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## **Aestheticization Processes: Phenomena, Distinctions and Prospects**

Wolfgang Welsch

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# Aestheticization Processes

## Phenomena, Distinctions and Prospects

*Wolfgang Iser*

Live with your century, but don't be its creation;  
afford your contemporaries however  
what they require, not what they praise.  
(Schiller, 1967: 105)

Perhaps however it would be altogether improper  
to see an aesthetic problem being taken so seriously.  
(Nietzsche, 1980: 24)

**T**HE FOLLOWING deliberations are comprised of four parts. To begin with I want to sketch a tableau of contemporary aestheticization processes. As this consists of quite different aspects, I shall next have to clarify what is meant by the term 'aestheticization' in these variant uses and how this term is to be dealt with correctly. In the third part I shall attempt a more in-depth explanation of aestheticization processes. The fourth part will then undertake an assessment of aestheticization processes and identify critical perspectives.

### **I. A Tableau of Contemporary Aestheticization Processes**

We are without doubt currently experiencing an aesthetics boom. It extends from individual styling, urban design and the economy through to theory. More and more elements of reality are being aesthetically mantled, and reality as a whole is coming to count increasingly as an aesthetic construction to us.

The following tableau of aestheticization processes first attempts to achieve some oversight of the partially known, but bewilderingly discussed, phenomena. Second, and above all, it should become clear that in addition to surface aestheticization there is a deep-seated aestheticization. The former has been much discussed and copiously derided; the latter less commonly so

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– although it is more significant – and to criticize this validly ought to prove more difficult. He who speaks of ‘aestheticization’ in only its superficial sense and fails to consider deep-seated aestheticization – as unfortunately most often occurs – remains below the diagnostic level which is necessary today.

*Surface Aestheticization: Embellishment, Animation, Experience*

*Aesthetic furnishment of reality.* Aestheticization is at its most obvious in urban areas, where almost everything has been subjected to a face-lift over the last few years. Shopping precincts have been fashioned to be elegant, chic and lively. This trend has long since affected not only town centres, but also the outskirts of towns and country refuges. Hardly a paving-stone, no door-handle and no public place has been spared by this aestheticization boom. Even ecology has, largely, become a further means of enhancement. If advanced Western societies were able to do completely as they wish, they would transform the urban, industrial and natural environment *in toto* into a hyperaesthetic scenario.

As such, the world is becoming a domain of experience. ‘Experience’ is a central watchword in these processes of enhancement or embellishment (Schulze, 1992). Every boutique and every cafe is today designed to be an ‘active experience’. German railway stations are no longer called stations, but rather, following their artistic garniture, call themselves a ‘world of experience with rail connection’. Every day we go from the experience-office to experience-shopping, relax with experience-gastronomy and finally end up at home for some experience-living. Suggestions have even been made that memorials – for example, those to Nazi atrocities – should be staged as an ‘experience-domain’.

Art too has interposed itself into the machinery of experience and continues its production in accord with the dialectics of such pseudo-experiences: the disappointment in those experiences, which in truth aren’t such, drives people from one experience to the next. The 1992 Documenta art exhibition demonstrated this afresh: it was described as being worse than all those preceding it, and in general worse all round – but, yet again, the number of visitors exceeded all expectations. It was the first Documenta which closed without having made a loss. The worse it is, the more successful it is – this law of the entertainment industry also seems to apply to the subsphere of art.

At this first, foreground level, aestheticization means the furnishing of reality with aesthetic elements, a sugar-coating of the real with aesthetic flair. This certainly re-engages an old and elemental need for a more beautiful reality corresponding to our senses and feeling for form. On top of this, particularly in the provinces, comes the symbolism of progress: ‘Look, you don’t just find these aesthetic productions in the metropolises, but here too – and here it’s better, because it’s on a human scale.’ The old dream, that of improving life and reality through the introduction of aesthetics, seems to be being brought to bear. However, it cannot be overlooked that only the most

superficial elements have been carried over from art and then realized in a levelled out form. Beautiful ensembles drift into prettiness, and the sublime descends into ridicule – Napoleon had already said that the sublime is only one step away from the ridiculous.

This everyday aestheticization is not, as some theoreticians believe, about an accomplishment – albeit an unsatisfying one – of the avant-garde programmes to extend and break down the limits of art. On the contrary: when Beuys or Cage pleaded for an extension of the definition of art, and its having no bounds, they were thinking that something which wasn't art should be understood as art – and that the conception of art would thereby be altered or extended. In today's aestheticization, however, it is quite the reverse, as traditionally artistic attributes are carried over into reality, daily life is being pumped full of artistic character. This corresponds not to avant-garde programmes, but possibly to older aestheticization programmes à la Schiller, the Systematic Programme of German idealism, Werkbund, etc. In the current aestheticization, however, these seem only to be being accomplished as a programme of furtherment of the kitsch.

*Hedonism as a new cultural matrix.* In this surface aestheticization the most superficial aesthetic value dominates: desire, amusement, enjoyment without consequence. This animatory trend today reaches far beyond the aesthetic enshroudment of everyday items, from the styling of objects and experience-loaded ambiances. It is increasingly determining the form of our culture as a whole. Experience and entertainment have become the cultural lodestar over the last few years. A society of leisure and experience is served by an expanding culture of festivals and fun. And, while one may smile about some of the all too strident offshoots of aestheticization, or about singular aspects of the cosmetics of reality, with its expansion throughout culture as a whole, the laughter can cease.

*Aestheticization as an economic strategy.* Much of this everyday aestheticization serves economic purposes. The bond with aesthetics renders even the unsaleable saleable, and improves the already saleable two or three times over. And nowhere, as aesthetic fashions are particularly short-lived, does the need for replacement arise as quickly and assuredly as with aesthetically styled products: even before the already in-built obsolescence leaves articles unserviceable they are aesthetically 'out'. Moreover, products which are becoming increasingly unsaleable on moral or health grounds are being rendered presentable and saleable once again through aesthetic ennoblement. The aesthetic aura is then the consumer's primary acquisition, with the article merely coming alongside. This has been recognized above all by the cigarette industry, which has long since been describable as aesthetically advanced. As early as the 1980s it had developed forms of advertising in which neither the product's, nor the firm's name arose, but in which the allure was aesthetic refinement alone.

This process is revealing. From it one can infer two transpositions

which are of general significance, reaching out beyond economics. First comes an exchange of commodity and packaging, essence and appearance, hardware and software. The article, formerly the hardware, is now just an accessory; on the other hand, the aesthetics, formerly the software, becomes the main issue. Second, these advertising strategies reveal that aesthetics has become an autonomous guiding value – if not to say the main currency – of society. If an advert succeeds in associating a product with aesthetics which interest the consumer then the product will be sold, whatever its real qualities may be. One doesn't actually acquire the article, but rather by its means, buys oneself into the lifestyle with which the advert had associated it. And, as lifestyles in themselves are today predominantly aesthetically forged, aesthetics altogether is not just the vehicle, but rather the essence.

