



## **Cruelty**

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“What, you have a Caravaggio?”, I said.

“Well, it’s not exactly ours but it’s here in the museum”, she said with a too-low voice and continued: “it’s a loan from an Italian foundation...”. I didn’t really listen anymore but just looked at her mouth moving as she continued to explain. Caravaggio doesn’t need to be explained, I thought to myself not realizing how completely wrong I was.

This was a few years ago at a dance conference held in an art center I forgot the name of in Hong Kong. The conference was nice and the line up of speakers prominent without asking for trouble. After the first day’s first session, I found myself having lunch sitting next to a volunteer for the conference. A younger woman that whenever she wasn’t a volunteer studied cultural management. We talked about this and that, nothing particularly fascinating and slightly awkward but it was this conversation. There was nothing we needed to prove, no gossip to share and no power positioning necessary. I nodded and agreed, sometimes filled in with a different perspective or saying something about myself until she off-handedly mentioned the Caravaggio, and after some

supportive exchange about painting we decided to go watch it together at some point. I, who never had anything to add to painting, never really liked to look at paintings and always felt a bit stupid when visiting the Prado, agreed enthusiastically, although thinking whatever, it will never happen anyway because this is after all a conference and there will always be a shuttle bus to bring us to the next location.

After the afternoon session the conference participants gathered in front of the art center waiting for the pick-up, but there was no bus around, and somebody who seemed to have authority let us know that the bus would be half an hour late and we apologize for the inconvenience. A few minutes later the young woman from lunch made herself present next to me. We waited.

"We can go and see it now, if you want?"

"See it... what do you mean?", I said having forgotten what this was all about.

"The Caravaggio!"

I looked at her, and she looked back, and it dawned on me.

"The Caravaggio, but of course." I said with enthusiasm, at the same time as I felt miserable because although I wasn't doing anything in particular I had no interest in either the Caravaggio or making an excursion in order to look at a painting. How ridiculous, and I made a note to myself that I need to be more obvious next time and make sure not to be misunderstood. Boundaries, I thought, important, but perhaps a bit too American.

It was too late to contemplate the ontology of boundaries, or anything else for that matter, so I kept up the enthusiasm and, indeed, we were going to see the Caravaggio. Without further preparation we were already on our way. Before anything else we had to cross a massive exotic garden that in the darkness of the Asian evening – which is very dark – felt like something Joseph Conrad could have invented. For me this was, if not *The heart of darkness* at least some other organ of the body's darkness, or simply scary shit.

Something flickered in my brain, some words, that in the obscurity glowed strangely pale, as if caught by secondary light. A little pretentious, without doubt, but those words suddenly spoke to me as if from far away: affectionate and violent, Antonin Artaud's words recycled by Deleuze and Guattari.

"The body is the body/it is all by itself/and has no need of organs/the body is never an organism/ organisms are the enemies of the body."

This was not the moment to contemplate further what Artaud had in mind. The young woman kept up a healthy pace on the somewhat slippery pathway that we were meant to follow. I for one kept myself safely in the middle of the path convinced that if I'd come too close to that darkness of nature it might just happen that I lose a limb, or altogether disappear into nothingness. As long as we stayed on the path we were still within the law, Newtonian physics still applied and we still belonged, but had we stepped out over the boundaries of the path, it would have been to step into sovereignty, into a state of where determination was set out of bounds and we would be absolutely alone also to ourselves. An experience void of condition, a kind of plastic or fluid darkness.

Finally we arrived at a building at the end of the dark forest, a mix between mausoleum, customs office and museum. The young woman went straight up to a counter, with an engaged attitude announcing – in a language I didn't understand – what our mission was. Behind the counter three individuals of indeterminate gender responded with curious gazes but without seeming to understand what the young woman was addressing. A negotiation was initiated and intense exchanges took place for what seemed to be a rather long period of time, until finally the young woman turned around and with a hand gesture made me follow her. We were moving in on the Caravaggio, and I didn't even know which one.

Without overdoing it, we walked deeper into the mausoleum. In order to enter the room with the painting we had to go through a curtain made of thick plastic sheets cut in strips something like a decimeter wide. It reminded me of gay techno clubs in Berlin in the early 90s, but there the plastic was transparent and moist. This time it was dry and the color of baby poop, but we had to go through it. Traverse the baby poop boundary into the sanctuary of art history where everything is safe, or so I thought. On the other side a room the size of half a badminton field, two individuals awaited us. They were both exceptionally old. A man several hundred years of age wearing a blue military-like uniform with a matching hat and a machine gun. A woman, who could have been his older sister wore a brown uniform, no hat, and the machine gun was exchanged for a duster.

