nature, which produces without a demonstrable purpose (1981, p. 9). As the only being that creates without a terminus point, the singularity of human creative work ultimately lifts the human above all other forms of life: "...the concept of art...[i]s there to raise man up, that is always to erect a man-god..." (1981, p. 5). For Derrida, Kantian aesthetics is thus inconvertibly anthropocentric. By identifying Ernst's creative mastery as the crux of the game's aesthetic and ontological power, Freud thus risks repeating the contours of this humanist legacy.

The introduction of the language of political economy to the Kantian paradigm also has significant consequences for the traditions of humanist critique that arrive in the century following Kant, critiques that would have no doubt been well-known in Freud's milieu. For example, readers familiar with the work of the early Marx will recognize the conceptual similarity between Kant's call for free art without salary and Marx's concept of "species-being" in the 1844 manuscripts. In the "Estranged Labor" essay, for example, Marx argues that alienated labor throws a proverbial wrench in the ontological machinery of human life. If it is to be free (i.e. not coerced), labor must not be the condition of our survival. Under capitalism, however, labor and life are caught up in a tautological violence that destroys the uniquely human capacity for free creation: "It is only as a worker that he continues to maintain himself as a physical subject, and that it is only as a physical subject that he is a worker" (1964, p. 109). For work to express the essence of the human, which is to say, to save the human from a demotion to the profane status of animality, life must become the *goal* of labor, what Marx calls "conscious life activity" (1964, p. 112). In doing so, life becomes the task of work by an aporetic *gap* between life and labor: "It is not a determination with which [the human] directly merges" (1964, p. 113).

To make life "the object of [our] will" is to introduce a cleavage—an essential rift—out from which human consciousness, history, and form arise. This also means that artistic labor is not restricted to the domain of what we might commonsensically call art (painting, poetry, sculpture) because by taking its life as the goal of its labor, the human *becomes* an aesthetic being. It is not only that humans make art (and animals do not) but a human life—its very being—*is* its art. It is this fundamental aesthetic act that animals

are missing, even if we might say that they belong to the general productions of nature. This is what Marx calls our “species-being”—the ontology unique to human existence (1964, p. 112). For Marx, just as for Kant, mimesis is thus bound up in an ontology of the human, one that centers our creative gestures as the essence of our singular difference from—and superiority to—the base instincts of animal life.

While *fort-da* is not the kind of aesthetic labor Marx imagined as best expressing the fecundity of human potentiality, *fort-da* nevertheless resembles Marx’s diagnosis. In creating *fort-da* to both master his trauma and give himself an object through which to form his subjectivity, Ernst takes his life as the goal of his labor. Installing the power of creative repetition at the heart of Ernst’s traumatic negotiation with his absent mother, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* recognizes the aesthetic gesture inherent in *fort-da*, and its ontological consequences. The point here is that between his absent mother and his current trauma, Ernst’s performative gesture takes his own being as the object of aesthetic creation. In other words, Ernst makes himself *into* something, which is to say, into a subject. As Lacan confirms, this process of subjectification is also “the moment when he [the child] is formed as a human being” (1998, p. 61).

Most crucially for my argument, the creation of this subjectivity is again premised on a concept of mimesis, which Freud introduces at the end of the chapter on *fort-da*.⁴ Elaborating on the general tendency of young children to solve traumatic experiences (such as those experienced at the doctor) by vengefully repeating the experience on a “substitute” (1998, p. 17), Freud explains the relationship between *fort-da* and imitation: “Nevertheless, it emerges from this discussion that there is no need to assume the existence of a special imitative instinct in order to provide a motive for play” (1975, p.17).⁵ In refuting the argument that children’s play is driven by an inherent instinct for mimesis (even if Ernst’s game is obviously mimetic), Freud effectively argues that there is nothing natural or instinctive about mimesis. The point is precisely that it is *not* behavioral. Ernst does not possess some ancient pre-cultural human instinct for imitation that leads him to copy his mother’s abandonment in the form of a game. On

⁴ It should be noted that Freud never actually uses the word ‘mimesis’ but rather refers only to “imitation” (17). It is generally accepted that Freud’s references to tragic theatre (both in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and elsewhere) owes its conceptual origins to Aristotle’s *Poetics*. See the first line of “Psychopathic Characters in the Stage” in which Freud directly cites the Aristotelian lineage: “If the function of the drama, as has been assumed since Aristotle, is to excite pity and fear and thus ‘bring about a catharsis’ of the emotions...” (144). See also Jean-Michel Vives’s commentary on Aristotle and Freud in “Catharsis: Psychoanalysis and the Theatre” in *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* (2011).