*Deep-seated Aestheticization: The Transposition of Hardware and Software and the New Priority of the Aesthetic*

The spread of aestheticization today is no longer merely superficial, but reaches into deeper tiers as well. Both of the processes above – the transposition of hardware and software and the new priority of the aesthetic – characterize not only the superficial processes, but also the deeper processes of aestheticization, which are now to be addressed.

*Changes in the production process – new materials technologies.* New materials technologies should be commented upon first. In the wake of microelectronics, the classical hardware, matter, is also increasingly becoming an aesthetic product. The conception and testing of new industrial materials is today purely computer simulated right through to final manufacture. Simulation – an aesthetic process which is enacted on the minitor's screen – no longer has an imitational but, rather, a productive function. So, here, too, aesthetics shifts to the fore, namely in what concerns the process as well as the desired results. Reality, once thought of as being hard, proves itself to be changeable, newly combinable and open for the realization of aesthetic wishes. When technology experts today say that it's unbelievable what we're able to do, this 'unbelievable' no longer means, as formerly, a self-confident plenitude, but the astonishment that material reality offers so little resistance. Through intelligent interference with its microstructure, it is changeable down to the last fibre. Reality is – from today's technological standpoint – of the most pliable, lightest stuff. Greater materials' strengths are being effected by softer, more aesthetic procedures.

Aesthetic processes don't only shroud already completed, given substances, but even determine their structure, affect not only the cover, but even the core. Aesthetics no longer belong merely to the superstructure, but to the base. One can see: today's aestheticization is by no means merely a thing of *beaux esprits*, or of the postmodern muse of amusement, or of superficial economic strategies, but results very much from fundamental technological changes, from the hard facts of the production process.

At the same time, this material aestheticization, as I call these processes, entails an immaterial aestheticization. The daily interaction with microelectronic production processes effects an aestheticization of our consciousness and of our whole apprehension of reality. He who constantly works with Computer Aided Design (CAD) knows about the virtuality and manipulability of reality; he has learnt how barely real reality is, how it is so aesthetically modelable. Perhaps we, the older generation, still understand too little of how easily a younger generation is beginning to establish itself in artificial worlds.

*Reality as constituted through media.* The next aspect is connected to this. Social reality too, ever since it has been primarily mediated and forged by the media, particularly televisionary media, is subject to radical derealization and aestheticization processes. Our old belief in reality must succumb to television, the bestower of reality. For televisionary reality is no longer binding and inescapable, but rather in contrast electable, changeable, available, can be fled. If something doesn't suit you, you change channel again. In zapping and switching, the advanced television consumer practises the derealization of the real – which is also otherwise valid. The media's pictures no longer offer a documentary guarantee of reality, but rather are largely arranged and artificial and are being increasingly presented according to this virtuality.<sup>1</sup> Reality is becoming a tender through media, which down to its very substance is virtual, manipulable and aesthetically modelable.<sup>2</sup>

I proceeded, in my tableau of contemporary aestheticization processes, from the increasing furnishing of reality with aesthetic elements, from its sugarcoating with aesthetic flair. Then I suggested that this surface aestheticization concerns not only singular factors within reality, but also affects the form of culture as a whole and that it is becoming increasingly universal. In addition to surface aestheticization (key word 'universalization') there is a profound expansion (key word 'fundamentalization'). With this, the exchange of position between hardware and software and the new priority of the aesthetic, which were first to be inferred from economic and advertising strategies, attain their full bearing. On the material as well as the social level, reality is revealing itself, in the wake of the new technologies and televisionary media, as being increasingly determined by aestheticization processes; it is becoming an ever more aesthetic affair – 'aesthetic' here, of course, being meant not in the sense of beauty, but rather of virtuality and modelability. A new, in principle aesthetic, consciousness of reality then reacts to these processes. This immaterial aestheticization reaches deeper than that literal, material aestheticization. It affects not just singular constituents of reality, but the manner of reality's being and our conception of it as a whole.

Comparable observations are to be made when one goes from material and social reality over to subjective reality, to the form of individuals' existence. Here too there is a superficial and obvious aestheticization, but underlying this too is a deeper aestheticization.

*Styling of Subject and Ways of Life – On the Way to Homo Aestheticus?*

The current aestheticization seems to attain its consummation in individuals. We are experiencing everywhere a styling of body, soul and mind – and whatever else these fine new people might want to have (or acquire for themselves). In beauty salons and fitness centres they pursue the aesthetic perfection of their bodies, and in meditation courses and Toscana seminars the aesthetic spiritualization of their souls. Future generations should then have it easier straight away: genetic technology will have come to their aid ahead of them, this new branch of aestheticization which holds out the prospect of a world full of perfectly styled mannequins.

Individuals' interactions with one another are also being increasingly aesthetically determined. In a world in which moral norms are disappearing, table manners and etiquette – the correct choice of glass and of the suitable accompaniment to each occasion – still seem to hold firm the most easily. Aesthetic competence is to offset the loss of moral standards.

In these processes, the *homo aestheticus* is becoming the new role model. He is sensitive, hedonistic, refined and, above all, of discerning taste – and he knows: you can't argue about taste. This affords new security amidst the insecurity which exists all round. Free of fundamentalist illusions, casually distanced, he enjoys all life's opportunities. The Kierkegaard literature waxes once again.<sup>3</sup>

But these superficial narcissisms also have a more profound background. All ways of life, means of orientation and ethical norms have long since assumed an aesthetic quality of their own to the modern consciousness. Since the historicism of the 19th century, at the latest, they have no longer been viewed as binding standards, but rather as historical, social or individual conceptions which are at best situationally appropriate – that is, for a particular location and time-span. There are always other, markedly contrasting, conceptions, and each can be altered or replaced. Morals pass as constructs of a near artistic order – but again fluctuating rather than of binding validity. Even when their declarations are rigid, their constitution on the whole bears aesthetic traits. And the criteria, on the basis of which one chooses between different morals, will also ultimately be of an aesthetic nature.

It is however true, that the in-principle aestheticization of our attitudes to life's practicalities and moral orientation is today leading to excessive manifestations, but it is not to be overlooked that the underlying mode of thinking has long since been valid. And again, it's easy to mock this or that outward manifestation, but extraordinarily difficult to raise even a single reliable argument against the situation's profundity.

*Aestheticization as a General Trend – In Varying Forms*

The cheapest form of behaviour towards the new and pressing immediacy of the aesthetic is simply to deny the phenomena – because what's not permissible cannot be; and because what one doesn't perceive is not so. One all too



easily makes use of the conceptual tricks, speaks of aesthetics *per definitionem* with only art in mind – already rid of pressing questions, one finds oneself in the safe haven of traditional questioning. Such escapism may well be necessary for anxious souls. But it is of no good to the philosophical understanding of what is. Defence takes the place of diagnosis and self-consolation that of conceptive exertion. It adheres to the magical belief that by looking the other way these phenomena can be made to disappear, or to the mania of theory that things are to be decreed and not explained. In contrast to this escapism, it's a question of viewing the diverse aestheticizations unabridged, to differentiate and to reflect. Only in this way can one arrive at a set of well-founded options.