The room was filled with a soundtrack consisting of symphonic pieces written by what I identified as Haydn. Nice music but written 150 years after Caravaggio created his paintings. To make things even better the room had been painted beige and the painting was mounted in a wooden construction that in no way hid cabling and other interesting things, including a glass that wasn't exactly the cleanest.

When placing ourselves in front of the painting however something took over.. In zero seconds I was possessed by the painting, paralysed, frozen in front of it, absolutely incapable of doing anything about anything at all other than surrender to the experience. The painting, known as *Supper at Emmaus* (1606), completely blew me away. Total cliché but that's what it did, nothing sophisticated but plain and simply. Never have I experienced something so intense as standing in front of this painting, or perhaps any other aesthetic arrangement. This was an experience that was prominently singular. I knew that I was having the experience, but had no idea of how to articulate what was going on, in fact the only thing I knew was that I had the experience but I still could for my life not explain it. It was there, it was undeniably there, but it was impossible for me to comprehend it.

I had seen this painting in books - some teacher had shown it in art history class and it had just been a painting like any other, special but *nothing special* and now I was completely numbed standing in front of it, unable to move, every cell in my body electrified.

It wasn't the size or the motif – five or so men and a woman seemingly engaged – nor the composition, brilliant obviously, but classical and organic. So what was it that made this instant *éclaté* into a connection with eternity?

At that moment the young woman poked me too softly, whispering as if she was crashing a world famous party that she was heading back. I waved her away unable to even turn my head in her direction, feeling OMG am I doing this. I remained in front of the Caravaggio realizing that if there was anything else than the completeness of the image, it was the upper right corner that placed me outside time and space. The corner is just a black field, nothing more than so, but that black is something entirely different - a black so black Pierre Soulages would die for it. It's not dark, not black, not *outré*, but a black so black it appears to be its own negative. I realized at that moment that Caravaggio invites the viewer to experience the black of black, the negative black that is not white but a black that defies representation. Caravaggio's black is a black beyond conditions. , it's black just black or a black that Lovecraft would spend several pages describing in terms deeply contradictory. It's not a static black which is comfortable as we can locate it, it is there and can be evicted. Caravaggio's black is otherwise. It is a plastic darkness that doesn't necessarily pulsate, nor does it expand but seems to grow. It is not alive but appears to have some form of animation. It shifts and quivers but is void of information. Its presence is immersive yet it gives of a sensation of continuous withdrawal.

Reality is nice because here everything is connected, not with everything else, but always with something. According to Kantian idealism, a dominant canon in Western philosophy, claim that here in reality nothing is real or actual but is only appearances or phenomena. When I curve my fingers around a glass it is not the actual glass that I experience but only its representation. In reality things are beautiful and fun but they are never actual or themselves, only practicing relations. Things don't want to show themselves as such but it seems that they withdraw from reality the moment reality aspires to bring them in.

In the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze there exists another realm to which humans don't have access except under extraordinary circumstances. Deleuze is not the only one to recognize something outside reality. The history of this is long and fragmented, and than the stronger philosophical canon from Plato and Aristotle over Descartes, Kant and Hegel, as it also ventures into terrains that dominant western philosophical discourses would dismiss because they propose non-rational forms of determination. This domain has been given many names, from Dun Scotus' virtual, to "the real" in Lacanian psychoanalyses, to immanence - the pre-individual or plane of consistency in Deleuze. This real is controversial because it acknowledges something outside what cannot be comprehended, thought or addressed through reason or intellect. The second half of the last century in particular seems in many ways to have been dedicated to a battle against the intensities Deleuze and others are discussing. The opposing position holds that there is nothing outside language, and if there is something beyond representation it cannot not be captured by the net of representation the moment it enters the human realm. In this realm, which evidently defies any kind of representation, Deleuze proposes that everything exists and is real, but that the price to pay for this real is the absence of any kind of relation. In this realm of the virtual nothing has any relation to anything, neither to other things, to time nor to itself. This formulation of the virtual, or immanence, renders possible something interesting, namely that as long as the world

