ഇശൽ പൈതൃകം

ത്രൈമാസിക ലക്കം: 41

Ishal Paithrkam

Online issue 26 print issue 41 March 2025

Mahakavi Moyinkutty Vaidyar
Mappila Kala Akademi
Department of Cultural Affairs
Government of Kerala-India
March 2025

ISSN:2582-550X

ഇശൽ പൈതൃകം
ത്രൈമാസിക
ലക്കം: 41
2025 മാർച്ച്

പകർപ്പാവകാശം: പ്രസാധകർക്ക്

ചീഫ് എഡിറ്റർ
ഡോ. ഹുസൈൻ രണ്ടത്താണി

എഡിറ്റർ
ഡോ. ഷംഷാദ് ഹുസൈൻ. കെ.ടി.

അസോസിയേറ്റ് എഡിറ്റർ
ഡോ. അനീസ് ആലങ്ങാടൻ

എഡിറ്റോറിയൽ ബോർഡ്
ബഷീർ ചുങ്കത്തറ
ഡോ. പി.പി അബ്ദുൽ റസാഖ്
എം.എൻ. കാരശ്ശേരി
സൈദലവി ചീരങ്ങോട്ട്

പ്രസാധകർ
മഹാകവി മോയിൻകുട്ടി വൈദ്യർ
മാപ്പിള കലാ അക്കാദമി
കൊണ്ടോട്ടി: 673 638
ഫോൺ: 0483 2711432

Ishal Paithrkam
ISSN: 2582-550X
Peer-Reviewed
UGC CARE indexed
Quarterly
Bilingual
Issue: 41
Online issue: 26
March: 2025

Editor
Dr. Shamshad hussain. KT

Printed @
LIPI Offset
Malappuram

Publisher
Mahakavi Moyinkutty
Vaidyar
Mappila Kala Akademi
Kondotty, 673638
Ph: 0483-2711432

www.mappilakalaacademy.org
www.ishalpaithrkam.info

De-contextualising of the Experience and Re-composing of Sensations: A Deleuzian Reading of the Aesthetics of Abstraction

Dr Denis Joseph Anatty Olakkengil
Dr Sijo Varghese C

Experiences are 'actual' as they are formed of human perception and affection, while the world of sensations verges on the 'virtual,' a state of Deleuzian 'percepts' and 'affects.' Walter Benjamin says that there is something prior to the experience—a world of ever fresh and ever elusive sensations. Abstraction in art is not an attempt to undo an experience and capture the 'original' sensation prior to that particular experience, but an attempt to compose sensations elusive of experiences. The world of sensations is the world of nonhuman indeterminations which lies at the source of all human determinations. The move from the actual to the virtual takes the figure back to its "diagram," in an attempt to preserve its multiplicity prior to the lived actualization, and as such it surpasses the 'giveness' of human interest or utility. Abstraction in art and poetry attempts to question the given meanings of the human in order to de-contextualize 'human' experiences. In their subliminal semantic silences, abstract works of art and literature try to compose sensations in approximation to the pre-linguistic world of body and its sensations.

Keywords: percepts, affects, actual, virtual, sensations

Art is a matter of choice, and the choice prefigures a choosing subject. Art, therefore, is not a 'response' to the contemporary conditions of existence confronted by the subject but the expression of an alternative world chosen by the subject. Prior to the choosing

'subject' there must be a being-there that is provoked to make a choice, and therefore, what happens antecedent to making the 'choice' constitutes the first instance of the subject or the self: the sensations and experiences. Experiences are 'actual' as they are formed of human perception and affection, while the world of sensations verges on the 'virtual,' a state of Deleuzian 'percepts' and 'affects.' Deleuze and Guattari take art as "*a bloc of sensations*" (164; authors' emphasis), and as Colebrook states, "[f]or Deleuze, this means that we can take experience as it actually is (experience in its actual form) and differentiate it into its *virtual* components. . . . Indeed, art works by taking us back from composites of experience to the affects from which those synthesised wholes emerge" (35; author's emphasis). Interrogating the frames of experience, abstract art and literature self-consciously open up the infinite possibilities of sensations.

