

To the Skyspace, or perpetual peace and wonder

Walter Benjamin's political thaumazein in James Turrell's oculi

If to be engaged with politics is to be engaged with history, then it would seem that nothing could be more apolitical than James Turrell's skyspaces. These works seem timeless—or at least engaged with time only on a geological or astronomical scale; they seem to take us out of, not into the time of history, the time of our everyday lives. Even the biological dimension of Turrell's work, its engagement with sense perception, seems detached from anything we could call biopolitics, they are panopticons without panopticism. While in the last third of the twentieth century perception itself was politicized, (along with the science of perception and the function of perception in science), these debates do not seem to have direct bearing on understanding Turrell. If one wanted to place his work into a political context one might, at best it seems, establish some affinities with the ecological movement of the early seventies, also contemporaneous with the realization of the first works based on his mature aesthetic strategies. However, I will propose that by placing his work into dialogue with Walter Benjamin's concept of 'thaumazein' or wonder, the evaluation of a hidden political dimension of Turrell's work becomes possible. In this evaluation, we can see that through his art a new philosophy of perception becomes central to a political aesthetic particularly relevant to the period of perpetual globalized, mediated, and technologized warfare.

In the last section of *One Way Street*, a fragment entitled, "To the planetarium" Walter Benjamin first presented one of the central themes of his later work. The term he deploys there, *thaumazein* or 'wonder,' is the same Plato placed in *Theaetetus* as the origin of philosophy itself. In *thaumazein* Benjamin believes he has discovered an elemental power strong enough to disrupt the dream of a culture under the spell of commodity fascination, a power which refigures the relation of humanity to the environment. This concept goes on to play a hidden role in arguably his most important essay, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' in

which capitalist over-accumulation, grounded in a technologized domination of the environment, is linked to the inevitability of war. This insight allows him to make a technologized remediation between the human senses and nature the key to a new political aesthetics. Given that our relation to the environment and natural resources is now, more clearly than ever, at the center of the perpetual war and ecological crisis stretching from Benjamin's time to our own, his theories seem increasingly relevant if not positively prescient.

Looking at Turrell's 'skyspaces' with Benjamin's eye then reveals a political dimension not inconsistent with Turrell's Quaker heritage at its most socially engaged as well as his personal history as a conscientious objector. His installations can be seen as a heterotopias in dialogue with the outside world exactly through a break in sense of time and place. Turrell's installations use technology and architecture to reframe perception itself, and in this reframing we come to the very grounds of philosophy and science, wonder. Wonder implies not the domination of nature as something outside of us, but an engagement with the pure encounter, an event from which both the self and the natural world emerge. Bringing art, philosophy and science together through the passionate engagement with the 'outside world' is an implicit contestation of the form of politics which, by necessity police the boundaries of these disciplines in order to function. If Benjamin has proven that the confluence of capitalism, technology and an ideology of the domination of nature can only lead to war, Turrell's work proposes that only by opening up another space, a space in which our relationship to nature is transformed from fascination to wonder can another future become possible. What I think can be found in this work then is the actualization of a significant new strategy for addressing the most pressing question of our time: war. We know already that in Turrell's skyspaces we can find moments of peace, but if their timeless character threatens to spill into the now, then perhaps some possibilities for the establishment of perpetual peace might be found there as well.