formulates itself as a complex web of relations it can also only transform within its own manifestation of knowledge. Said otherwise, a context or a set of relations can only transform in respect of itself, within its own possibilities. The argument of a different realm is that it is incompatible with reality, that we can not voluntarily access it. However, we can produce the opportunity for an encounter with it, which is not an it, but also on this level withdraws from capture. At this moment life opens up to the possibility of what can be called potentiality, that which remains beyond the realm of the possible but also includes both what is possible and is not possible. Potentiality is not of this world but exists in a state of prominent independence, which also means that an encounter with potentiality can generate an experience that is contingent to reality.

It was the black of potentiality that I experienced in that art center in Hong Kong a couple of years ago, a black in front of which one experiences endlessness in an instant, eternity embedded in each moment. It is at the same time an experience that is full only of its own emptiness, since if it were something it would already have representation. This is a black beyond black, a black lit by its own negative, that exists without any relations, in a universe of absolute singularity. It's a not black but something that has been baptized *chiaroscuro*, a kind of clear darkness in which something appears illuminated from the back. Caravaggio's black is darker, a tenebrous vibration coming into existence. This is a darkness that generates a line of illumination arising from the black domain of nothingness, a line between that binds together the world and the virtual, between making difference and determination, a line along the unilateral distinction between determination and difference as such.

To find myself there in front of the Caravaggio was to be with the blackness and to follow the tenebrous line between making difference and determination, it was an encounter with the virtual, an extended confrontation with presence and hence the withering of the subject. I experienced fulfilment at the same time as I dissolved, pure presence or an Artaudian moment.

In pre-modern western society, no differentiation was made between art and craft. The forms of governance of the time made such divisions unnecessary. However, with the rise of capitalism, the decline of the church, the scientific revolution, and, as a consequence, the coagulation of the nation state and republic, it became imperative to differentiate the two. The German philosopher Alexander Baumgarten is often identified as having coined the modern understanding of the term aesthetics – usually dated to 1735 - and giving it new meaning, from indicating sensation to instead mean taste, i.e. taste as the ability to judge according to the senses rather than to the intellect. But what does according to the senses mean? Doesn't it mean that Baumgarten discards the option that the "entire" world can be judged and located through the intellect, reason and a sober mind, and instead introduces the possibility that some things must be judged through taste, and that this type of judgment always is personal and individual? One option is that Baumgarten wasn't really into art but instead wanted to offer philosophy a problem, a problem that was hiding in the shadows. The introduction of aesthetics and taste became a dark area for philosophy, something that made philosophy worried and opened up for new options for how to determine thought.

From a different angle, Baumgarten implicitly proposes that the encounter with art always carries this particular darkness. To experience art implies inspecting one's own darker domains, domains into which reason and intellect can not and must not reach. This is because taste, while a matter of convention and norm, is also also is a portal to a self-referential domain that carries the possibility of spinning philosophical thought into its own eradication, into its own darkness.

Here it becomes urgent to try to understand what it is that one experiences at moments when intellect and reason are not sufficient and the subject must submit its judgment to taste. A consequence of Kant's aesthetic philosophy with regard to disinterested contemplation and the autonomy of the artwork is that the aesthetic experience must be conceptualized as self-referential in order to maintain its autonomy. This autonomy secures the aesthetic experience specificity in relation to any other experience. Any experience that can be compared with another experience can also be transformed and financialised. Art is evidently an industry and business, but the experience of art is not, at least not entirely. In order not to slip into finance art must guard its possible autonomy and insist that the intellect cannot be used to judge art or to have an aesthetic experience.

A complex problem emerges, namely that of the understanding of the relation of aesthetic experience to politics, both in the sense of direct (didactic) representation and insofar as politics is embedded in form. To what extent, if at all, does aesthetic experience carry political conditions? Or does aesthetic experience inherently carry the possibility of generating political consciousness contingently? Is art perhaps a space from which political decision must be excluded in favour of the possibility that a political position can be generated? In other words, contrary to taking a decision (between prepared possible choices), the aesthetic domain might be a space in which political decisions can be generated. Something that resonates with Aristotle's understanding of *poiesis*, namely bringing something into existence.

