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"THE BEAUTIFUL DOES NOT GET ELECTED LIKE MISS WORLD"

When Jean-François Lyotard writes about Kant's *sensus communis*, he is keen to keep his distance from what he calls "sociologizing and anthropologizing" accounts. In both *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime* and "*Sensus communis*: The Subject in *statu nascendi*," Lyotard offers a radical reading of the *sensus communis* as purely transcendental, as an unrealizable Idea which cannot, in any way, be experienced.[1]

To see what is at stake here, even if only briefly, recall part of what Kant says about the *sensus communis* in the *Critique of Judgement*:

> [U]nder the *sensus communis* we must include the idea of a sense *common to all*, i.e. of a faculty of judgement which, in its reflection, takes account (*a priori*) of the mode of representation of all other men in thought, in order, *as it were*, to compare its judgement with the collective reason of humanity... This is done by comparing our judgement with the possible rather than the actual judgements of others, and by putting the limitations which contingently attach to our own judgement.[2]

One of the things this passage reveals is that the slippage, the potential slide into anthropology and sociology which Lyotard is so intent on arresting, is not entirely outside Kant's own text, something that commentators have merely imposed on it as a bad reading. Lyotard detects traces of "empirical realism" and hears in this passage an "anthropological resonance," especially in the reference to "the collective reason of mankind" (*Lessons* 220). Aesthetics may turn out to be a slippery slope with disciplinary consequences, but Lyotard warns us to be careful where we step. He urges us to resist "the anthropological temptation" ("*Sensus communis*" 226) and remember that the aesthetic community is "not primarily constituted by the convergence of opinions given by individuals" (*Lessons* 219-20). "Communicability is a transcendental characteristic of taste, and it in turn requires a transcendental supplement, i.e., the Idea of the supersensible" (*Lessons* 218-19).

Thus, for Lyotard, the *sensus communis* is never a determinable community, a community ever "observed in experience" ("*Sensus communis*" 224). "It is certainly not what we call a 'public'. Not the society of art-lovers in museums, galleries, concerts, theatres, or who today look at reproductions of works (and, I may add, of landscapes) in their homes" ("*Sensus communis*" 224). "It is not a matter of social consensus, and even less of one obtained by ballot. The beautiful does not get elected like Miss World" ("*Sensus communis*" 225).

Miss World? As an example, she is "a little slip of one or two lines," but her brief appearance cuts the striking figure for which most Miss Worlds are known. Presumably, what Lyotard is trying to emphasize, first of all, is that the Miss World pageant is precisely *not* a beauty contest. Beauty, including that of the human form, is not a matter of presentable ideals or models.[3] It is not possible to appeal to cognitive or scientific knowledge in order to judge what is beautiful. Concepts (rules) do not precede reflective judgements of taste, and no community of judges could ever decide the question of beauty once and for all – or even for a year, if Miss World is to be our example.

While these points are well taken, it is more than a little curious that Lyotard relies on that age-old cliché of which many an anthropologist would be

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aware: the association of woman with the beautiful. Woman returns in the context of aesthetics in all her stereotypic exemplarity, even if as an example of the wrong kind of example. We cannot, of course, ask Miss World what she thinks of all of this, for that would be succumbing once again to another sort of anthropological temptation. But maybe the possibility of her fleshy body speaks for itself, calls attention to something that should worry us about Lyotard's insistence that the *sensus communis* must remain transcendental. How, if, as Lyotard believes, only a transcendental account of the *sensus communis* would prevent reducing the normative to the norm, can we ever address the matter of bodies? How would it be possible to speak of a community of fleshy bodies as something other than a procession of pageant contestants, be they in swimwear or evening dress? Are the only options available either an insistence on the transcendental or a reductive account of the empirical that turns "anthropological" and "sociological" into dirty words? Would it not be possible to argue that fleshy bodies do exist in the *sensus communis*, but being with others does not necessarily mean an *experience* of others, an *experience* of community?

Lyotard claims that the *sensus communis* remains a hypotyposis ("*Sensus communis*" 235). Should we take a sliding step, a glissade, here? Perhaps Miss World is herself a sort of hypotyposis – an outline, a sketch, and yet a vivid presentation of a scene, a fleshy scene, to be fleshed out in future, overflowing the limits of both a judge's ballot and Lyotard's argument.



notes

1 Lyotard makes this remark in *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime* 18. In "*Sensus communis*: The Subject in *statu nascendi*," he also declares that "the *sensus* must be protected from anthropologization" (224).

2 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, para. 40.

3 For Kant, the human form is a special case for judgements of taste (see paras. 16-17), in so far as it always also involves teleological judgement. Interestingly enough, Kant relies on the help of a beautiful woman in para. 48, when he needs to make this point clear in his discussion of the relation of genius to taste. I reflect on the significance of this particular example in "Women on the Edge of Modernity," forthcoming in *Women: A Cultural Review*.

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