Walter Benjamin in his essay "Experience" (1913) says that "there exists something other than experience," and for one who "knows experience and nothing else" will have "no inner relationship to anything other than the common and always already-out-of-date" (4). According to him, "[e]ach of our experiences has its content. We ourselves invest them with content by means of our own spirit—he who is thoughtless is satisfied with error" (4). According to Caygill, Benjamin questions Kant's notion that "there is a distinction between the subject and the object of the experience, and also that there can be no experience of the absolute" (Caygill 2). Caygill explains that Benjamin is of the view that "experience as reading is not divided between an active 'reader' (subject of experience) and a passive 'read' (object of experience). The 'read' is by no means a passive datum but makes as active a contribution as the 'reader' to the accomplishment of 'perception as reading" (Caygill 2). There is no given 'subject' to read as there are no given 'objects' to be read, and what there is, is reading and its infinite possibilities. There is a "double infinity": "the transcendental infinity of possible marks on a given surface (or perceptions within a given framework of possible experience) and the speculative infinity of possible bounded but infinite surfaces or frameworks of experience" (Caygill 4).

Andrew Benjamin and Charles Rice in their book *Walter Benjamin and the Architecture of Modernity* write that according to Benjamin in order to break the frames of given experience the adult has to regain the "prelapsarian language" of children (179). The child's perception is "not yet developed and structured into a system of correlations and reflections. The child's receptivity is therefore 'pure'" (A. Benjamin and Rice 180). In Benjamin's early city portraits of the 1920's, Andrew Benjamin and Charles Rice observe, "children don't live the 'protected' bourgeois life" of the adults:

> Whereas the adult's relationship with things is one of distant separation, condescension, superiority and dominance, the child is unpretentiously 'mingled' with them in a tender acquaintance, which represents a higher level of knowledge. . . . In order to achieve this redemptive level of experience the adult must become a stranger in the city and re-learn the 'childhood stage.' (A. Benjamin and Rice 182)

The child's relationship with "the world of things" is not mediated by experience; instead, it is a tactile closeness: "a knowledge of the object that does not proceed from detached observation through the sense of vision, but is sensorial and sensual. . ." (A. Benjamin and Rice 183).

Abstraction in painting, for instance, results from a conscious refusal to be figurative even up to its infinite possibilities. This is because any attempt to be figurative even in its ultimate abstract terms turns out to be a giving in to epistemology. The distrust of the constructs of the human provokes an exploration deep into the pure power of the colours and lines in painting. The abstract combination of the colours and the movement of the lines, bereft of all semantic references except the self-reference as colours and lines, enable perception to trace itself back to its origins in sensation. Thus, abstract art harbours a nostalgia for self-certifying foundations and origins. It continuously generates ideas, objects and experiences that fulfil all the conditions of the proper but do not yet have names. It is indetermination in approximation that goes beyond the conditions of human determination. It is a world of pure sensations, and the work of art is no longer the

expression or representation of lived experiences. Deleuze and Guattari write: "The work of art is a being of sensation and nothing else: it exists in itself" (164). Abstraction in art is not an attempt to undo an experience and capture the 'original' sensation prior to that particular experience, but an attempt to compose sensations elusive of experiences.

Experiences are sensations contextualised and comprehended in language, and so painters and poets have to surpass the world of given experiences in order to deliver the surprises of sensations. The medium of words makes it imperative for poets to contend with the very exit point of sensations to gain access to them. The world of sensations is the world of nonhuman indeterminations which lies at the source of all human determinations. Abstraction in art and poetry therefore coexists with the philosophical search for the realms of the real or the indeterminate. The search would, of necessity, take one to the base of human experience and to the concepts of the 'actual' and 'virtual,' as these concepts are explored by the philosophers Henri Bergson, Merleau-Ponty, Deleuze and Guattari.

In Henri Bergson the search for the 'virtual' goes to the state prior to the 'experience:' "It would be to seek experience at its source, or rather above that decisive *turn* where, taking a bias in the direction of our utility, it becomes properly *human* experience" (240-241; italics as in the original). If the conversion to human experience brings us to the 'actual,' the state prior to the conversion is the 'virtual.' Bergson takes the conversion to the 'actual' to be a diminishing:

> To obtain this conversion from the virtual to the actual it would be necessary, not to throw more light on the object, but on the contrary to obscure some of its aspects, to diminish it by the greater part of itself, so that the remainder, instead of being encased in its surroundings as a *thing*, should detach itself from them as a *picture*. (28; author's emphases)

It is the human action that diminishes the 'virtual' and detaches the 'actual' as a representation or a "*picture*." The 'actual' is not "reality as it appears to immediate intuition, but an adaptation of the real to the

interests of practice and to the exigencies of social life" (Bergson 239).

