UDC number 14 Kierkegaard S.
Bojan Blagojević
University of Niš
Faculty of Philosophy

AESTHETICISM AND DECONTEXTUALIZATION

Abstract: The topic of our presentation will be the existential-political critique of aestheticism provided by Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. His concept of the "aesthetic mode of existence" aims to designate a worldview founded on radical decontextualization of the individual. We will aim to show the links between two seemingly distinct implications of this process of decontextualization: on the one hand, the aestheticist outlook on one's own life and the striving to make one's life into a work of art, and on the other hand, the political anonymity and the psychology of "the crowd" provided in Kierkegaard's work *A Literary Review*. Contrasting the traits of "the age of the revolution" to the ones of "the present age", Kierkegaard exposes the underlying formative causes of aestheticism and anonymity and provides a socio-political framework for their assessment.

Keywords: aestheticism, decontextualization, Kierkegaard, anonymity, the public

1. Introduction: Romanticism Zombified

The clash between the Enlightenment and Romanticism in the arts and philosophies of Central Europe seemed to have ended in the first two decades of the 19th century, with Hegel declaring the triumph of Reason. However, in the aftermath of the clash, with Hegel's death and the subsequent popularity of Schopenhauer, the stage was set for a powerful backlash of the German discontent. In 1841, Prussian emperor Frederick William IV, "the romantic on the throne", invited Schelling to take up Hegel's chair of philosophy in Berlin. As Kant and Hegel had been German Idealism's champions of the Enlightenment, Schelling had (alongside Fichte) throughout most of his philosophical authorship championed ideas of the Romantic Movement. It is through the influence of his lectures (attended, among others, by Engels, Bakunin, Bauer, Kierkegaard, Ranke, Alexander von Humboldt, etc.) that the Emperor wanted to reinstall a reactionary regime. All the attainments of the bourgeois revolution, spread throughout Europe by Napoleon's conquests were to be undone. 19th century Europe was witnessing the revival, or rather zombification of Romanticism with governmental aid. The authors most frequently recognized as the exponents of this revival Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Kierkegaard. I will aim to show, however, that Kierkegaard is the odd man out on this list. In order to do so, I will present both his moral and political critique of the individual and political aspect of what he calls "the aesthetic mode of existence", and show that they are both founded on a process of radical decontextualization.

2. The Aesthetic Individual: Art out of Boredom

In his first published work, *Either/Or* (written in 1842.), Kierkegaard presents two views on what he calls "the aesthetic mode of existence". The first is presented in first-person perspective by an aesthete called simply A; the second is presented from a third-person perspective by an "ethical individual", a judge named William. By examining their respective arguments, I will show the basic principles and presuppositions of aestheticism, i.e. "the aesthetic mode of existence".

Kierkegaard draws the depiction of human existence from Schopenhauer, who had been a major influence in his youth. In his *magnum opus*, *The World as Will and Representation* (Schopenhauer 2010: 338-49), Schopenhauer depicts the human life as a series of circles between desire (i.e. suffering), the fulfilment of desire (brief moments of satisfaction or pleasure) and boredom (i.e. the lack of desire). Since human beings are capable of reflection, they become aware of the endless repetition of the circle, and this awareness turns their willing into suffering and provides boredom with another essential aspect: it is not only in the moments of our lack of desire that we are bored. Boredom acquires omnipresence: our desires and pleasures become boring as well. This reflective boredom is the prevalent mood of the aesthetic individual and his principal motive for action.[1]

> I (…) proceed from the basic principle that all people are boring (…) This basic principle has to the highest degree the repelling force always required in the negative, which is actually the principle of motion (…) Boredom is the root of all evil. It is very curious that boredom, which itself has such a calm and sedate nature, can have such a capacity to initiate motion. The effect that boredom brings about is absolutely magical, but this effect is one not of attraction but of repulsion. (Kierkegaard 1987i: 285)

How does one escape boredom, then? One way would be to escape desire, but that would lead to a life of depression. (Kierkegaard 1987: 185) Thus the aesthete begins an analysis of Schopenhauer's circle, and it has been recently argued that the stages of that analysis comprise the structure of *Either/Or, part I.* (Благојевић 2016: 174)

The first section, "The Immediate Erotic Stages or the Musical-Erotic" (Kierkegaard 1987ii: 45-135) deals with the concepts of reflection and immediacy. Since reflection is the process through which an individual becomes aware of his or her temporally continuous existence (and the constant recurrence of Schopenhauer's circle), the aesthete examines the possibility of unreflected existence through the example of Don Juan. Unlike any everyday garden-variety seducer, Kierkegaard's Don Juan lacks the ability to "recollect" his previous conquests as well as the ability to plan ahead for any new ones. According to this view, we can escape boredom if we can escape the temporal context and remain in the immediacy of the moment. However, the aesthete is well aware that Don Juan is not a person, but a literary character,

