

## PRIVATIZATION OF THE AESTHETIC REALM: THE BELL-SENNETT THESIS

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### INTRODUCTION

A sociological analysis of the arts in modern society can focus on the changing nature of either the artist-audience relationship, aesthetic content, or aesthetic experience. Within the past year, two works have been written which offer very similar and parallel interpretations of such changes. Bell (1976) and Sennett (1977) both claim that in recent decades there has been a privatization of the aesthetic realm. Each is more concerned with the culture and world-view of modern society in general, but the arts are seen as being particularly supportive of this trend.

Our first aim is to present the central organizing thread in these two formulations; namely, the "privatization" of modern consciousness. Second, we will discuss such a general process as it applies to the aesthetic realm in modern society. Third, we offer a general analytical critique of the Bell-Sennett position.

### PRIVATIZATION OF MODERN CONSCIOUSNESS

For Bell and Sennett, a privatization of the aesthetic realm relates both to the privatization of modern consciousness and to larger social-structural forces. They focus on different aspects of modern consciousness and social structure and different aspects of aesthetic privatization, but they are compatible and complementary in nature. Together, their respective positions constitute a comprehensive statement of a privatization thesis. The diagnoses are similar: post-industrial societies are moving from a public-directed to a private-directed condition, and "secularization" is the explanatory factor.

Sennett's objective in The Fall of Public Man is to describe the changing quality of face-to-face interaction since the 18th century in the light of a changing macro-social, historical, and cultural matrix. The balance between private and public life exemplified best in the 18th century has been shattered. Public life, with its atten-

dant qualities of civility and cosmopolitanism, was made possible by recognizable rituals, codes and signals (styles of dress, modes of speech and gesture). The theatre and coffeehouse represented the most important locales for such public interaction. If the public realm was characterized by a "sincerity" to artificial social constructs, the "private" realm of family and friends was characterized by "authenticity" to natural requirements, responsibilities, and desires.

As a result of the forces of industrial capitalism and secularity, "personality" became introduced into the public realm and the private realm came to be viewed as an "idealized refuge". While the private realm became more highly valued, the public realm was devalued. Early modern man, once embedded in a network of social relationships associated with the role of "citizen" is, in the contemporary period, progressively in a state of retreat and withdrawal. The important part of one's life is no longer outside the immediate circle of family and friends. Such a development could not avoid an impact on the aesthetic realm as well.

For Bell, the modern period has witnessed a transition from a value system geared to production to one oriented toward individual consumption. That is to say, primacy has shifted from an institutionalized value system supportive of the public sector to one which is not only supportive of the private sector but which could also undermine the public sector.

Bell utilizes a "structural-cultural" approach, and posits a disjunction of three separate realms: 1) the techno-economic, geared toward efficiency; 2) the polity, whose axial principle is equality; and 3) the culture, based on a hedonistic, anti-bourgeoisie value system. He says:

'Modern culture is defined by this extraordinary freedom to ransack the world storehouse and to engorge any and every style it comes upon. Such freedom comes from the fact that the axial principle of modern culture is the expression and remaking of the "self" in order to achieve self-realization and self-fulfillment. And in its search, there is a denial of any limits or boundaries to experience; nothing is forbidden, all is to be explored...!' (1976 13-14)

This is rooted in the "fundamental assump-

of the new". Bell states:

'(Modernism)... is willfully opaque, works with unfamiliar forms, is self-consciously experimental, and seeks deliberately to disturb the audience--to shock it, shake it up, even to transform it as if in a religious conversion... Modernism, too, insists on the meaningless of appearance and seeks to uncover the substructure of the imagination...!' (1976 46-47)

Bell's general position is given as follows:

'Where culture is related to the past, accessibility to culture is shaped by tradition and expressed in ritual. Personal experiences and feelings are seen as idiosyncrasies, irrelevant to the great chain of continuity. But when culture is concerned with the individual personality of the artist, rather than with institutions and laws, then singularity of experience becomes the chief test of what is desirable, and novelty of sensation becomes the main engine of change.' (1976 132)

Substituting personal feelings and impulses for objective realities as a source of artistic meaning, and substituting process and action for artistic content result in a privatization of aesthetic expression and creation.

