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Guilty Wonder. An Exploration of the Aesthetic, Affective, and Political Implications of the Wondering Gaze¹

Abstract

Wonder's affective neutrality and perceptive *firstness* have led to its connotation with innocence and *naïveté*. This paper challenges the perception that wonder is a value-free stimulus. Instead, it explores wonder's potential to unveil, expose and denude—thus playing on the difference between norm and exception. Wonder's history is loaded with othering's cruelty, the spectacularization of difference, and the libidinous entanglement of voyeurism, leading to the question, to what extent wonder is comprised of guilt? Subsequently, this paper supplements the notion of guilt with a differentiated account of indebtedness, following the hypothesis that wonder can also be conceptualized as a politically mobilizing affect if taken seriously.

Keywords

Curatorial Studies, Fascist Continuities, Privilege, Saidyia Hartman, Walter Benjamin

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The wonder that the things we experience are “still” possible in the twentieth century is not philosophical. It does not stand at the beginning of a realization, unless the idea of history from which it originates cannot be held.

Benjamin 1980, I.2:697, trans. J.B.²

While reading Walter Benjamin's treatise *On the Concept of History* (1940), I stumbled upon his condemnation of those wondering about fascism. I paused to think about his specific critique of the wonder that fascism evoked for some people already 80 years ago. Caught out by his critique, I realized that I, too, had sometimes found myself in this state of wonder about the increasing number of anti-Semitic and racially motivated attacks in Germany over the last years. Reading Benjamin thus opened up a way to challenge some problematic undertones of my thinking.

By taking my wonder about wonder as a point of advantage, this text explores the guilty elements and downsides of wonder. I will first provide a quick history of the concept of wonder and how its role was conceptualized regarding aesthetic and epistemic processes. Then, I will lay out my research question: to what extent is wonder comprised of guilt? I will sketch normative presumptions, normalizing practices of othering, and wonder as

² „Das Staunen darüber, daß die Dinge, die wir erleben, im zwanzigsten Jahrhundert noch möglich sind, ist *kein* philosophisches. Es steht nicht am Anfang einer Erkenntnis, es sei denn der, daß die Vorstellung von Geschichte aus der es stammt, nicht zu halten ist“ (Benjamin 1980, I.2:697). Although the term *Stauen* is commonly translated to English as *amazement*, I chose to translate it as *wonder*, as I am interested in the affective complex of wondering including cognitive and evaluative processes. Benjamin's denial of it being non-philosophical indirectly hints at the possibility of misunderstanding the bespoken affect as triggering knowledge. Thus, as I will show, what kind of wonder is at stake in this quote is not clearly determined from the outset.

Besides *wonder*, the second possible translation of *Stauen* would have been *astonishment*, as Benjamin is very interested in the etymological relation of *stauen* to *stauen* (Benjamin 1977, II.1:531) also to be found in *astonishment*. I will come back to this notion later in this essay. While *wondering* is etymologically derivable from Proto-Germanic *wundra*, *astonishment* is traceable to similar roots as *stauen*: from Proto-Germanic *stunona* (“to sound, crash, bang, groan”) or also from Proto-Indo-European: *(s)ten-, *(s)ton- (to thunder, roar, groan), which is equivalent to *a-stun* (Seebold 2002, 277). Most English Dictionaries suggest synonymous uses for *astonishment*, *amazement* and *wonder*, with *wonder* being the only notion bearing reflective moments, see for instance (Johnson 1755).

a privilege. Subsequently, the notion of guilt will be supplemented by a differentiated account of indebtedness, following the hypothesis that wonder can also be conceptualized as a politically mobilizing affect if taken seriously.

Although “wonder” is an aesthetic emotion,³ there is a significant line of research that understands wonder as an “epistemic emotion” (Candiotta 2019), with “its epistemic function [being] [...] the one of questioning triggered by the recognition of a problem” (ibidem, 853). The question, whether wonder plays a valuable role in epistemic processes or forestalls it, is part of a philosophical struggle that is as long as philosophy itself: for Plato (1982, 155d) and Aristotle (Aristotle, 1989, 13 [982b]), wonder primed the beginning of philosophic revelation. In contrast, due to the dangers of excessive wondering,⁴ and of falling appraise to the spectacle, Descartes opted for its banning (Descartes 2010, 22, §76).

