

Reflection and Pleasure in
the Aesthetics of Marx Wartofsky

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INTRODUCTION

This essay will explore the relation between philosophical reflection and pleasure in Marx Wartofsky's work in aesthetics. The thesis I will attempt to explain is that there is something deeply symptomatic of the nature of aesthetic judgment in Wartofsky's disregard of the need to theorize pleasure. Let me explain immediately that I take this to be no mere oversight on his part for what need is there—from Wartofsky's philosophical position at least—to theorize that which was at once most obvious, natural, and ubiquitous. But, for those of us whose surfaces and depths are not so thoroughly inhabited by the *Spieltrieb*, and so too for those of us interested in aesthetic theory, let me also try to suggest where and how an explicit theorization of pleasure might be formulated from within what I take to be Wartofsky's aesthetics. First off, the place of his aesthetic theory is not where he seems to have imagined it to be but is instead still more central to the underpinnings of the project he worked most thoroughly upon: historical epistemology. Let us recall just how he described the idea of an historical epistemology. In his 1974 essay, "Perception, Representation, and the Forms of Action: Towards an Historical Epistemology," after he characterizes genetic, evolutionary, and naturalistic epistemologies as limited precisely by their inherent historicism, he goes on to write:

But my view goes beyond them in arguing that what the species brings to perception, as the product of its biological evolution, is the starting point for an historical epistemology; and that the transformation and development of this genetic inheritance is a function of changing historical praxis; in short, that perception has a history.¹

And if we now ask again after the place of aesthetics within the program of an historical epistemology, we might discern what I take to be two answers from Wartofsky's writings, or perhaps a strong and a weak version of one and the same answer. Wartofsky seemed to hold that the value of aesthetic theory consisted in its ability to reflect upon the historicity of representations, especially visual ones. That is, aesthetic theory was to describe and theorize the historical nature of perception via reflection upon the history of representations, which Wartofsky described in turn as things "constructed by us, for the sake of perception."² Since representations are the very stuff according to which perception occurs, the history of perceptions itself made visible to us by way of the representations out of which—or simply of which—it has been constituted. This is what I call the weak version of Wartofsky's aesthetics because it merely locates the place where the history that has already occurred might be made visible and reflected upon. This is in fact a second, and philosophical, reflection, whereas the initial, primary reflection is that of our vision itself, or better: of our visual praxis, which Wartofsky posits—in the strong version of his thesis—as the artifactual, mimetic reflection of the praxis of making representations. Hence the strong version of the role of aesthetic theory in Wartofsky's historical epistemology occurs in those passages where he suggests that perception's history is actually driven by artistic practice. Thus, the artist who "reeducates" us regarding the possibilities of vision does aesthetic theoretical work. According to this strong version, the transformation of perception is driven by the representations made by

artists. Or, as Wartofsky put it in his 1981 essay, "Sight, Symbol and Society: Toward a History of Visual Perception":

To put this in the sharpest way, I propose that human vision, unlike that of any other animal species, is transformed by the very practice of visual representation, i.e. the making and use of pictures, or of other forms of visual representation ... What I am claiming is that we see by way of our picturing or our pictorial representation, and that changes in the styles or modes of pictorial representation are instances of, and also socially effect changes in modes of visual cognition.³

This strong version becomes a still stronger claim when we realize that Wartofsky was not willing to remain satisfied merely with the assertion that human vision has a history, or that human vision is itself an artifact; rather, he went on to suggest that the artifactual transformation of vision was to be understood as an evolution, to be sure, it was a cultural rather than a biological revolution, but the point he was reinforcing with this aspect of his claim was that changes in vision, like biological changes, are preserved and transmitted from one generation to the next, albeit by the artifacts themselves rather than the genes. For the alternative characterization of the relation between vision and picture making, consider the following passage from Theodor Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*:

Proust, and after him Kahnweiler, argued that painting had transformed vision and thus objects. However authentic this experience may be, it may have been formulated too idealistically. The reverse might also be supposed: that objects themselves were historically transformed, that the sensorium conformed to this, and that painting then found the ciphers for this transformation. Cubism could be interpreted as a form of reaction to a stage of the rationalization of the social world that undertook its geometrical organization; in these terms cubism was an attempt to bring within the bounds of experience what is otherwise contrary to it.⁴

To return to Wartofsky, there are two crucial things to be remarked here: the first is that the visual artifact—insofar as it preserves and transmits—functions like nature, with the corollary that rather than the species being the extension within which preservation and transmission occur, it is instead now society, or more specifically, culture; the second thing to remark is that the artifact Wartofsky has most definitely in mind here is not the category of visual representations but vision itself. That is, the artifact par excellence, if you will, is vision, or still better: visual praxis. And it is here—in elucidation of the fully artifactual character of vision—that I would like to reorient, with pleasure, Wartofsky's locating of aesthetic theory within the project of historical epistemology.