Let's look back again to the tableau of aestheticization processes. Aesthetic elements are on the advance at a superficial level in both objective and subjective reality: façades are becoming prettier, shops more exciting, noses more perfect. But aestheticization reaches deeper too, affecting basic structures of reality as such: of the material world in the wake of new material technologies, of social reality as a result of its mediation through media, and of subjective reality as a result of the supersession of moral standards by self-styling.

Taken collectively a general condition of aestheticization ensues. 'Aestheticization' basically means that the unaesthetic is made, or understood to be, aesthetic. This is exactly what we are currently experiencing all around. However, this aestheticization does not follow the same pattern everywhere, and the type of aesthetic glaze applied to the unaesthetic can be different from case to case: in the urban environment aestheticization means the advance of what's beautiful, pretty, styled; in advertising and self-conduct it means the advance of staging and lifestyling; with regard to the technological determination of the objective world and the mediation of social reality through the media, 'aesthetic' above all means virtualization; and the aestheticization of consciousness ultimately means: we no longer see first or last fundamentals, but that for us reality assumes a constitution which until now was known to us only in art – a constitution of having been produced, being changeable, unobliging, fluctuating, etc. In its details, then, aestheticization results in varying ways, but taken collectively the result is a general condition of aestheticization.

## II. Clarification of Concepts

### *Is Ambiguity Synonymous with Unusability?*

But perhaps I should first answer a possible objection before proceeding further on the basis of this general condition. I have just said that the expression 'aesthetic' did not have the same meaning in all of the previous examples. Sometimes it related to things beautiful, or merely pretty, sometimes to styling, sometimes to virtualization and so on. Furthermore, its point of reference also varied: sometimes it was concerned with the characteristics of objects, sometimes with associative dimensions, sometimes with the manner of reality's being.



May one actually deal with a concept in this way? Or, to put it another way: if such varying modes of usage belong to the grammar of the expression 'aesthetic', does this not condemn the expression to being unusable? Doesn't ambiguity of this sort make the concept a fake concept? Should even the diagnosed universality of the aesthetic ultimately be merely a result of the expression's many-sidedness, and therewith an illusion? Is 'aesthetic' a *passé-partout* word, which is suited to everything precisely because it says nothing? Ought one not then to drop the expression completely because inexactitude in a concept is synonymous with unusability?

The problem of the aesthetic's semantic ambiguity is as old as the discipline called aesthetics itself. Baumgarten, its founder,<sup>4</sup> defined aesthetics as the 'science of sensitive cognition' (1750: §1). Aesthetics was to be not primarily to do with art, but a branch of epistemology. Hegel on the other hand, a good half-century later, understood aesthetics to be decidedly a 'philosophy of art', and more precisely, 'of fine art' (1993: 3). Whereas, again some decades later, an expert such as Konrad Fiedler took exception: 'Aesthetics', he said, 'is not the theory of art'; the 'juxtaposition of beauty and art' is rather the '*protos pseudos* in the realm of aesthetics' (1991: 9). The catalogue of such contrary definitions of aesthetics can be continued almost without end. Sometimes it is to concern the sensuous, sometimes beauty, sometimes nature, sometimes art, sometimes perception, sometimes judgement, sometimes knowledge; and 'aesthetic' should mean in alternation sensuous, desirous, artistic, illusory, fictional, poetic, virtual, playful, unobliging, etc.

This ambiguity could indeed lead one to despair of the sense and usability of the expression. Every aesthetic theorist says something interesting, but each says something different. 'Anything – and nothing – is right', as it was once formulated by Wittgenstein (1958: 77, para 36), '... this is the position you are in if you look for definitions ... in aesthetics'.

### *Family Resemblance*

*The Wittgenstein example.* Wittgenstein, however, shows us a way out of these difficulties. He demonstrates that, although coherence in usage is necessary for terms with variant uses, this coherence need not be thanks to a unitary property, but can come about in a different way: through semantic overlap between one usage and the next. The differing meanings then have, as Wittgenstein (1958: 65, para. 31) says, 'no one thing in common' – that is, no one element which enables one to decree what *the* aesthetic is – rather their relationship results from these overlaps alone. Wittgenstein denoted a structure of this sort as exhibiting 'family resemblance'.

It is in exactly this way, in my view, that the term 'aesthetic' is constituted. Family resemblance determines its grammar. In borrowing a famous passage from Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, one could almost use the formulation: 'Instead of producing something common to all that we call aesthetic, I am saying these phenomena have no one thing in common which makes us use the same word for all – but they are *related* to one another in many different ways. And it is because of this relationship, or

these relationships, that we call them all “aesthetic” (Wittgenstein, 1958: 65, para. 31). In the quote I have only replaced the word ‘language’ with ‘aesthetic’.

*‘Aesthetic’ – a term exhibiting family resemblance.* For reasons of space, I can only outline here the idea of this family resemblance of the aesthetic – a more exact exposition would go beyond the scope of this article. The consequences, upon which I shall expand in the following, are in any event more important.

The first meaning of the aesthetic is, of course – according to the word’s literal sense – the sensible.<sup>5</sup> But the first bifurcation occurs even here. ‘Sensible’ has a cognitive meaning on the one hand and an emotional meaning on the other. The first denotation corresponds to perception, which registers genuine sensuous qualities such as colours, sounds, tastes and smells. The other denotation corresponds to sensation, which evaluates the sensuous data on a scale between desire and aversion.

A further ramification then occurs on the sensation side through the influence of the cognitive side. Desires are, of course, initially sensuous desires determined by vital interests. For the sake of cognition, however, perception must disregard such direct sensations as far as possible, must rise above them, in order to ascertain the sensuous predicates as such (blue, high, smooth, etc.) without taking account of sensuous pleasure or displeasure (appetizing, stimulating, threatening, etc.).

It is this cognitive focus in the sensible – this targeting of pure perception – which leads, on the sensation side, to the construction of a second, higher sphere of desire and aversion, over and above the first, directly sensuous sphere. The scale of desire is not as such discarded, but rather modified, another storey is added so to speak: the *piano nobile* of a specifically aesthetic desire raises itself above the ground floor of sensuous desire. This is the birthplace of the aesthetic sense: of taste. This evaluates objects not according to vital interests (as alluring, pleasant-tasting, nauseous or the like) but rather in terms of a higher, reflexive pleasure or displeasure: as beautiful, harmonic, ugly or disturbed.

