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# Democratic freedom as an aesthetic achievement: Peirce, Schiller and Cavell on aesthetic experience, play and democratic freedom

Michael Räber

## Abstract

In this essay, I reconsider the constitution of democratic freedom in aesthetic terms. My interest is in articulating a conception of aesthetic freedom that can be mapped onto a conception of democratic freedom. For this purpose, I bring together Charles Sanders Peirce's ontology, which comprises fragments of an aesthetic theory, Friedrich Schiller's concept of aesthetic play and Stanley Cavell's democratic perfectionism. By providing a philosophical framework for constructing an aesthetics and politics that supports the recent aesthetic turn in political theory, which urges overcoming political theory's excessive dependence on an epistemological theory of representation, and by proposing a modification to the turn's heavy reliance on theories of affect, my reading of Peirce, Schiller and Cavell offers a new way to think about the political significance of the autonomy of aesthetic experience and affect for democratic freedom.

## Keywords

aesthetics and politics, aesthetic experience, democratic freedom, democratic theory, play, pragmatism, Charles Sanders Peirce, Friedrich Schiller, Stanley Cavell

The Universe as an argument is necessarily a great work of art, a great poem [...] But let us compare it rather with a painting—with an impressionistic seashore piece—then every Quality in a Premiss is one of the elementary colored particles of the Painting; they are meant to go together to make up the intended Quality that belongs to the whole as a whole. That total effect is beyond our ken; but we can appreciate in some measure the resultant Quality of parts of the whole.

Charles Sanders Peirce (1931, 5.119)<sup>1</sup>

## **Introduction**

The autonomy of aesthetics has been invoked as a key element of an emancipatory and liberating politics from the negative effects of rationalization and from alienating social and political norms and practices, most prominently, in recent years, by thinkers of the aesthetic turn in political theory.<sup>2</sup> Thinking about political questions from the perspective of aesthetics, is to turn towards affect and sensation, based on which it becomes possible, according to this turn, to theorize and enact an emancipatory politics. Yet it is precisely this turn to affect and sensation and their explicit or implicit ontological and political prioritization over self-directed rule formation that, according to critics of this turn, undermines the emancipatory potential of a critical theory of democracy.<sup>3</sup> Their concern is that an aesthetic approach to democracy that ontologically and politically prioritizes affect risks becoming undemocratic and uncritical, compromising the ideal of democratic freedom and possible practices of emancipatory politics, because this prioritization abandons democracy's interest in citizens' ability to articulate their own experiences, interests, and beliefs to other citizens in the context of a public exchange of political perspectives and opinions that then allows for a critical assessment of divergent experiences, interests, and beliefs.

In this essay, I endorse the aesthetic turn's main idea that the autonomy of aesthetics is a key element of emancipatory, liberating democratic practices. However, my ambition in these pages is to argue for an aesthetic conception of democratic freedom that operates in-between the autonomy of affect and the capacity for self-controlled formation of habits and rules, thus venturing beyond the one-sided ontological prioritization of affect that underpins many accounts of the aesthetic turn. Such a conception will allow us to understand democratic freedom in terms of a practice of self-determination that emerges through aesthetic experience and play. For this purpose, I bring together Charles Sanders Peirce's aesthetics, Friedrich Schiller's concept of aesthetic play, and Stanley Cavell's democratic perfectionism, and explore their contributions to such a task.<sup>4</sup>

My use of the term “aesthetics” in this essay is not limited (nor directly applicable) to a theory of art, but refers to Peirce’s idiosyncratic use of it. While Peirce never arrived at a definitive statement of what he intended to mean by “aesthetics,” I suggest that the term “aesthetics” for him refers to *aesthetic experience* (the affective reaction to the qualitative dimension of our perceptions and sensations) and to the free *interplay* between aesthetic experience and the mental activities that deliberately form our habits and rules of action. Aesthetics, thus understood, is both about our felt appreciation of things that humans attend to, and about their attentive and playful comportment toward those things, in which they suspend their habitual ways of dealing with things and persons and reconfigure and re-pattern the conceivable uses for, and relations to, them so that novel possibilities to form new habits and rules of action emerge.

In arguing for an emancipatory and liberating politics in conjunction with such a notion of aesthetics, I invoke James Tully’s conception of politics, according to which politics in its broadest sense denotes the various relations between governed and governance, which consist in the antagonistic relations between “practices of governance” and “practices of freedom”:

‘Practices of governance’ [are] the forms of reason and organisation through which individuals and groups coordinate their various activities and the practices of freedom by which they act within these systems, either following the rules of the game or striving to modify them.<sup>5</sup>

By relying on Tully’s notion of politics and by referring to these practices as political, I do not (or not primarily) refer to the formal practices of governance through representative, constitutional politics, but rather I refer more broadly to the various actions, discourses, and sensibilities that configure the field of the possible for subjects to act. Understood in this sense, practices of governance are practices of subjectification, as subjects of governance gradually obtain a particular

configuration of practical identity, by which I mean a more or less habitual way of acting, perceiving and feeling within the rules and customs that guide social and political life. Aesthetics, as I understand it here, denotes a domain of acting and reflecting wherein subjects can construct practices of freedom, by which they can counteract, disrupt and transform such broadly understood practices of governance. This domain is especially relevant in circumstances where strategies of direct reform, negotiation, deliberation, and problem-solving either are unavailable or ineffective, either because those who wield authority can undermine or sidestep them or because subjects themselves are held captive by limiting habits of perceiving (or more generally of sensing) the world and other humans.

I suggest in this essay that counteracting and changing such practices of governance sometimes requires disrupting the habits of perception and sensation that prefigure our individual and collective attempts of sense- and rule-making, and that entering the space of reasoned judgment and justification alone is not always sufficient for this task. The project of a critical philosophy of democratic politics in aesthetic terms, then, is to explore philosophically how our practices of perceiving, sensing, and feeling can become practices of freedom that we then can use to intervene in the practices of governance that determine us.

Democratic freedom, on this view, does not depend on pursuing the greatest possible degree of fluidity or instability in one's identity and agency, nor on trying (vainly) to do away with all social determinacy of the subject, but on acknowledging both identity's and society's incompleteness. Thus, when I argue for the importance of the autonomy of aesthetics for an emancipatory and liberating politics, I am not suggesting that subjects, if they want to be free, should (or could) distance themselves from *all* social determinations. Rather, I am suggesting that the disruption of individual and social regularities should be seen as a central productive *moment* in the practical process of constituting subjects and democratic communities. Freedom, as I suggest here, is not a

freedom from all rules and from all that is social, but rather denotes the changeability of rules and the social. Such changeability—I will attempt to show with Peirce, Schiller, and Cavell—depends on the possibility of subjects to experience themselves as different from themselves (which always means different from their respective roles as participants in a social practice), which in turn depends on a practice of being attentive to the qualitative dimension of our experience and a practice of aesthetic play, from which truly new possibilities for individual and social practices emerge. This also means that the normative question of what is individually and socially good or right depends on a dialectical interplay (we could also say tension) between our rule-guided habits and the disruptive distancing from these habits.

