

BOOK REVIEW

Leonhard Emmerling,
*The Art of Diremption: On
the Powerlessness of Art.*

Translated by Parnal Chirmuley 2021

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Leonhard Emmerling's *The Art of Diremption: On the Powerlessness of Art* engages the reader with a historical and philosophical trajectory of the idea of the power of art down the ages starting with the aesthetic philosophy of Immanuel Kant right up to contemporary times. An art historian with a PhD from Heidelberg University, Emmerling worked as a curator and writer in Germany, New Zealand, and India, and serves currently as the director of the Goethe-Institut Chicago, US. Though the volume runs to a modest 125 pages, it is by no means an easy read and can be read with profit only by those who are familiar with the Western philosophy of art. The book was originally published in German in 2017 but was later translated into English by Parnal Chirmuley and published in 2021. Dr. Chirmuley is an associate professor at the Centre of German Studies, JNU, New Delhi.

Apart from a very engaging introduction, the book is divided into fifteen sections. These fifteen sections may be broadly divided into two parts. The first eight sections trace a trajectory of the philosophy of art starting with Kant to Schiller down to Stendal and Nietzsche and finally to Hegel. It is in the final section of this first part which deals with Hegel that the author elaborates on the idea of diremption of art which serves as the title to this volume. The remaining seven sections builds on this theoretical foundation and takes up philosophical issues like Truth, Morality, Radicality, Community, and Ethics with relation to aesthetic experience/difference. This second section starts with the chapter, "What Does Art Do after the End of Art" and ends with the "Politics of Art", the polysemic

suggestiveness of the titles giving birth to diverse ideational expectations from the initiated reader.

In many ways the author's introduction to the volume is very illuminating wherein he maps out in a somewhat nuanced vein the thesis he seeks to advance through his work. He starts off by telling us that he hopes to contest the widespread "nonsensical" valorisation of art, particularly contemporary visual art, as a transformative societal force capable of addressing imbalances, inequities and injustices along the registers of the social, the economic, the political, or even the ecological. For him such an idea is nothing short of what he calls, "presumptuous heroism" and emanates from a wilful denial or non-acknowledgement of "one's subjugation to the contradiction inherent in social relations"(2) leading to a simplistic soteriological discourse of creating a society free of all kinds of violence here and now. The uncritical amalgamation of art with life is negated on two counts. One, "the cross-financed valorisation between morals and aesthetics" (3) can only be described as an attempt at social work through the context of art and is implausible primarily due to the manifest distinction between reality and seeming on the plane of aesthetic difference. Two, this aesthetic difference further acts as a bulwark against any kind of accountability in the public domain arising out of any artistic intervention. On the flip side, the artist too is provided immunity against the veracity or otherwise of her artistic efforts nor is she to be held to account regarding what conclusions may be drawn from her work.

Emmerling further buttresses his arguments by problematising the creativity of the artist in contemporary times in relation to the forces of the market and a consumer society that uses culture as symbolic capital. Often what is seen is the mutation of individual creativity so that the artistic subject is co-opted by the market which then dictates the subject's creative potential so as to enable her to place it in the service of the market. Viewed thus, it is significant that the number of visitors thronging art museums is more an indication of the commodification of art than an indicator of genuine appreciation of art. It is in this milieu of ideas that the author seeks to unpack the narrative of the power of art, to explore what art can and cannot achieve within society. In so far as aesthetic judgement is reflexive, and aesthetic difference underscores the dichotomy between truth and

illusion, art cannot rid itself of a fundamental weakness. Hence, for Emmerling, “Art is weak. It therefore requires an ethics of powerlessness, which rejects the discourse of impact and power, in order to enable a politics of art, at the heart of which lies the permanence of reflection, ungroundability of thought and the emergence of form as the event of the new” (7).

The book starts with an extensive two-part discussion on Kant’s ideas of the beautiful and the sublime with copious references from *The Critique of Judgement*. In Kantian aesthetics “purposiveness without purpose” of a work of art at its inception leads to disinterested pleasure at the stage of reception. There is no private interest or tendency or, worse still, an erotic proclivity in the perception of the beautiful leading to the presupposition that the pleasure the individual feels would be “a ground of satisfaction for everyone.” This is the Kantian idea of subjective universality. The judgement based on taste is “not a judgement of cognition” and hence it is not logical but aesthetic, its determining ground being subjective. Interestingly, what separates the subject from others is her subjectivity and this very fact yet again is a common shared attribute with respect to all others. Thus, Emmerling puts forward the case that it is in the awareness of “her subjective generality and the generality of separation that the subject encounters herself as belonging to all of humanity” (15) and this is where he locates the *sensus communis* and also the category of “Rucksichtnahme” or respect. This “respect” is consideration for the judgement of others the exercise of which leads to the forging of collective and communal reason “where reflective judgement as subjective is in consonance with the judgement of others and its frenzy comes to rest” (20).