⁵ Given its proximity to Freud’s subsequent work on group psychology, the language of imitation here suggests a historical connection to Freud’s debate with Gustave Le Bon, Wilfred Trotter, and others over the existence and nature of group psychology. My argument, however, is that Freud is referencing an aesthetic concept of imitation drawn from the Kantian tradition Derrida describes, not a behavioral one drawn from the debate over political representation and crowd psychology. See Part II of Freud’s *Group Psychology and The Analysis of the Ego* (1920). See also pgs. 39-43 in Daniel Pick’s “Freud’s ‘Group Psychology’ and the History of the Crowd.”

the contrary, Ernst imitates *because* he invents. He invents to solve something that left him with a bad taste and so demanded compensatory conversion (but not without leaving a trace of the unpleasant stimulus that required the conversion in the first place).

In other words, for Freud, mimesis is a mechanism—that is, part of the economic structure of psychic life organizing the subject, which is neither natural nor historical but *aesthetic*. And insofar as imitation is a psychic mechanism, it can also be made subject to analysis. The repetition of the trauma in the form of a game is the condition of possibility for trauma to be known and recognized—in this case, by Freud. It is the repetition that confers authenticity to its triggering origin, not the origin itself, which lacks all authenticity because it lacks a proper existence. As Lacan notes, “[fort-da] is aimed at what, essentially, is not there, *qua* represented” (1998, p. 63). Without the copy (the repetition), there is no trauma. We encounter it with Ernst retroactively, only through its expression as a game, which registers the trauma because it attempts to represent it. If for classical Western aesthetics, representation is opposed to truth, then it is a psychoanalytic platitude that truth (here the truth of the trauma) requires representation. Ernst thus inverts the hierarchal terms of the Platonic theory of forms: representation comes *before* truth and so too before the subject. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, representation is not the reflection of the subject but rather its precondition. Put differently, *fort-da* is the trace of the past materially unworking and reworking the subject as an *aesthetic* being.

IV: Fort-Da and Tragic Theatre

It is precisely this conclusion that lends importance to Freud’s subsequent commentary on mimesis. While Freud does not necessarily assume the aesthetic significance of his preceding analysis to be relevant to a general theory of psychic economy, his turn to tragic theatre goes some way in further demonstrating the aesthetic contours of *fort-da*. After declaring that there is “no need to assume the existence of a special imitative instinct,” Freud uses tragic theatre to demonstrate that Ernst’s enthusiasm for playing *fort-da* is not unlike those audiences of tragic plays subjecting themselves to traumatic catharsis in their identification with the tragic hero (1975, p.17). Most notably, Freud suggests that such a comparison serves as “convincing proof” that his analysis of the *fort-da* game is correct. Freud’s indirect reference to Aristotle’s *Poetics* likewise confirms that Freud does indeed have aesthetics in mind:

Finally, a reminder may be added that the artistic play and artistic imitation carried out by adults, which, unlike children’s, are aimed at an audience, do not spare the spectators (for instance, in tragedy) the most painful experiences and can yet be felt by them as highly enjoyable. This is convincing proof that, even under the dominance of the pleasure principle, there are ways and means enough of making what is in itself unpleasurable into a subject to be recollected and worked over in the mind. (1975, p. 17)⁶

⁶ See Section 14 of Aristotle’s *The Poetics*: “The tragic fear and pity may be aroused by the Spectacle; but they may also be aroused by the very structure and incidents of the play, which is the better way and shows the better poet...not every kind of pleasure should be required of a tragedy but only its own proper pleasure. The tragic pleasure is that of pity and fear and the poet has to produce it by a work of imitation...” (McKeon, 1941, p. 1468).

Considering that Freud has already gone to some lengths to distinguish between psychoanalysis and aesthetics during this period, it is notable that Freud finds himself using aesthetics to prove a clinical point. But despite the confidence with which Freud turns to tragic theatre, his comments also position the reader as the one who doubts and so suggests some uncertainty or impossibility that Freud's analysis undergoes. The very appearance of theatre as a heuristic example already shows us the clue to solving Freud's anxiety. For even if theatre audiences enjoy their suffering like Ernst, why does tragic theatre function as the "convincing proof" here? Why not other children's games or even the obsessional practices of the hysteric, who Freud famously identified as special for taking pleasure in repeating her painful symptoms? After all, it is not clear why tragic theatre would even offer a particularly instructive comparison. As Freud points out, the grotesque dramas of human suffering on stage—what he calls the "artistic play and artistic imitation carried out by adults"—are done for the benefit of an audience (1975, p. 17).