I have organized the paper into four parts. In the first part, I briefly review prevailing arguments for and against aesthetic accounts of democratic emancipatory politics, and argue that they unnecessarily limit emancipatory democratic practice by either relying exclusively on an affective pragmatics, or on a theory of evaluative judgment. This forms the basis for my engagement with Peirce, Schiller, and Cavell in parts two to four.

Taking cue from Deleuze, it becomes possible to value Peirce's aesthetics as a resource for an aesthetics and politics that mobilizes a dissensual politics in a space in-between thought and what, against the current background, is unthinkable, because of Peirce's commitment to the autonomy of aesthetic experience over narrative and judgment.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, however, Peirce presumes the continuity of qualitative aesthetic experience with the constitutive effects of reflection and understanding, based on which we can formulate a politics of aesthetics that hovers between sensation and cognition. Peirce's ontology suggests that forming, following, and justifying a rule on the one hand, and feeling the experiential consequences of following a rule on the other, are entangled in a way that cannot be fully separated: it is not that a rule compels how we (should) feel, nor that feeling compels what rules we should form and follow, but for him feelings without rules

are meaningless and purely accidental, and rules are blind mechanisms, if the processes of forming and following rules do not take into account our affective responsiveness.<sup>7</sup> Freedom, following Peirce, is both the freedom from rules and the self-controlled constitution of them, which both require an aesthetic mode of engaging with the world—it arises in our efforts to oppose the idea of necessity, and emerges as a primary aesthetic principle in resistance to that which is fixed, determined, or absolute. Reading Peirce in tandem with Schiller's *On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters*, in the third part, this mode can be conceptualized as play (*Spiel*), which essentially consists of engaging receptively and creatively with the world, and wherein feeling and thought, difference and identity, change and stasis are held together, and which, following this reading of Peirce and Schiller, is the key mechanism by which humans can become free.<sup>8</sup> Based on this reading of Peirce and Schiller, and incorporating Cavell's perfectionist conception of democratic subjectivity and community in the final part, I propose an aesthetic conception of democratic freedom that refers to an aesthetic practice of individual and collective self-transformation.

### **1. Democratic freedom, non-contradiction, and the politics of aesthetics**

There exists a longstanding tradition of criticism for the spectatorship and eventfulness of society and politics, which in more general terms, is a criticism of the aestheticisation of politics. The critique is rooted in the conviction that appearances—that is, that which is given to our senses—cannot have a critical force but instead requires to be fully brought under the purview of the faculty of judgment. The spectacle and the glittery surface of appearances, taken on their own, overwhelm and deceive us as they make us passive consumers and recipients without critical substance. It is only when appearances are verified or falsified that we handle them adequately and that we can avoid circumstances that enslave us. One finds this critique articulated throughout the history of political thought, and it continues to pervade contemporary discussions of political and democratic thought.

Anti-democrats such as Plato, as well as modern and postmodern advocates of democracy, have condemned aesthetic elements of politics as something to keep out of our conceptions of politics; whether it is a critique of representation (and theatre) in general as we find in Rousseau, or as the central feature of totalitarian-fascist politics (Benjamin). Today, many contemporary theorists of democracy—deliberative democrats, radical democrats and critical theorists alike—often see aesthetic elements of politics as harmful for the ideal of the autonomous, self-determined individual and consequently, for the very project of democracy itself.<sup>9</sup> In contrast to Plato, today's friends of democracy affirm democratic freedom and equality, and postulate them as legitimising ideals of democracy itself. Meanwhile, the type of critique used to model politics often remains (mostly implicitly) committed to the belief that real freedom and self-determination, can only be had if we are committed to a critical programme that aims at overcoming mere outward appearances by the transcending force of a form of philosophical criticism that permanently or transiently helps to avoid, expose and correct (self-)contradictions.<sup>10</sup> From this perspective, we are only free and self-determined when we do not contradict ourselves or live in conditions that contradict us, and this is achieved either by acting according to moral law, public reason, or within non-alienating structures. Aesthetics, in turn, cannot serve a critical function, because an aestheticised politics seems to directly move citizens by stirring their affects. This seems to commend the particularity of random sensory stimuli and to abstain from any reference to a conception or rule, that could transcend and control the contingency of these stimuli, which then makes critical analysis and synthesis impossible. In contrast, a politics that can condition a self-determined life is guided by formal rights, public reasons, ideal procedures, non-alienating social conditions, etc., all of which help to safeguard democratic freedom.

Against this negative view of aesthetics in politics, Jacques Rancière has been arguing that aesthetics has to be necessarily deemed political in so far as aesthetic practices both sustain their



distinctiveness from other spheres of experience and are "'ways of making and doing' that intervene in the general distribution of ways of making and doing."<sup>11</sup> Accordingly, aesthetic practices are political because they disrupt the accepted order of subjects and objects by way of disrupting the accepted order of senses and sensibilities, thus initiating a possible emancipatory realignment of our accepted order of subjects and objects through the realignment of our affective practices. Rancière's aesthetics and politics is based on what Panagia aptly describes as Rancière's "affective pragmatics," recalling a term by affect-theorist Brian Massumi.<sup>12</sup> Affect, Massumi claims, denotes a pre-conceptual intensity of bodily dispositions, and, as William Connolly has argued, is "a wild card in the layered game of thinking (acting and judging)," insofar as it acts in subjects as an autonomous force that unconsciously shapes their conscious judgments.<sup>13</sup> If we use Rancière and Connolly as typical examples of a wide range of thinkers of the aesthetic turn (mentioned in footnote 2), we can generalize here that the aesthetic turn's insistence on the political significance of the autonomy of aesthetics tends to be based on a theory of political affect that insists on the ontological and political priority of affect over thought, interpretation, and judgment.

Against this prioritization of affect in democratic theory, Linda Zerilli has recently elaborated a conception of democratic freedom from the perspective of philosophical aesthetics that is supposed to hold the middle ground between an overly rationalist conception of democratic politics on the one hand and an overly affective conception of democratic politics on the other.<sup>14</sup> Democratic freedom, she argues with Hannah Arendt, is a function of aesthetic judgment, not because such judgment enables the elaboration of normative reasons for differentiating between the legitimate and coercive exercise of a collective will, but because it enables individuals to participate in the free collective exercise of making judgments about "what will and will not belong to the common world."<sup>15</sup> Her argument is compelling in that it points to the necessity of providing a theoretical framework that can answer the question of how aesthetic experience and the making of

collective rules, including political rules, can be thought of as standing in a dynamic relationship. I consider her account of political aesthetics significant also because it provides the possibility of conceptualizing democratic freedom in aesthetic terms—a project that is largely absent from contemporary accounts of politics and aesthetics, presumably because the concept of political freedom is commonly aligned with a politics of identity or a conception of the unencumbered self. Zerilli’s conception of democratic freedom, for its part, however, ultimately prioritizes judgment by subsuming the realm of the aesthetic under the critical powers of evaluative judgments, which unnecessarily constricts the political significance and the autonomy of aesthetics.<sup>16</sup> Her demand for a democratic theory of aesthetic judgment has always already pre-determined what possibilities there can be to organize and re-arrange the sensibilities of a political community and the relations of its citizens to this community. What we need, instead, I argue, is an aesthetic conception of democratic freedom that truly holds the middle ground between the autonomy of aesthetics on the one hand and the self-determined re-constitution of the habits and rules that guide practices of governance and practices of subjectification on the other hand.