Thus, the necessity to surpass direct emotions in the interests of cognition also motivates sensation to go beyond its primary constitution and to shift towards a higher sensible, a specifically aesthetic desire.<sup>6</sup> From now on there are two forms of sensible rating: according to taste of sense and according to taste of reflection, as Kant (1987: 214) called this distinction.<sup>7</sup>

As such, the tableau for everything further is given: there are two branches of the aesthetic, a cognitive (perception) and an emotive (sensation). The latter however is subject to an additional refinement, or doubling: the brushwood of taste is bound to the branch of sensuous desire, to come into bloom in works of art and in aesthetic reflexion. Even here it can be seen how passages and cross-connections exist between the different dimensions of the aesthetic: the higher desire arises through a specific transformation of the preceding desire and, what’s more, this results transversely

through the other, cognitively oriented branch of sensibility. This teaches us how differences as well as intersections belong to the aesthetic from the start – the path to family resemblance is trodden from the beginning onwards.

I would like to indicate just briefly how further elements of meaning of the aesthetic arise. The constitution of the higher, specifically aesthetic desire is connected generally with a demand for sublimation. This forms the starting point for a series of further denotations. In matters of purpose it leads to the concept of cultivation through aestheticization, on a pragmatic level to the denotation of aesthetic design as the recoating of what's to hand, on an ontological level to the denotation of the aesthetic as appearance opposed to essence, virtuality opposed to reality, fiction opposed to fact and so on.

Finally, from here, attempts even take place to separate completely aesthetic denotations from their origins and interconnections. This occurs in the concepts of aesthetic autonomy and of autonomous art. 'Aesthetic' here signifies on the one hand a way of life – the aestheticized maintenance of a jocular distance towards everything real, masterfully living to the full one's sense of possibilities and indulgence in virtuality – and, on the other hand, it becomes synonymous with 'artistic'. In the end, 'aesthetic' can come to mean little more than 'according to aesthetic theory' – this is how far removed the expression has become from its original meaning of the sensible.

But, even in these cases, a more exact analysis always reveals that such separation is just show, an operational front, whereby the reference to other meanings of the aesthetic cannot be cast aside. Those meanings pushed into the background break forth anew within the seemingly autonomized sphere. In this way the concept 'art and life' confronts the programme of 'art for art's sake'; and even appeals for gross sensuality, which had been distanced on principle with the turn towards reflexive taste, become topical again in situations of over-drawn idealization, as for example in the strategies of *art brut* and in material aesthetics. The single meanings of aesthetic remain unavoidably bound within the conceptual field of the aesthetic, which in turn always encompasses other meanings. Thus, in every usage of the expression – negative or affirmative – other meanings also resonate. The individual meanings cannot, so to speak, get rid of their family, but entertain quite differing relationships with the individual family members.

With this brief sketch of the spread of meanings of 'aesthetic' I wanted to render two things recognizable: first, how each respective meaning links with a previous one, grows as it were forth from it, such that intersections and cross-connections exist throughout, and that it is in fact a family resemblance structure which lies before us;<sup>8</sup> and, second, that it is necessary to pay attention to the position of a usage within the complete field of meanings – one can then not only precisely determine singular usages, but also do justice to the diversity of meaning of the aesthetic.

### *Consequences*

If then 'aesthetic' is an expression whose varying usages are related by family resemblance, and if these usages are at the same time sufficiently

differentiable, what consequences does this have in dealing correctly with this expression?

First: in spite of its ambiguity, the expression is serviceable. The variety in usages doesn't exactly disavow a concept, but can – in correct usage – even form the basis of its particular serviceability. 'Inexact' is not synonymous with 'unusable'.<sup>9</sup> If one consciously keeps apart the different meanings then one can profit greatly in availing oneself of the expression.

Second: proceeding in this way is not only legitimate and purposeful, but necessary. He who wants to develop an aesthetics in the full sense of the word must be able to do justice to *all* usages of the expression. Anything but this would result in a partial aesthetics at best. A comprehensive, truly complete aesthetics – which I advocate – may not take random selections as its point of departure. Philosophically, or rather in aesthetic theory, it would be wrong and antiquated to give, or want to dictate, a single, ultimate concept of the aesthetic. To exclude by decree those parts which don't suit one, or to declare one certain meaning the basic meaning among the diverse meanings of the aesthetic runs counter to the phenomenon. This imperial gesture suggests clarity, but *de facto* draws the field of the aesthetic incorrectly. Bad philosophy flirts with the traditional expectation that one must reduce the multitude of meanings to one basic meaning in all circumstances. It thereby fulfils its own desire for mastery, as well as that of those who prefer conceptual bulldozing to the analysis of complex problems.

Third: an aesthetics which faces up to the reach of the aesthetic demands greater far-sightedness and ability to differentiate than a partial aesthetics. Put briefly, it is more difficult. It demands the consideration of the varying semantic provinces, versions and groups, and the ability to specify accordingly with which semantic accent one is operating and which intersections one is making use of. Only in this way can one do justice to the complexity of the aesthetic.

Fourth: the point of these comments is found in objecting to the most conventional of all constrictions relevant to aesthetics, which today seems to be becoming popular again: the restriction of the aesthetic to art. He who links the concept of the aesthetic exclusively to the province of art and wants to fence it off completely from daily life and the living world *partout*, practises aesthetic-theoretical provincialism.<sup>10</sup> He takes a single province of the aesthetic as his theme, while ostensibly addressing the aesthetic world. He thereby falls short not only of the full and legitimate concept of the aesthetic, but also – in objective irony – of the concept of that which he ostensibly serves: that of art. For modern art no longer longs to be locked within the golden cage of autonomy, rather it renounces such aesthetic-theoretical ghettoization.<sup>11</sup>

Art is certainly a particularly important province in the universe of meanings of the aesthetic – but it is not the only one. Today's immediacy of the aesthetic results from exactly this, that the conventional equation of aesthetics and art has become untenable, and that other dimensions of the expression have moved into the foreground. That's why – for the benefit of

the full concept of the aesthetic and also for the benefit of art<sup>12</sup> – one must take steps against the narrowing of the aesthetic to what is artistic, why one must keep aesthetics clear of this obsolete constriction.

### III. Epistemological Aestheticization

Among the convolution of aestheticization processes portrayed in Part I many ominous signs are found, in view of which it would be foolish to want to maintain that everything is bettered through aestheticization. We can no longer share this hope, that of aestheticization programmes from the late 18th century onwards. On the contrary: proclamations such as Schiller's that only the aesthetic man would fully be a human being,<sup>13</sup> or that of Hegel–Schelling–Hoelderlin that 'truth and goodness become kindred only in beauty' (Hegel, 1989: 87) reveal themselves to be dubious in view of the forms in which such aestheticization programmes acquit themselves today.

But how is the line separating positive from negative to be drawn in aestheticization and how might criticism of singular manifestations of aestheticization be substantiated? Generally speaking, either criteria for truth, or for morality, or aesthetic criteria come into consideration for this purpose. One can seek the assistance of science,<sup>14</sup> ethics or aesthetics.

The attempt to expect criticism of aesthetics, from aesthetics of all things, sounds all too paradoxical. In the same way, ethics is not the best authority today for a critique of aestheticization, since ethics itself – from neo-Aristotelean bases through to Foucault – is currently on its way to becoming a subdiscipline within aesthetics. Obviously then, only science remains to be backed and therewith the truth-card.