Bergson questions the method of philosophy that carves out objects and facts out of reality and says that philosophy has to get back to the pure intuition of reality:

> Pure intuition, external or internal, is that of an undivided continuity. We break up this continuity into elements laid side by side, which correspond in the one case to distinct *words*, in the other to independent *objects*. But just because we have thus broken the unity of our original intuition, we feel ourselves obliged to establish between the severed terms a bond which can only then be external and superadded. (Bergson 239; italics as in the original)

He takes empiricism and dogmatism to be the instances of the "external and superadded" bonds that philosophy has taken in the place of the "living unity, which was one with internal continuity," and writes that they can substitute only the "factitious unity of an empty diagram as lifeless as the parts which it holds together" (Bergson 239). Elizabeth Grosz says that for Bergson, intuition "restore[s] the complexity of undecidability to the real" (9): "intuition is an emergent and imprecise movement of simplicity that erupts by negating the old, resisting the temptations of intellect to understand the new in terms of the language and concepts of the old (and thus the durational in terms of the spatial)" (Grosz 8). With Bergson intuition emerges as a new method in philosophy that resists the habits of conceptual intellectual thought and restores the real in its virtual multiplicity distant from the actual.

Merleau-Ponty uses the words 'visible' and 'invisible' in relation to the 'actual' and 'virtual,' and suggests the interrogation of the 'visible' as a method to unveil the 'virtual' world of the 'invisible.' He says that the interrogation in philosophy is not a question that leads to a tacit understanding of the "Being," or a question that makes us realize that "I know that I know nothing," but "a true 'what do I know?'" (*Visible and the Invisible* 128). The question, "what do I know?" aims "at something, as it were a *question-knowing*, which by principle no statement or 'answer' can go beyond and which perhaps therefore is the proper mode of our relationship with Being,

as though it were the mute or reticent interlocutor of our questions" (*Visible and the Invisible* 129; italics as in the original). The term "*question-knowing*" pre-figures our "Being" within the grammar of the language who/which takes part in the 'meaningful' disclosure within the language and cannot be differentiated from ourselves/our questions as an 'answer,' or a distinct linguistic unit. The "mute or reticent interlocutor of our questions" is not beyond language and does not make "Being" the pre-linguistic, or the semiotic other (*Visible and the Invisible* 129). The question "what do I know?" can imply in it a set of other questions like "what is knowing?" "who am I?" "what is there?" and "what is the *there is*?" (*Visible and the Invisible* 129; author's emphasis). Merlau-Ponty writes:

> These questions call not for the exhibiting of something said which would put an end to them, but for the disclosure of a Being that is not posited because it has no need to be, because it is silently behind all our affirmations, negations, and even behind all formulated questions, not that it is a matter of forgetting them in its silence, not that it is a matter of imprisoning it in our chatter, but because philosophy is the reconversion of silence and speech into one another. . . . (*Visible and the Invisible* 129)

The questioning of the 'visible' unveils the 'virtually visible' or the 'invisible' which is pre-human: "[it] is the things themselves, from the depths of their silence..." (*Visible and the Invisible* 4). The interrogation brings the pre-human into the human and actualizes the virtual which cannot express itself.

Elaborating on his concept of the virtual that can be awakened out of the actual, Merleau-Ponty writes: "[t]he invisible of the visible . . . is neither *produced* by our psychophysical constitution, nor produced by our categorical equipment, but lifted from a *world* whose inner framework our categories, our constitution, our 'subjectivity' renders explicit. . ." (*Visible and the Invisible* 247-248; author's emphasis). Taking the views of Henri Michaux on Paul Klee, he writes in his essay "Eye and Mind:"

> sometimes Klee's colors seem to have been born slowly upon the canvas, to have emanated from some primordial ground, "exhaled

> at the right spot" . . . like a patina or a mold. Art is not construction, artifice, the meticulous relationship to a space and a world existing outside . . . it awakens powers dormant in ordinary vision, a secret of preexistence. (141-142)

Merleau-Ponty's view of the 'virtual' as veiled in the 'actual' goes against Bergson's idea of the virtual as distinct from the actual and lies at the source of human experience. While Bergson takes intuition as a mode to restore the virtual in its all multiplicities beyond the actual, Merleau-Ponty interrogates the actual in order to actualize the virtual.