## **2. The Freedom-Enabling Function of the Aesthetic in Peirce’s Ontology**

Peirce never developed an aesthetic *theory*; rather, he has left us with fragments that can be acknowledged as belonging to a ‘Peircean aesthetic’, which becomes recognisable in its basic features.<sup>17</sup> The aesthetic of Peirce can be found, first and foremost, within the architectonic of his triadic classification of ontological categories. All phenomena for Peirce are marked by ‘firstness’, ‘secondness’ and ‘thirdness’.<sup>18</sup> The ‘firstness’ of a phenomenon designates a particular qualitative presence, particular in the sense that it designates a unique moment of experience (*this* experience) that is in no direct relation to other experiences, objects or subjects. ‘Secondness’ emphasises the overcoming of such unique moment by means of a contrast. Here we are concerned mainly with the

mode of existence of the world as material reality and as a simple duality of cause and effect. Finally, ‘thirdness’ is the category of experience endowed with habits, which connotes a pattern of conduct (regularities, laws). Peirce conceives of the relations between these categories as recursive, as he assumes a principled unity of them, and hence what Peirce acknowledges as an independent qualitative aspect of reality (‘firstness’) is at the same time continuous with ‘second’- and ‘thirdness’. ‘Firstness’ denotes the raw and irreducible occurring quality of an experience, and from this quality one can abstract certain features that can be transferred to other objects—for example, the emergent quality of *this* experience to “redness” and to the associated similarities and differences with and between other red *x*. In other words, the such- and that-ness of the quality of feeling captured by the category of ‘firstness’, can enter into ‘secondness’, for example, into the two-part predicate “*x* is brighter red than ...”. Each ‘thirdness’, in turn, presupposes ‘firstness’ and ‘secondness’, which is linked by means of a relation between ‘firstness’ and ‘secondness’. For example, the predicate “... expresses a comparison of color” can be used to describe a relation between red tones with the predicate “*x* is brighter red than ...”.<sup>19</sup> Fundamental to this ontology is the idea that none of the possible, the actual, and the regular is more fundamental than the other and no category can be reduced to the other. In other words, things that differ by virtue of their regularities are ontologically equal to occurrences that produce differences. This means that reality for Peirce is never fully lawful and never just what exists in actuality, but that there are always real deviations from the regular and the actual, in the form of becoming, change, and difference. Peirce assigns the aesthetic a central function in this process of becoming, change, and difference.

It is primarily the characterisation of aesthetics as considering “those things whose ends are to embody qualities of feeling,” as well as “objects simply in their presentation,” that points to an affinity between ‘firstness’ and the aesthetic.<sup>20</sup> Wherever there is a phenomenon, Peirce holds, there is a quality that belongs to it.<sup>21</sup> Such quality is a “simple and positive quality of feeling” and as such,

nascent and pervasive, but on the other hand, it is vague and elusive because “its mere may-being gets along without realisation at all.”<sup>22</sup> In other words, the ‘first’ in ‘firstness’ denotes the undeveloped and rudimentary character of that category, and also means that qualities of feeling and objects taken in their qualitative presentation, register on an affective level. While experience is mediated through signs, in Peirce’s ontology, the mediation of the qualitative impact of an experience is confined to the category of ‘firstness’. Such mediation has nothing directly to do with registering actual facts (‘secondness’), or conceptualizing and rule-guided conduct (‘thirdness’). Experience of ‘firstness’ is mediated in a non-cognitive, affective experience of aesthetic signs (that he also calls “icons”), in a quality of feeling that is part of experiencing an aesthetic sign.<sup>23</sup> Although Peirce maintains that such quality of feeling of ‘firstness’ is ubiquitous and fundamental, it is at the same time precarious, ephemeral and episodic; it tends to get soaked up by ‘secondness’ and ‘thirdness’—not least because our organising minds tend to assume an ordinal and hierarchical nature of their relationship to one another.

In *Cinema 1: The Movement Image*, Deleuze aptly compared Peirce’s category of ‘firstness’ to the close-up in a film.<sup>24</sup> The close-up of a face on screen strips the face of its ordinary characteristics of being representative of an individual, of manifesting a social role and of communicating meaning—the close-up dissolves and makes disappear the reality of these functions of a face. Inasmuch as the close-up suspends representative individuation, socialisation and communication, ‘firstness’ is the category in Peirce’s ontology that tries to capture the “quality of a possible sensation, feeling or idea.”<sup>25</sup> Thus, ‘firstness’ stands neither in any necessary relation to any represented entity, nor in any necessary relation to actuality (‘secondness’) or argument (‘thirdness’), just like a close-up.

As ‘firstness’ is that category of reality that refers to the qualitative dimension of experience, it designates the *potential* of the given experience and its opening for a “myriad-fold variety” of

connections and interpretations.<sup>26</sup> In other words, ‘firstness’ is that aspect of experience that could let us feel that part of reality that we experience as out of the ordinary, as *contingent* and not lawful. We experience ‘firstness’ usually as something that stands out from the flux of our lives, as something that pierces through our habitual routines.<sup>27</sup> In order to experience this part of reality as something that stands out from the flux of our lives, one benefits from the rare faculty, Peirce says, “of seeing what stares one in the face, just as it presents itself, unreplaced by any interpretation, unsophisticated by any allowance for this or for that supposed modifying circumstance,” for which the artist is best positioned.<sup>28</sup> Peirce should not be understood here as saying that this “seeing” involves some sort of immediate experience or an immediate access to reality. I rather take him to mean something similar to what Wittgenstein calls the “lighting up” of an aspect and Cavell calls the “uncanniness of the ordinary.”<sup>29</sup>