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[1] Kierkegaard's analysis of boredom and its connection with chatter, authenticity and political commitment influenced thinkers of the hermeneutics of facticity (e.g. Heidegger, Gademer, Patočka,…) but the lines of these influences fall outside the scope of this paper.

a "force of nature" or desire incarnate. An actual individual cannot hope to escape reflection and remain a human being. Thus, the aesthete has to continue his inquiry.

His next object of interest is the satisfaction of desire, depicted in the section "Silhouettes" (Kierkegaard 1987i: 165-216). The story is now told from the perspective of the women seduced, as they bring the moment of permanence into the process of seduction and fulfilment of desire. Thus, the individual who wishes to avoid boredom must be prepared to abstract from his or her own object of desire. In interpersonal relations, this would require two things: first, the seducer must be well acquainted with the local customs and rules of conduct (in order to be successful at all); and second, he must not see those customs as normative in any essential manner; they are only to be seen as means for achieving his ends (as the other individuals are to be seen). Such a project requires elaborated strategies, and the aesthete presents them in the following section, "Rotation of crops". (Kierkegaard 1987: 281-300)

The aesthete identifies three main sources of boredom in modern human existence: a permanent job, friendship and marriage. Repetitiveness involved in these relations is the main cause of boredom in our culture.

> Guard, then, against *friendship* (…) Never become involved in *marriage*. Married people pledge love for each other throughout eternity (…) If, instead of saying "throughout eternity," the couple would say "until Easter, until next May Day," then what they say would make some sense, for then they would be saying something and also something they perhaps could carry out. (…) One must always guard against contracting a life relationship by which one can become many. That is why even friendship is dangerous, marriage even more so. (…) If an individual is many, he has lost his freedom and cannot order his riding boots when he wishes, cannot knock about according to whim. (…) Never take any *official post*. If one does that, one becomes just a plain John Anyman, a tiny little cog in the machine of the body politic. (Kierkegaard 1987i: 295-8)

Thus, in order to escape boredom, we must avoid such permanent relations and instead employ what the aesthete calls "rotation of crops": changing our activities, acquaintances, and romances every once in a while, and when we run out of options (because options are, after all, limited) we start over. In order to succeed in this endeavor, we must be able to manipulate not only other people but also ourselves. It is clear that our desires must be under our complete control, but in order to be successful in fulfilling them, we must also master all other aspects of our personality. What we construe of ourselves is completely up to us, and there is only one valid criterion for assessment of our design: is it interesting?

The aesthetic existence thus returns again to the ideal of Don Juan: if an aesthete cannot live out the aesthetic ideal presented in Don Juan's character, then he can make his own life into a work of art. John Mackie notes an important implication of this project: "Because the unity of form and content in a consummate work of art precludes any *definitive* critical analysis, no understanding of the work is ever final; but for that reason the possibilities for understanding are infinite." (Mackie 1972: 8) Just as no definite rule can be given for making a successful work of right, no definite rule can be given for living a life. "Life" designates not only our current condition but

our continuous temporal existence, including our life narratives and our projects for the future. If a present condition becomes boring, the aesthete has another device at his disposal: reinterpreting his past in a different key. This is exactly the topic of one of the later sections of *Either/Or part I*: "First Love". (Kierkegaard 1987i: 231-280) If we cannot forget our past at will and we have no way of objectively changing it, reinterpretation of our desires and/or fulfilments can help us escape repetitiveness that leads to boredom. This is the main problem for the aesthete: by removing himself from all authorities imposed by social contexts, he presents himself with an impossible demand for completely mastering every aspect of his life: his present, past and future, his desires, and his circumstances.

This is one of the objections to the aesthetic position that the ethical individual puts forward. By decontextualizing himself, the aesthetic individual turns himself into a phantom, an existence with no actuality. This process takes place in a number of overlapping stages. The first stage is removing oneself from the axiological plane of the particular *Sittlichkeit* of the community. Values and norms of the community are perceived only as facts, as a set of rules that have no intrinsic value and can be circumvented at will. The second step is not acknowledging the intrinsic value of other human beings. The aesthete doesn't conceive of his self as essentially related to other human beings and sees them only as means to achieving his own ends. The third step is total disintegration of the self: every concrete moment of existence is seen as a coincidence that can be manipulated for the purpose of being as interesting as possible. The aesthete has lost "the binding power of the personality" (Kierkegaard 1987ii: 160) and thus his life dissolves into moments in which his life is being determined by factors out of his control.

