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Aesthetic Form and Black Lives Matter**

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Krisis 41 (2): 51-52.

DOI

10.21827/krisis.41.2.38238

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After 400 years of brutality and oppression, what finally made possible for a majority of American citizens the realization that some large portion of our fellow citizens continues to be systematically diminished and discriminated against? One answer is Netflix and HBO, along with the whole suite of online viewing platforms that deliver visual narratives.

By summer 2020 there was a certain fatigue – after months of quarantine viewing – and thus an appetite for more compelling drama. More pointedly – and here is where the role of aesthetic form becomes prominent – there was the preparation provided over the last several years by the expansion of a relatively new form of visual narrative, of the miniseries and multi-season series formats. Contemporary viewers are thus afforded, via these novel forms of consuming narrative, a more extended, nuanced, and thus deeper involvement with whatever dramas unfold. We thereby became, by means of our narrative imaginations having been reformatted and extended, more invested in the significance of things and perhaps thereby more attentive. These formats cultivated in us a hunger for an ever-greater commitment to extended drama, just like that which Aristotle defined as the enactment of the meaning of what human beings do.

Regardless of how explicit the video evidence of black people being dehumanized and killed, we have only our imaginations to rely on to tell us the meaning of, and allow us to sympathize with, the horrors that we witness. However well-meaning all those Sidney Poitier films, or the poignancy of Norman Rockwell's paintings of integration, whatever sympathy they elicit seems not to have sufficiently prompted the imaginations of white people; they did not go deep enough within the souls of white folk to rouse them very far up. So too the relentlessness of the video evidence of violence against blacks, the CNN format of the 24-hour repetition compulsion of horror, which often leaves us more numb than awakened. Evidence, sadly, might prove insufficient fuel for the imagination.

We can only imagine ourselves, unfortunately, into the humanity of our fellow citizens – as well as our own (which remains an ongoing task for each of us) – and I'm suggesting that what might have played a critical role in the retrofitting of the white imagination such that it could take in the reality of 'I can't breathe,' is that black lives can come to matter only if the white imagination is prepared to see them and to admit it. Other commentators on race relations, far wiser, believed that love would be the means for preparing the expansion of the imagination. But, in the imagination, love – at least in regard to race – has shown itself to be as feckless as evidence.

In the face of the ongoing insufficiency of love, the multi-season, multi-episode form of visual narrative helped make possible what love has been thus far incapable of. It's as if the accumulation, finally, of so many previous seasons of violence against blacks, the episodes of Emmett Till, Rodney King, Oscar Grant, Trayvon Martin, Sandra Bland, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Michael Brown, Freddie Gray, Breonna Taylor, et al., culminated in the season finale George Floyd. Binge-watching helped prepare the imagination to

realize Floyd's murder as the culmination of too many episodes and seasons of brutality. I don't in any way mean to equate these horrific events and murders with entertainment, but I do believe that what made it possible only now for white America to see the meaning of them is that they appeared to happen – in the imagination – according to the aesthetic forms by which we now mostly consume visual dramas. (Note the curiosity that the broadcast of *Roots* in 1977 was one of the very first miniseries).

Human actions become meaningful when the imagination has the means and forms to make them appear so. Aristotle explains in his *Poetics* that art is superior to history because the latter, regardless how true, remains too close to events for their significance to be experienced. History thereby offers precious little opening for us to imaginatively take in and feel the drama of events. It's as if we couldn't fully imagine the extent of the system of tragedy until we had repeatedly witnessed an unending miniseries of tragedies. Consider again the prophecy of Gil Scott-Heron's *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised*; the revolution that consists of the realization of systemic racism was indeed televised, but only after television was revised to afford the appearance of a deeper and broader drama. Seeing exactly what continues to happen did not suffice to elicit the desire for change. We can't know the meaning of the reality we inhabit until it appears as a form we can imagine it in. And only then, perhaps, might we begin to imagine it otherwise.

Biography

Tom Huhn is the chair of the Art History and BFA Visual & Critical Studies Departments at the School of Visual Arts in New York City. He received a PhD in Philosophy from Boston University, and has been a visiting professor at Yale University and the University of Graz, Austria. His books include: *Imitation and Society: The Persistence of Mimesis in the Aesthetics of Burke, Hogarth, and Kant*; *The Cambridge Companion to Adorno*; *The Wake of Art: Criticism, Philosophy, and the Ends of Taste*; and *The Semblance of Subjectivity: Essays in Adorno's Aesthetic Theory*. His publications include: *New German Critique*, *Art & Text*, *Oxford Art Journal*, *British Journal of Aesthetics*, *Art Criticism*, *Telos*, *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, *Oxford Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, *Art Book*, *Art in America*. Huhn has been a Getty Scholar and Fulbright Scholar. Huhn's curatorial works include: «Ornament and Landscape,» at Apex Gallery; «Still Missing: Beauty Absent Social Life,» at the Visual Arts Museum and Westport Arts Center; «Between Picture and Viewer: The Image in Contemporary Painting» at the Visual Arts Gallery, NYC.