Wonder as an epistemic emotion can be differentiated from wonder as an aesthetic emotion in line with Kant’s distinction between theoretic cognition and aesthetic judgment: “[T]heoretical cognition abstracts from the particulars of individual phenomena. In contrast, aesthetic judgments are in the end [...] about individual objects, and they try to do justice to subtle nuances in appearance rather than abstract from these individualizing nuances” (Menninghaus et al. 2019, 175). As an epistemic emotion, wonder confuses the categories and irritates us, driving us to learn more about what we wonder about. Wonder as an aesthetic emotion denotes the capability to see between the categories of rational thinking, which is also why Adorno takes wonder to be a vital feature against instrumental reason (Adorno 1970, 7:192).⁵

Thus, we can sketch two main traditions of interpreting wonder:⁶ wonder as stimuli, initiating scientific curiosity, and wonder as mere amazement, for which “ignorance” is not escaped but instead accepted for the sake of the spectacle.⁷ Both interpretations build similarly on wonder’s aesthetic

³ For wonder as *the* aesthetic emotion, see: Fingerhut and Prinz 2018. For a discussion of aesthetic emotions in general, see Menninghaus *et al.* 2019 and Keltner and Haidt 2003.

⁴ Descartes speaks of wonder (fr.: étonnement) as an excess of admiration (fr.: admiration).

⁵ In “Aesthetica” (Baumgarten 2007 [1750]) dedicated an entire chapter to aesthetic wonder: “The art of preserving the new and miraculous in beautiful thoughts, and of awakening curiosity and wonder is called aesthetic thaumaturgy.” For critical discussion, see Menke 2003.

⁶ For an overview of the history of wonder, see: Matuschek 2011 and Gess 2017.

⁷ Gallagher et al. distinguish wonder from awe, with the latter denoting “a direct and initial experience or feeling when faced with something amazing, incomprehensible, or

elements, e.g., changes of perception, and its affective elements, as it changes our mood and affective relation towards the object. Wonder then is a means to focus, to steer attention, to perceive something, yet it does not contain value judgments: “wondering at x doesn’t involve any value-judgment on x; it doesn’t prompt one to seek x or to avoid it, all it involves is curiosity about x, a desire to know more about it” (Descartes 2010, 20, §71). Common denominator of both strands is that wonder touches upon the borders of one’s knowledge by *perceiving* something new and being in any way *affected* by it.

From this quick survey of different conceptions of wonder, wonder appears to be a relatively neutral affect, as no emotions (like love, hate, disgust) come into play besides a (slight) shock. The affective neutrality and perceptive *firstness* are why wonder has the connotation of innocence, maybe *naïveté*. However, in this paper, I want to challenge the perception that wonder is only the start, a stimulus, and besides that value-free: Benjamin’s wonder does *not* stand at the beginning of a cognition process or a philosophical questioning. Thus, it follows, there is a wonder at the end of something, or it is not philosophical, or, of course, both. I suggest it is a gazing wonder, staring, therefore exposing the fragile border between norm and exception. This text aims at exploring the wonder Benjamin gestured at, specifically wonder’s potential to unveil, expose and denude—thus encompassing elements of violence and vulnerability, practices of othering, habits of overseeing. Consequently, this paper explores my very own presumptions and privileges exposed when I wonder about that which Benjamin condemned eighty years ago.

The first part of this text concentrates negatively on dimensions of guilt in wonder, e.g., wonder at the end of the possibility to know, complicit with the victor’s narrative, and thus willing and able to ignore or deny constant structural oppression. The second part of this text focuses on the possibility of wonder being the turning moment between knowing and not-knowing, between perception and callousness, constructing a politically constructive conception of guilt.

sublime” (Gallagher et al. 2015, 6). Wonder, then, denotes “a reflective experience motivated when one is unable to put things into a familiar conceptual framework—leading to open questions rather than conclusions” (Gallagher et al. 2015, 6). For this paper, no differentiation between both dimensions of wonder shall be made, as both the inhibiting as well as the igniting dimension of wondering are at work in Benjamin’s denunciation: Wonder exposes not only the object wondered at, but also the wondering person and the historical structures that crafted the object of wonder as the *exception* to the rule, the *extraordinary* in midst of *ordinariness*.