#### *A Critique of Aestheticization in the Name of Truth?*

And, indeed, many intellectuals are taking to the battlefield against aestheticization in the name of truth. They say a universal aestheticization would result in the dissolution of truth and the destruction of science, the Enlightenment and reason. The sciences would be threatened with being undermined should rhetorical brilliance become more important than the justification of assertions. The Enlightenment would totter aimlessly should the aesthetic law of fiction step in in place of truth, and plurality in the place of obligation. Finally, should fundamental questions become questions of taste, then reason would be being scandalously disregarded.

These warnings are, however, reprises. In them the old contest between truth and beauty, essence and appearance, fundamentalist obligation and fictional freedom is revived once again – a contest which has permeated the Occident in multifarious forms since Plato's critique of poets, Bernard of Clairvaux's polemics against Gothic style, and since the conflict between idealism and romanticism.

However, I think that the fundamental principles in this contest have changed. It is increasingly settled. And, what's more – against the expectations of our forebears – it is settled in favour of aesthetics. It is my thesis that it came to this in consequence of the development of scientific rationality

itself, through which truth has to a large extent become an aesthetic category. Following the introductory tableau of aestheticization processes, I have yet to mention the most incisive and furthest reaching aestheticization: the aestheticization of our categories of knowledge and reality, including the category of truth as ordained by the guiding authority of modernity, science. Through this, allegedly ‘rational’ defences against aestheticization have long since been losing ground on their own territory.

*Epistemological Aestheticization – Over 200 Years Past*

I must expand on this point, although of course I can only recount the history of this modern aestheticization of knowledge as a short story, as it began as early as around 200 years ago (see Welsch 1995: esp. 485–509). Here too, Kant, the revolutionary of modern philosophy, forms the point of departure.

*Kant: aesthetics as a fundamental epistemological discipline.* Kant showed in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1929/1965), under the title ‘Transcendental Aesthetic’ that aesthetic factors underlie our knowledge. According to Kant’s (1965) ‘revolution of the way of thinking’ we know ‘*a priori* of things only what we ourselves put into them’, and what we first put into them are *aesthetic* stipulations, namely space and time as forms of intuition. It is through these that objects come to be at all for us. And our cognition and reality reach just so far as these forms of intuition extend. To this extent, aesthetics has for Kant – as the theory of these forms of intuition, that is as a *transcendental* aesthetic and not, say, a theory of art<sup>15</sup> – become epistemologically fundamental.<sup>16</sup> Since Kant we have known of the aesthetic fundamentals of all knowledge, of a principal proto-aesthetic of cognition.

*Nietzsche: the aesthetic-fictional character of knowledge.* Nietzsche – possibly the aesthetic thinker *par excellence* – took this Kantian foundation further and rendered it so convincing that ever since, though one may address the question of our cognition’s aesthetic constitution, scarcely anything can be brought forward against it.

Nietzsche showed that our representations of reality not only contain fundamental aesthetic elements, but are wholly aesthetic in nature. Reality is a construct which we generate, like artists with fictional means – through forms of intuition, projections, phantasms, pictures and so on. Knowing is a fundamentally metaphorical activity. Man is an *animal fingens*.

In the script *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense* of 1873, Nietzsche writes:

one may certainly admire man as a mighty genius of construction, who succeeds in piling up an infinitely complicated dome of concepts upon an unstable foundation, and, as it were, on running water. Of course, in order to be supported by such a foundation, his construction must be like one constructed of spiders’ webs: delicate enough to be carried along by the waves, strong enough not to be blown apart by every wind. (Nietzsche, 1979: 85)



As such, knowledge is depicted in an aesthetic perspective. Like artists or constructors of considerable virtuosity we create forms of orientation, which must be as movably and elastically constituted as reality itself is fluid and changeful. All our orientation is begotten poetically, fictionally structured, and in the manner of its being as fluctuant, but as fragile too, as one traditionally said and believed only of aesthetic phenomena.

*The suffusion of the epistemological aestheticization in the 20th century.*

*Theory of science.* Is an aesthetic view of knowledge of this type represented only by exquisite – or eccentric – aestheticians such as Nietzsche? No. Nietzsche's views became increasingly commonplace in the 20th century. Even this century's theory of science has gradually become 'Nietzschean'. Thus, Otto Neurath (who belonged to one of most severe schools of the theory of science – the Vienna Circle) described our situation in a manner quite similar to Nietzsche's: 'We are like mariners who must rebuild their ship on the open sea, without ever being able to disassemble it in dock and reassemble it with the best components' (Neurath, 1932/33, Vol. 3: 206). This sentence from Neurath became the guiding maxim for the analytic philosopher Willard van Orman Quine (1960: vii). And even in Karl Popper (1969: 103) we read that, 'where we believe we're standing on firm and stable ground, everything is in truth unstable and in fluctuation'. Thus one sees: even theoreticians of science, who certainly don't want to be Nietzscheans, cannot avoid sounding Nietzschean when reviewing basic questions. The aesthetic constitution of reality is not just the view of a few aestheticians, but of all theoreticians reflecting on reality and science in this century. This is a view which is indeed *due*.

*Hermeneutics.* A similar diagnosis is forthcoming in hermeneutic philosophy. Hans Blumenberg (1979) pointed out that the old metaphor of a sea voyage has been increasingly modified in the history of Occidental thought, and hence become the key modern metaphor of the *conditio humana*. Once there was a complement to the voyage and its dramatic culmination in the catastrophe of being shipwrecked: a spectator who could observe this all from the safety of firm ground and who was himself unaffected by the mishap. Increasingly however one has appreciated that there is no such neutral or higher ground, rather that the position of any given spectator is fluctuant, unsecured and subject to its own voyage – to put it differently, that we are all sitting in boats.<sup>17</sup> No option remains for us other than 'Ship-building [our way] out of Shipwreck.'<sup>18</sup>

*The post-analytic theory of science and philosophy.* More recent analytic (or post-analytic) philosophy – like Nietzsche, modern theories of science and hermeneutics – is of the view that we are forced to operate 'upon an unstable foundation, and, as it were, on running water'. This is a consequence of the talk of a reality-in-itself's having become principally empty of meaning because there is only 'reality-under-a-certain-description' (Rorty, 1979: 378) – and that means: in the spectrum of problematic (not absolutely justifiable) premisses and as one version of reality alongside others.



Paul Feyerabend's (1984) was the most provocative formulation of the aesthetic character of truth as he pointed out that the sciences basically proceed no differently to the arts,<sup>19</sup> since both operate according to a style, and truth and reality in science are just as relative to style as in art:

If one examines namely what a particular form of thought understands by these things, then one encounters not something which lies beyond the form of thought, but in its own fundamental assumptions: truth is whatever the form of thought says truth is. (Feyerabend, 1984: 77)

Rorty drew a revealing conclusion from these scientific-theoretical views. He appeals for a 'poeticized culture'. By this he means a culture which knows that our 'fundamentals' are all aesthetically constituted, are namely without exception 'cultural artefacts' which can only ever be scrutinized against other cultural artefacts but never against reality itself. A poeticized culture acknowledges this situation instead of further insisting in vain that, 'we find the real wall behind the painted ones, the real touchstones of truth as opposed to touchstones which are merely cultural artefacts'. It appreciates '[the fact] that *all* touchstones are such artefacts' (Rorty, 1989: 53, see also 65, 67–9).