> You hover above your self, and what you see down below you are a multiplicity of moods and conditions that you make use of in order to find interesting contacts with life. You can be sentimental, heartless, ironic, witty (…) Then this chance contact with someone occupies you absolutely, and you forget your despair and anything else that otherwise rests on your soul and mind. (Kierkegaard 1987ii: 199)

Decontextualization brings two sorts of difficulties for the aesthetic individual. The first one (which would probably have no significance for the aesthete) is the moral one: decontextualization prevents the aesthete from fulfilling his moral duties both to others and to himself (the duty to treat all human beings as ends in themselves, i.e. to enter into non-manipulative relationships with them). The second one concerns prudence: decontextualization prevents the aesthete from achieving happiness in life. Since factors necessary for happiness are not always at our disposal, a life filled with enjoyment is very rarely available. Even if we imagine an individual that has control over all those factors (Judge William's example is Nero), we will find that his life is not filled with enjoyment, but numbness. "Only in the moment of desire does he find diversion. He burns up half of Rome, but his agony is the same. After a while, such things do not give him pleasure anymore." (Kierkegaard 1987ii: 187) The ethical individual ultimately sees the aesthetic existence as doomed to stagger between an unhappy parasitic existence and depression.

The aesthete's fallacy is clear. From the fact that repetitive things tend to become boring, he erroneously concludes that through avoiding repetitiveness we can lead an interesting, pleasurable life. And to avoid repetitiveness, we must always be free to make new choices. In order to do so, we must not submit to any objective criterion of choice, since otherwise we would be forced to make similar choices in similar situations. Thus, our choices must be arbitrary. The conception of freedom as arbitrary choice requires the world to be void of any meaning, transcendent or immanent. There can be no human nature to guide or limit our choices, no God to command, forbid and punish, no legitimate social authority to impose laws or prohibitions. And since the aesthete is not omnipotent, every choice he makes is finally an object of regret. (Kierkegaard 1987i: 38)

The ethical individual presents the aesthete with a solution to his desperate condition, and that is recontextualization. It is only through reconnecting the self with its proper constituting factors (community, individual history and the history of humanity) can the individual hope to achieve a meaningful existence.

However, Kierkegaard insists that there is another mode of existence besides aesthetic and ethical: the religious mode, characterized by radical contextualization. While the ethical existence is characterized by submitting to the universal norms of morality (such as Kantian laws, valid for every individual as a rational being), the religious individual submits to God's commands directed only to him, as this single, irreplaceable individual (Kierkegaard's example is Abraham). This is the essential contrast: the aesthetic individual who perceives himself as a unique individual who can set all his properties and circumstances aside at any time, and the religious individual who simultaneously sees the relative character of his situation and yet holds fast to it with all seriousness and devotedness.

3. The public: decontextualization in politics

In 1846, Kierkegaard published *A Literary Review* (Kierkegaard 1996). It was literally a review of a novel *Two Ages* by Thomasine Gyllembourg. The novel depicts a tale of a family whose fortunes span the immediate postrevolutionary age, the age of honour, loyalty and passion, and the advent of a rational and reflective modernity, the present age, an age of calculation and prudent choices (Kierkegaard 1996: xiii). While *Either/Or* is clearly a critique of the heritage of Romanticism, it can be argued that Kierkegaard is using *A Literary Review* as a critique of the Enlightenment, or rather the perversion of the Enlightenment's ideal of equality, incarnated in a process that Kierkegaard calls "levelling". The conservative Kierkegaard apparently envisaged his age as a melting pot comprised of the worst traits of both the Enlightenment and Romanticism. And while his attention in *Either/Or* is turned towards the individual, in *A Literary Review* he focuses on the features of society and cultural life at large. His literary strategy remains the same: presenting a phenomenology of failure to achieve one's life's tasks and pinpointing the reasons due to which this failure takes place. As

we have demonstrated, in *Either/Or* Kierkegaard aims to show that one can realize his own life's tasks only by a passionate engagement of the contextualized whole person – an engagement he now calls "inwardness". His task as a writer is now crystalized as that of bringing about and promoting such a passionate engagement. In *A Literary Review* he contrasts the age of such a passionate engagement – the age of revolution – to an age that lacks passion – the present age. His first, shorter depiction is that of the age of revolution. Since it is an "essentially passionate" age, it possesses form, culture (since the degree of culture depends on the "resilience of inwardness"), decorum (the guarantee that there is something sacred), immediacy of reaction (envisaged as a restoring of natural conditions), the principle of contradiction (it can become either good or evil), and is less liable to be accused of rawness. (Kierkegaard 1996: 53-8)

