"Make Yourself Useful!"

Shannon Winnubst
Southwestern University
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"Make yourself useful!"

A stinging command. One that rings and reverberates all across whitened, westernized, colonized lands. Lodged deeply in our cultural psyches, it rings and rings and rings, leaving us nothing but guilty in its wake.

The grasp of utility is deep, deeper than the late 19th century European systems of ethics could begin to convey. John Stuart Mill merely systematized what had already been stirring in cultural practices of northern, western Europe across the prior three centuries. And Max Weber then cast its net yet further, easily and appropriately, sealing the twin triumphs of capitalism and Protestantism, and further hiding the true victor, utility. By giving vague cultural sensibilities proper names, Utilitarianism and the Protestant Work Ethic, the power of categories settled utility yet deeper into our cultural fabrics. And, in the ultimate act of a totalizing grasp, it even delimited itself, setting the (alleged) boundary of its own reach: aesthetics lay beyond it.

Or so utility said. And so we, dutifully at the beginning of the 20th century, championed the radically solitary domain of aesthetics as the last frontier safe from the vagaries of the market. Whether we are still lured by the "art for art's sake" mantra or we have seen through the political nihilism that results all too easily from it, the vague sense that aesthetics is the singular realm beyond the grasp of utility persists. Grappling with the seeming impossibility of thinking or living without utility, we most easily turn to aesthetics. *"What is not useful?"* After much searching, we comfort ourselves with the discovery of *"style, aesthetics, art…"* This is, after all, surely what Nietzsche had in mind when he beckoned us to turn away from the grave seriousness of morality towards art, "where the lie is sanctified."[1] Is not the sanctifying of the lie, the undermining of the

grand epistemologies of truth, not also an evading of utility, modernity's most forceful form of truth?

It is a tempting solution, with radical possibilities. But perhaps also too obvious and simple. As Michel Foucault's method, if not his explicit response, demonstrates, this valorizing of the aesthetic as the realm exempted from the powerful barometer of utility may itself be an enactment of utility's power. Indeed, as Georges Bataille argues over and over, utility may not be so easily eluded.

Foucault repeatedly demonstrates the subtle mechanisms of boundary construction and controlled transgression performed in the emergence of categories. In *The History of Sexuality, Volume One*, for example, he shows over and over how a normalizing category emerges through the careful construction of that which lays beyond it. As an exemplar perhaps, heterosexuality emerges as a category of identity only against the emergence of homosexuality, the category of (apparent) transgression that finally serves to re-inscribe the heterosexual as the norm. Bataille outlines similar functions in Volume II of *The Accursed Share*, where he shows how behaviors are eroticized via prohibitions, demonstrating again how the transgression of set boundaries re-enforces the category transgressed. For Bataille (following Levi-Strauss), the exemplar is incest, where the prohibition against inter-generational sexual contact within biological families actually serves to eroticize familial ties, ensuring the continued flow of erotic energy in this otherwise closed container. And finally, in more recent texts, Judith Butler helps to open the field of queer theory by using these strategies to show how the grasp of the sex/gender distinction in feminist theory effectively controls the kinds of transgressions against the normative heterosexual matrix, limiting it to homosexuality rather than trans- or bi- or multi-sexualities. In all of these texts, we learn to read categories as performative entities that, in delimiting their own boundaries, ensure that the transgression of the category will only further solidify the category.

It is an old lesson by now. And, here, it presents us with the possibility that our very conception of the aesthetic as something beyond or outside of the useful is itself an effect that further blinds us to the deep grasps of utility.

I want to explore how this deep grasp of utility—the valuing of that which is useful as the ultimate criterion for all actions, thoughts and even desires—reaches inside all of us in these whitened, westernized lands in ways that exceed our usual demarcations of utility's realms. I want to explore how utility operates within us not as a rational response to moral questions, nor as an ethical response to religious duty, nor even as a civilized response to economic imperatives—but as a much deeper sensibility about aesthetic style. A much deeper sensibility about the world and its rhythms and our places in it. A sensibility that is written on and in and through our bodies, shaping us to fulfill its needs without even the question of our consent. An imperative aesthetic style. An unwritten code. An etiquette.