What remains is nevertheless the following question: what do I experience when the experience is self-referential? Deleuze proposes that the subject experiences itself experiencing, or, said differently, experiences experience. The subject is experiencing through itself generic experience, or Experience itself. Such an experience, experience itself, must be an empty experience, or rather an experience that is full of its own emptiness. It's because the experience is empty that it can generate something other than possibility. The condition that aesthetic experience is full of its own emptiness, and that this emptiness must be without relations, is evidence that aesthetic experience is the experience of pure immanence, or that the experience coincides with the virtual. Aesthetic experience follow the line between difference and determination. As Deleuze writes in *Difference and Repetition*, "cruelty is nothing but determination as such that precise point at which the determined maintains its essential relation with the undetermined...". The aesthetic experience is the subject experiencing through itself generic experience, i.e. the subject experience pure immanence with maintained, at least partially, subjectivity. Said differently, it implies to through life experience oneself as existence, as potentiality.

After an eternity that finally wasn't more than 25 minutes I managed to detach from Caravaggio's painting. I hurried out of the mausoleum. Took a quiet farewell from the ancient man with the machine gun and his older sister and half ran through the previously so scary garden. I caught the bus and soon the conference context was re-established. I, however, was a new person and I had never been here before. The aesthetic experience with the peculiar quality of being full of its own contingent emptiness, must by definition be a New experience, singular and universal. It must be an experience that cannot belong to the world and cannot be located by intellect or reason. But how can the world accommodate an experience that is not of the world? It can't. But it must, because *something* must not-be in the world, without relations, belonging and location. When the world, or consciousness, cannot accommodate an experience it must either ignore it, pretend it didn't happen - which will result in being haunted by its possible reoccurrence - or the world must change in order to be accommodated by the experience. This is a transformation from something known, but not into something simply unknown, which is already something that can be recognized, but instead a transformation from something known, or knowledge, into something that is unknown also to the unknown, the unknown's negative. We understand that for the world to be accommodated by aesthetic experience it must rescue itself with the support of potentiality. It must use the virtual to produce a relation or connection. But since the virtual is a capacity consisting of singularities, the relation created must be contingent, which means that it is at the same time whatever, n'importe quoi and no matter what. This does not necessarily mean something extraordinary, but it means that the outcome is equally, something completely conventional and something that transforms the world in its entirety.

The aesthetic experience does not transform the world. The change is not gradual, but occurs in one stroke: it is a breach. Aesthetic experience makes the world, or at least some thing, come to an end. Until here, but no longer, and now we have to build the world again from bits and pieces that are familiar but to which we have to prescribe new functions.

Anything that is in the world is in relation to other things and gains its identity through these relations, relations that are to different degrees dynamic. The relations through which something gains identity, however, are in their turn related to further relations. There is no end to relations and nor is there an origin to them. The world is performative and the absence of origin comes with a price, which is that something else determines not what relations can be established or not, but how they are established, maintained, practiced, terminated and so on. It goes without saying that if there is no origin, if the world is performative, that determination is instituted by power, dominant discourse formulated as grand narratives or sustainable canons.

Everything in the world is given or denied opportunities to establish relations as long the determination of relations is maintained, which is not difficult since, for example, humans can only form relations in respect of what determines a situation or context. In short, which is too short but never the less, the world is stuck with its determination and there is no way out because the way out is equally determined. Determination, however, also

defines who has the right to a voice, who is worth grieving, who or what is worth saving or fighting for. We can fight and struggle and propose alternative narratives but those struggles will be for nothing as long as they don't manage to change determination in itself.

Bruno Latour has proposed that change is not enough, but what is necessary is to change change, to change how something changes. To change change is to change determination.

As long as society respects the forms of determination that dominate the world today injustices will continue and repeat themselves, society will be gendered, class-based, racially differentiated, support private property, colonialism and so on. As long as this form of determination is maintained there can be no end to suffering. Things can get a little bit better or worse never change fundamentally. The determination that dominates the western world today has its origin in early modernity and is based on arguments in relation to the world that are hard to support today, not least because it is based on a determination that made it possible for a small but powerful group of individuals to irreversibly perturb the balances of the world. In respect of art and aesthetic practices it was to a large degree Kant who generated the determination, evidently correlated with more general forms of determination in respect of the world. In other words, as long as we make art, and understand art in respect of a Kantian aesthetic paradigm, art, whether it wants or not, always support forms of determination that are repressive, violent, racial, gendered, in short unacceptable. The same holds for philosophy. As long as philosophy isn't practiced with the aim of destroying determination – which from the point of reason is impossible – it will always be a practice that maintains, if not promotes forms of injustice that cannot be tolerated.