As artifact—that is, made thing—just what kind of thing is vision? For Wartofsky vision is a curious kind of thing, hardly thing like at all, more like activity and dynamism than object. Vision is more like a kind of movement than a thing—perhaps this helps explain Wartofsky's productive ambiguity regarding the status of visual representations: are they

things made by the activities of vision and visualizing, or is vision a thing made by the activities of making visual representations? Of course, Wartofsky would have it both ways, and the best reason to want to have it both ways is that he sought to avoid having the "artifactual" character of vision ever make any aspect of visual practice into a dead thing. Hence Wartofsky's intellectual activity of dynamically avoiding any and all reifying implications of "artifact" is expressed again and again by his description of the specific artifact—vision—as fundamentally transformative. And what is the dynamic artifact vision fundamentally transformative of? Answer: of whatever vision has already seen and already been. It's just here where I think Wartofsky missed an opportunity to fully appreciate the centrality of aesthetic theory to his project of historical epistemology.

I see the link as follows: just as for Wartofsky the crucial aspect of vision's artifactuality consists of its ability to transform not only vision but human praxis as well, so too has aesthetic judgment or taste been formulated as a likeability, that is, the one at the heart of human fashioning and self fashioning. It is within the specifics of transformation where I think the intimacy might best be seen between Wartofsky's transformative visual praxis and the aesthetic tradition of Kant, Schiller, Hegel, and Nietzsche. For central to both schemas is the implicit recognition of disavowal, as well as affirmation, as the engine of self-transformation.

We might reconsider in this light Wartofsky's assertion regarding the educative value of the artist's visual representations. I would want to say, and I think this is fully in line with Wartofsky's avowal of the non-prescriptive nature of artistic representations, that such representations teach us not how to see the world, but rather teach us that however we see the world we might just as easily disown our way of seeing for some other one. The lesson of the artwork is not then primarily a lesson for vision, even if the artwork occasions a transformation of visual practice. The lesson of the artwork is instead an occasion for the lesson of aesthetic judgment, which is to say taste.

Here we approach pleasure, and the difficulty will be to try to understand what kind of lesson the particular pleasure of taste has for us. Put differently: what kind of artifact is pleasure? From our reading of Wartofsky we already have a preliminary understanding of artifact as the movement of self-transformation, as the movement away from stasis and reification. Wartofsky's doctrine of pleasure—but perhaps this might serve as a description of the nature of his particular pleasures as well—resides in the acknowledgment that one is a made thing. This acknowledgment occurs not as a thought but rather as the movement of thinking (let us now call it praxis) away from what it has already been and toward what it might become. For Wartofsky it was of course the register of the visual in which one most readily acknowledges oneself as a being—in particular as one who sees and enacts that acknowledgment by making visual representations—pictorial or not—while it is likewise there, within and according to vision, where one is transformed by this very acknowledgment. This, I want to suggest, is the intersection of Wartofsky's historical epistemology and taste, for taste, like Wartofsky's descriptions of our visual practices, is not best characterized as the way we come to know the world, but rather as the way we come to make the world as a radically

human one. Although Wartofsky reminds us of our kinship with all species that have vision insofar as it is not for any of us the organ alone that allows us to see but rather the whole organism sees by dint of the organ, there is nonetheless a radical distinction between us and all other sighted species: we might say that whereas vision happens to, and within, all other sighted species, we, on the other hand own, make, and externalize our vision. As Wartofsky puts it:

what is imaged in the animal eye's structure is its biological life world, and it is interiorized or structured genetically. What is imaged in human visual structure is the cultural historical life world, and it is interiorized or structured culturally: as that which embodies itself in pleasure. Artworks and aesthetic experiences were for Wartofsky opportunities for cognitive advance and transformation; they were for him the stuff out of which, and within which, we make and transform our worlds. But they are also—and I think he would have agreed with this—occasions for play, not just cognitive play, but the pleasure of the play of a whole being enacting its nature, which is to say its praxis. That pleasure—*aesthetic pleasure*—is the pleasure of a being making itself into an artifact (all other artifacts are but expressions or versions of this one) and likewise the pleasure of a being unmaking itself as such.

NOTES

1. Wartofsky, Marx, "Perception, Representation, and the Forms of Action: Towards an Historical Epistemology." *Ajatus* 36 (1974): 19-43, 23.
2. Wartofsky, "Perception." Representation, and the Forms of Action," 29.
3. Marx Wartofsky, "Sight, Symbol and Society: Toward a History of Visual Perception," *Philosophic Exchange* 3 (summer 1981): 23-40, 27.
4. Theodor Adorno, "Aesthetic Theory," trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 301.
5. Wartofsky. "Sight, Symbol and Society," 36.
6. Marx Wartofsky, "The Politics of Art: The Domination of Style and the Crisis in Contemporary Art." *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 51, no. 2 (spring 1993): 217-25, 221.
7. Wartofsky, "Sight, Symbol and Society," 37.