*Scientific practice.* Researchers in the natural sciences, too, have long since become aware of the importance of aesthetic factors to their pursuit of knowledge. Thus Bohr, Einstein or Heisenberg had already argued aesthetically at critical points, and Poincaré even bluntly explained that aesthetic and not, say, logical potency is the central skill in a good mathematician (see Chandrasekhar, 1981; Wechsler, 1978). More recently the effect was ground-breaking as Watson advised that he had only succeeded in deciphering the structure of DNA because he had assumed from the start that the solution would have to be of the utmost elegance – only with this aesthetic premiss did he manage to find the correct solution among the large number of those remaining theoretically open in reasonable time (Watson, 1970). Rational barriers have since been broken down in people's heads, and one today endeavours to bring aesthetic factors systematically to bear in the knowledge process. Recent approaches in theories of science even attribute a causal function to changes in the aesthetic canon for scientific revolutions (see Hesse, 1980; McAllister, 1989). In view of theories such as that of the 'Big Bang' or the never-ending story of quarks one can scarcely do anything but ascribe great relevance to aesthetic and fictional factors.

The awareness of a fundamentally aesthetic character of knowledge is asserting itself today in all academic study. Whether semiotic or systemic, whether in sociology, biology or microphysics, everywhere we notice that there is no first or last fundament, rather that by way of agreement it is precisely in the dimension of 'fundamentals' that we run into an aesthetic constitution. Semioticians tell us that chains of signifiers constantly refer to other chains of signifiers and not to, say, a primary signified; systemics instructs us that instead of 'having recourse to final unities', we only ever observe observations and describe descriptions (Luhmann, 1990: 717); and

microphysics finds that wherever it tries to reach down to an elemental level it encounters not the elemental but new complexity.

This basic aesthetic awareness has long since pervaded the pores of society and the minds of individuals – in any case, much more than the prevalent academic anxiety and defensive public rhetoric would like to admit. The consort of individuals with current aestheticization processes is borne by the awareness of this in-principle aestheticization.

*Conclusion: 'aesthetic turn'.* I shall summarize the development outlined here: truth, knowledge and reality have assumed increasingly aesthetic contours over the last 200 years. First, it has become evident that aesthetics' participation is fundamental in our knowledge and our reality. This began with Kant's Transcendental Aesthetic and extends to the self-reflexion of today's natural sciences. Second, the view that cognition and reality are aesthetic in the nature of their being has increasingly established itself. This was Nietzsche's discovery, which has subsequently been expressed by others, above all with recourse to nautical metaphors, and which reaches through to today's constructivism. Reality is not independent of cognition, a fixed given quantity, but the object of a construction.

If earlier one thought that aesthetics is concerned only with secondary, supplemental realities, then today one recognizes that the aesthetic belongs to knowledge and reality directly at a fundamental level. Traditional knowledge of reality sought to be objective, that is fundamentalist, whereas it was made clear that the legitimacy of aesthetic phenomena was a genuinely begotten one. But at the same time categories for the understanding of the production of reality were actually being developed on the quiet. Since it has become clear to us that not only art, but other forms of our conduct too – through to cognition – exhibit productive traits, these aesthetic categories – categories such as appearance, manoeuvrability, diversity, fathomlessness or fluctuation – have become fundamental categories of reality.

And all of this was decreed not by some aesthetician or other, but was a recognition forced upon us by science, the guiding authority of modernity. It prescribed an *epistemological aestheticization* – an in-principle aestheticization of knowledge, truth and reality – by which no question remains unaffected. This epistemological aestheticization is the legacy of modernity. If one is to talk of the contemporary standing of aesthetics, then one must constantly keep in mind this protoaesthetics and face up to its assertions.

In this respect one could speak of an 'aesthetic turn'. The further we question, the more fundamental our analysis, the more we come across aesthetic factors and structures of an aesthetic nature. In our context today – in the context of non-fundamentality – all 'fundaments' display an aesthetic countenance together. Or, more precisely: non-fundamentalism means just this – that the supposed 'fundaments' are aesthetically constituted. One is not to mistake this for an 'aesthetic fundamentalism'. The concern here is its opposite: a departure from each and every fundamentalism (see Welsch, 1992a).

Today there is no single argument which is able to effectively engage this aestheticization.<sup>20</sup> Irrespective of whether one values it or not – all thinkable objections will themselves be subject to it. Because, in modernity, truth has revealed itself to be an aesthetic category, defences rooted in truth are no longer able to beat back aestheticization. Science cannot keep us from the aesthetic wanton, it has itself been overrun in its own camp – not through flippancy however, but through the pressure of insight.

#### *The Relationship of the Diverse Forms of Aestheticizations to One Another*

And how is the relationship to one another of the different levels of aestheticization addressed in the course of my account to be viewed? How do, first, the embellishing everyday surface aestheticization, second, the more in-depth technological and mediative aestheticization of our material and social reality, third, the equally deep-seated aestheticization of our practical attitudes in life and of moral orientation, and fourth – and finally – the epistemological aestheticization, relate to one another?

I have expanded on the epistemological aestheticization so extensively because it is obviously the most fundamental of all the aestheticizations with which we're concerned today. It seems to me to form the actual substratum of current aestheticization and to explain its conspicuous acceptance. It operates as foil and engine, and also as counsel for these aestheticization processes. In that cognition and reality have turned out to be aesthetic at heart, we have become generally prepared for aestheticization. That's why we are increasingly acceding to the transposition of former hardware into software, as is determining daily life in the wake of technological and media aestheticization. And for the same reason, we enact this deep-seated aestheticization in a sweeping surface aestheticization, realize it as it were through to and within the skin of appearances, demonstrate it to ourselves *ad oculos*, practise it daily.

#### **IV. Perspectives of Aesthetic Criticism of Aestheticization Processes**

In the meantime we appear to have lurched into an extremely awkward situation with regard to the question raised at the beginning of Part III, the question of criteria which are capable of impeding aestheticization or of permitting criticism of certain of its manifestations. Truth, the criterion on which all hopes had been concentrated, is obviously unfit to intervene against aestheticization, since truth itself has largely become an aesthetically forged category in modernity. I had cast aside ethical criteria straight away for the same reason – ethics is today in the process of transforming itself into a subdiscipline of aesthetics. Does this mean that we now have been gratuitously handed over to aestheticization without all criteria?

