

On the Autonomy of the Aesthetic: Witkin I versus Witkin II

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On this occasion we celebrate and deliberate the publication twenty years ago of Robert Witkin's "[The Aesthetic Imperative of a Rational-Technical Machinery](#)." It is a striking and richly textured essay. Witkin weaves together ambitious abstract thinking, which takes off from the tradition of critical social theory, with a fine-grained sensibility closely attuned to the aesthetic dimension of everyday and organizational life.

Witkin's general theoretical formulations are highly original. Against structuralism and reductionism, he insists on the significance of the subject, on taking account of social actors' internal sensibilities. He employs ethnomethodological, and more broadly phenomenological language to describe how social structure must be contingently accomplished, how it must be acted upon emotionally and interpretively by sensate human beings, not just accepted, internalized and delivered as a habitus with the one-way directions of social structure remaining intact.

To create such a reference to autonomous subjectivity is to conceive action in a non-rational way, to filter social structural determinism via, in Witkin's words, the "understanding' that is uniquely afforded the subject." Presuppositions about action must be connected with conceptions of social order. The element of collective order that Witkin correlates with his emphasis on sensate, emotionally intelligent action is aesthetic form. The "aesthetic imperative" is what affords an actor the "intelligence of feeling." To describe the structure of this aesthetic collective order, Witkin draws upon the world of art and music. To discover the aesthetic order, sociologists must investigate "rhythm, pitch, dynamics, dissonances and harmonics... color, texture and tonal (light and shade) values."

This is a new, more aesthetic oriented take on the presuppositions about action and order that structure every social theory and empirical study. Typically, the theoretical logic that opposes rationality and economism/organizational-ism derives from moral or discursive theories. The great interest of this aspect of Witkin's paper (Witkin I) is the effort to reach beyond these standard cultural-sociological alternatives. Almost three decades before recent "strong program" forays into iconicity (Alexander 2008ab), Witkin I finds a way to conceptualize in the theoretical and empirical terms of social science the legacy of aesthetic philosophy, practice, and criticism. Witkin's contribution is far from being merely at the level of theoretical logic. He goes

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beyond the programmatic, filling his essay with subtle empirical observation and interpretation, reading the material surface interiors of Unilever and the sartorial exteriors of its employees in a manner that powerfully reveals and communicates the feeling-sense of their aesthetic forms and formulations. They are flat, they are colorless, they are geometric, they separate the head from the body.

But when Witkin specifies these presuppositions and interpretations into a model of empirical causality, the invigorating sense of actor subjectivity and intriguing interest in the independence of aesthetic order fade away. Here he (Witkin II) clearly suggests that the effect of the Unilver aesthetic is to prepare the subject-worker to acquiesce to organizational efficiency, to the soulless iron cage of the possibly capitalist but certainly utterly bureaucratic office machine. If this is so, then the autonomy of the subject is only apparent, and the independence of the aesthetic order illusionary and epiphenomenal. According to Witkin I's general theoretical proposal, if the aesthetic dimension is not given real independence from the objective order, the subject is doomed to be conceptualized in a merely passive, behavioral and adaptive way. If taking the aesthetic order into account means, however, only that we learn how the subject is reduced to being flat, affectless, and adaptive, the significance of Witkin I's theoretical move is neutralized. Why should we theorize the aesthetic dimension in modern life and actor subjectivity if, in practice, they function only to reinforce objective order from the outside?

In his model of empirical causality, Witkin II ties the aesthetic order very tightly to the organizational-cum-economic. From such a statement as the “aesthetic dimension is integral to the substantive relations of organizational life” – a weak causal statement that suggests no one-way determination – Witkin moves to a much stronger, more deterministic one: “Physical artifacts play an important role... in their power to *reflect and cue* these demand characteristics.” He reiterates this more mechanical formulation as the paper proceeds: “Organizations... have a real interest in *ensuring that they call out a presence* in their members that is *appropriate in the context of their objectives*... The design of *organizational artifacts calls out in the subject* a certain presence... Organizations differ in their purposes, in their environments, and in their cultural contexts. These differences are *reflected* in the design of artifacts.” When Witkin asks about “the aesthetic *correlates* of rational-technical machinery,” he answers that “the modernist designer may be said to have made a virtue out of *the necessity imposed by the conditions* of mass production and mass consumption” by “*adapting*, culturally, to modern metropolitan life by metaphorically appropriating the machine and the mechanical environment.” He concludes that “the development of an organization as a rational-technical machinery *gives rise to* an aesthetic imperative characterized by... familiar elements of the modernist design.” (All italics added)

Witkin I develops a theoretical logic that challenges “the flight from the aesthetic,” formulating conceptions of action and order that challenge determinism in the name of subjective independence and (relative) cultural autonomy. This strong and vigorous art-sociology adumbrates and complements the strong program in cultural sociology today, especially its forays into music and art (Eyerman 2008, McCormick 2009). Witkin II seems to propose an empirical model of organizational aesthetics that contradicts the spirit of Witkin I.