The comparison with Wittgenstein’s aspect-seeing may seem misleading here, because aspect-seeing is a semantic “seeing-as” (I see something-as-something, namely, as in the much-cited example of a drawn figure, I see either a rabbit’s or a duck’s head), while the category of ‘firstness’ refers precisely to a kind of attention in our qualitative experience that does not aim directly at the semantic content of what is perceived.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, Wittgenstein’s remarks about what happens at the moment when we see something differently (we suddenly see  $x$  as  $y$ ) can illuminate the sense of ‘firstness’ as piercing through our habitual routines, in particular through our habitual dispositions of seeing. Seeing, Wittgenstein says “is a state,” whereas “to interpret is to think, to do something.”<sup>31</sup> To say that seeing is a state implies two things. First, it implies that seeing has genuine duration (it is a „continuous seeing“ of an aspect<sup>32</sup>) and is a largely dispositional stance that is entangled with a “form of life,”<sup>33</sup> and our broad “picture of the world.”<sup>34</sup> Second, the *moment* of seeing (an aspect) is in turn an „immediate, spontaneous reaching for the relevant form of description,” as Mulhall comments, which occurs against the background of continuous seeing.<sup>35</sup> Wittgenstein talks about the

moment of seeing something *differently*, a new aspect, as the lighting up of or being struck by an aspect that appears new or strange. What happens at this moment of change is that it breaks with established referential contexts of our habitual ways of perceiving: in order to be able to suddenly see something as something else, the relation of this former something to its ordinary practical contexts must be dissolved and reconfigured. In other words, suddenly seeing something different is a moment of disruption and disfiguration of our habitual and ordinary ways of perception and ways of attending to appearances. Importantly, then, suddenly being struck by an aspect is not a matter of willfully flipping between different perspectives, but is something that occurs to us as we are attentive to the world and to others: it is a moment of seeing again viz. of seeing anew something we are already familiar with.<sup>36</sup> Ordinary and familiar things and ways of using them become extraordinary when we turn our focus to them and they suddenly become “uncanny” and odd, as Cavell says. Cavell describes this shift from a sense of feeling at home to a sense of uncanniness as the shift from the familiar to the “surrealism of the habitual.”<sup>37</sup> We can easily brush our teeth or take a walk in the park without paying attention to it, but attending to the details of what we are doing (and perceiving) often causes us to stumble, and they suddenly feel strange, unfamiliar, surreal.<sup>38</sup> Of course, ordinary things or situations can suddenly appear uncanny to us only because they normally feel familiar and ordinary. This contrast between what we always already have in view (the commonly ordered and normed), and what we usually do not have in view and what therefore feels puzzling and strange to us, points to the fact that the puzzling and strange is not simply a given, there for us to just take in, as it were, but an achievement. The experience of ‘firstness,’ thus, is an achievement that requires a receptive sensibility in attending to the qualitative dimension of our experiences.

Because our attention to the qualitative dimension of our experience makes the objects (or aspects of them) of our experience feel new, different, or strange, ‘firstness’ can take on the

function, in the context of human action, of ensuring that we do not see our conceptual systems and rules as self-sufficient, and that we are not content to secure what we can control, but that we are prepared to be disturbed and to cope with it innovatively and creatively. In other words, ‘firstness’ is an ontological realm beyond our descriptions, habits and conventions—a realm that functionally enables the freedom from descriptions, habits and conventions by offering the possibility of experiencing contingency and strangeness. I believe Peirce was trying to express that when he said:

the idea of First is predominant in the ideas of freshness, life, freedom. The free is that which has not another behind it, determining its actions; but so far as the idea of the negation of another enters, the idea of another enters; and such negative idea must be put in the background, or else we cannot say that the Firstness is predominant. Freedom can only manifest itself in unlimited and uncontrolled variety and multiplicity; and thus the first becomes predominant in the ideas of measureless variety and multiplicity. It is the leading idea of Kant’s ‘manifold of sense.’ But in Kant’s synthetic unity the idea of Thirdness is predominant. It is an attained unity; and would better have been called totality; for that is the one of his categories in which it finds a home. In the idea of being, Firstness is predominant, not necessarily on account of the abstractness of that idea, but on account of its self-containedness. It is not in being separated from qualities that Firstness is most predominant, but in being something peculiar and idiosyncratic.<sup>39</sup>

The contrast Peirce makes in this passage between his notion of freedom and the Kantian understanding of freedom can be described as follows. Whereas for Peirce freedom as an idea is only conceivable using the category of ‘firstness’ and its manifestation in unlimited and uncontrolled variety and multiplicity; for Kant, the idea of freedom is based on the notion of a synthetic unity—the stable, diachronic identity of the autonomous self, which is only free if it is bound by laws that it could consent to under its own rational will.<sup>40</sup>

In other words, while Kant's idea of freedom is anchored in the idea of human autonomy as rational self-legislation, Peirce's notion of freedom seems to be anchored in the absence of any legislation. This is true, insofar as Peirce's notion of freedom demands the preservation of the non-conceptual aspects of our experiences and the acknowledgement of the category of 'firstness', as that which resists actual relational compositions and rule-based institutions of any sort while enabling and preserving contingency and pluralism. Thus, because 'firstness' is aesthetic and non-authoritative, freedom can manifest itself in 'firstness'. Without acknowledging the category of 'firstness' as a freestanding aspect of reality, we run the risk of locking ourselves into our own systems of concepts, of rules or institutions, and could get caught up in them without having a way out. Those who want to finally eliminate contingency or strangeness from such systems, want to lock themselves into a self-contained and determined reality that ultimately inhibits self-determination, and denies the reality of individuality and difference outside it.

As much as democratic politics faces a constant struggle to find the right procedures and rules to legitimise political authority, the lens of Peirce's aesthetics brings into focus that the idea of freedom demands the absence of and resistance to final authoritative norms and rules. The openness that goes with such an understanding of freedom, depends necessarily on an engagement with the qualitative-aesthetic dimension of experience that provides citizens with the possibility to interrupt and reconfigure their ordinary involvements in any form of relations, habits, customs, roles and norms in society, which might lead to the disarticulation and subsequent transformation of democratic society and democratic subjectivity. In the next two sections, I will suggest with Peirce, Schiller and Cavell that this space in-between these ordinary entanglements on the one hand and their disarticulation and transformation on the other is the place where aesthetic play can occur: The playful disruption and reconfiguration of the ordinary as a central productive mode of reconstituting democratic subjects and democratic communities.