In this sense, Ernst's solution to his traumatic abandonment now bears little resemblance to an audience viewing Oedipus's tragic downfall, even if Ernst is obviously caught in the snares of his Oedipal complex. And yet all the same, there is clearly something about Ernst's game that does not quite furnish enough proof to demonstrate the economic principles of psychic life. Freud realizes that "no certain decision can be reached from the analysis of a single case like this" (1975, p. 10). As such, the economic principle needs something else and Freud finds the proof in art. For unlike Ernst, tragic theatre is performed in front of a *willing* audience. The audience participates in a voyeuristic pleasure and narcissistic projection that converts the unpleasant experience of tragedy into something palatable—that is, the desire to experience suffering through identification with the tragic hero on stage, a masochism that is felt as *pleasurable*. That the audience deliberately seeks out suffering as a vehicle for a pleasurable aesthetic experience shows us, says Freud, that even the most unbearable experiences can be transformed into something enjoyable. Why would we seek out these painful experiences if not indeed for the dramatic return of the pleasure they promise?⁷

At this moment, Freud seems close—tantalizingly close—to declaring Ernst's game worthy of aesthetic analysis and his grandson, a dramaturge in waiting. By the end of the paragraph, however, Freud decides that such aesthetic questions are ultimately of "no use for our purposes, since they presuppose the existence and dominance of the pleasure principle, they give no evidence of the operation of tendencies beyond the pleasure principle, that is, of tendencies more primitive than it and independent of it" (1975, p. 11). Echoing his judgment of the failures of aesthetic philosophy, he advises that "[t]he consideration of these cases and situations, which have a yield of pleasure as

⁷See also Freud's comments on the masochism of tragic theatre in "Psychopathic Characters on Stage": "drama...is supposed to delve deeper into emotional possibilities, to manage to transform even the forebodings of doom into something enjoyable, and it therefore depicts the embattled hero rather with a masochistic satisfaction in succumbing...it is from the feeling of misery of the weaker creature pitted against the divine might that pleasure may be said to derive, through masochistic gratification and the direct enjoyment of the personage whose greatness nevertheless the drama emphasizes" (Freud, 1960, p. 145).

their final outcome, should be undertaken by some system of aesthetics with an economic approach to its subject-matter” (1975, p. 11). Psychoanalysis will not undertake this task, for it must pursue that which lies beyond the pleasure principle. Considered within the light of my argument, however, Freud’s comparison reveals that the performative structure of *fort-da* is fundamental to understanding the game’s ontological and aesthetic function. For this purpose, Giorgio Agamben’s account of gesture in *Means Without Ends* is particularly useful. In contrast to Flusser’s description of gesture as a symbolic form of affect, Agamben understands gesture as an expression of representation itself:

Nothing is more misleading for an understanding of gesture, therefore, than representing on the one hand, a sphere of means as addressing a goal (for example, marching seen as a means of moving the body from point A to point B) and, on the other hand, a separate and superior sphere of gesture as a movement that has its end in itself (for example, dance seen as an aesthetic dimension). Finality without means is just as alienating as mediality that has meaning only with respect to an end...*the gesture* [on the other hand] *is the exhibition of a mediality: it is the process of making a means visible as such.* It allows the emergence of the being-in-a-medium of human beings...the gesture is in this sense communication of a communicability. [his italics] (2000, p. 58.8-58.9)

Agamben’s point here—if we translate it to the *fort-da* game—is that we cannot consider *fort-da* entirely as Freud does, namely as a “means as addressing a goal” (i.e., relieving Ernst’s trauma) or as something that exists simply for its own sake (2000, p. 58.8). Nor indeed is it sufficient to understand gesture as a general form of affect. Rather than communicating a meaning or a state of mind, gesture makes communication *itself* visible—what Agamben calls the “being-in-a-medium of human beings” (2000, p. 58.9). Gesture exists because mediation is the one thing we cannot speak:

However, because being-in-language is not something that could be said in sentences, the gesture is essentially always a gesture of not being able to figure out something in language; it is always a gag in the proper meaning of the term, indicating first of all something that could be put in your mouth to hinder as well as in the sense of the actor’s improvisation meant to compensate a loss of memory or an inability to speak. (2000, p. 58.9)

As a pre-verbal child, Ernst has no recourse to language but for the babbles of sound Freud generously ascribes to “fort” and “da.” He cannot make sense of his mother’s absence in spoken language, but we know that Ernst has an opinion on his mother’s absence precisely because he plays this game. Situated at the entrance of the symbolic, Ernst thus shows us the border between meaning and nothing—that border where the human writes its singularity. In the play of its movement then, *fort-da* traces the thickness of representation without which Ernst would neither be human nor a subject. In other words, it is through *fort-da* that Ernst begins to tarry with representation, and so too with the tangle of aesthetics and ontology. But if *fort-da* allows us to consider the relationship between aesthetics, ontology, and subjectivity in the manner I have traced in my reading, the risk is that Freud does not progress beyond the humanism he inherits from the German aesthetic tradition—at least not here. The founding of Ernst’s

subjectivity simply bears too close a resemblance to the relation between human existence and mimetic art extolled by both Kant and Marx. Such a resemblance has profound consequences for the ethical and political contours of Freud's reading. If representation is the necessary scaffold of subjective life—that aesthetic structure without which neither being nor psyche can exist—then how does this bear on our understanding of the relationship between art and the world?

V. The Ethics of *Fort-Da*

In his exploration of the ethical in psychoanalysis, most notably in his 2006 essay, "Psychoanalysis and the Aesthetic Subject," Leo Bersani argues that psychoanalysis indeed represents a powerful entrenchment of the humanist discourse we associate with Western metaphysics, a critique he specifically levels against its treatment of art and aesthetic experience. Its promise for political thinking, most especially for understanding the axis between aesthetics and politics, risks collapsing under the weight of its own philosophical inheritances:

Psychoanalysis describes our aptitude for transforming the world into a reflection of subjectivity. It has treated the work of art as a double model of subjectification: a privileged representation, in its content, of subjectifying strategies as well as an exemplification, in its structural and stylistic enunciations of the artist's subjectifying resources. Psychoanalysis has been the most authoritative modern reformulation of the Cartesian and Hegelian opposition...between Nature and Spirit or between *res extensa* and thought. The clinical subject of psychoanalysis strips ([Bersani] quotes from Hegel), 'the external world of its inflexible foreignness [in order to] enjoy in the shape of things only an external realization of himself,' in order to find again, 'his own characteristics,' which Hegel attributes to the 'free subject' (Bersani, 2006, p. 162).⁸

As Bersani points out, Hegel's description of a "free subject" reads as a description of the subject of psychoanalysis at its worst—and most politically unpalatable—moments.

The mastering force of Spirit as the technological rationality exploiting and dominating nature for service of human progress finds expression in the Freudian account of the subject's relationship to reality, most especially in art. The radicalism of the Freudian project, which disturbs the foundations of the rational Western subject by introducing the unconscious, takes a most unfortunate turn when it interprets the world as nothing more than a function of the subject's narcissistic projection. In Bersani's account of psychoanalysis, art is properly the domain of fantasy—where the subject imposes its history and its trauma onto the world outside and expects nothing more than

⁸ Bersani shares this critique with many other thinkers including, for example, Jean-Luc Nancy. See Nancy's comments on psychoanalysis in his reading of Descartes from *Ego Sum* (1979): "...psychoanalysis—Freud's and Lacan's—will have constituted the furthest advance of the metaphysical problematic of the Subject. Simultaneously, it will have constituted the extreme anthropologization (as well as the socioinstitutional inscription of this anthropologism), and, as it often happens at any extreme point, it will have brought to light the limit of anthropology's critical faltering" (6).

its own reflection back. If such a subject also expresses the singular difference of the human over that of the animal by its artistic—and aesthetic—gestures, then indeed psychoanalysis fails to question the very legacies it so temptingly appears to undermine. *Fort-da* demonstrates this failure acutely. If for Marx nature is there as material for the “conscious life activity” of human beings, then so too does Ernst take the world as fodder for the scaffold of his selfhood (2006, p. 112). His mother, his mother’s absence, and the world of objects becomes a mirror—and anchor—of his own (human)being.