Nonetheless, aesthetic criteria remain. I previously set these aside before all else. However, this was done only to accord with appearances. For, first, the fact that there are aesthetic criteria is not to be disputed. Aesthetics

has always differentiated between the accomplished and the unaccomplished, better and worse, exemplary and digressive. And, second, it is precisely in a situation of global aestheticization that one expects aesthetic criteria to become especially relevant and have the chance to attain particular regard. To back aesthetic criteria in a situation of universal aestheticization is, thus seen, consistent rather than paradoxical.

Which individual aesthetic criteria are plausible? Or to put it another way: how is Adorno's promise, that aesthetic sensitivity is always simultaneously an organ of its own self-criticism, to be brought to bear in today's conditions?<sup>21</sup>

### *An Objection to the Turmoil of Aestheticization*

A basic aesthetic law states that our perception needs not only invigoration and stimulation, but delays, quiet areas and interruption too. This law condemns the presently epidemic trend for enhancement to failure. Total aestheticization results in its own opposite. Where everything becomes beautiful, nothing more is beautiful; continued excitement leads to indifference; aestheticization breaks into anaestheticization. It is then precisely aesthetic reasons which speak in favour of breaking through the turmoil of aestheticization. Amid the hyperaestheticization aesthetically fallow areas are necessary (see Welsch, 1992b).

Aesthetic reflexion will not allow itself to become the agent of an aestheticization which in truth is tantamount to an anaestheticization – of the production of insensitivity, of the stupor arising through being constantly aesthetically overwrought. Aesthetic thinking opposes the turmoil of aestheticization and the pseudo-sensitivity of an Experience Society.

### *In Favour of a Blind-Spot Culture*

What things currently hinge upon is not a hyperaestheticization of culture of this sort, but – running contrary to this – the development of a *blind-spot culture*. What is meant by this? Reflected aesthetics always encourages one to be aware of the twofold relationship between heeding and excluding. To see something is constantly to overlook something else. There is no vision without a blind-spot. Developed sensibility is attentive of this and faces the consequences (see Welsch, 1990).

These consequences reach far beyond the narrow realm of design or aesthetics. The indications here – unlike those in the superficial trend of embellishment – are of a societal consequence of aestheticization which is worth pursuing. A genuinely aestheticized culture would be sensitive to differences and exclusion – not only in relation to the forms of art and design, but equally in daily life and in facing social ways of life.

This analogizing of aesthetic and living conditions is legitimate because the relationships between ways of life are structurally the same as the relationships between aesthetic complexes. The same aspects of

plurality are valid here, those of specificity and partiality and of the tendentious blindness of perspectives for one another, and here too, recognition and justice are required. For this reason an aesthetically reflective awareness is able to illuminate, clarify and assist in day-to-day questions. It is sensitized for basic differences and for the peculiarity and irreducibility of different ways of life. It perceives deviant principles, sees through imperialisms, is allergic to injustice and encourages one to intervene for the rights of the oppressed. As such, aesthetic culture is able to contribute at least indirectly to political culture (see Welsch, 1994).

The example of tolerance serves to make clear just how dependent political culture is on aesthetic culture. Tolerance without sensibility would be just a bare principle. One imagines a person who has made all of the maxims of tolerance their own, but who in day-to-day life lacks the sensitivity to even notice that the perceptions of others are different in principle and not just subject to some arbitrary lapse, that is, that it's a case not of a deficit as such, but of a cultural difference. A person of this sort would never be embarrassed by so much as having to make use of his tolerance, but rather would incessantly practise imperialisms and oppression with the clearest of consciences and in the securest of beliefs that he's a tolerant person. Sensitivity for differences is then a real condition for tolerance. Perhaps we live in a society which talks too much of tolerance but has too little command of sensitivity.

Through its sensitization effects aestheticization can interpose in societal processes. I see chances here in aestheticization – which I don't see in the tendencies to embellish which are mostly in the foreground where the talk is of aestheticization.

### *Summary*

Aestheticization is neither to be affirmed nor rejected without qualification. To do either of the two would be equally cheap and wrong. In the thought of the epistemological aestheticization I have tried to name a principal reason which makes the modern inevitability of aestheticization processes comprehensible. If we look at deep-seated aestheticization, then we are concerned with a form of aestheticization which seems to be as good as incontestable. Its non-fundamentalism forms our modern 'basis'. Whereas if we look at surface aestheticization much cause for criticism exists. The in-principle justification of aestheticization processes in no way means that every form of aestheticization is to be sanctioned. I have lastly made clear that it is precisely from an aesthetic standpoint that objections to current manifestations of aestheticization are both possible and necessary. Finally, if we look at the social and political implications of an aestheticized culture, that is at the sensitization for differences and the development of a blind-spot culture, then the indications in this respect are of the chances and responsibilities of a new immediacy of the aesthetic. Only the in-principle justification of aestheticization processes, together with specific criticism of certain forms of aestheticization and the development of the opportunities for sensitization,

will permit us to bring about something just from the midst of aestheticization.

Translated by Andrew Inkpin

### Notes

1. In the age of pixel technology, the photo too, formerly a direct documentation of reality, has become unreliable in principle. In still being able to count on the old belief in reality, while at the same time availing oneself of newer, manipulatory technology, opportunities for perfect deception open up.
2. Video games are a case in point. They are an interactive form of television, definitively detached from any reporting obligations and references to reality. That they prevalently present not pleasant, but rather dramatic, warlike and shocking realities, is evidence of a need resulting from aestheticization. In time, aestheticization as such makes everything arbitrary and stale and thus awakens the need for ever stronger stimuli. At the same time, one believes it possible to deliver these innocuously in the aesthetic medium. Video games, therefore, by way of compensation offer the hard reality which is increasingly receding from daily life through aestheticization processes. A good share of today's art, too, sees its purpose in the mediation of hard reality, corporeality and drastic experiences – all that then which we have lost in reality as a result of aestheticization processes. In the same way, the everyday adventure industry seeks to present emergency without risk. Video wargames, body art and bungee-jumping form a family. To be sure: opposing aesthetic strategies may resist aestheticization in one form or another, but they cannot extricate themselves from aestheticization altogether.
3. Its affirmative version today stems from Foucault, who is all too sweepingly rated as being subversive. Foucault's 'aesthetics of existence' is largely an acclamation of aesthetic self-styling in contemporary spirit. Of one's life one should make 'an oeuvre that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria' (Foucault, 1990: 11). Foucault, however, thinks that independent and resistant subjects would emerge in this way. But de facto they instead turn out adapted and submit themselves to the objective aestheticization like decorative puppets. Robert Wilson and Botho Strauss introduce us to this new type of zombie. The fine new subjects in the brave new world are in truth less independent and wilful than adapted and controllable. Their authenticity too is neither high-spirited nor volitive in character.
4. Baumgarten created the term 'aesthetics' in 1735, first lectured on the subject in 1742, and published the first book with this title in 1750.
5. '*Das Sinnliche*' in the German original. In the following, I have translated this as 'sensible' where this relates to both perception and sensation, and as 'sensuous' where the denotation is a non-reflexive one [trans.].
6. These relationships had already been meticulously analysed by Aristotle. See Welsch (1987).
7. See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement* (1987: 214, para. 59). Furthermore, Kant designated both types of judgement 'aesthetic'. In both cases the judgement in respect of the object is indulged merely in 'the relation that the presentation of the object has to the feeling of pleasure and displeasure'.
8. The transition from one usage to the next takes place roughly as expressed by Wittgenstein through a comparison with the formation of a thread: 'we extend our



concept . . . as in spinning a thread we twist fibre on fibre' (Wittgenstein, 1958: 67, para. 32). The cohesion in the thread – analogous to that of a term such as 'aesthetic' – results not in 'the fact that one fibre runs through its whole length', but rather in 'the overlapping of many fibres' (1958: 67, para. 32). 'We see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail' (1958: 66, para. 32).