### 3. Aesthetic play: Peirce and Schiller

For Peirce, a belief constitutes a habit, and a habit is a rule of action: to believe something is to be disposed to act on it.<sup>41</sup> A belief furthermore is “thought at rest,” and the occasion for leaving this state, he urges, should not be an artificial skepticism that makes us think up all sorts of doubts to which we might subject our belief, but should arise from a felt incoherence between our habits and our environment.<sup>42</sup> Incoherence here refers to the qualitative feeling of strangeness or uncanniness in relation to our established habits, as discussed in the previous section, and thus to a sense that we might have to revise or come up with new habits. Surely this is the first step in a much more comprehensive pragmatic process of revising old or establishing new habits, a process in which we must try to make explicit our subjective feelings of incoherence to others, and to consider other people’s experiential accounts.<sup>43</sup> The important point here is that it is our qualitative feeling of incoherence that moves us to start this process, and not any possible skeptical doubt. This is so, because Peirce’s pragmatism implies that qualitative feelings can be signs of something because they can be elements in regular sequences of actions. What we call the referencing of something to something else begins with the integration of a sensation into a rule of reflex. This should not be understood in a behavioristic sense. Rather, the point is to see that Peirce, and pragmatism as a whole, opposes the view that being (nature, society, etc.) has no meaning and no sign character until it is given meaning by a subject through their mental act, or until it is used as a sign by being brought into a referential context. In Peirce’s ontology, a feeling is neither merely individual nor subjective, but simply an occurrence. This is so, for Peirce, because feelings occur in a context of actions that follow from some rules or habits, and these actions are real (they occur in nature) insofar as someone feels them, just as these felt consequences of actions are real and occur in nature.<sup>44</sup> Our rules and habits are not copies of contingent feelings, but, if we follow Peirce, they are always the

coding of a possible reaction to feelings that have certain relevance for us, because of what we are used to, because of the rules we instantiate. It is thus Peirce's central pragmatist idea, that thought and rules depend on developed patterns of feeling, which fall within the realm of aesthetics, and that thought and rules are habits because they organize feelings, which are themselves functional contexts of thought and rules.<sup>45</sup>

Within this pragmatic process of establishing and re-constituting habits, the experience of 'firstness' functions not as a premise in an argument, but as a perceptual 'insight' that registers on an affective level, arising from the fact that something in our experiences lights up and causes us to wonder about it and (possibly) to see and respond to it in ways that differ from our usual ways of responding, which then might help us in our efforts to reconstitute our habits (and ourselves in relation to society). A (if not *the*) central productive mode in reconstituting them in a self-controlled way is what Peirce calls "pure play" or "musement."

By "musement" and "pure play," he means a purposeless, creative and free mode of mind, in reference to Friedrich Schiller's *Letters*, which identifies the "*Spieltrieb*" (play drive) as the driving force of human, social and political freedom.<sup>46</sup> As Jeffrey Barnouw notes, Schiller's *Letters* present a similar idea to that of Peirce's ontology, namely the "conception of 'aesthetic' integration of experience, a dimension rooted in feeling which informs the development not only of knowledge but of motivation and character."<sup>47</sup> In *Letters*, Schiller famously discerns the "formal" and "sensuous" drive humans possess, the former of which denotes the powers of perception to give form to the world, and the latter denotes the power of conveying impressions of that world.<sup>48</sup> While the formal impulse seeks to bring unifying harmony into the diversity of the manifold and particular appearances, the sensuous drive lets us become "receptive" to the world (it is the power to be affected and moved) and the more such receptivity presents "surface ... to phenomena," the more "world" humanity has to "apprehend."<sup>49</sup> These antagonistic drives in humans, Schiller says, must be

brought to work in concert through play, because this enables humans to be free from constraints—social, moral and physical—since play is directed to “*reconciling* becoming with absolute being and change with identity.”<sup>50</sup> Such reconciliation is a function of play’s oscillation between our tendency to impose general forms on our experiences on the one hand, and our tendency to accept sensory experience as simple pleasure and satisfaction on the other.

Schiller’s idea that play proves to be a mediator of the sensuous and formal drives carries a systematic dimension that anticipates contemporary concepts of play, such as those found in Caillois (1961) or Sutton-Smith (1997). This dimension consists in understanding play as the dynamic, oscillating movement between opposing poles. Caillois partitions play into four categories (competition, chance, mimesis, vertigo), which, individually or in combination, are meant capture the most diverse forms of play. At the same time, he holds that all plays, for all their diversity, participate in a fundamental polarity in one way or another: the polarity between *paidia*, the unregulated, uninhibited, freely improvised play characterized by exuberance and spontaneous enjoyment of an activity, and *ludus*, the play characterized by structured activities and explicit rules, in which obstacles are sought and overcome through training. This polarity between spontaneous, unpurposive gaiety and rule-conforming normativity corresponds with Schiller’s juxtaposition of formal drive and sensuous drive, from which play emerges. In Schiller’s case, it is aesthetics in general and art in particular that adds a third in-between those poles, so that the opposition between form and sentiment is neither overcome nor abolished, but remains in oscillating movement. Art, for Schiller, paradigmatically models play’s creative capacity to teach such movement, as the sheer abundance of aesthetic forms that art displays teaches humanity its potential for receptivity and perception of diverse life forms.<sup>51</sup> Artworks, he says, teach us to conceive of the play impulse as “the shaping spirit of imitation,” which handles “appearance as something self-sufficient.”<sup>52</sup> Thus, for Schiller, attending to appearances and semblances (“*Schein*”) and engaging in aesthetic play are the

keys to move between identity and difference, and the modes of action through which we can cultivate our imagination to imagine individuality and society as ideal states in which such movement can occur.<sup>53</sup>

In short, both in artistic creation as well as in aesthetic experience, a disjunctive “either-or” is transformed into a conjunction of simultaneity. Exactly this simultaneity of the opposite is achieved in play, in the form of a bilateral and dynamic subordination of the formal and sensuous drive, as a movement of in-between. And in this space in-between, which play opens, the self is free, being determined neither by external forces nor by general, a-temporal forms.<sup>54</sup> Sure enough, insofar as Schiller’s notion of aesthetic play denotes a practice of re-constructing identity through engagement with what is other than the identical, it must be distinguished from a practice of play as it is most often used today, namely as capitalist adaptation in the ubiquitous commodification of pleasure, fun, and immediate gratification.

What we have said with Peirce for the category of ‘firstness,’ namely that the qualitative experience of ‘firstness’ taps into the realm of freedom and that it requires the acknowledgment of the contingent and strange as real, can be reformulated here with Schiller and the idea of aesthetic play: The receptivity for difference formed through aesthetic experience and artistic creating is a training of the imagination for humans to acknowledge the strange(r) not as something other but as a potential starting-point for the process of becoming different themselves, and thus for the free play of continuously changing the determination of their (collective) identities, habits and dispositions to act and to respond. Aesthetic play, in other words, functions as a productive mechanism for the self-controlled organization of our habits of feeling. Reading Peirce through Schiller, then, suggests that for Peirce and Schiller aesthetic play helps individuals to form a disposition toward aesthetic receptivity to differences in appearances and provides perspectives and vistas they might not be familiar with, which they can use to re-construct their practical identities.

#### **4. The aesthetic as a register of democratic subjectivity: Peirce, Schiller, and Cavell**

I have argued that the function of the aesthetic for the idea of freedom in Peirce and Schiller consists in the inseparable continued disarticulation and reconstruction of habits and dispositions of action through engagement with phenomena in the mode of aesthetic experience and aesthetic play. Such mode makes available an ontological space that can function as an inexhaustible source for the disarticulation of (social and political) norms and rules by way of providing the resources necessary to counteract conformity to such roles and norms that co-determine individuals and collectives socially and politically; when individuals are receptive aesthetically to the world they are open to be moved and transformed by it, which opens up a space for the reflective occurrence of self-difference because individuals experience themselves and others, as yet to be determined and malleable to different determinations.