1. Wonder as Privilege

According to Benjamin, wondering about fascism does not uncover fascism but rather exposes those wondering. He accuses them of believing in an “idea of history,” which has normalized “progress” and made fascism into a regression to be wondered at: it reveals the wondering person’s assumptions about the world, based on which a distinction between the normal and the exceptional is made (Benjamin 1980, I.2:697). Benjamin opposes the view in which a “state of emergency” is the exception. Instead, he asks his readers to perform a mental twist: for as long as a society was built on or integrated oppressing structures (which is forever, in Benjamin’s view), what feels like a state of emergency had to be endured by those oppressed: “The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception but the rule” (Benjamin 1980, I.2:697).

Two opposing conceptions of history are at work: “on the one hand, the cosy ‘progressive’ doctrine, for which historical progress, the development of societies towards more democracy, freedom or peace is the norm, and, on the other, the one [...] which takes as its standpoint the tradition of the oppressed for whom the norm or rule of history is the oppression, barbarism and violence of the victors” (Löwy 2005, 58). Two subsequent ways of relating to fascism emerge. For those believing in constant progress, fascism “is an exception to the norm of progress, an inexplicable ‘regression,’ a parenthesis in the onward march of humanity” (ibidem, 58). For those being on the other side of history, fascism is only the “most recent and brutal expression of the ‘permanent state of emergency’ that is the history of class oppression” (ibidem, 58). As Hartman puts it, the “intransigence of racism” and its “antipathy and abjection naturalized in *Plessy v. Ferguson*” build “an amazing continuity belied the hypostatized discontinuities and epochal shifts installed by categories like slavery and freedom” (Hartman 1997, 7).

Wondering implies a privileged position of being at a temporal or spatial distance to whatever we wonder about.⁸ Distance is a core feature of wondering, but also a reason for it being a “guilty pleasure”: to favor distance as the only mode of observation means to join in into an outdated conception of objectivity, which strips vision off from the seeing body, passions, and interests: “The eyes have been used to signify a perverse capacity—honed to

⁸ “Wonder creates the distance from which only reality can become the object of observation and, on the other hand, man can become the observer” (Matuschek 2011, 8, trans. J.B.).

perfection in the history of science tied to militarism, capitalism, colonialism, and male supremacy—to distance the knowing subject from everybody and everything in the interests of unfettered power” (Haraway 1988, 581). It is a distance that divides the seeing eye from its position in the world. Thus, to connect wonder with distance is, on the one hand, valid, as it leaves you for a short moment detached from your other surroundings. On the other hand, it is not valid, as wonder sucks you in, it intensifies the relation with the object, it *attracts* you. To strip away wonder from its alluring, non-rational side and reduce it to mere observation means contributing to a masculinist perception of objectivist observation. It is a privilege to gain distance from the perceived object, especially when the object is a constant means of oppression.⁹

Hartman similarly pointed to this affective entanglement of vision when she claims, the “act of ‘witnessing’[is] a kind of looking no less entangled with the wielding of power and the extraction of enjoyment” (Hartman 1997, 22). By spelling out the libidinous dimensions of witnessing, the problematic dimension of spectacularism also at work in the act of wondering surfaces: “Are we witnesses who confirm the truth of what happened in the face of the world-destroying capacities of pain, the distortions of torture, the sheer unrepresentability of terror, and the repression of the dominant? Or are we voyeurs fascinated with and repelled by exhibitions of terror and suffering?” (Hartman 1997, 4-5). Hartman shows that the witnessing gaze is not neutral and discernible from the situation but rather shares an affective investment in the situation. Witnessing is not mere observation, as it involves your entanglement in a situation where your observations matter.

A third problem related to the strict division between seeing the subject and the perceived object becomes apparent when looking at the common proximation of wonder and the feeling of the sublime.¹⁰ Attempting to grasp the feeling of being overwhelmed at the sight of nature, Kant sketched the concept of the sublime (Kant 1990, 164). Adorno paraphrased: “[...] the high mountains speak as images of a space freed from the shackles of constraint and restriction and of possible participation in it, not by oppressing it” (Adorno 1970, 297). “Nature” reveals itself as an agent, but what it is freed from is *my* instrumental gaze in which *I* perceive *it* as a mere resource.