9. Wittgenstein: 'Only let us understand what "inexact" means. For it does not mean "unusable"' (1958: 88, para. 41).

10. As is well known, Karl Heinz Bohrer has lamented political provincialism in the Federal Republic of Germany and called for more aesthetics in politics. Conversely, he himself supports a form of provincialism in aesthetics: a decidedly artistic provincialism. Bohrer argues for the limitation of the aesthetic to art, even to great art or emphatic art (see Bohrer, 1993: 48–64). He hereby declares the artistic province to be the world as such of the aesthetic. I call this aesthetic-theoretical provincialism, since one is a provincial not in that one is at home in a particular province, but in that one holds this province as unique and mistakes it for the world. Bohrer's options don't simply differ, but contradict one another. When he adjoins more aesthetic politics, he himself has a trans-artistic sense of the aesthetic in mind in which the aesthetic is understood 'not only as a criterion for artistic imagination, but far more for the way in which people deal with one another too' (Bohrer, 1988: 19). However, when he talks of aesthetics in relation to art, he favours autonomy without practical reference. As such, his political aesthetics and his artistic aesthetics mutually contradict.

11. The autonomy theorem has always been misunderstood if one chooses to take it absolutely. This could be seen even for Baudelaire who simultaneously proclaimed *l'art pour l'art* to be the only remaining existential ideal for the few; Gehlen and Adorno (each, of course, in his own way) have theoretically formulated the connection between autonomy and societal reference in showing how autonomy always has a precise societal function as its reverse side.

12. Today's art, even where it sets itself against day-to-day aestheticization, is nevertheless etched by it. It opposes, filled with hope, strenuously or desperately – often, too, in vain. As it is, it cannot be overlooked that art has always reacted very consciously to the societal state of the aesthetic. Wherever in the world sensibility has been under threat, art – heedful of its old bond – understands itself as the harbinger and rescuer of the sensuous (Dubuffet); where embellishment is rife, it can see its responsibility in countering this and behaving decidedly demurely (*arte povera*, concept art) – just as earlier, in an aesthetically more sparing world, it had championed the Elysium of beauty. Art reacts not only to art, but constantly to reality and particularly to the state of the aesthetic therein.

13. Schiller said 'that it is precisely play and play alone, which of all man's states and conditions is the one which makes him whole and unfolds both sides of his nature at once'; 'man . . . is only fully a human being when he plays' (Schiller, 1967: 105, 107; emphasis in original).

14. '*Wissenschaft*' in the German original, which encompasses all fields of academic study – i.e. not exclusively the pure or applied natural sciences [trans.].

15. In making these observations, I don't wish to defend the way in which Kant construed these forms of perception individually, but rather point out the principal fact that, for Kant, aesthetics became a fundamental discipline in theoretical philosophy. Certainly much of Kant's exposition is problematic and untenable: the unhistoricalness of the transcendental a priori, details of the explication of space and



time, the restriction to these two forms of intuition alone. But the *idea* of this Transcendental Aesthetic was an inciting thought, which, through its later transformations – some of which are about to be named – assumed an increasingly tenable form.

16. As a matter of fact Kant pondered, at the beginning of this Transcendental Aesthetic, whether or not it might be better to comply with the meaning of aesthetic as newly developed by Baumgarten – that is (as Kant understood Baumgarten) as the attempt ‘to bring the critical treatment of the beautiful under rational principles’, thus reserving the title aesthetics for ‘that doctrine ... which is true science’ (1929/1965: B 35 f). In the ‘General Observations on Transcendental Aesthetic’ Kant additionally underlines that his Transcendental Aesthetic should have ‘that certainty and freedom from doubt which is required from any theory that is to serve as an organon’ (1929/1965: B 63). The fact that Kant designated the Transcendental Aesthetic as being decidedly *aesthetic* and held it to be the primary aesthetic should be a warning to all those who think that this Transcendental Aesthetic can lightly be excluded from the realm of legitimate aesthetic concepts. Kant saw things quite differently. He was still free of the later conjunction of aesthetics and art.

17. One may object that this is mere metaphorical parlance. But the concern is first, if with a metaphor at all, then with a metaphor for an elemental situation, and elemental situations are only ever explicable metaphorically. And, second: if recent thinking has increasingly apprehended reality as the product of metaphorical activity, then metaphors are not mere ‘metaphors’ but rather potentially valid descriptions of reality.

A comparison with Aristotle shows how fundamental this difference is in relation to older conceptions. He too made use of a nautical metaphor at an important point – but with a completely different aim in mind. In the *Protrepticus*, his appeal to philosophy, Aristotle says of the philosopher: ‘Like a good sea-captain he moors his boat to that which is eternal and unchanging, drops his anchor there, and lives his own master’ (Düring, 1961: 69 [B 50]). It is just this chance to drop anchor, this Archimedean Point, which is no longer seen by modern thought.

18. ‘Schiffbau aus dem Schiffbruch’: the German title of Chapter 6 of Blumenberg, *Schiffbruch mit Zuschauer* (1979: 70–4). It doesn’t seem to me to be going too far to characterize hermeneutics – in Gadamer’s version, too, say – as thought in the conditions of this view.

19. Furthermore, Konrad Fiedler had already observed in 1876 that: ‘Art is as much research as science, and science is as much design as is art’ (1991: 31).

20. Similarly Rüdiger Bubner (1989: 139) observes: ‘In fact no sufficient means are available to designate truth as truth and appearance as appearance without taking the risk of becoming involved in the turmoil. In the aestheticization of daily surroundings portrayed, categories critical for knowledge, as those for deceit are being desolated.’ Bubner (1989: 139) also records the key role of modern scientific knowledge in the irrefutability of aestheticization processes: ‘The long-since effected break-down of the undoubted dependability of the scientific picture of the world enforces ... aestheticization. ... Scientific progress unintentionally refutes the naïve prospect of finality which accompanies it.’

21. ‘It is precisely the nerves most highly-developed aesthetically that now find self-righteous aestheticism intolerable’ (Adorno, 1974: 145 [Nr. 95]).

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**Wolfgang Welsch** teaches philosophy at the Otto-von-Guericke University, Magdeburg, Germany.