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VIOLENCE AND ORGANIZATION IN NATALIE BOOKCHIN'S ART

Blake Stimson is Professor of Art History at University of Illinois at Chicago and author, most recently, of Citizen Warhol.

What we now call “contemporary art” long ago abandoned an old modernist rule—that the only way art can guard against political fatuousness and ideological docility is to focus on its own formal qualities, on its properties as *art qua art*. “When they are young, many artists are quite ignorant,” critic Clement Greenberg could still say in 1994. “They are convinced that their art can help humanity in a much more direct way.” As smug as we are in our routine rejection of this principle, of course he was right—when its aim is to help, art rarely accomplishes more than letting its professional and patron classes off the hook.

Those of us discomfited by this truth might look to the work of Natalie Bookchin for one answer to the question of what art can actually do. To see the alternative she offers us, we could simply point to her emphases on “tempo,” “counterpoint,” “orchestral moments,” “Greek choruses” and other formal conceits in the accompanying interviews, but this risks being misleading. Greenberg’s point was never that form itself was magic, that its prissy autonomy from the gritty, life-and-death reality of non-form helped humanity by itself. Instead it was a matter of distinctively artistic form and the “greater pleasure” of aesthetic experience it produces in us. Greater than what? In a nutshell, greater than the private pleasures that we have as individuals, families, communities and nations. Good Kantian that Greenberg was, such

pleasures—the pleasures of *culture*, we can call them—did not measure up to the substantive pleasure of art.

While the social implications of this high/low distinction is old and familiar—in its most common variant, art is to culture as avant-garde is to kitsch as politics is to market—we often forget that this does not mean that art *equals* politics any more than it means that the easy whetting of our desire by a bauble on Amazon equals the elaborate machinations of the Davos elite. Such would be to collapse strategy into tactics, or the long game of our desire for politically-realized freedom from brute domination into the market-cycle ploys of activist necessity. Because we lose sight of this distinction, that which brands itself as “political art” is often as dispiritingly subservient as that art which cuts straight to indeterminacy, hybridity, creative destruction and the other period tastes of the obscenely rich. Even when it is about abject violence wielded on behalf of that obscenity—as it almost always is—the pleasure of *art qua art* is sobering, reflective, dialectical, bigger than the brute animal emotional apparatus of the self and its always facile tactical conceptualization. Bookchin’s work offers that larger pleasure in spades.

To fully appreciate this we need to begin with her raw material: the overly freighted sense of identity and outsized abject fear of that class of Americans who, justifiably or not, feel threatened to their core. Emotion begets emotion, and we are invited by both films included here to respond with sympathy or outrage or sadness or scorn. For example, the interviewees in *Long Story Short* (2016) are extraordinarily sympathetic as the film respectfully reveals the brutal material, emotional and logistical demands of their homelessness just as the vloggers in *Now he’s out in public and everyone can see* (2017) are conspicuously symptomatic as they flail in the wind of their own hurt, fear, resentment and unmet desire. The wellspring of emotion boils up more or less equally in each and overwhelms its categories—race, poverty, identity, humanity, nationality, homelessness et al.—even if those speaking in *Long Story Short* are in the position of being categorically judged while those in *Now he’s out in public* self-appoint as judges. “Toe the line or that line will toe you!” is how one black man describes his own experience of race, for example.

While it would be easy to be overwhelmed with emotion ourselves as we witness this categorical violence, neither film encourages such a vulnerable response. Our anger or sympathy is never left unchecked in the ways that good propaganda can engineer. (Successful examples of such engineering are endless, but think of the foul blood-and-soil pride of any nationalist pitch, or the fear-mongering of LBJ’s 1964 “Daisy Girl” and George H.W. Bush’s 1988

Interviews at Union Station Homeless Services
Pasadena, California



Long Story Short title sequence

“Willie Horton” ads, or the turn to the existential reality of bare life itself driving government accountability campaigns from the Eastern bloc’s color revolutions to Black Lives Matter). Bookchin’s films do not ask us to pretend the violence doesn’t exist or that it is simply the natural order of things, nor do they invite us into the liberal grave of sentiment, of melancholic acceptance of the status quo, or of passive submission to our own violence and the violence of others. Broadly, such responses are the endgames of Greenberg’s kitsch—the pleasures of *culture*, we called them—rather than the higher, less self-certain, more demanding and more exacting pleasure in Bookchin’s use of artistic form.

Whether it is art or not, the meaning of any image is a function of how it organizes feeling. The color red feels one way, for example, blue another, and their juxtaposition a third. If a feeling believes too much in its own raw state, or in the abstract category that allows us to conceptualize that raw state, or, finally, in the dumb conflation or heartless alternation of the two, it fails to reach the threshold of art. Art organizes feeling in such a way that it transcends its own innate tendencies towards the violence of categories, on the one hand, and wallowing in the suffering of categorical violence, on the other: it takes

the moral certainty arising from suffering and the rational certainty given by categories and mediates between them with aesthetic form.

But such mediation is not as simple as my mechanical explanation makes it sound. We could compare it to grappling with the complex and conflicted feelings that we sometimes have about those we feel close to. For example, think of your feelings about the powerful category of poverty as you view *Long Story Short*, first with the interviewees' reports about their lived experience of its violence and then, particularly during the credits, as that which activates the care of the agencies and other services where the film was shot. Now keep that emotional conflict close as you stand back and intellectually consider the abstract question of good political and economic organization: How should we organize the social relationship of part to part and part to whole such that conflict can be expressed, addressed and resolved? How to recognize and reconcile both individual need and social need without sacrificing any of either? How to guard against such an organization collapsing under the weight of an unjust concentration of power? How to bring such an organization into being in a field of vested interests and unattended needs?

Feelings and concepts alike blind us to the real meaning of such questions when we cannot see beyond our own. This is as true for the smarm of unctuous tolerance as it is for the rage of venomous resentment. The richer pleasure of mediation that art offers us is unavailable either as concept or feeling and only presents itself to us as form. The questions driving it—those about a better world—lose their sensuous legibility as soon as we fall into the dead certainty of emotion or reason alone. The beauty of Natalie Bookchin's work is that it insists on holding these human capacities taut, both together and apart as twin pillars of self-realization. In her editing and montage, in the moments of unison and the moments to pause, we feel the play of these capacities struggling to organize our aesthetic response as solidarity, as a properly democratic political will that is defined by its reach towards socialism. In so doing—at least for the fleeting moment of the aesthetic experience itself—that uniquely human potential holds us aloft in the public freedom and political potential of art and keeps us from the precarity that awaits in the deathly gulch of culture below.