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"Make yourself useful, *boy*--"

Listen to the southern twang, the mean trace of slavery's history lingering in that last word, that damning last word which is always implied if not spoken in the command itself: "*boyyy—.*" It pulls the command right out of the sky of abstractions and slams it squarely on the ground. This ain't about no lofty ideals—this is about bodies. Bodies of control and bodies to be controlled. Bodies of discipline and bodies in need of discipline. Bodies of power and bodies that obey. Bodies and histories. That simple, far from innocent *"boyyy"* cuts the demand straight into its fundamental register—the old but hauntingly familiar voice of the patronizing white overseer that never seems to die. Whether spoken sternly by a parent to a child, frankly by a boss to an employee, reprimandingly by a teacher to a student or jokingly by a friend to a companion, it is the same voice speaking and the *"boyyy"* is at the end of every sentence. This command of utility, whenever and however spoken, is about bodies—black, brown, white, yellow; queer, female, trans, disabled, poor; Jewish, Catholic, Muslim, Hindu. It is about bodies and the ways that utility seeps into them through their social mappings of power.

If etiquette is the proper comportment of the body, these social mappings of power should be readily legible in the codes of its practices. Whether one knows which fork to use, for example, has always been one of the most simple locators of social class. But if we place utility in this realm of etiquette, we may begin to see how both utility and etiquette work together to draw the maps of some of our most salient categories of

identity and difference. Reading utility as a primary force in shaping proper comportment, we begin to see how this imperative shapes all bodies—racializing, sexualizing, gendering, classing, even spiritualizing and nationalizing according to how bodies fall on either one or the other side of the command, "Make yourself useful, *boyyy*."

The stories with bodies of color are all too easy to tell, belying the ways that racism lurks literally just beneath the skin in the United States. Brown bodies are lazy, black bodies even lazier. White folks marvel at the hard work of Mexican day-laborers as they toil away in their yards and bathrooms and garbage cans: "*that Mexican sure does work hard, don't he?"* The surprise belies the expectation. Black bodies are seen only in crime reports, drug zones and welfare lines. Their usefulness all dried-up post-Emancipation, they are no longer even expected to work. And then the yellow bodies, who have mistakenly taken the command of utility to the other extreme—working much too hard, far too useful, displaying their zeal for success in extraordinary bad taste. One must know how to appear with just the right amount of usefulness to gain entrance to those cherished boardrooms. To work too hard is not in good taste and, accordingly, not highly valued, leaving the physical laborer with one of utility's most perverse twists: it takes three jobs of hard, physical labor just to pay the bills. It is not by accident that the bodies in those boardrooms all look alike, behave properly and display just the right amount of usefulness to ensure their lives of luxury.

Sexualized bodies fare only slightly more subtly than racialized ones: the queering of that "*boyyy"* as the effeminate one who cannot protect himself has always echoed through its racialized tenor. (We hear this most clearly in the contemporary voice of that white overseer, the white police officer poised on the brink of violently sodomizing his catch.) The perversion of queer bodies lays in their categorical refusal of the act that renders sexuality meaningful—the act that renders it useful. An affront to all 'natural' sensibilities, a sexuality that categorically precludes reproduction, the guise utility dons here, can be nothing but a breach of etiquette. The reverberations surface with humorously literal aberrations of taste: queens with cartoonish femininity on parade; gay men with 'too much' taste and a perfectionism that paralyzes; lesbians with bad

haircuts and no taste at all. Again, the simple balance between too much and not enough is missed, but here it is biologically impossible: these sexual bodies cannot be useful. Granted, the categories are shifting as the lesbian baby-boom takes cultural root. But the lesbians in flannel shirts and combat boots have only been eclipsed by lipstick chic as the much promised polymorphous perversity has finally arrived: transsexual bodies will truly never be of any use at all.

Utility's gendering of bodies may seem old-hat and obvious by now. Surely, we know that masculine bodies are the ones that work hard and produce useful commodities for the marketplaces—whether economic, intellectual, political, spiritual or moral. Masculine bodies produce things. Conversely, feminine bodies are put on their pedestals because they were never even made for working. As Bataille voices that which should perhaps remain unspoken (if the phallus is to remain veiled): "the prostitute[, as] the perfection of femininity, is the only being who logically should be idle."[2] Feminine bodies perform their femininity perfectly when they behave as beautiful bodies untainted by even a trace of material servitude. In fact, it is through this purity from utility that female bodies become the 'natural' arbiters of good taste and the quintessential consumers, locking the role of shopper as the subject position that bridges the 1950's ideal housewife to the 16-year-old female target of all marketing. How do women fit into the closed economy of utility? We shop-'til-we-drop. And yet are women not simultaneously the exemplary commodities exchanged? And is not the exchange value determined precisely by their disavowal of such roles? Following Irigaray here, we see that feminine bodies perform the merging of aesthetics and utility perfectly: it is in their beauty that feminine bodies are deemed valuable. It is in their complete disavowal of all crass utility that feminine bodies are judged useful to the (specular) economy.