In *What Is Philosophy?* Deleuze and Guattari take Bergson's view of the virtual which is different from the actual and is prior to experiences of the human, and develop a new idea of the virtual which is "no longer the chaotic virtual but rather virtuality that has become consistent, that has become an entity formed on a plane of immanence that sections the chaos" (156). Instead of the actualization of the virtual what we see in Deleuze and Guattari is a move from the actual to the virtual. The dissolution of the form of a figure (any instance of the figuration in words or in colours/lines) from the world of livid experiences takes it back to a point before its differentiation as a human construct. According to Deleuze the move from the actual to the virtual takes the figure back to its "diagram," in an attempt to preserve its multiplicity prior to the lived actualization, and as such it surpasses the givens of human interest or utility (*Francis Bacon* 70). It is a move to a plane of composition free from the determinants of meaning. The figure then becomes the Figure as it becomes imperceptible to the given modes of representation. It is not a relapse into anything chaotic but an approximation to the indeterminate world of sensations. Deleuze and Guattari say: "The virtual is no longer the chaotic virtual but rather virtuality that has become consistent, that has become an entity formed on a plane of immanence that sections the chaos" and they call it "the Event, or the part that eludes its own actualization in everything that happens" (156). To an artist it is a world of light, shadows, and colours, and to a poet it is a world of words: art and poetry become the compositions of sensations or the composing of sensations.

Art and poetry reverse the common logic of science which is based on the move from the virtual to actual, and it accounts for the silences and elisions that distinguish it from science. While science limits the chaos of the virtual by tracing factual points of reference, art and poetry keep the infinite invariability of the virtual within, what Deleuze would call, a "chaosmos:" "movements without subjects, roles without actors" (*Francis Bacon* 219). Therefore the 'reality' of science is different from the 'real' of art and poetry:

> The event is not the state of affairs. It is actualized in a state of affairs, in a body, in a lived, but it has a shadowy and secret part that is continually subtracted from or added to its actualization: in contrast with the state of affairs, it neither begins nor ends but has gained or kept the infinite movement to which it gives consistency. It is the virtual that is distinct from the actual, but a virtual that is no longer chaotic, that has become consistent or real on the plane of immanence that wrests it from the chaos—it is a virtual that is real without being actual.... (Deleuze and Guattari 156)

The 'real' is not the 'actual', but at the same time it is not the 'virtual.' It is something that goes out of the 'actual' towards the 'virtual' and at the same time comes out of the 'virtual' towards the 'actual.' It is, therefore, the chaotic that is becoming consistent on a plane of pure immanence, and as such the real appears only as sparks of surprises.

In *Difference and Repetition* Deleuze writes: "The theory of thought is like painting: it needs that revolution which took art from representation to abstraction. This is the aim of a theory of thought without image" (276). What Deleuze aims to take from painting to philosophy is what practices of abstraction brings to contemporary art and poetry. Abstraction in art and poetry attempt to question the given meanings of the human in order to de-contextualize language from 'human' experiences. In its subliminal semantic silences, abstract art and literature try to compose sensations in approximation to the pre-linguistic world of body and its sensations. The absolute dissolution of phenomenal realty in the works of Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee, for instance, denote their absolute distrust of the ability of experience to cipher subjective sensations. Their works show a drastic

move towards the sovereignty of sensations in an attempt to find an alternative imaginative world equivalent to the world of experience. In his *Black Lines* (1913) Kandinsky uses colours and patterns with purely private and inexpressible associations. The multicoloured patches that dominate the surface are criss-crossed with aimless lines that elude any definite form. These fortuitous strokes and blotches evolve out of instant sensations but, at the same time, the way the lines defy chaos and move in the direction of a range of mountains betray the intrusion of the world of experience. Abstraction here can be seen as a postexperience attempt to plunge directly into the world of sensations consciously trying to ward off the phenomenal world of experience that provoked the artist.

The interrogation of the human does not bring us to the world of the nonhuman as it is beyond meaning but shows how words denude themselves and thereby approximate themselves to the indeterminate. Deleuze and Guattari demonstrate how the writers make the standard language disintegrate to the indeterminate:

> The writer uses words, but by creating a syntax that makes them pass into sensation that makes the standard language stammer, tremble, cry, or even sing: this is the style, the "tone," the language of sensations, or the foreign language within language that summons forth a people to come, "Oh, people of old Catawba," "Oh, people of Yoknapatawpha." (176)

The words and expressions from the various dialects, native/tribal languages, parody, neologism, and archaism that pervade abstract poetry manifest the poet's attempt to distinguish the words in their own linguistic ontology and not reduce them to their extra-linguistic/ semantic referents. Wallace Stevens (1879-1955), an American modernist poet, explores the dynamic interplay of experience and sensation in his poem, "Earthy Anecdote" (1918). As the title signifies the poem comes as a short narrative of an incident. The verbs in the past mark an action completed in the past and is perceived in the present. The action happened across the vast expanse of Oklahoma. The first stanza states the anecdote succinctly: "Every time the bucks went clattering / Over Oklahoma / A firecat bristled in the way"