In order to provide a context for the contrast between the age of revolution and the present age, Kierkegaard puts forward a lengthy typology of communities:

> When the individuals (severally) relate essentially and passionately to an idea and, on top of that, in union essentially relate to the same idea, that relation is perfect and normal. The relation singles out individually (each has himself for himself) and unites essentially (…) If, on the other hand, individuals relate to an idea merely en masse (that is, without the individual, inward-directed singling out), we get violence, unruliness, unbridledness; but if there is no idea for the individuals en masse, nor any individually singling-out inward-directedness, then we have rawness. (Kierkegaard 1996: 55)

These three types of community can be conceived as contexts that can encourage or hinder the development of authentic individuality, characterized by inwardness. The first type (representing the age of revolution) encourages the triple relation constitutive for authentic individuality: relation of the individual to herself, to others and to the idea. Other types of communities are characterized by their failure to encourage one or more of these relations.

> The harmony of the spheres is the unity of each planet relating to itself and the whole. Remove one of the relations and there will be chaos. But in the world of individuals the relation is not the only constituting factor, and so there are two forms. Remove the relation to oneself, and we have the mass's tumultuous relating to an idea; but remove this too, and we have rawness. People then push and shove, and rub against each other in futile outwardness (…) gossip and rumour and specious importance and apathetic envy become a surrogate for both this and that. Individuals do not turn in inwardness towards themselves and away from each other, nor outwards in unanimity over an idea, but towards each other in crippling and disheartened, tactless, levelling reciprocity. (Kierkegaard 1996: 55-6)

Levelling is an abstract mathematical process through which the individual surrenders his choice to the superindividual collective, within which he has just as much significance as everyone else. Thus, the essential characteristic of his choices is that they are being made only collectively. The value of choice is transferred from the decisions of the individual to the numbers of the collective to which he now belongs in every respect. Kierkegaard sees the reason due to which the individual decides to submit to that "idolized positive principle of sociality" as the fear from

eternal responsibility that the individual has before God, and only "fearlessness of religiousness" can deliver him from levelling. (Kierkegaard 1996: 76-7)

Although the modern age has constantly striven towards levelling, the result couldn't have been achieved because the collective wasn't abstract enough; each collective has either to a certain extent engaged the individual as individual or maintained a certain relation to the idea (as is the case in the age of revolution). However, with the emergence of the press and the public, levelling has finally become possible.

> For levelling really to come about a phantom must first be provided, its spirit, a monstrous abstraction, an all-encompassing something that is nothing, a mirage – this phantom is *the public*. Only a passionless but reflective age can spin this phantom out, with the help of the press when the press itself becomes an abstraction (…) a passionless, sedentary, reflective age, when the press, itself weak, is supposed to be the only thing that can keep life going in the prevailing torpor, will spin out this phantom. The public is levelling's real master, for when levelling is only approximate there is nothing it levels with, while the public is a monstrous nothing. (Kierkegaard, 1996: 80-1)

As we have noted earlier, Kierkegaard's point is simple: the individual makes her choices in relation to her context; her decisions can carry the weight and risk only if she is forced to make her choice by something located in the situated in which she is embedded. The press and the public allow the radical decontextualization of the individual, removing him from every actual situation and presenting to him any and all topics as a potential subject about which he can and should form an opinion. "Everyone is well informed; we all know what path to take, and what paths can be taken, but no one will take them." (Kierkegaard1996: 94) Instead of action, the public encourages chatter, erasing the distinction between public and private, between that which concerns us and that which does not. The discussion on the agora or in the parliament, centered about important issues our community is facing, now gives way to the chatter about any and all trivial current topics brought forth by the press. "What is it to *chat*? It is to have repealed the passionate disjunction between being silent and speaking (…) chat dreads the moment of silence that would make the emptiness plain." (Kierkegaard 1996: 87)

Individuals embedded in such a community are doomed to anonymity. Their opinions are devoid of significance and can be contradictory or constantly changing. Since the individual is deprived of an anchor consisting of his contextualized self, he is left to passionless, frivolous chatter.