This argument resonates with what Aletta Norval has called Stanley Cavell's conception of "democratic subjectivity and community," which emphasizes the need for individuals to transform themselves and avoid conformism by challenging narratives and certainties about themselves in order to "being true to oneself."<sup>55</sup> The failure to do so, for Cavell, not only weakens individuals' freedom, but also imperils the general "democratic aspiration" of democratic life to be a form of free life, where free life presupposes the full development of a democratic society's capacity for self-transformation.<sup>56</sup> Democratic individuals, in other words, need to possess a disposition for engaging with the strange and the not yet accounted for, as a condition for their freedom. Only by such engagement can they avoid becoming trapped in an ossified narrative that consolidates supposed certainties about themselves. In other words, citizens' power of imagining and enacting democratic individuality anew is a register of democratic self-determination, for Cavell, whereby such powers are intertwined with the potential of social and political transformation of the democratic people.

Individuals who believe that their selves as mostly determined by forms and forces external to themselves, and who strive to redraw these determinations in attentive-creative exercises of aesthetic experience and aesthetic play, hence need to imagine “a transformation of society,” Cavell urges.<sup>57</sup> That is, they have to picture a transfigured society in which they could realise themselves as their “next self.”<sup>58</sup> Realising the next self, however, is not the actualisation of a (common) essence, but is only realised through the repeated political reinvention out of the realm of potentiality—out of the realm of ‘firstness’ and through aesthetic play, we could say. This realm of potentiality and aesthetic play is the source for re-creating the next self, which is not an ideal of “aesthetic perfectionism” (by which Cavell means an elitist cultivation of taste aimed at escaping “the mediocrity or leveling, say vulgarity, of equal existence”) but rather expresses the “democratic hope” of continually disrupting and transforming the ossification, mindlessness, and conformity of our democratic subjectivity and community.<sup>59</sup> Cavell’s conception of democratic subjectivity and community reflects both Peirce’s and Schiller’s aesthetics because it signifies the reality of what people (and things) *could* be, rather than what they actually are or necessarily ought to be—in short, it reflects an ideal process of recursively reconstructing identity—form (Schiller) or habit/general ideas (Peirce)—by imaginatively engaging the diversity of difference that the virtual qualities of the qualitative experience of ‘firstness’ offer. Engaging in aesthetic experience and play, in other words, are ways to counteract the peril of conformity, by affording citizens opportunities to reconfigure and recreate democratic subjectivity and community and to create and enact a new political reality.

In a democratic society, what forms do such aesthetic experience and play practically take? How do individuals in a democratic society come to be interested in or oriented toward the potentially disruptive aesthetic experience and play described here in the first place?<sup>60</sup> How do democratic subjects escape the weight of their identities to be able to be receptive to the sort of aesthetic experience valued here? What are the productive connections between aesthetic

experiences of certain kinds and the forms of democratic self-determination can take? A detailed answer to these questions would go beyond the scope of this essay.<sup>61</sup> Nevertheless, I would like to hint at some possible answers by referring again to Cavell, but this time to his reflections on how film is paradigmatically an object for the kind of aesthetic experience necessary for a conception of democratic freedom that I have articulated here.<sup>62</sup>

In his writings on film, Cavell advances many arguments for the value of film for our democratic and moral lives.<sup>63</sup> Here I'd like to highlight one particular point about the aesthetic experience of viewing (moving) images on a screen that is relevant to the aesthetic conception of democratic freedom I have outlined in this essay. This point revolves around the idea that viewing moving images on a screen challenges and trains us (viewers) to become attentive and receptive to the presentness of appearances, and their particularities, which are always at risk of avoidance. The experience of viewing film is at once the experience of the ordinary and the extraordinary: Ordinary, because viewing film is a common and shared experience, concerned and tied up with everyday life—film is, Cavell maintains, “the poetry of the ordinary,” and extraordinary, because film exemplarily exhibits the dual structure of missed experience and its potential recovery.<sup>64</sup> Film can foreground aspects of the ordinary world in a unique way and bring into focus a lot of what we miss about our own experiences; it invites us to cultivate, train, and refine our attention vis-à-vis the particularities and details of what we see. Further to this, in viewing film, we might become aware of the condition we find ourselves in as viewers, which is the condition of having to affirm what matters to us (as private individuals and as a community), and in having to affirm what matters, we might miss what matters—as Cavell says, we could “fail to guess the unseen from the seen, to fail to trace the implications of things—[...] to fail the perception that that there *is* something to be guessed and traced.”<sup>65</sup> As Walter Benjamin already noted, film owes this capacity in part to its technical possibilities, as it “assure[s] us of a vast and unsuspected field of action (*Spielraum*),”

making available details and particulars in space and time—through techniques such as the close-up, or slow-motion—otherwise not available to experience.<sup>66</sup> Such *Spielraum* (room for play) opened up through film is not simply a more accurate or more transparent way of looking at the world, but reveals the manifold textures and surfaces of the screened appearances, thus forming a new sense of what aspects of the world, of ourselves, and of others we are disposed to see and acknowledge. In short, by oscillating between seeing the ordinary as it is presented on screen and seeing the ordinary as what we cannot normally see, film is an invitation to engage in the kinds of aesthetic experience and aesthetic play that I have outlined above. Attention to the seemingly ordinary and mundane can lead us to discover (with Peirce we should say “feel”) something extraordinary about it, which might lead us to break with our habitual preoccupations, thus providing us with the perceptual and reflective insights to re-create ourselves in the mode of aesthetic play in relation to others and to existing social practices.

## **Conclusion**

In this essay, I have outlined a conception of democratic freedom in aesthetic terms. According to this conception, we can achieve a form of democratic freedom by engaging in a process of creating a self against the background of established stable identity-attributions. I have described this process as an ongoing process of re-creating our habits of feeling by subjecting them to a form of self-criticism through aesthetic experience and aesthetic play that, following Peirce and Schiller, should inform our responses to the particularities of the specific circumstances we find ourselves in—that is, as a process that foregrounds neither the blind autonomy of affect nor the intellectual capacity for the self-controlled formation of general ideas. The main feature of this process is an attentive engagement with an unconstrained potentiality of appearances that are not filtered on the basis of preconceived conceptual-judgmental frameworks, and that allow democratic subjects to interrupt and playfully transform their habitual entanglements in any form of relationships, customs, roles,



and norms in society, thus allowing them to experience themselves and others as yet to be determined and open to various determinations. This experience of difference is a requirement for the self-determined transformation (or appropriation) of the social and political practices that determine us, and thus a requirement to intervene in practices of governance, insofar as they are always also practices of subjectification. This understanding of democratic freedom only makes sense, of course, if we understand democracy not as a historical struggle that would ideally converge toward a determined limit, but if we understand democracy as an open-ended process, a great poem, analogous to Peirce's recursive triadic ontology and semiotics.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Peirce (1931, 5.119). Primary references are to the Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce and appear as volume number and paragraph.