In approaching art as a symptom of the subject, psychoanalysis thus situates the subject as the ultimate arbiter of meaning, whether in art or elsewhere. In doing so, psychoanalysis, Bersani argues, risks suppressing—indeed, perhaps even annihilating—the difference of the world and so too the very ethical claim of the psychoanalytic project.⁹ Such an ethical claim would be rooted not only in the capacity for the subject to always-already be *otherwise* than its history but the degree to which relationality—or a *being-with* the world—might still yet be possible, a world in which others are not reduced to the scaffold of the self. Indeed, the ethical consequence of Freud’s reading of *fort-da* is that mastery is the solution to trauma and in being the solution, it means that the world—as the traumatizing agent—must be erased (or at least, transformed). For Bersani, however, the work of art need not necessarily be the site of this destructive and narcissistic gesture of mastery. “Can the work of art,” asks Bersani, “contrary to psychoanalytic assumptions, deploy signs of the subject in the world that are not signs of interpretation or of an object-destroying jouissance, signs of what I will call correspondences of forms within a universal solidarity of being?” (2006, p. 164). Bersani’s project in “Psychoanalysis and the Aesthetic Subject” is to excavate the possibility that art might not only stand for the subject’s hostile compromise with the world.

In other words, Bersani sees a way to treat the “aesthetic subject” without the trappings of a humanist ontology, a gesture that leads him to first oppose aesthetics to psychoanalysis: “What I have tried to show in my work on psychoanalysis and art—has been how art can in effect position us as aesthetic rather than psychoanalytically defined subjects within the world” (2006, p. 164). In contrast to Ernst, this “aesthetic subject” is neither master nor servant of the world, but “a mode of relational being that exceeds the cultural province of art and embodies truths of being” (2006, p.164). In pluralizing being, and thereby suggesting that art opens us to potentials *beyond* the limit of human experience, Bersani restores the ethical potential of psychoanalysis. In a rather uncanny reformulation of Freud’s own critique of aesthetics, Bersani thus takes us where psychoanalysis would not go—namely, the dissolution of the aesthetic nature of human experience, and its subjective scaffolding, or at least, the Enlightenment version.

Psychoanalysis is not entirely incompatible with a different concept of aesthetic subjectivity (2006, p.168). Indeed, one might argue that Lacan’s reading of the *fort-da* game has gone some way in undoing what Bersani diagnoses as the latent humanist symptoms of psychoanalytic aesthetics. Unlike Freud, Lacan is not inclined to treat *fort-da* as the sign of mastery. In fact, Lacan bluntly rejects Freud’s conclusion: “To say that

⁹ I have opted to use “suppressing” here rather than “repressing” because it suggests a conceptual tendency in psychoanalytic discourse rather than the action of a subject or psyche.

it is simply a question for the subject of instituting himself in a function of mastery is idiotic” (1998, p.239). The root of Lacan’s critique circulates around the status of the trauma that *fort-da* is meant to solve. The truth that *fort-da* points to—the truth of Ernst’s mother’s absence—remains untouchable because it can only be represented *as* an absence. *Fort-da* thus circles around the trauma of an encounter with the Real, which cannot be identified or represented, precisely because it can only be represented *in absentia*.

An act of imitation (e.g., mimesis), therefore, cannot be the ground of a humanist logic. As Lacan points out, the creation of the subject is entirely *accidental*, grounded only by an encounter with the Real that forever evades proper representation and thus cannot—in any logical way—function as a ground for subjectivity (1998, p. 63). Put differently, Ernst’s game never loses touch with the trauma that provoked its existence. Like an oyster with the grit in its shell, *fort-da* bears the stamp of the trauma—the horror of the missing mother—in the essence of its form; its very existence expresses the unmasterable limit with which it endlessly communicates. As Bersani notes, “[w]hile consciousness continuously forms affectively motivated projects that essentially oppose us to the world, projects whose satisfaction requires mastery of otherness, we never cease corresponding unconsciously with that otherness” (2006, p. 171). *Fort-da* thus tries to show what it *cannot* show and by doing so, it plays at the edge of an abyss that lays claim to any attempt at mastery, signification, or totality. *Fort-da* is a system in which the mother’s absence cannot be properly digested and so the game stays close—terrifyingly close—to the meaningless chaos it tries helplessly to master.