> Not only do people write anonymously, they write anonymously in their own name, indeed speak anonymously. Just as an author puts his whole soul into his style, so a person essentially puts his personality into his speech (…) And just as the public is a pure abstraction, so in the end will it be with human speech – there will no longer be someone speaking but an objective reflection will gradually impart an atmospheric something, an abstract sound that will render human speech redundant, just as machines make workers redundant. (Kierkegaard 1996: 92-3)

Kierkegaard's critique is directed to the political: its target is the type of community that turns citizens and agents into mere observers and the crowd. Even the revolutionary movement of 1848 doesn't escape Kierkegaard's critique, because it leaves the solution of the questions of equality to the people which, in an age of levelling, comes down to leaving those questions to the crowd. Kierkegaard is not a spokesman of conservatism, but advocates a possibility of a community of individuals based on a "pragmatic" agnosticism in politics and a modern conception of the individual's freedom to make her own choices. (Kirmmse 1990: 278) It is impossible for the community that Kierkegaard is talking about to return to the classical or revolutionary age. Since it cannot revive values from the past, its only way out is authentic individuality. We cannot confront the process of levelling by returning to an earlier age.

4. Concluding remarks: the strategies of decontextualization

As we have noted earlier, the levelling process is characterized by the absence of the individual's relation to himself as well as his relation to others and to the idea. The path to the idea is blocked, according to Kierkegaard, because the public would level every attempt to establish an idea believed by all members of the community. This is exactly the basis for establishing nationalistic or totalitarian regimes. This skepticism concerning the creation of new ideologies is what Kierkegaard thinks is required for the proper development of the individual. The individual must begin his process of recontextualization with reestablishing his relation to himself. If all other individuals have lost their individuality in the abstraction of the public, and the path to the idea remains blocked, Kierkegaard's individual is faced with a radical choice: either nothingness or God. However, this is neither the God of the Church (because the Church public is just as anonymous as the secular one) nor the God of the prophets and judges of the Old Testament that provides the individual with the authority to judge individuals and nations. To be an authentic individual in an essential sense is to assume responsibility for one's choices and decisions and not to require any determinate idea (i.e. nation, class, etc.) to connect us with other individuals; he does not relate to other individuals through the public but assumes responsibility for bringing about their authenticity.

Although we have noted that Kierkegaard seeks the answer to the question of why individuals submit to the public in the fear of eternal responsibility before God, it is useful to ask the traditional question: *qui bono*? Is there a party that may profit from all the aforementioned consequences of decontextualization? We have already remarked in the introduction the interest that Frederick William IV had in promoting Romanticism in Prussia. If decontextualization indeed produces demotivated individuals susceptible to manipulation (and self-manipulation), one could expect that such a tool could easily be used by power-hungry regimes. Kierkegaard's descriptions point to phenomena that are too familiar in our present age.

Suppose such an age invented the swiftest means of transport and communication,

unlimited ways of managing combined financial resources; how ironic that the rapidity of the transport system and the speed of the communication stand in inverse relation to the dilatoriness of indecision. (Kierkegaard 1996: 56)

If we could assume that a whole generation had the diplomatic task of keeping time at bay, so that anything at all was continually preventing from happening yet all the time it seemed as though something *were* happening, then our age would unquestionably be achieving something just as prodigious as the age of revolution (…) the present age is the age of advertisement, the age of miscellaneous announcement: nothing happens, but what does happen is instant notification. (Kierkegaard 1996: 61-2)

If decontextualization can be brought about and encouraged, it can also be hindered and fought against. Kierkegaard would argue that in order to start a political struggle, if it is to be efficient, the initial point still has to be the individual and his passionate inwardness. Hence his life-long dedication to incite authenticity in his readers. However, the response, if it is to be authentic, must depend on the reader alone.

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Bojan Blagojević

ESTETICIZAM I DEKONTEKSTUALIZACIJA

Rezime

Tema našeg rada je egzistencijalno-politička kritika esteticizma koju je izložio danski filozof Seren Kjerkegor. Njegov pojam „estetskog modusa egzistencije" označava pogled na svet zasnovan na radikalnoj dekontekstualizaciji pojedinca. Pokušaćemo da pokažemo veze između dve implikacije ovog procesa dekontekstualizacije koje izgledaju nepovezane: s jedne strane, esteticističko viđenje sopstvenog života i težnja da se od

svog života napravi umetničko delo, i s druge strane, politička anonimnost i psihologija „gomile" koju je Kjerkegor izložio u svom delu *A Literary Review*. Suprotstavljajući odlike „doba revolucije" odlikama „sadašnjeg doba", Kjerkegor razotkriva podležeće formativne uslove esteticizma i anonimnosti i pruža sociopolitički okvir za njihovu procenu.

bojan.blagojevic@filfak.ni.ac.rs