

The Cultural Promise of  
the Aesthetic

Monique Roelofs

Bloomsbury Studies in Philosophy

2014

B L O O M S B U R Y  
L O N D O N • N E W D E L H I • N E W Y O R K • S Y D N E Y

# Contents

List of Figures	viii
Acknowledgments	ix
Credits	xi
Introduction	1
1 The Aesthetic, the Public, and the Promise of Culture	5
2 Whiteness and Blackness as Aesthetic Productions	29
3 The Gendered Aesthetic Detail	57
4 Beauty's Moral, Political, and Economic Labor	89
5 The Aesthetics of Ignorance	107
6 An Aesthetic Confrontation	129
7 Racialized Aesthetic Nationalism	151
8 Aesthetic Promises and Threats	177
Postscript	209
Notes	213
Bibliography	243
Index	257

in the context of institutionally embedded templates of subjective and collective existence. The cultural promise of the aesthetic represents a structuring principle of the aesthetic field. It lies at the heart of hopes, needs, and aspirations we embody in our various aesthetic practices—endeavors that are both collectively based and productive in shaping community. To speak of the cultural promise in the singular, as has and will at times be illuminating, is to use shorthand for a multitude of promises that aesthetic agents perpetually engineer in the forms of objects, persons, situations, environments, critiques, styles, and encounters.

Along the lines of Nietzsche's improvisatory paradigm of promise making, cultures anchored in aesthetic promises are malleable formations. While Nietzsche, with Arendt, underscores the moral weight and social powers of the binding promise, he alerts us, with Lipspector, Adorno, and Constant, among many others, to the ethical and political productivity of breaking, revising, and letting go of promises. Retroactive as well as forward-looking, this improvisatory mode of promising enables us to redirect aesthetic forms and passions as we build webs of relationship among subjects and objects. Sequences of evolving and interconnecting aesthetic promises allow for varying levels of cultural organization. The force, the cohesiveness, and the political compartment enabled by the promise can manifest itself in a rock-solid, unmovable commitment to a style, a genre, an artist, a program, a thematic, a query, an identity, a movement, a group, or it can admit of a loose and open form of collectivity. Rubrics such as a national, postcolonial, queer, black, feminist, green, or working-class aesthetic, a person's highly individualized style, modernism, surrealism, and global aesthetics each allow for internal degrees of variation along these lines.

The preceding list of aesthetic cultures and forms of collectivity demonstrates that, like the promise part, the culture- and the aesthetics part of "the cultural promise of the aesthetic," stand in need of pluralization. Aesthetic promises, including promises of culture, lie at the heart of an expansive range of aesthetically saturated cultural formations that include certain national and regional cultures envisaged by eighteenth-century philosophers but also reach far beyond this to encompass other types of micro- and macrolevel identifications and differentiations and their mutual repercussions and interconnections. These formations invite a fine-grained picture of modes of aesthetic collectivity that are under formation and that do not admit of exhaustive or defining mappings. The rationality and flexibility of promising lends itself to theorizing a network of mobile, intermeshing systems of aesthetic affiliation and disaffiliation, appropriation and disowning. The ineradicably intersectional entwinement of social categories makes visible that the relations among such systems cannot be stabilized. The notion of shifting promises creates room to acknowledge this: At the same time, the emplacement of promises in institutionalized structures of address and the potential depth of our attachment to them enables us to theorize the persistence and tenacity of cultural segments and powers, which are able to preserve themselves across newly emerging forms, and to remain unmoved in the face of the most concentrated attempts at change.

The cultural promise of the aesthetic, among other aesthetic promises, carries out its work as an element in evolving webs of relationality and address. Rooted in such constellations, aesthetic promises are instrumental in shaping forms of aesthetic

collectivity. As components of formations of relationality and address, they realize incessantly mutating procedures of historically grounded differentiation. The result is a heterogeneous fabric of communal ties and fissures. Leaving behind the Enlightenment model of a public forum comprised of general subjects, we arrive here at a view on which the community constitutes a mobile platform mired in simultaneously aesthetic and political strategies that encounter renewal from unforeseen sources and in unpredictable corners. Within this forum, we dispatch promises of political change on paths of which we do not know where they lead us. This proposal does not project an open-ended field of possibility, however.

As a mode of address and a vehicle for collectivity, the promise reproduces the socially disparate procedures analyzed in this book. Aesthetic promises forge asymmetrical bonds and ruptures. They do not achieve an equal distribution of prefigured happiness or anticipated culture, or promise the same thing to everyone, but align themselves with vectors of power regulating the social world. Coca-Cola and the movies, twentieth-century signs of idealized contemporaneity that supply Macabéa with a springboard into the present, fail to transpose her from her supposedly archaic locale and persona into the global setting of technologically advanced modernity. What is promised to whom, at what price, and with what results reflects imbalances governing symbolic exchange generally.<sup>25</sup> This means that aesthetic promises typically also imply threats, as illustrated by the effacement of recalcitrant forms of difference in Neruda's elemental poems, and by the functioning of beauty, the art of literature, material substances, and consumption goods in *The Hour of the Star*.

Neruda's elemental odes give expression to a promise of culture that we can associate with Kant's and Hume's views of aesthetic publicity, even if the odes' promise goes well beyond what these philosophers actually had in mind. Offering an allegory of the possibilities of the aesthetic, Neruda envelops the reader into a web of address that instantiates interpretive, material bonds among subjects and among subjects and objects. The poems promise that by participating in this network of relationships and address, we can bring about an egalitarian and harmonious community, a culture by and for the people. The structure of reciprocal loving animation the "Ode to Things" imagines is emblematic of a dynamic of desire and signification that informs an influential Western conception of the aesthetic. On this conception, aesthetic address assumes a public form, and the aesthetic domain constitutes a public forum for such address. The Enlightenment tradition in philosophy grounds the operative notion of publicity in common human appreciative faculties honed by certain conditioning experiences. Aesthetic pleasure, perception, and judgment, on this model, represent a collective good, potentially shareable by all. Neruda's odes extol the collective possibilities for reading, making, and readability that we can attach to this view of aesthetic publicity, and to the aesthetic, more generally.

Like Neruda, John Dewey articulates a promise for the aesthetic that we can ascribe to the Enlightenment model of publicity. Highlighting the culture-building powers to be unleashed by a pedagogy of the aesthetic, that is, by a sustained process of aesthetic education, he exalts the powers that aesthetic experience, in its unified temporal unfolding, its multilayered, dynamical composition, and its integrative workings is able to hold out for culture "in its collective aspect" (1934, 333). The civilizational