<sup>2</sup> On the aesthetic turn in political theory, see especially Kompridis' compilation *The Aesthetic Turn in Political Thought* (Kompridis 2014). This literature further includes, but is not limited to, the following works: Elisabeth Anker, *Orgies of Feeling: Melodrama and the Politics of Freedom* (2014); Frank Ankersmit, *Aesthetic Politics: Political Philosophy Beyond Fact and Value* (1996); Roland Bleiker, *Aesthetics and World Politics* (2009), and *Visual Global Politics* (2018); Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (2010), and *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2015); Craig Carson, *The Aesthetics of Democracy: Eighteenth-Century Literature and Political Economy* Carson (2017); William Connolly, *Neuropolitics: Thinking, Culture, Speed* (2002), and *A World of Becoming* (2011); Joshua Foa Dienstag, *Cinema Pessimism: A Political Theory of Representation and Reciprocity*; Thomas Dumm, *A Politics of the Ordinary* (1999); Yaron Ezrahi, *Imagined Democracies: Necessary Political Fictions* (2015); Kennan Ferguson, *The Politics of Judgment: Aesthetics, Identity, and Political Theory* (2007); Jason Frank, "Aesthetic democracy: Walt Whitman and the poetry of the people," *The Review of Politics* 69:3 (2007), 402–430, *Constituent Moments: Enacting the People in Postrevolutionary America* (2010), and "The living image of the

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people,” *Theory & Event*, 18:1 (2015); Jeffrey Green, *The Eyes of the People: Democracy in an Age of Spectatorship* (2011); Davide Panagia, *The Poetics of Political Thinking* (2006), *The Political Life of Sensation* (2010), *Ten Theses for an Aesthetics of Politics* (2016), and *Rancière’s Sentiments*; all works by Jacques Rancière, most notably *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* (1999), *The Emancipated Spectator* (2011), *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2013a), *Aisthesis* (2013b); Morton Schoolman, *Reason and Horror: Critical Theory, Democracy and Aesthetic Individuality* (2004), and *A Democratic Enlightenment: The Reconciliation Image, Aesthetic Education, Possible Politics* (2020); Linda Zerilli, *A Democratic Theory of Judgment* (2016).

<sup>3</sup> See e.g. Linda Zerilli (2016), Nadia Urbinati (2014; 2019), and also Ruth Leys’ elaborate critique of affect theories’ tendency to adopt, without critique, a non-cognitivist and non-intentional understanding of affect (Leys 2011; 2017).

<sup>4</sup> As is well known, Peirce never developed or elaborated on a political philosophy properly speaking, nor was he a believer in the ideal of democracy. Towards the end of his life, he described himself as an “ultra-conservative, [...] an old-fashioned christian, a believer in the efficacy of prayer, an opponent of female suffrage and of universal male suffrage, in favor of letting business-methods develop without the interference of law, a disbeliever in democracy, etc. etc.” (Cited in Hoopes (1998, 19)). My application of Peirce’s aesthetics to democratic theory does not suggest that we can or should make a political thinker out of Peirce, let alone a theorist of democracy, but rather that his idea that freedom exists as a function of the aesthetic that is continuous with our organizing efforts within a process of self-legislation and self-determination.

<sup>5</sup> Tully (2008, 19).

<sup>6</sup> Deleuze valued Peirce for his commitment to a non-linguistic theory of the sign that upholds the autonomy of the visual sign over the linguistic sign. On the importance of this aspect of Peirce’s theory of signs for Deleuze, see chapter three of Ronald Bogue’s study *Deleuze on Cinema* (2003).

<sup>7</sup> This means, for Peirce, first, that all cognition as discovery and production of rule-like connections

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is related to a quality of sensation, and second, that every rule itself is accompanied by a quality of sensation. This also means that rules and feelings can only be considered real if we consider them in relation to each other, i.e. if we take the affective consequences of rules into account, and if we place feelings in the context of our rule-governed habits. If I, as a parent, mechanically discipline my child for a serious misbehavior without taking into account the feeling of justice and injustice in the child affected by the rule (the punishment) and in myself, the rule applied is a mere blind mechanism, and in that sense, according to Peirce, has to be described as unreal. What we need to take into account is that it feels a certain way when I beat the child, that it feels a certain way when I temporarily ground them, that it feels a certain way when they have to help me in the kitchen as punishment, and that it feels another way if I appeal to their conscience without disciplining them, etc.

<sup>8</sup> Schiller (2005). Hereafter *Letters*.

<sup>9</sup> E.g. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (cite); Axel Honneth, *Reification: A New Look at an Old Idea* (2012); Jon Simons, “Aestheticisation of politics: From fascism to radical democracy,” *Journal for Cultural Research* 12:3 (2008), 207-229; Nadia Urbinati, *Democracy Disfigured: Opinion, Truth, and the People* (2014).

<sup>10</sup> This certainly applies to neo-Kantian theorists (e.g. Habermas 1989; Urbinati 2014), but also in part to neo-Hegelian, neo-Marxist and hermeneutic theorists who understand self-determination as the counterpart of reifying alienation and domination, and reject an aestheticised politics as something that tricks people into accepting fabricated needs as real needs and delusions as reality (e.g. Honneth 2012; Simons 2008).

<sup>11</sup> Rancière (2013a, 8).

<sup>12</sup> Panagia (2018, 2); Massumi (2015, 41). The aesthetic turn has also been driven by critical engagement with the work of Gilles Deleuze, particularly the place given to affect in his these works:

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*Difference and Repetition* (Deleuze 2004), “Bartleby; or, The Formula” (1997a), “To Have Done With Judgment” (1997b), and *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Deleuze and Guattari 1987).

<sup>13</sup> Massumi (2002); Connolly (2002, 91).

<sup>14</sup> Zerilli (2016).

<sup>15</sup> Zerilli (2016, 21).

<sup>16</sup> Zerilli affirms that the aesthetic should have a place in democratic politics only in conjunction with judgment, because aesthetic judgments are, in an important sense, evaluative judgments, which she describes as „the kind of judgments we make when calling something ‘good’ or ‘bad,’ ‘just’ or ‘unjust,’ ‘beautiful’ or ‘ugly,’” and which we need for the establishment of a liberating politics. A page later, she decries her profession for not (anymore) encouraging “citizens to advance publicly substantive (value-laden) views of the good,” a practice, I take her to say, should be at the center of our democratic life. Zerilli (2016, xiii; xiv).

<sup>17</sup> This section draws partially on Smith (1973).

<sup>18</sup> Peirce (1931, 1.25)

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Krausser (1977) and Short (2007, 75-90) for more detailed accounts of the relationships between Peirce’s categories.

<sup>20</sup> Peirce (1931, 5.129; 5.36).

<sup>21</sup> Peirce (1931, 1.418).

<sup>22</sup> Peirce (1931, 5.44; 1.304).