Finally, we may see this reign of utility at work most brutally in the realm of spiritual lives—or what we should properly call religion. Only those religious practices that issue into some moral statement about the world, some clear evaluation of behaviors, ideas, choices or lifestyles, are worthy of the very name, religion. All others, whether meditative practices or pagan aesthetics, whether ritualized prayer or goddess festivals, only defame the concept of religion when they claim it for themselves. As the fount of all values, proper religion must exercise the power of a transcendent to master the

world—to master the world and nature and all unruly desires. It is the place in which we learn the fundamental practices of discipline, spelled out before us in clear and distinct principles.

These are, of course, cartoons. Cartoons intended to laugh at the arrogant voice that might actually speak them. But in that sad laughter we hear ugly truths. We hear the ways that racism, heterosexism, sexism and nationalism write themselves upon our bodies through the register of utility. We hear the many forms that utility assumes: economic, reproductive, biological, moral—even aesthetic. Fundamentally, these forms write themselves upon our bodies through demanding that we become just exactly the right sorts of tools—the sort of (white) tool that labors without showing it, exploits the work of (black, brown, female) others while disavowing their abilities to work, supplies just the right amount of products (children), and declares itself pure and dedicated to clear, distinct principles of mastery and control (over nature, over others, over the world). It is the Enlightenment utopia. And it writes itself upon our bodies in the very ways we conduct ourselves from moment to moment, day to day, week to week. It writes itself upon our bodies in the kinds of tools that we become.

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In suggesting that the command of utility is written upon our bodies, I am suggesting that it infects our senses of style, our senses of taste and etiquette. Perhaps the fundamental corporeal register in which we can witness this ruling of etiquette is temporality: timing is everything.

A basic lesson of childhood is about timing. We learn rather quickly not only which parent to ask for what, but more importantly when to ask for it. Whether we get $2, $5, $10 or $20 for the night's activities, whether we get to spend the night at Joni's or Joey's house, whether we get to go to the movies or the skating rink all hinge entirely on the fragile balance of timing. We learn to read the rhythms of the adult world with an unspoken precision. And this precision writes itself on our bodies with greater and greater force as we slowly enter that world of adult bodies.

Temporality frames the space of etiquette. Whether it is gauging the window of fashionable tardiness or delivering the joke at its singular moment of possibility, one's

style is constituted fundamentally through one's relation to proper timing. The range of proper timing varies from place to place and community to community: urban time is certainly not what suburban time is, not to mention rural or small town time; single time varies from coupled time; middle class time differs from working class and again from upper class time; children's time seems infinitely longer than adult time; and, of course, the infamous "CPT" ("Colored Person's Time") differs considerably from the punctuality of good old fashioned white Protestant time. Nothing conscious, nothing intentional, and yet speaking more loudly than any of our professed values or aesthetics—temporality gives us away. It tells where we came from and where we are placed in this world. It tells what kinds of tools we are.

One way to connect the (seemingly) totalizing realm of utility with the systems of domination that we all embody is thus to investigate its temporality. As an activity that is determined by the ends that it obtains, utility is driven by a temporality of anticipation. It directs consciousness always towards the future, assuming an intentionality that can both be controlled and master conditions necessary to achieve the desired end, usefulness. The endpoint of one's activities is expected, anticipated, and awaited as the final judgment of all moments leading towards it. This is teleology at its strictest definition, where the *telos* must manifest itself in clear and distinct ways—in useful ways. Implying that these ends can be obtained, this temporality of anticipation also assumes that it will recognize its final achievement. It is satisfaction that is so deeply anticipated, and this satisfaction is expected to be recognized with certainty. The temporality of utility embeds us in a deep anticipation of satisfying certainty.

But the effects of this temporality of anticipation on the present often seem to run at odds with this promised endpoint. Utility's temporality, in its demanding march towards its singular goals, performs some of the hallmarks of colonialism's 'divide and conquer' strategies. Each and every moment in a consciousness driven by utility is sequestered off into its individual role in the grand movement towards achievement. Utility divides our experience into separable moments that fall neatly into sequential lines, all leading towards the final point of use. The shirt is ironed so that the body will appear orderly so that the voice will be heard authoritatively so that the argument will persuade so that the position will be obtained so that the money will be earned so that the

economy will flourish so that the citizens will buy more shirts to be ironed. Unbothered by any circularity that appears through a general perspective, utility operates comfortably in this closed economy, dividing each moment discretely from the next, reducing the meaning of the present *qua* present to a nonsensical question.