"Subjectivation", in addition, characterizes the interpretive process. As both Bell and Sennett imply, the audience, lacking internal standards of judgment are forced to look only to themselves as the ultimate source of aesthetic judgment. Sennett clearly recognizes the self-doubt of the modern audience. Bell follows Ackerman's assessment that the dissociation of social location and cultural style leads to judgmental indeterminacy. For Ackerman, "one has a choice between having no opinion or accepting the opinion of the expert, and the most available expert is the professional manufacturer of opinion. The altered response to the arts is, I believe, a product of public deference to museums, commercial galleries, and the news media" (1976 40). Regardless of whether one turns to oneself or to others for aesthetic standards, the point to emphasize is that aesthetic judgment is ultimately constructed by the individual consumer. This represents a privatization of the aesthetic experience in that judgments are no longer the result of the internalization of objec-

tive, i.e., public standards; rather they are a product of "reflectiveness".

#### 4. Private Cultures and the Lack of a Cultural Center

The functional specialization of the social structure has occurred within the aesthetic realm as well. The aesthetic realm is as differentiated and pluralistic as the society is as a whole. Such differentiation is a privatizing influence in that the signs, symbols, and meanings are understood only by a small coterie of followers of each "genre". The lack of any overarching symbol system such as religion results in the absence of a common frame of reference. Experts in one "genre" cannot communicate with experts from other "genres". And, experts in general have very little in common with their audiences. The aesthetic realm has become fractured, fragmented, devoid of coherence. It has become an agglomeration of plural, discrepant aesthetic sub-worlds. However, the mass media does tend to forge a common, public culture among consumers, which Bell calls "psychic interaction" (1976 89). The commonality, however, is more at the level of experience, than of symbolic meaning, because the major function of modernism is to "shock", not to shape collective meanings. This brings us to the last element of the "privatization" thesis, the triumph of "sensibility".

#### 5. The Primacy of Sensibility in the Aesthetic Realm

In the modern world, it is the primary responsibility of the artist to "administer shocks to others" (Sennett 1977 201). Bell articulates the triumph of sensibility in terms of the "eclipse of distance" between artist and audience. Modernism is characterized in terms of the attributes or goals of sensation, simultaneity, immediacy, and impact. What is sought is an "identity between object and emotion, an identity not through contemplation but through action" (1976 112). One effect is that "one has lost control over the experience--the ability to step back and conduct one's 'dialogue' with the art" (1976 117). There is a triumph of technique over content. The emphasis is on the fleeting moment, and not with transcendent meaning.

Sensibility connotes a privatization of the aesthetic experience because it cannot

transcend the concrete self. Contemplation, conversely, has as an object the condition humaine. As Bell states: "to forego the 'representation' of another, is not merely to forego a text; it is to deny the commonality of human experience..." (1976 133). In short, modernism does not trigger reflection on the place of the individual within the cosmos, or relate personal experience to those experienced by other human beings, whether relative to one socio-historical period or across time and space, but rather stimulates and shocks the self in an immediate and intense fashion.

The rise of sensibility as an organizing principle for aesthetic experience has reached its pinnacle with the "visual arts": "The very technique of the new arts, principally cinema and modern painting, act to eclipse the psychic and aesthetic distance between the viewer and the visual experience..." "This central aspect of modernity--the organization of social and aesthetic responses in terms of novelty, sensation, simultaneity, and impact--finds its major expression in the visual arts." (Bell 1976 106-107).

## CONCLUSION

The Bell-Sennett thesis is a very formidable position. There is considerable evidence suggesting that aesthetic experience, aesthetic creation and aesthetic content have in general become more private and self-centered in nature. Their thesis, then, is accurate in its description and portrayal of general and aesthetic trends over the course of recent centuries. However, the privatization thesis, in our view, suffers from two major inadequacies.

First, both Bell and Sennett assume the existence of an isomorphism between the aesthetic realm and the total culture. While it may be the case that the aesthetic realm is "privatized", that does not necessarily mean that a precise symmetry exists between art and society. The strategy of deducing aesthetic privatization from the more general privatization of modern consciousness is questionable in the light of the considerable autonomy of institutional spheres characteristic of modern societies. The extent to which the arts ought to be singled out for attention as being particularly indicative and supportive of a more generalizable cultural trend is problematic.

Second, the thesis, in focusing on a modal type, fails explicitly to recognize the possibility of a multiplicity of aesthetic processes and forms. It generalizes to the aesthetic realm as a whole a preoccupation with the self and "personality" which in fact is more characteristic of certain sub-groups in that realm. That is, there are varying degrees of aesthetic privatization depending on 1) social location within the society, by social class, or religion; 2) social location within the aesthetic realm, as artists, audience, or sponsor; and 3) the nature of the aesthetic situation.

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