⁹ Derrida (2001, 113-114) builds on Levinas’ critique of the visual metaphor in Greco-Christian philosophy. Here, similarly to Haraway, he isolates the cruel relationship between the claim to objectivity and possessive strivings.

¹⁰ See: Matuschek 2011, 42-44, and Menninghaus *et al.* 2019.

Again, the reciprocity of wonder becomes apparent, and, at this point, problematic. I seem to wonder at nature's power, yet my perception is freed from the constraints and one-dimensionality of instrumental thinking.

Adorno, with Kant against Kant, explicitly criticized modern perception for categorizing the perceived in too general categories, therefore losing sight of that in-between, the small, the deviant: "The more densely people have spun a categorial web around what is other than their subjective mind set, the more have they disaccustomed themselves to *the wonder of that other* and deceived themselves with a supposedly growing familiarity of what is foreign" (Adorno 1970, 7:192; Emph. J.B.). Adorno gestures at wondering being the very capacity of perceiving that which does not fit into familiar categories, for instance, nature as a complex, living multitude of agents that is by no means a mere resource. To take the feeling of sublimity seriously means not only to shudder at the sight of high mountains but also to shudder at any little rock lying in your way. It means to feel yourself as a part of "nature," and not only attend the spectacle from a safe distance and then turn away. In this case, as indicated, safe distance denotes the privilege to see with a "gaze from nowhere" (Haraway 1988, 581), but not to get involved with the situation and interrogate your position in it.

2. Othering, Exhibiting, and Exposure

Wonder is not only a perception but also an action: the *staring* moment is inextricable from the *reflecting* moment, as both are intertwined in one *act* that not only perceives but, again, can be perceived. Although my reaction is no action in an emphatic sense (as I might not have the chance to act otherwise in the very moment of wondering, see: Makropoulos 1989, 23), it is perceivable and thus constitutes an interaction with the world. Additionally, my wonder manifests what I perceive as usual and what is not. It thus reveals the normativity of perception: the compromise of being seen and judged as "different."

Wondering involves elements of Othering (Brons 2015) since a difference is inserted between the subject and object in the wondering act of the person who wonders about something. "An analysis of the other-not-me (or of oneself) does not occur without the intervention of the me (or of one's 'higher' self), and the division between the observer and the observed. The search for meaning will always arrive at a meaning through I" (Minh-Ha 1989, 70). As Mihn-Ha shows, perceiving something as Other works only

while constituting an “I.” What is therefore reproduced in terms of “truth, reality, and otherness” cannot reach the irreducible presence of that which is perceived but always needs to cross the chokepoint of the “intervening me.”

Wondering means to differentiate between the “familiar” and the “strange”: This becomes particularly evident with the history of exhibition-making when the exhibition of looted art from imperial and colonial endeavors was institutionalized in the *Cabinets of Wonders*. Cabinets of Wonders and similarly world fairs sought to perpetuate the difference between “civilized” and “barbaric” peoples. The concept of world fairs can even stand paradigmatically for the exoticization- and othering-practices of Western colonial society (Wyss 2010; Lonetree 2012; Brons 2015). That these practices are still operative is shown in the ongoing debate about the Humboldt-Forum, Berlin:

As already was the case during those times when ‘exotic curiosities’ were displayed in the ‘cabinets of wonders’ belonging to the Princes of Brandenburg and the Prussian Kings, the Berlin Palace-Humboldt Forum will apparently serve the purpose of developing a Prussian-German-European identity. This concern is in fact directly opposed to the aim of promoting a culture of equality in the migration society and is being pursued to the detriment of others. The supposed ‘stranger’ and ‘other’ will be constructed with the help of the often centuries-old objects from all over the world, and the extensive collection of European art on Berlin’s Museum Island will be put to the side. In this way, Europe will be constructed as the superior norm.¹¹

Colonial exhibitions, and their practices of collecting and displaying “exotic” findings, inextricably bind the concept of wondering, understood as a particular strategy, to a power nexus in which Western Europeans impose their ways of belief by exposing the other.

