

Introduction to the Special Issue

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In *Either/Or* (1839), Søren Kierkegaard offers the aesthetic and the ethical as two distinct modes of human existence. The aesthetic, embodied in the life of the passionate, if dissolute, bohemian “A,” is a life lived for the senses, the passions, for forms and figures. In “The Seducer’s Diary,” the young aesthete declares that “it is not a single beauty that captivates me but a totality; a dream image floats past, in which all these feminine natures form their own configurations among one another, and all these movements seek something, seek rest in one picture that is not seen” (Kierkegaard 272). Such is the seductive power of the aesthetic, and the profound artistic variety available to those who live by it. The danger, A’s friend, the more austere judge “B” tells us, is that such a life lacks inwardness, reflection, and can thus easily lead to a dissolving of the self — a condition otherwise known as despair. He tells him, regarding the decisions he has chosen to live by, that his “choice is an aesthetic choice, but an aesthetic choice is no choice. In general, the act of choosing is a literal and strict expression of the ethical” (Kierkegaard 485). For B, A represents the dissipating, for want of a better word “decadent” logic of a life enthralled by the aesthetic — many people, inside and outside the academy, have agreed with him. But whether one agrees with A, or B, or both, or neither, Kierkegaard captures one of the central debates of modern culture.

Kierkegaard’s notion of the “aesthetic” is in part derived from the writings of Hegel, a philosopher whose work he admired and repudiated in equal measure. For Hegel, aesthetics is that branch of philosophy which tries to grasp “the wide *realm of the beautiful*, and, more particularly, their province is Art — we may restrict it, indeed, to *Fine Art*” (Hegel 3, emphasis in text). Hegel justifies this restriction by claiming that the arts, as opposed to the natural world, are the highest manifestation of human creativity, and therefore dis-

play the working of the human spirit. That is not to say that the aesthetic cannot be applied to nature – the experience of the sea or mountains or sunsets, the importance of hiking and travel, in Hegel’s day and in our own makes this clear. It is simply that the arts offer a wider realm of reflection, by virtue of their formal construction, to the philosopher. To apprehend the working of beauty in something, be it artificial or natural, Hegel writes, we must think of it in and of itself, for “if we consider it in its necessary connection with other things we are not regarding it by itself or for its own sake, and, therefore, not as beautiful” (4). But there are two more important steps, Hegel claims, that we must take in pursuit of the aesthetic. The first is to then reflect on the beautiful in its relation to the spirit which supposedly created it, of which it is the external manifestation; the idea, in other words, that is apparently behind it. Beauty, then, really is the manifestation of an abstract idea. The second step we must take is to see the formal appearance of an artwork, for example, in relation to the historical processes in which it partakes and which served to form it; a historical process which is ongoing. The key question is how the individual artwork manifests the development of ideas (4).

Another post-Hegelian would challenge the abstraction inherent in such definitions. In the preface to his 1873 work, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, Walter Pater remarks that though there have been many attempts to capture the meaning of “beauty” in the abstract, “the value of such attempts has often been in the suggestive and penetrating things said by the way” (Pater 3). That is, the grand metaphysical speculations of a Hegel is actually a departure from the true qualities of the aesthetic: the appreciation, apprehension, or critique of the unique existence of an individual artwork, object, event, or person. In contrast, the “true aim of the student of aesthetics” is to “define beauty not in the most abstract, but in the most concrete terms possible.” They must search for “the formula which expresses most adequately this or that special manifestation of it” (3). Not generality, but specificity; not an idea “behind” a work, but the idea which exists in the very aesthetic dimension of a work itself. The aesthetic reflection should be derived from the uniqueness of form.

Whether this is wholly distinct from an ethical perspective is doubtful and, despite his reputation amongst those who have little read him, this was absolutely not Pater's own view. But the relationship between the ethical and the aesthetic remains a difficult topic to address, much less to mediate. This special issue concerns an example of such specificity as Pater calls for: aesthetics and ethics in American culture. Each paper considers the aesthetic in a slightly different way, from literary history to its relation to the political to the enduring qualities of particular forms. What they all share is the conviction that to understand America – if such a task is possible – one must understand its aesthetics.

American “soft power,” if one believes in such a term, lies in aesthetics as much as ethics. The ubiquity of McDonalds, Starbucks, the international popularity of *Friends* or *The Big Bang Theory*, Robert de Niro, Calvin Klein jeans, iPhones, all of the bric-a-brac of American life which have become global brands, global markers of Americana, testify to this. This is speculative and nebulous – unquantifiable – and yet do we not know that we are encountering a globalized America if we see advertisements for a monster truck rally in Provence or visit Burger King in Southampton General Hospital? The aesthetic is a specific form that frames a particular kind of experience. It would be absurd to claim that the aesthetic has an importance to American life that it does not have in other cultures – the whole point of aesthetics is that all human existence is reliant upon sensory forms for expressing anything at all; here the Platonist and the neo-materialist must agree, even if the one is perhaps more enthusiastic about this than the other. The aesthetic is central to the understanding of any culture, and so to appreciate American life one must wrestle with the aesthetics of American life. We forget the aesthetic, as the aesthetic, at our peril. This narrower claim is where the essays in this special issue take their starting points.