The present is judged, clearly and distinctly, by the role that it plays in the achievement of useful ends. The present is judged by the future, framed by the future anterior—i.e., the perspective of the 'will have been'—that already reads each moment as if the future moment of utility has already been achieved. Perhaps beautifully performing western metaphysics and its repeated reduction of the present to a fleeting juncture between past and future that ontologically resists conception, utility thereby totalizes its grasp, seeping into each discrete, sequential moment through the implicit judgment of that moment's usefulness—albeit a judgment that the singular moment itself can never adequately answer. Utility provides its own certainty, rendering each singular moment vulnerable to a judgment whose final criterion—as a criterion that operates on general principles that necessarily supersede the singular moment—it can never provide.

Judgment and mastery thus structure utility's temporality of anticipation. And the experience of consciousness embedded in this temporal structure is appropriately demarcated. Having itself always already assumed the form of a tool, consciousness structured by utility demands that experience should answer it in the form of a tool. The world should present itself to us in useful ways and, when it fails to do so, it is the human mandate to shape it accordingly. An exemplary performance of a phallocentric specular economy, it issues into the forms of racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism and nationalism that were parodied above but sadly saturate our cultural practices: the temporality of anticipation provides one of the more subtle tools of judgment and mastery at work in each of these systems of domination.

But what if we refuse to reduce ourselves to tools?
Wouldn't this be, simply, in bad taste?

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If the world insists on blowing up, we may
be the only ones to grant it the right to do so,
while giving ourselves the right to have spoken
in vain.

-- Georges Bataille
The Accursed Share, Volume II

Living now, at the dawn of the 21st century as it is called in whitened, westernized lands, a dawn that is promising a century still more bloody than the last and bloodiest yet, such a line as Bataille's sounds absurd at best, perverse at minimum. To resign ourselves to the world blowing itself up seems the very worse kind of aestheticizing of violence that modernism could have bred. But it is not exactly resignation that Bataille is voicing. To be resigned requires that one was involved, invested. And to give oneself the right to speak in vain certainly does not imply involvement—but rather the right, the space, not to be involved. Never to have been invested. Not to be running on the same rails of time and efficiency and meaning that the world proclaims. Not to be, as an enactment of the most concise rejection that late capitalism (suspiciously) offers us, useful.

To do these things is, as our glimpses and cartoons show us here, far from simple. It cannot be, for example, merely the act of celebrating laziness or deliberately choosing activities that result in sheer absurdity, such as debauchery or acts of self-destruction. To do these things is to be shunned by this society in the most simple and straightforward of manners: it is to re-enforce the normalizing power of the very society one hopes to escape. It is not to create a space beyond that society—or beyond utility.

The call of Bataille, and of Foucault and Nietzsche and Butler and Irigaray and so many others of their ilk, is more subtle. As I hinted above, Foucault turned in his later texts to a celebration of style, to the art of caring for the self, as a turn away from the normalizing ethics of rationalist modernity. Nietzsche also turned in his later works towards a sense of the aesthetic and style that would not collapse into the conceptualized realm of good taste I have sketched here. While I hope to have intimated that a turn to aesthetics cannot be a naïve claim to step beyond the grasp of utility, the attempt to live one's life with the sort of 'style' suggested by texts such as Nietzsche's and Foucault's may nonetheless disclose the frayed limits of utility's totalizing grasp.

Taste, as I hope to have already implied, is one of the longest reaching tentacles of whitened, westernized ethical and moral precepts. It is all that I have cartooned above about the ways that utility, the hallmark of these precepts, writes itself into our racist, sexist, heterosexist, classist and nationalist 'ethics'—and, more frighteningly, into our bodies. To have good taste is to mirror the dominant, and dominating, world back to itself. It is to behave properly, which means ultimately to make oneself useful in exactly the sort of veiled manner that allows power to emerge in this phallocentric, white supremacist world. It is to make oneself just the right sort of tool that can, in turn, manipulate all other tools to its own ends. It is to have just the right timing—not to mention the right race, sex, gender, sexuality, class, nationality and religion. To have good taste is a primary way to mark one's location in this culture. It is a mark of how well we have learned to be properly useful and, thereby, to perpetuate systems of domination.