To move on from this colonial mode of exhibiting and invent other possibilities for art intervening in politically charged circumstances, Ivana Bago and Antonia Majača created an alternative exhibition format, setting *Exposure* as a new leitmotif. The irreducible grammatical openness of the terminus *exposure* precisely encompasses the two-fold character of the notion of wonder, as it denotes both the event causing wonder and the reaction in the subject:¹² “Exposures opens itself up above all as a point for the gathering together and mutual empowerment of projects that resist the imperative of

¹¹ In: “Stop the Planned Construction of the Humboldt Forum in the Berlin Palace!”, No Humboldt 21!, 3 June 2013, [online] www.no-humboldt21.de/resolution/english.

¹² See Hentschel and Krasmann 2020.

static representation and whose vision is directed to the generation of new models of joint action and the transformative effect on all who become a part of the project, whether as authors, participants, curators, organizers or the publics” (Bago and Majača 2010, 85).

The term exposure draws together contradictory, but often simultaneously occurring dimensions of perception also at stake in the act of wondering: it stands on the one hand for agent-centered intentional actions directed towards an object such as uncovering [*Enthüllung*], disrobing [*Entblößung*], unmasking [*Bloßstellen*], exhibiting [*Ausstellen*], excavating [*Offen- and Freilegen*] or even threatening [*gefährden*] (Willmann and Messinger 1993, 361). On the other hand, exposure refers to an experience in the subject, such as being exposed, denuded, or exhibited. Exposure can be an event and a subjective state simultaneously; it can refer to the exposed object or the exhibiting subject.

Exposure, with the implied reflectivity and reciprocity, can help to redefine the practice of exhibition-making and to transgress the imperial spectacularity and paternalistic gestures in exhibition-making: “Rather than exoticizing Bosnia Herzegovina as this post-conflict space, we decided to invite colleagues working in other contexts, with the focus on Europe, to meet in Bosnia Herzegovina, and talk about the issues that dominate the West-European perception of the Balkans, but were hardly endemic to the region” (Majača and Bago 2020, 62).

The curators used long-term, locally anchored practices to connect different, already existing projects with one another, thus seeking a dialogue between groups in which people prepared to show themselves as vulnerable. In this way, the curators aimed to transform formats intended to showcase contemporary art exhibitions into platforms to form new communities and alliances.

Moving away from reproducing stereotypical differences between the self and other challenges the traditional, modern exhibition setting and its normative account on what counts as (Western) art: “Some of the works that we have shown could even be described as ‘bad art’ by some generic standards of curatorial judgment, some of them were only half-developed, some bordering kitsch. But it is exactly this disobedience towards the idea of a curator as the confident, omniscient arbiter of value that is in itself a form of exposure” (Majača and Bago 2020, 70).

3. Wonder as a Break

The privilege of a safe distance conceptualized in visual terms in the section above can as well be construed in temporal terms. Then, guilty wonder is not pointing at the privilege of a *safe distance* but a lack of historical consciousness. This point is emphasized by Hartman's notion of a faux "amazing continuity" which can only be upheld if categories of "freedom" and "slavery" remain valid as clear-cut historical periods: "The abolition of chattel slavery and the emergence of man, however laudable, long-awaited, and cherished, fail to yield such absolute distinctions; instead fleeting, disabled, and short-lived practices stand for freedom and its failure" (Hartman 1997, 13). Similarly, Benjamin criticizes the Left for their libertarian arrogance when they work on abstracted notions of freedom and thereby dismiss fascism's "intimate relation with contemporary industrial-capitalist society": "For Social Democracy, Fascism was a vestige of the past; it was anachronistic and pre-modern. In his writings of the 1920s, Karl Kautsky explained that Fascism was possible only in a semi-agrarian country like Italy, but could never prevail in a modern, industrialized nation like Germany" (Löwy 2005, 59). Opposing this view, Benjamin denotes fascism to be "deeply rooted in modern industrial and technical 'progress' and was, ultimately, possible *only* in the twentieth century" (ibidem, 59). Ephemerality, in addition to distance, is another reason why wonder seems to be guilty for Benjamin, for in the moment of wonder, we are disconnected from history and left in a state of unknowingness.