It is, however, ethics proper with which this issue starts. Nir Evron's discussion of the ethical in Edith Wharton's work is part of a return to ethical criticism – as opposed to the various permutations of formalism or ideological criticism which have dominated literary studies over the last century. It is the ethical of the everyday that marks Wharton's work, Evron argues, an ethics which it is harder to assess in the grand Hegelian style, but which does lend itself to the specificity of aesthetic criticism as Pater imagined it. Per-

haps it is more reminiscent of the sentiment of one of the great critics of Pater's aestheticism, however; those moving words with which George Eliot concludes *Middlemarch* (1871): that "the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs" (Eliot 784). Out of such things, Eliot builds her aesthetic; Wharton, too, at the apex of that overwrought "Gilded Age." How one lives and among what types of things is, in part, an aesthetic matter—but one with intense ethical ramifications.

The second piece in this special issue is an interview with Kate Hext and Alex Murray, two of the editors (with Kristin Mahoney) of *Cusp*, a journal which has quickly become one of the flagships for the study of the *fin de siècle* and Decadence, a dynamic field which is producing much exciting research. "Decadence" has become the general term for the study of the period in which Pater was writing, and the period afterwards, and has a particular relation to the aesthetic. It contains much, though perhaps not always enough, of what was previously referred to as "aestheticism." "Decadence" as a term is useful for capturing both the ethical and aesthetic dimensions of *fin de siècle* culture. It is at once a stylistic descriptor (we might think of the loosening of poetic strictures in the work of Paul Verlaine or of Wilde's and Aubrey Beardsley's indulgence in salacious imagery in *Salome*) and a term of critique for the ways in which a culture has developed. Max Nordau famously castigated his era as "decadent" in *Degeneration*, and in our own day, voices from Moscow to Washington DC decry the so-called "decadence" of the West. Hext and Murray explain the term, its continued relevance, and its relation to America. Decadence as an international artistic phenomenon happens later in America; a matter of Hollywood as much as Paris.

No less constructed than Wharton's novels or the decadence of Hollywood, though underappreciated as a literary form, the writer's interview is an aesthetic form which emerges to fullest fruition in the so-called "American century." Lucy Cheseldine sketches its relation to celebrity culture and to literary form — as well as to the same external-internal, self-society, aesthetic-ethical dichotomies that Kierkegaard explores. The interview is not an exclusively American form, but it is a form that has been particularly elevated and refined as part of American public culture. Cheseldine outlines the

aesthetic dimensions and argues that they serve to lay down the dimensions for a form that owes far more to fictionality than scholars have been wont to realize.

Cheseldine is more concerned with the interview of the artist than than of the critic, but Roslyn Joy Irving's conversation with Tim Lanzendörfer and Pierre-Henri Monot uses the form to reflect on the "forms" of academic life. Lanzendörfer and Monot are two of the leading figures in the Academic Forms research network, a Germany-based study group investigating the way that academia, particularly – though not exclusively – the humanities, operates and which forms we use to express ourselves. These include the monograph and the article – those which most readily come to mind – but also unremarked upon forms, such as the conference coffee break and office hours. Academic Forms is an international network, but it has its basis in American Studies, a subject which is well placed to negotiate older and newer forms. American Studies combines literary and media studies with sociological research, political theory, philosophy, area studies, geography, and much more besides. Lanzendörfer and Monot pose the question, essentially, what will our forms be in the future?

Clare Birchall and Matthew Potolsky, two eminent scholars of aesthetics and the socio-political, are also concerned with questions of what the future holds, but for society at large. They consider the aesthetics of secrecy in a post-Snowden age now dominated by debates around technology, internet safety, artificial intelligence, and digital ethics. These issues prompt their concerns, and have done for some time, but their consideration is ultimately around what the form and dimensions of the secret – its aesthetics – reveal about these issues. Here the aesthetic emerges as a more fertile ground for cultivating profound reflection. Secrets, they stress, have "a look and a feel as well as a content; they are a matter of imagery, narratives, and affects as well as information." This affective conception of the secret leads Potolsky and Birchall to consider the "secret as secret," as Birchall puts it early in the discussion. What, they ask, is it about the aesthetic dimensions of the secret that might reveal and conceal the ways in which privacy, surveillance, security (personal and state), and capitalist logic work in our current era. The aesthetic dimension of the secret demands attention, even if it, by its nature, is difficult to grasp. Perhaps it demands so much attention because it is dif-

difficult to grasp. Secrets, particularly state secrets, most often leave us, Potolsky points out, with a sense of the sublime.