<sup>23</sup> Peirce (1931, 5.44).

<sup>24</sup> Deleuze (2001)

<sup>25</sup> Deleuze (2001, 98).

<sup>26</sup> Peirce (1931, 5.44).

<sup>27</sup> Peirce cites as examples the experience of acute pain caused by an electric shock, the thrill of



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physical delight, the piercing sound of a train whistle, or the stench of rotting cabbage. Peirce (1931, 1.304).

<sup>28</sup> Peirce (1931, 5.42).

<sup>29</sup> Cavell (1988); Wittgenstein (2009b, 204<sup>e</sup>, § 118).

<sup>30</sup> Wittgenstein (2009b, 204<sup>e</sup>, § 118).

<sup>31</sup> Wittgenstein (2009b, 223<sup>e</sup>, § 248).

<sup>32</sup> Wittgenstein (2009b, 204<sup>e</sup>, § 118).

<sup>33</sup> Wittgenstein (2009a, e.g. 11e, § 19; 15e, § 24).

<sup>34</sup> Wittgenstein (1969, e.g. 15<sup>e</sup>, § 94).

<sup>35</sup> Mulhall (2015, 22).

<sup>36</sup> This moment of seeing anew or of seeing something extraordinary in the ordinary might be an instance of what Wittgenstein more broadly called to see the world in wonder: „And I will now describe the experience of wondering at the existence of the world by saying: it is the experience of seeing the world as a miracle.“ Wittgenstein (1993, 43). And this sense of mystery that wonder conveys is necessary for a full recognition of human existence and the existence of the world. On this see Cahill (2011) and Kidd (2017). Similarly, Peirce says that wonder is the focus of “musement” (by which he means something akin to play). Musement, he says, “may take either the form of esthetic contemplation, or that of distant castle-building (whether in Spain or within one’s moral training), or that of considering some wonder in one of the Universes [of signs] or some connection between two of the three, with speculation concerning its cause.” Peirce (1998, 436).

<sup>37</sup> Cavell (1988, 154).

<sup>38</sup> Wittgenstein says “the aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something—because it is always before one’s

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eyes.) The real foundations of his enquiry do not strike a man at all.” Wittgenstein (2009a, 56<sup>c</sup>, §129).

<sup>39</sup> Peirce (1931, 1.302).

<sup>40</sup> Kant (1996, 95).

<sup>41</sup> He outlines this conception mainly in the two famous essays “The fixation of belief” (Peirce 1931, 5.223-47) and “How to make our ideas clear” (Peirce 1931, 5. 248–71).

<sup>42</sup> Peirce (1931, 5.223).

<sup>43</sup> I provide an account of this larger pragmatic process in Råber (2020).

<sup>44</sup> Peirce thus distances himself both from idealist theories of subjectivity, which presuppose the image of a subject of knowledge detached from the world, and from the usual analyses of the relation between impressions and ideas by British empiricism. He might be called a kind of metaphysical empiricist, a designation that seems justified in light of statements such as this one: “There is nothing at all that is absolutely confrontational; although it is quite true that the confrontational is continually flowing in upon us” (Peirce 1958, 7.653). Cf. Legg (2017), who interprets Peirce’s theory of perceptual experience in a similar vein. She shows how, for Peirce, perceptions and perceptual judgments are in a continuous relation to each other, with a perceptual judgment indexing (but not copying) a perception. See also Wilson (2016) for a recent exploration of Peirce’s particular empiricism.

<sup>45</sup> Insofar as “habit is that specialization of the law of mind whereby a general idea gains the power of exciting reactions,” and a “disposition to respond to a given kind of stimulus in a given kind of way,” (Peirce 1931, 6.145; 5.440) this disposition to respond is not exclusively the outcome of a cognitive process, but, according to Peirce, of a process whereby “instantaneous feelings flow together into a continuum of feeling, which has in a modified degree the peculiar vivacity of feeling and has gained generality.” Peirce (1931, 6.151).

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<sup>46</sup> Cf. Peirce (1931, 6.452; 6.458). On the influence of Schiller's *Letters* on Peirce for the development of his conception of 'firstness' and the formulation of his pragmatism, see also (Anderson 1995; Barnouw 1994; Dilworth 2014; Fisch 1982; Hookway 1985; Sebeok 1982).

<sup>47</sup> Barnouw (1988, 615).

<sup>48</sup> Schiller (2005, 79, 81).

<sup>49</sup> Schiller (2005, 87).

<sup>50</sup> Schiller (2005, 97).

<sup>51</sup> Schiller (2005, 155).

<sup>52</sup> Schiller (2005, 195).

<sup>53</sup> Art, Schiller says, is a "daughter of Freedom," and "the construction of true political freedom" is the "most perfect of all the works of art" (Schiller 2005, 7). Schiller's concept of aesthetic education attempts to elucidate an enlightenment aesthetics that is oriented towards the "reconciliation of identity and difference," as Morton Schoolman recently has argued, by holding identity and difference simultaneously in balance in neither constructing identity through the suppression of difference nor by merely tolerating them, but by actively engaging the strange and uncanny in the familiar and ordinary (Schoolman 2020, 24).

<sup>54</sup> On this see Petry (1992) who traces Peirce's concept of self-control back to Peirce's readings of Schiller's *Letters* (among others).

<sup>55</sup> Norval (2007, 144); Cavell (1990, 1). See also Norris (2017) for a Cavellian perfectionist conception of democratic subjectivity and community.

<sup>56</sup> Cavell (1990, 1).

<sup>57</sup> Cavell (1990, 7).

<sup>58</sup> Cavell (1990, xxxv).

<sup>59</sup> Cavell (1990, 56).

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<sup>60</sup> On this question see Schoolman (2020, 65), where he argues with Whitman that “poetry nurtures [...] sensibility as our *receptivity* to differences,” and because it lacks a definite truth that could be uncovered, “difference appears mysterious and its mystery becomes a source of wonder irresistibly attracting our reception. [...] Appearances appear different, differences appear mysterious, mystery intimates wonder and kindles our receptivity.”

<sup>61</sup> I elaborate an comprehensive answer to these questions from a different perspective in Råber (2013).

<sup>62</sup> Panagia (2020) elaborates the implications of Cavell’s ontology of film for a theory of democratic association.

<sup>63</sup> These writings most notably include Cavell (1978; 1979; 1981; 1984; 2004).

<sup>64</sup> Cavell (1984, 14). As Sandra Laugier notes, for Cavell the “ordinary realism of cinema” is not primarily a function of its ability to portray reality (even though it is that too), but a function of its “inclusion in ordinary life and [its] role in the constitution of self. Democratic art, therefore, and democracy of the singular are created by the way in which each person is making their own experience” (Laugier 2021, 277-78).

<sup>65</sup> Cavell (1984, 14).

<sup>66</sup> Benjamin (2002, 117). See Singh (2020) for a detailed discussion of play and cinema in Benjamin.