This wonder is not about the innocent amazement of a child who sees something *for the first time*, asks questions, and receives explanations. Instead, the sacrifice of the possibility of knowledge to the belief in progress feeds Benjamin's guilty wonder. It describes the danger of wonder without history, which is not at the beginning of knowledge or politically catalyzing but is the expression of a locked-in attitude. This wonder cannot be translated into political action because it perceives structures as isolated and loses the understanding of deeper connections and contexts.

Nevertheless, in this ephemerality, wonder's absolute dedication to the *Augenblick*, Benjamin himself envisions a positive potential. Written three years before the *Theses on the Concept of History*, Benjamin described another image that sheds light on a more optimistic relation between wonder, revelation, and political action.¹³ Here, wonder offers a moment to pause,

¹³ Die Stauung im realen Lebensfluß, der Augenblick, da sein Ablauf zum Stehen kommt, macht sich als Rückflut fühlbar: das Staunen ist diese Rückflut. Die Dialektik im

a moment in which the flow of life comes to a halt, and time begins swelling. Wonder then can be perceived as a metaphorical backlog; it is the heightened threshold of perception, the water flooding the surrounded areas. As he narrates further, wonder focuses on the “dialectics of standstill,” the micromovement of a forth and back that only oneself can feel. As indicated in the song, the fugitivity of a moment (in which the wave breaks at your foot) shall not be prolonged, and it cannot be extended. It is only a moment, and it will be gone as soon as you realized it was there. However, it would be a mistake to withdraw your foot from this zone of possible exposure, as then, the possibility of wonder would be gone for good. Remain open, this verse seems to say, and close to the movement of the world.

However, the third part of the quote, again, foreshadows some of the dark sides of wonder also pointed out in this text: “If the stream of things breaks at the rock of wonder, there is no difference between human life, and a word. In the eternal theatre, both are only the wave’s crest” (Benjamin 1977, II.1:531). In the moment of wonder, our affective state is in high vigilance. It is the bodily reaction to perceiving something new. We are at the disposal of the situation, yet it can be a word and a human life in danger that similarly affects or does not affect us. Benjamin’s pessimistic account of how wonder can mobilize people may thus seem realistic. We may wonder about cruelty and forget about it again. We may wonder about cruelty and stay attuned to it as long as it is spectacular. We may wonder about cruelty and just get used to it, losing the *first-ness* of a situation that should always remind us: we shall never get used to any form of oppression.

4. Between Vulnerability and Capability

Ahmed connotes wonder positively, as it is *the* affect able to break the slick surface of the ordinary, thus conceptualizing a different account between wonder and history: “I would suggest that wonder allows us to see the surfaces of the world as made, and as such wonder opens up rather than sus-

Stillstand ist sein eigentlicher Gegenstand. Es ist der Fels, von dem herab der Blick in jenen Strom der Dinge sich senkt, von dem sie in der Stadt Jehoo, die immer voll ist, und wo niemand bleibt, ein Lied wissen, welches anfängt mit: Beharre nicht auf der Welle, / Die sich an deinem Fuß bricht, solange er / Im Wasser steht, werden sich / Neue Wellen an ihm brechen. Wenn aber der Strom der Dinge an diesem Fels des Staunens sich bricht, so ist kein Unterschied zwischen einem Menschenleben und einem Wort. Beide sind im ewigen Theater nur der Kamm der Welle (Benjamin 1977, II.1:531).

pends historicity. History is what is concealed by the transformation of the world of the ordinary, into something already familiar, or recognizable" (Ahmed 2014, 179). Ahmed conceptualizes wonder as an aesthetic and affective feeling, as "wonder expands our field of vision and touch" (ibidem, 169), and as a condition for social relation: "Wonder is the precondition of the exposure of the subject to the world: we wonder when we are moved by that, which we face" (ibidem, 179).

For Ahmed, wonder is the point of advantage for political mobilization: "Wonder is what brought me to feminism; what gave me the capacity to name myself as a feminist." (ibidem, 180) However, apart from wonder, anger, pain, joy, and hope also pushed her towards political activism (ibidem, 69). It was not only wonder directed at the familiar but also the *normalcy* of the familiar. After the wonder, a process of questioning and sharing begins in which one's own experience is compared with the wondering of others. Ahmed describes the process leading from individual pain to talking about pain as a process of collectivization that the experiences of exposure characterize: "We could think about feminist therapy and consciousness-raising groups in the 1970s precisely in terms of the transformation of pain into collectivity and resistance. Carol Tavris argues that consciousness-raising groups were important because 'to question legitimate institutions and authorities, most people need to know that they are not alone, crazy, or misguided'" (ibidem, 172).