One ought then to see the ontological stakes in the game of this not-at-all-precocious child, who signs his mourning and his being in the same act, who unveils the traumatic singularity of human experience and shows it to us. A different humanism is at work here perhaps, one no longer possessed by the fantasy of mastery but rather one whose ‘fallenness’ is the only true mark of its ontology. In this humanism, the human no longer creates ideally so that it may bring purpose to its existence but rather stands watch over its work with the anxiety proper to a being shot through with the permanent threat of death and dissolution. Here, the human no longer sees nature as the nutritive source of its creative being but as the poisonous sign of its alienation: “The function of the exercise with this object [the reel] refers to an alienation, and not to some supposed mastery, which is difficult to imagine being increased in an endless repetition, whereas the endless repetition that is in question reveals the radical vacillation of the subject” (Lacan, 1998, p. 239).

As Lacan explains, the repetitive nature of *fort-da*, despite its relation to the new, only deepens the fracture of the subject. The existence of the subject is thus fragile, contingent: “If the young subject can practice this game of *fort-da*, it is precisely because he does not practice it at all, for no subject can grasp this radical articulation” (1998, p. 239). *Fort-da* is suspended between representation and the void it carves out, which is to say, it marks the split of subjectivity—between existence and chaos. Put differently, there is no ontology of the subject for its recourse to representation only demonstrates that its *being* is always-already undone. This goes some way in explaining why Freud’s explanation, that Ernst masters his traumatic experience by symbolically inflicting abandonment on his mother, is ultimately incorrect. Suggesting that Ernst merely reacts

to the conditions of his perceived abandonment presupposes that his subjectivity is solidly in existence prior to this trauma. Such a reading sees *fort-da* as the aesthetic reflection of the rational subject, who interprets its discomfort and reacts in accordance with the logical steps necessary to change it. Read this way, *fort-da* is treated as a microcosm for the Western liberal individual, who masters its destiny on his own terms, regardless of the structural realities or limitations (i.e., history).

In contrast, I want to argue that *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* allows us to read Ernst's playful delight as the sign of an ethics beyond humanism. As I have shown, Freud's analysis of Ernst bears the symptoms of a humanist discourse by emphasizing his creative mastery over the alienating effects of his mother's abandonment. By producing a new pleasure akin to those of theatre audiences, Ernst deploys imitation (i.e., mimesis) to suture his wound closed, and so founds his subjectivity through an essential *human* gesture. Lacan teaches us that such a game installs an encounter with the Real at the heart of the subject as that essential *rift* through which subjectivity and consciousness are structured. Ernst's missing mother thus represents the crack through which Ernst's subjectivity can come into being—that place or hole from which his self can wind and unwind its way into the world. “It is with his object,” says Lacan, “that the child leaps the frontiers of his domain” (1998, p. 62). But such a leap is always done as a gesture to the unrepresentable ‘other’ who compels my being. For the point of *fort-da* is that the (missed) encounter with the Real bears the name of *mother*.

The rift or crack is therefore there where the ‘other’ stakes its claim—whether this ‘other’ be human, animal, worldly, or otherwise. Rather than treating this cleft or crack as an unmasterable alienation, we might then see Lacan's reading as explicating there where the world makes *contact*—where it generously gives plenitude to our being. For in being *never-myself*, I am therefore also *of-the-world*. As the oscillation between self and world, *fort-da* plays joyously, even lovingly, with this border. In this sense, *fort-da* shows us that the *being-with* of human existence ontologically coincides with mediation of representation: the call of the world *is* the call of representation that sounds humans to themselves and to each other as beings of mediation. Art—and aesthetics—thus show us our ethical tie to the world's plenitude without which our capacity to be more than human could not take place.

In doing so, *fort-da* offers us what Bersani calls for—an idea of the subject that would be rooted neither in alienation nor narcissism, but as that which *begins* from intimate contact with the world. *Fort-da* would, thus, become an image of the “relational mode of being” with which Bersani proposes to replace the traditional psychoanalytic notion of an aesthetic subject. As he writes, “external reality may at first present itself as an affective menace, but psychoanalysis—like art, although in a more discursive mode—might train us to see our prior presence in the world, to see, as bizarre as this may sound, that, ontologically, the world cares for us” (2006, p. 174). To read *fort-da* as a sign of this care—which is to say, as a sign of our belonging to (rather than only our alienation from) the world—proposes a still yet different path for *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and its importance for aesthetic thinking.

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