The problem can be illuminated by engaging in a thought experiment. How would one respect the “autonomy” of the visual forms that Witkin identifies at Unilever? One could do so only by acknowledging that these shapes are not determined by the

necessities of the organizational machine, that they could, in fact, vary independently from them. I think a case can be made that the flatness and geometric quality of the Unilever aesthetic is part of the post-impressionist aesthetic tradition that begins with Cezanne and goes on to Cubism and then Bauhaus. This aesthetic was determined not by capitalism or by organizational needs for efficiency, but by internal emotional-cum-aesthetic developments that responded to strains and breakthroughs in the culture, psychology, and society of the fin-de-siècle period itself. Witkin seems clearly to acknowledge this possibility at one point. Referring to arguments that strictly correlate the aesthetic he has identified at Unilever with macro-social structure, Witkin I asserts that “such explanations neither exhaust, nor even confront, adequately, the meaning of the revolution in design [which] represented a profound cultural shift that could hardly be reduced to the exigencies of managing paper.” But Witkin II seems immediately to back away. He writes approvingly of Hauser’s social deterministic approach to style. Yet Hauser’s base-superstructure argument that modern capitalism, with its urban middle class, “produced” individualism and naturalism makes exactly the opposite empirical argument to Witkin II. Can modern capitalism and organizational rationalization produce both geometric abstraction and volumetric naturalism at the same time? Only if notorious last instance arguments are evoked: the idea of the transition from Fordism to post-Fordism – worked out after the publication of Witkin’s essay – represents a striking argument of this kind.

Would it seem outrageous if I were to suggest that the feeling-cum-aesthetic intelligences of Victorians, on the one hand, and mid-twentieth century moderns, on the other, were shaped and caused by something other than economic and bureaucratic organization? To Witkin II, it would, but not to Witkin I. It was at the height of pre-war World War I capitalism – which supposedly called forth naturalism (Hauser) and realism (Lukacs) – that the great aesthetic breakthroughs to a (new kind of) modernism emerged. And, to contest Witkin II more directly, it was in the very midst of Unilever’s supposedly objectively necessary geometricism that there emerged Pop painting and Robert Venturi’s *Learning from Las Vegas*, laying out a postmodern architectural aesthetic. They were both still very flat indeed, but they were colorful, curved, and not at all geometric, linear and formalized.

I also wonder whether Witkin II’s construction of his dependent variable – his description of the modern aesthetic as geometric – is not too Bauhaus and Cubist? Was the aesthetic sensibility of modernity really so flat, colorless, and geometric? When we see the physical-cum-aesthetic work environment of the 1950s and 1960s faithfully recreated in the contemporary television drama *Madmen*, for example, we are drawn to the curving lines of men’s and women’s highly fashioned bodies, to the color of clothing and fabric texture, to the brown, yellow and red sensuousness of interior decoration, to the boisterous expressiveness of advertising, and to the flagrant behavioral transgressions – well known in the informal organization of the modern business world – of alcohol and sex. The show’s creator Matthew Wiener has been highly praised, and his massive television audience mesmerized, for his authentic recreation of the iconic surfaces of that earlier, mid-century American time.

Would somebody wish to claim that this aesthetic, too, was produced by the iron necessities of organizational efficiency? It would be tendentious to do so. I would propose a different line of causal explanation, one that points to the (relative) autonomy of the aesthetic and its ability to form feeling intelligence. The story would start with the nineteenth century modernist recovery of the decentering “other”.

This includes mid-century obsessions with Japanese and Chinese woodcuts, which played such a formative role in subsequent Western art and architecture. For the purposes of the story I am telling here, however, I would emphasize the other of the savage and barbaric, which incited the wild colors of Fauvism and Picasso's incorporation of African forms. This story line in painting leads to the explosion of expressionism, whether representational or abstract. In modern architecture, it leads to Frank Lloyd Wright fanatically fighting the geometrism of Le Corbusier, continuing the craftsman tradition in his "organic" modernism that produces the Guggenheim Museum and whose curves continue in Frank Gehry's work today.

Of course, if postmodernism were merely the product of post-Fordism, then none of this matters. I doubt very strongly that it is, and I am quite confident that Witkin I agrees.

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