Indebted to her account on wondering, as a practice that puts you in response to your surroundings, I will in the following construct a positive conception of the guilt of wonder, building on the critique developed with Benjamin. Before that, I will show how Brecht actively conceived wonder as aesthetic-political means, which Benjamin appreciated as a positive form of sparking interest by making people wonder, thus perceiving it as an ability (Benjamin 1977, II.1:531).

Bertolt Brecht made wonder the "central category" of his theater practice (Rebentisch 2011, 353). He developed a theater praxis to keep wonder fresh, to relearn wondering. He "exhibited reality," which meant for him "to alienate it in such a way that its real 'condition' is revealed to the audience. One's own becomes recognizable as foreign, the ordinary is exhibited and thus becomes tangible" (ibidem, 350). By orienting his plays as closely as possible to his audience's everyday experiences, Brecht blurs the boundaries between reality and fiction, causing the supposedly normal to take on an absurd color. Instead of reacting sympathetically to something depicted and thus producing pity for something foreign, one wonders about one's own

and everyday circumstances. Wondering about oneself brings into the foreground what otherwise remains in the background. “What appear [sic!] before consciousness, as objects of perception, are not simply given, but are effects of history: ‘even the objects of the simplest sensuous certainty are only given to him through social development, industry and commercial intercourse’ (Marx and Engels 1965, 57). To learn to see what is ordinary, what has the character of ‘sensuous certainty’ is to read the effects of this history of production as a form of ‘world making’” (Ahmed 2014, 180). The familiar emerges; it is no longer a convenient background but becomes conspicuous through minimal changes and exaggerations (Rebentisch 2011, 350). The specifically political effect is the questioning of familiar structures revealed in the work as contingent.

Wonder describes in this context the perception of oneself as strange. It denotes the exhibition of familiar structures that elicit a process of productive alienation. As Rebentisch locates the ethical-political potential of art in a “reflexive distance to what is represented” (ibidem, 368), wonder not only describes the act of exposing and alienating conventions but also of exhibiting oneself, as de-familiarization of the familiar. Benjamin claims that the epic theater is not *presenting* conditions [*Zustände wiedergeben*], but instead, it discovers them, it let them be explored, through disruptions of procedures (Benjamin 1977, II.1:522). What follows is a discovering-audience, a mass exploring themselves, thereby—in the ideal case—becoming aware of suppressing structures and their collective power. The distancing moment of wonder turns emancipatory, and it denotes a rupture that Brecht employed as an artistic means to re-learn wondering about the given status quo.

With Benjamin and Brecht, we can conceptualize wonder as an artistic strategy to let people stumble about the oppression they grew accustomed to. This wonder is a fugitive thing, which needs to be grasped in the same moment or grasp us in the right moment.

5. Wonder’s Claim

How Benjamin conceptualized this relatively positive yet fragile account on wonder also offers an answer: wonder in the *Eighth Thesis* does not have to be conceptualized as failed political knowledge and action. Instead, wonder may be conceptualized as a non-philosophical revelation, as Benjamin differentiated between different kinds of knowledge. Two are essential here: *Determined Knowledge* [Bestimmtes Wissen], and *Knowledge gained from Insights or Revelations* [Wissen erlangt durch Einsicht oder Erkenntnis]

(Benjamin 2007, 73, trans. J.B.). The first is the knowledge that “directs us to transcend ourselves and becomes action” (Konersmann 2007, 345, trans. J.B.), it is secured knowledge that can be communicated. The latter, however, is transitory and different from a consecutive form of knowledge, existing “between an intuition [*Ahnung*] and the knowledge of truth” (Benjamin 2007, 74, trans. J.B.). Konersmann attaches an explicitly philosophical responsibility to this fugitive kairological [*kairologisch*] insight: as a constitutive element and not only entangled, the perceiving subject is actively participating in the situation (Konersmann 2007, 335).