From Kant’s ideas on beauty the author moves on to an engagement with the Kantian sublime and brings Schiller’s idea of the sublime into the ambit of discussion. The sublime for Kant resides in the mind and not in the external objects of nature, it is associated with awe and reverence as opposed to love and is linked to a “negative interest” that carries with it a suggestion of fear. From this it follows that while beauty maybe encountered both in art and in nature, the sublime can be experienced only through interaction with nature for no work of art can communicate the suggestion of fear that is an inevitable part of an encounter with the sublime. In so far as the sublime appeals to the human being’s sense

of purpose to transcend her own boundedness it implies freedom. The author then brings the Kantian sublime into conversation with Schiller's ideas that only the sublime can "remind the human being of her eternal destiny and her real homeland" (25). The implications of Kant's idea of beauty as autonomous with no purchase on the sphere of morality is contrasted with Schiller's declaration of beauty to be a legislating principle: "To give freedom through freedom is a fundamental law of this realm."

In contradistinction to Kant, Schiller rejects the idea that beauty promises happiness and Emmerling now revisits Stendhal to introduce the happiness motif. In *De L'Amour*, Stendhal says, "La beaute n'est que la promesse de bonheur" which could imply two things: 1) Beauty is nothing other than a promise of happiness, 2) Beauty is only a promise of happiness. The formal criterion of defining beauty which we found in Kant and Schiller is now substituted with its function in augmenting happiness of the human subject. The first reading of Stendhal's words would imply that only that which "fulfils the function of providing happiness can be considered beautiful" (34) and hence it points to a trans-social human core beyond social frameworks. The second reading yields a negative scepticism: beauty is only the promise of happiness and a promise is unreliable and is liable to transmute into a lie. In either case beauty is associated with an eternally deferred future, as a "substitute for real social transformation, a mere palliative" (34).

Central to Nietzsche's philosophy is the connection Stendhal forged between beauty and happiness. However, he does away with the possibility of a failed and undelivered promise of happiness. He also dispenses with reflection which in Kant ennobled simple sense perception. For Nietzsche, there is no ambivalence in the relationship between beauty and happiness; the effects of beauty is direct and hits the subject physically. In *On the Genealogy of Morality*, he writes, "All art acts as a suggestion to all the muscles and senses...All art works as a tonic, enhances power, fires desire (that is, the feeling of power), spurs finer memories of inebriety..." Art is always beautiful and it affirms the life force of the human being, is "life enhancing and stimulating, reinforcing the human being's will to power" (40). The book engages with Nietzsche elaborately and focusses on his idea of art as a force that counteracts the conception of a world that is "cruel, contradictory,

beguiling and without meaning.” It is also a world that is characterised by an impossibility of knowledge and that gives rise to art: “We do not know the true nature of singular causality. Absolute scepticism: the need for illusion.” To that extent, art is a lie but it is life-enhancing. Being a stimulant of life, art is necessarily greater than any so-called truth.

The next step in this philosophical journey is Hegel who broadens the concept of art and gives it access to a terrain hitherto unexplored or unthought of. In *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art, Vol I*, Hegel dispenses as a thing of the past any bondage to a particular subject-matter and a mode of portrayal. For him, “[F]orm and every material is now at the service and command of the artist whose talent and genius is explicitly freed from the earlier limitation to one specific art form.” However, this ability to occupy any subject matter and access any form comes with a price. Art is no longer the privileged bearer of Truth. Nor need Truth be revealed in art as beauty. What art evokes is pleasure and critical judgement. Emmerling now refers to Hegel’s *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* and tells us, “This uncoupling of beauty and truth is the appearance of a truth with reference to the mode of existence of a bourgeois society, with the truth of diremption as its signature” (63). In other words, modern bourgeois society is a society of diremption where the individual subject has her subjective rights but it is the totalization of the particular that becomes universally applicable. In the words of Hegel, “[T]he ‘I’ is simultaneously the most individual and the most universal [element]” In its paradoxical enmeshing of subjectivity and generality, diremption represents the formation of the social. At the heart of this social process is the smallest unit, the “I” which is divided as the centre of two poles and from which diremption as a social process is set into motion. The individual consciousness produces itself as its own object, “as a consciousness of the ‘firstly, that I know, and secondly, what I know’” (67). Thus, diremption manifests itself as a generative principle in the activity of the mind which constitutes itself as being and becoming.

Having thus brought the concept of diremption squarely in the terms of his intellectual exegesis via Hegel, Emmerling goes on to propose: “Art is one of the forms that diremption takes as it unfolds” (71). As a social subsystem, art is engulfed by the dynamics that govern it and it also needs to “prove its own

insubstitutability” with reference to other subsystems. For Emmerling, this could imply either the reduction of complexity or the production of complexity involving on the one hand exemplary correspondence between sign and object or the sharpening of difference between appearance and reality on the other. But in either case, for him, art produces morality . Therefore, he goes on to say, “The end of art is the beginning of its return as morality” (75) and henceforth in the second section of the book he brings in a whole host of philosophical concepts like radicality, community, and ethics to put forward his case and come to the final consideration of the status of “art as the political praxis of freedom” (125).

The Art of Diremptionis a scholarly book and it calls for an initiated readership. The author does not shy away from using almost half the page to accommodate his detailed footnotes from the innumerable academic resources he consulted. A sizable number of these references are originally written in German without corresponding English versions and this can prove somewhat daunting for an English reader who is unfamiliar with German. This is particularly the case more with academic papers than books for most of the masters of German philosophy are available in translation while all the academic papers may not be as easily accessible in other languages. In a final word, this is not a book for beginners, but for the initiated it can be a rewarding experience affording fresh and nuanced perspectives on the nature, function, and power/lessness of art through the lenses of Western philosophy.