The responsibility of art and philosophy today, especially considering omnipresent capitalism and currencies in western political imagination, must be to make its way out of its determination, out of art, out of philosophy. Art's job, its responsibility, is to make itself not not-art, which is evidently supporting the same good old determination, but it must become the negative to simultaneously both art and not-art. Art and philosophy can afford such an effort, unlike social or political contexts which indeed relate directly to people with needs and lives. Art and philosophy most definitely engage people but rarely (though not rarely enough) is it a matter of life and death. Perhaps it is time, especially in parts of the world that are privileged, to consider parallel to a socially engaged art (with a tendency to transform into culture) an art that takes upon itself the responsibility to both emphasize arts ability to provoke the possibility of aesthetic experience and, at the same time, work its way out of art's determination.

If the understanding that aesthetics experience is different from other kinds of experience, and that what is experienced is Experience, it can be concluded that aesthetic experience cannot, as we have seen earlier, be a matter of knowledge. However, much the last 50 years has been a struggle against the possibility of aesthetic experience, due to, among other things, the fact that post-structuralist theory couldn't under any circumstances incorporate an understanding of aesthetic experience that moves beyond the realm of meaning, semiotics and reason. But if aesthetic experience

can be introduced to language or always already is contained by semiotics, what then is the difference between aesthetic experience and the experience of, for example, New York's subway at rush hour, or anything else in life? If there is no difference, how can one artwork be valued so much higher than another, or how can a certain painting blow a person away and for another be indifferent? Or how if so could the Caravaggio experience take place?

Contrary to today's neoliberal tendencies that strive to incorporate art into culture, it is important to strengthen the distinction or incompatibility between art and culture, and to emphasize that art is not culture. Although art is always made in culture it does not mean that it is, or coincides with, culture. As Jean-Luc Godard once said, culture is the stuff we eat, meaning that it is good for our health and we can know in advance how things will proceed. Culture operates in the realm of consciousness and is always understandable in respect of probability. On the other hand, in the case of art, the moment its existence is reified in respect of how good or bad it is, it stops being art and simply becomes design, culture. Art is always in culture but the experience of which art can produce the possibility is not in but only *of* a certain culture. Art withdraws from the social and from culture, and aesthetic experience is something that always happens only to the individual, beyond the reach of probability.

In the event of aesthetic experience, since the experience is singular and not in culture, it also means that the experience cannot confirm the identity of the individual having the experience. Implicit in the aesthetic experience is that it dissolves the subject of the individual who has the experience. In the last instance, it is determination that grants identity prominence, but when determination crumbles so does the opportunity to secure the subject. The aesthetic experience in Deleuzian terminology establishes a vector to the abyss of pre-individuality, to a domain that is by definition beyond the reach of knowledge.

It is determination that secures identity and in general the distribution of the world's power, injustice and so on, but here determination is dynamic, at least for most or some people, and offers opportunities for individual navigation, a navigation that is never properly one's own but is authorized by determination. Determination manages our lives and makes them liveable, for many or at least some. When determination, as in the aesthetic experience refers only to itself, when something is determined by itself, navigation necessarily comes to an end. What is experienced through aesthetic experience is Presence, which means to coincide with oneself. What occurs is that absolute determination at once is superimposed with its obverse, the absence of any determination whatsoever, or as Deleuze writes in *Difference and Repetition*, difference as such.

What I experienced in front of the Caravaggio was nothing other than absolute determination and/or difference as such, in other words cruelty. But this is an interesting kind of cruelty because, since it happens outside the realm of knowledge, and is Presence, it is a form of cruelty that cannot be reflected. It is an un-reflected state of simultaneous bliss and fear, a state in which there is no choice but only necessity, contingent necessity.

I want to give my unreserved gratitude to the young woman that I had lunch with for insisting that I should see the Caravaggio. Those moments in front of *Supper at Emmaus* are among the most important in my life and will always be. Indeed, that extended moment changed my life forever, not as a transformation but in one instance, from something that I thought I knew to something entirely different, whatever and no matter what. Cruelty.