Justin Patch's essay is an exploration of the populist aesthetic practices of the first Trump campaign and presidency. Patch demonstrates that the signature features of the Trumpian aesthetic are the reappropriation and resignification of pre-existing forms for the sake of partisan exploitation. His primary examples are the ways in which the Trump presidency used a video of a protestor against police brutality who accidentally set his feet on fire; the video was re-edited to use the title song of the film *Footloose*, an aesthetic recontextualization for the purpose of political ridicule. His second example is the way that the Trump campaign initially used popular music at its rallies, often against the wishes of the artists. The affront was part of the aesthetic, as it demonstrated the dominance that was central to Trump's political messaging. Both uses of music—as a symbol of domination and an instrument of ridicule—demonstrate in a debased form the DIY ethic that has always been part of populist movements that claim to favor producers or makers over the elite.

Staying with music, James Little explores the aesthetics of silence and the unsaid in Frank Ocean's body of work. Gaps, lacunae, pauses, recalcitrance, evasion, and public silence form an important part of Ocean's aesthetic. This is something which is easily missed because of the nature of silence; a formal absence, rather than a presence. This absence becomes a statement in and of itself, and Little encourages us to pay close, and affective, attention to the balance of the said and the unsaid, the stressed and the unstressed rhythm. In an American life so beset by noise, Little's essay reintroduces the power of quietness.

Natalie Erkel looks at two contemporary art manifestos in order to make sense of recent developments in the form. Manifestos are, by definition, opposed to convention. They announce programs of change. Nevertheless, 175 years of manifesto-writing has resulted in a fairly established set of formal conventions. This makes manifestos ripe for parody, which in turn suggests something significant about the contemporary avant-garde, namely, that it is cautious, even skeptical, about the kind of change that used to be its stock-in-trade, and now uses tried-and-true methods to critique itself.

This part of the issue is rounded off with two reflections on a recent exhibition of the abstract expressionist Sean Scully at the Bucerius Kunst Forum in Hamburg. Scully is an Irish-American citizen who grew up in London and attended university in Newcastle; he has lived across Europe, and in the United States, Mexico, and North Africa. He thus might be said to an artist whose work transcends the narrowness of cultural boundaries. And yet, the artistic direction to which he is most often said to belong is one which is often characterized as “American.” James Dowthwaite and Natalie Erkel explore the “Americanness” of Scully’s aesthetic, and offer their reflections on the exhibition.

Occasional papers are a regular feature of this journal, including special issues. The two occasional papers that round out this issue were unsolicited, but they nevertheless resonate with the theme of aesthetics (and ethics). Matthew Feldman’s study of Pound’s influence on three infamous American fascists during his decade-long confinement in the mental institution he called the “bug house,” demonstrates how the poet’s views on culture led to a set of dangerous political beliefs that, while unpopular in the 1950s, seem to be gaining traction today. Contemporary right-wing commentators repeat the mantra that politics is downstream from culture. Pound is proof positive of this theory. There are many right-wingers who have followed his cultural and political lead, and even those, like the group calling itself CasaPound in Italy, who have adopted his name. Feldman establishes a genealogy extending from a poet who set out to write what one scholar has called the “fascist epic” to the internet trolls of today who are collectively writing a new tale of a particular tribe.

Moritz Wischert-Zielke examines the meaning of the ghouls and zombies in the popular, post-apocalyptic video game series *Fallout*. While zombies are not represented as a “race” in the game, they are nevertheless racialized in ways that resonate in the game narratives and settings. This racial ambiguity is a function of the game’s aesthetic, but it is also a function of the cultural history of the zombie itself, which originates in West African and Caribbean beliefs but has been appropriated by any number of authors and filmmakers to demonstrate both the diabolical “mastery” of slaveholders and the danger of slave revolts. By comparing the ludic to the narrative structures in various versions of the game, Wischert-Zielke demonstrates that the ethics of

killing zombies (who are always non-player characters) depends both on the historical context, and on the aesthetics of how the first-person shooter is encouraged to feel about aggression.

Hegel's systemic movement of *Geist* mediates the distinction between the aesthetic and ethical – sublimates them, to use the usual translation of his term *aufheben*, resolving them into the external and the internal. At the end of *Either/Or*, and more fully in *Fear and Trembling* (also 1839), Kierkegaard offers the religious as a kind of sublimation (though in reality it is really a kind of spiritual disruption) of both the aesthetic and the ethical. In *Marius the Epicurean* (1885), Pater offers an ameliorated epicureanism as an ethical approach to life derived from aesthetic sensibilities. This special issue offers no such resolutions. Instead, it offers an assertion of different kind: the aesthetic struggles to get a hearing in our contemporary discourse and it should be heard. The word “aesthetic” might be ubiquitous, but it is most often only as handmaiden of the ethical, used to illustrate an ideological point, manifesting a way of life, or a particular philosophy. This issue takes the aesthetic as an important mode in and of itself. It asserts the enduring importance of the aesthetic as an area of human culture.

Works Cited

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About the author

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