Bringing *kairos* [καῖρός], the “right moment” and the “window of opportunity” together with wonder, it becomes clear that both trigger a similar kind of knowledge: it is the moment in which something reveals itself, and only in this time frame, the revelation, the opportunity, or an idea can be grasped. As *kairos*, wonder is a gift in which something presents itself, and it needs to be followed up. In a kairological moment, we are not the ones in control of perception and knowledge, but it is the things entering our lives: “Nicht wir versetzen uns in sie, sie treten in unser Leben” (Benjamin 1991, V.I:273). It follows that every moment bears the burden of an operational decision. Every moment is an action, which means that every moment has a claim-right on us. The moment of wondering is when something new reveals itself to us, and it is upon us to decide whether we accept the invitation.

The notion of guilt can then be formulated positively as a form of being expected by the *kairos*, a moment in time that was waiting for us: “Then, like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with *weak* messianic power, a power on which the past has a claim. Such a claim cannot be settled cheaply. The historical materialist is aware” (Benjamin 1980, in: Löwy 2005, 29-30). Here, we can see the “weak messianic power” as the gift waiting to redeem its claim. As any gift, it awaits its reciprocation. The historical materialist, the person noting and registering every event and in particular, advocating the endless list of acts of suppression, is aware that the past’s claim is not settled cheaply. Thus, wonder is not philosophical knowledge, as it is not a determined one, it is not secured, and not in immediate relation to an action. Instead, wonder is when the subject succumbs to the power of things and must quickly decide how to deal with it. Thus, wonder is not necessarily a category of distance but of intense absorption *in the disruption* of everyday life. The disruption bears the potential for political action. I conclude, in the act of wonder, one is indebted to the object wondered at: what affects me has the power to become the starting point for

political action.¹⁴ If the latter fails to appear, the former remains guilty. Wondering is then about an intuition making its claim on you. It does not stand at the beginning of a realization, and it is not philosophical, yet it may stand at the beginning of a very personal process of de-normalizing the familiar, sharing wonder, and exposing oneself to the world.

Conclusions

The normative dimension of the wondering gaze is what parts the familiar from the unfamiliar. Thus, wondering is a practice of recognizing and exploring the unknown and acting out as the manifestation, reproduction, and normalization of perception norms. Wonder is guilty if it involves practices of othering. Secondly, if failure is detected and political action would not redeem the wonder. From this, it follows that wonder also has a political potential and denotes a capability that can be learned. It is then the power to see the unfamiliar, estrange the ordinary, and abstract from the given.

Wonder then denotes the ability (Benjamin 1977, 531) not to surrender to principles of familiarity and “universal” categories, under which the variation is violently subsumed, but to perceive the extraordinary and to take it seriously without spectacularizing it. With Ahmed, the concept of wonder can be expanded to include the dimension of vulnerability: it is an opening of oneself towards the unusual and a passion to explore it. In this sense, wonder is the basis of a distance to, and positioning in the world connected with forms of exposure. The courage to position yourself, as I showed with Ahmed, can be learned. Following Adorno, wonder as ability can be seen as the basis of a critical attitude, as it allows you to break up categories, dive into new sensoria, and relocate yourself.

With *Exposures*, I provided a curatorial alternative to wondering as a normative practice of exhibiting. With Brecht, I showed how an aesthetic practice could train the capability to wonder about oneself, and thus a practice of othering can be prevented. With Marx and Ahmed, I sketched a philosophical way to wonder, yet not stagnate in a lack of historicity and depoliticized gazing.

Wonder—between exhibiting and exposure, between witnessing and voyeurism, between vulnerability and capability—comprises hope, recognition, sensibility, and openness; but also normalization processes, manifesta-

¹⁴ For a conception of guilt as the origin of community (munus, lat: burden, obligation, gift, office) see Esposito 2004.

tions of norms, and reproductions of violent regimes of visibility and envisioning. Wonder's history is loaded with othering's cruelty, the spectacularization of difference, and the libidinous entanglement of voyeurism. Reformed artistic and curatorial strategies can reflect upon the violence and power dynamics implicit in practices of seeing, exhibiting, and wondering and therefore inherit the potential to transform them. I aimed to outline some of these aspects in this article. Although this text did not pursue a systematic approach to the affective and aesthetic entanglements of guilt and wonder, I invite you to take it as a reason to wonder about wonder and a reminder not to wonder carelessly. Mobilize!

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