In its Nietzschean vein, style becomes the attempt to create one's life—to create one's values and relations and spaces and temporalities—in ways that are not reducible to these ethical or rational precepts. This is not, again, merely to negate rationality or morality in a silly pantomiming of the irrational and immoral as more worthwhile. It is not to engage in this sort of reverse-valorization of opposites, nor in the anticipated transgression of categories that only reinstates the original category's power. Rather, it is to move beyond this logic of negation. It is to step away from it, not against it—to step aside, with light feet. It is to untangle and surpass utility's apparent totality, along with its shaping of our bodies, our taste, our very temporality.

As we have already encountered, the temporality of utility operates within the demonstrable. The imperative of satisfaction—of recognizable satisfaction—structures utility as its defining moment. Out of this temporality, social power emerges as utility's strongest tool to shape human experience to its own needs and demands. Because it can be recognized, because utility lodges us in a closed economy with set parameters that enable us to know when it has been achieved, utility presents the social map of power with a clear and distinct barometer. Is this body useful? We can answer that question,

definitively and with damning—racist, sexist, classist, heterosexist and nationalist—consequences. Utility thus grounds our social configurations of power.

But it can only do so in its own closed economy. Utility cannot see outside of itself. As we have witnessed here in its insidious control of aesthetics—indeed, of our very corporeal habits and rhythms of etiquette—utility totalizes social relations precisely through foreclosing the possibility of any space or thing beyond it. Socially enmeshed in it, we cannot even conceive of thinking outside of it: the simple question of the utility (professionally, politically, culturally, even aesthetically) of this very essay surfaces with unremarkable ease. But, at the very same time, utility is not as totalizing as it might (wish to) appear. It is not the exemplary performance of Hegelian dialectics that it fools us into thinking it is in our cultural practices and habits. Utility falls short. The closure of its boundaries presents itself too explicitly. The very neatness of its system suggests that it has suspended any account of its own condition of possibility—namely, its own demarcation.

Utility functions as a totalizing logic only within the closed boundaries of its own criteria. That is, only insofar as we fail to question why we might want to buy more shirts—or enter the cherished boardroom or produce our 2.5 children or cite an ethical imperative or even look like the Aryan fantasy—does utility entangle us entirely in its web. But, while it may be exceedingly difficult, particularly given the seductive social power that it would cost us, it is not impossible to ask such questions. It is not impossible to locate this blind spot in utility's logic.

Reading utility as a restricted kind of teleology, we begin to see that utility actually cannot account for its own *telos*. As in the shirt-ironing example, circularity eventually emerges. The immediate *teloi* of utility (appearing well-coifed, attaining the position) eventually close in on themselves, offering no *telos* beyond the ones that utility already assumes. That is, utility cannot account for why it is itself finally useful. Rather, it can seduce us into its material effect, which is considerable, and blind us to these ontological questions. But this blinding, as I hope to have invoked here, comes only with the perpetuation of numerous systems of domination and the foreclosure of this more general, ontological sort of questioning about purpose, about ends.

This is, of course, its crucial blind spot. It is only in foreclosing any account of its own over-arching *telos* that utility sets its own boundaries and begins totalizing the economy it has closed for itself. It is only from this basis that utility can be idealized as the sort of unquestionable value that it has become in whitened, westernized lands. And, of course, it is in this idealizing that it further exercises its social—and aesthetic—power. It is in this idealized state that 'good taste' emerges as one of utility's most insidious tentacles, shaping our desires to place ourselves squarely in this culture where utility parades so effectively as beauty. But, true to the dynamics of blindness and insight, this insight into utility's blind spot weakens its blinding material effects. If utility only totalizes its grasp through its seductive material effects of power and its foreclosure of its own condition of possibility, cracks emerge in its own closed economy. It is no longer totalizing.

To create a style, rather than a taste, of resistance to domination—and the utility that drives so much of it—is then possible. While it is undoubtedly difficult, involving practices that jar us from patterns as unconscious as our embodied, subtle temporalities of anticipation, it is nonetheless possible. As Bataille warns us, "It is not easy to realize one's own ends if one must, in trying to do so, carry out a movement that surpasses them."[3] But, if the ends are useful, it is possible. And this may be our best attempt to surpass our placements in this culture of domination and truly become anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-homophobic, anti-capitalist. It may be our best attempt to cultivate styles of quintessentially bad taste and develop an etiquette—not an ethics—of resistance.

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[1] *On the Genealogyof Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufman (Vintage: New York) 1989, 153.
[2] *The Accursed Share, Volume II*, trans. Robert Hurley (Zone Books: New York) 1993, 146.
[3] *The Accursed Share, Volume I*, trans. Robert Hurley (Zone Books: New York) 1991, 21.