(Stevens 3). It was every time the "bucks" went *clattering* that a "firecat" stood excited ("bristled") in their way, or it was the *clattering* of "bucks" that excited the "firecat." While the word 'buck' clatters with meanings (according to *OED* the word means "[t]he male of various animals," "a dandy," and "[a] male American Indian; a black male, a male Australian Aborigine. Now regarded as *offensive*."), the word 'firecat' seems to be meaningless as it is a neologism of Stevens. The naive and semantically silent "firecat" takes heads-on the clattering "bucks" making them sporadically silent and forcing them to take differing turns in meaning. The poem seems to interrogate the absoluteness of meaning (a product of experience), and demonstrates the semantic end of the semiotic expressions (sensations). The encounter between the bucks and the firecat happens more on the textual surface of the poem than in any realm of referential reality. As a neologism, the 'meaningless' firecat is not to order the bucks in meaning but to question the 'clatter' of human meanings and to turn the words back to their sonic silence (words distanced from their meanings). The phrase "bucks went clattering" of the first and second stanza becomes "bucks clattered" in the fourth stanza, and the change of the syntax marks the ultimate sonic dissolution of the meaning as the expression is bereft of any narrative plot implied in the phrase "bucks went clattering." At the same time the neologistic and meaningless expression the "firecat bristled" of the first stanza acquires a clear narrative potential towards the end of the poem:

> The firecat went leaping,
> To the right, to the left,
> And
> Bristled in the way. (Stevens 3)

At last, the 'story' ends as the "firecat" loses its sensual promptness ("closed his bright eyes") and slumbers ("slept"), or habitualizing itself to a meaningful 'buck.'

Abstraction in art and poetry enfolds a world of shades and colours or a world of words that unfolds a world of Deleuzian 'percepts' and 'affects' prior to the human perception and affection. The poem is not a representation of the experiences of the poet but

an interrogation of the semantic and the syntactic frames that form and define meaningful experiences. The interrogation helps to create the proximate of primal sensations in art and literature that are yet to converge on a particular linguistic self. Abstraction and the subsequent dissolution of meaning make poems rather like diagrams that expose the possibilities of the real but never the real itself. The real loses its suchness in experience, as every experience is human in its inevitable contextual comprehension in language. Art or poetry, therefore, becomes a medium that aesthetically enables one to interrogate the experience and become approximate to the real. The real that the art opens up is not an appendage to any particular bygone experience, and at the same time it is also resistant of any newer experience: it is sensation elusive of experience and it constitutes the aesthetic of abstraction.

References

Benjamin, A., & Rice, C. (Eds.). (2009). *Walter Benjamin and the architecture of modernity*. Re.

Benjamin, W. (1996). *Selected writings* (M. Bullock & M. W. Jennings, Eds.; Vol. 1). Belknap Press.

Bergson, H. (1911). *Matter and memory* (N. M. Paul & W. S. Palmer, Trans.). Allen.

Caygill, H. (1998). *Walter Benjamin: The colour of experience*. Routledge.

Colebrook, C. (2002). *Gilles Deleuze*. Routledge.

Deleuze, G. (1994). *Difference and repetition* (P. Patton, Trans.). Columbia University Press.

Deleuze, G. (2005). *Francis Bacon: The logic of sensation* (D. W. Smith, Trans.). Continuum.

Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1994). *What is philosophy?* (H. Tomlinson & G. Burchell, Trans.). Columbia University Press.

Grosz, E. (2005). Bergson, Deleuze and the becoming of unbecoming. *Parallax, 11*(2), 4-13.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (1996). Eye and mind. In G. A. Johnson (Ed.), *The Merleau-Ponty aesthetics reader: Philosophy and painting* (M. B. Smith, Trans., pp. 121-149). Northwestern University Press. (Original work published 1993)

Merleau-Ponty, M. (1968). *The visible and the invisible* (A. Lingis, Trans.; C. Lefort, Ed.). Northwestern University Press.

Stevens, Wallace. (1954). *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*. Knopf.

Dr Denis Joseph Anatty Olakkengil
Associate Professor of English
Sri. C. Achutha Menon Government College
Thrissur, Kerala, India
Pin: 680014
Ph: +91 9447610162
Email: djanatty@gmail.com
ORCID: 0009-0000-3662-3742
&
Sijo Varghese C
Professor of English
Govt. Polytechnic College, Kunnamkulam
Thrissur, Kerala, India
PIN: 680 523
Ph: +91 9495636705
Email: sijovarghese079@gmail.com
ORCID: 0009-0001-6399-5960