

THE STATUS OF AESTHETICS TODAY

A B S T R A C T

In my paper I will examine some of the turning points in recent history of aesthetics. I claim that recent developments in aesthetics have not only broadened its range of interests and made it more up-to-date vis-à-vis concurrent art, but have also taken aesthetics into realms that were previously not its own. In this respect, I see Jacques Rancière as the pivotal figure, whose recent writings offer a possible novel – although also risky – endeavor. Furthermore, I will examine some other – divergent, but also highly productive – aesthetic theories of the recent decades.

KEY WORDS

AESTHETICS
HISTORY
JACQUES RANCIÈRE
ART
TURNING POINTS

TURNING POINTS IN AESTHETICS

In this paper I intend to present a brief sketch of what I see as the main turning points in aesthetics – of those at its inception, on the one hand, and those in recent decades, on the other. I thus intend to offer a fragmentary picture of the development of aesthetics to the present time so as to gauge its position and relevance within the current state of the humanities and social sciences. I should add that the views I express here are based mostly on my personal experiences which were to a large extent formed through my experience with and within the International Association for Aesthetics, where I have been active since 1980. Doubtlessly, this activity and my exchange with colleagues from across the globe have left visible traces in my interpretation of what aesthetics was, what it is, and how other people applying it perceive it.

When speaking about aesthetics we all tend to start with Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten who during the 1730s developed this term in his *Aesthetica* (published between 1750 and 1758). As it has been observed,

in the years to come, the term and the discipline [of aesthetics] spread in Europe with astonishing rate considering the technologies for information exchange at that time. For instance, a chair of aesthetics was established at the University of Copenhagen as early as in 1788. This, however, does not imply that the discipline as such was unambiguously defined and delimited already at that time. On the contrary, Baumgarten's definitions and reflections were themselves rather loose. Not even his own immediate successors, such as G. F. Meier (1718-1777), were especially true to his ideas. The most prominent and influential further development of the concept of aesthetics in Baumgarten's own age we owe to Immanuel Kant.¹

This new term, namely aesthetics, acquired also a number of contradictory meanings, these ranging from that developed by Friedrich Schiller to that suggested by Hegel. From a long-term perspective the turning point was most certainly the meaning that aesthetics was given by Hegel: if Kant viewed beauty – regarded as an object of aesthetic experience – as primarily that of nature, then Hegel interpreted aesthetics as philosophy of art – a designation that for the most part remains in place until our very present. Let me note some essential differences between the two traditions: while in the Hegelian tradition art – driven by the inner dialectical tensions, the spirit and its priorities – undergoes enormous changes to meet at the end its death (or end), the aesthetics arising from Kant ignores such genetic designations and wants to speak from a universal (and therefore also transhistorical) position.

While the former is based on an idea and therefore possesses strong links to its historical and social setting (including that of ideology), then the latter privileges experience and decontextualization. The former is usually regarded as a part of the Continental tradition and the second of the Anglo-American.

“OLDEST SYSTEM PROGRAMME OF GERMAN IDEALISM”

In early romanticism the relation between the art and the aesthetics was essentially modified: early romanticism established a symmetrical alliance between the art and the aesthetics. This change was articulated in the “Oldest System Programme of German Idealism” (1796) attributed to Hegel, Hölderlin and Schelling. In this brief fragment the idea of beauty attains a very particular position:

Finally the idea which unites all, the Idea of *beauty*, the word taken in the higher platonic sense. I am now convinced that the highest act of reason, which embraces all Ideas, is an aesthetic act, and that *truth and goodness* are brothers *only in beauty*. – The philosopher must possess just as much aesthetic power as the poet.²

In the brief remaining passage in the “System,” poetry is raised to the highest position, surpassing sciences and arts, with philosophy requiring “monotheism of reason of the heart.”³ The same document proclaims the state to be “something mechanical,” for “every state must treat free people as a piece of machinery; and it should not do this; thus it must *come to an end*.”⁴ This revolutionary statement is complemented by proclaiming the object of freedom to be an *Idea*. And here we return to the beginning of the discussion of this fragment, for the “Idea” which unites all subordinate ideas is the Idea of beauty, the latter thereby unifying the true and the good, with the aesthetic act becoming the highest instance of human reason. Why should beauty be an object of philosophy and why can beauty be related to ethics? Because it is in an essential relation with the true and the good and is a model of perfection.

In enlightenment and romanticism the criterion of beauty shifted from the object to the subject. The idea of beauty was replaced by the sentiment of the beautiful. From now on it was the taste that was capable of carrying a judgment of beauty – a knowledge that depends on the sensible and not on the intelligible. Until the nineteenth century the idea of beauty was the only basis of the aesthetic criterion. With romanticism the object of art vanished, i.e., it was no longer clear and self-evident that the object of art as representation was erected on the foundations of beauty, but was instead increasingly erected upon categories such as the sublime, the interesting and the ugly.

RECENT HISTORY OF AESTHETICS

Until the post-World War II period, aesthetics was either a discipline of academic philosophy as developed especially in German academic context or analytic aesthetics as developed in the Anglo-American framework and in its extensions such as the Scandinavian countries. Marxism developed its own brands of aesthetics – some Hegelian and some not – with phenomenology being another strong trend, having its roots mainly in Germany and France. From the 1960s and 1970s onwards, the traditions of the Frankfurt School and of the emergent critical theory became yet another broad and influential body of what were also aesthetic ideas, even though their authors (Theodor Adorno or Walter Benjamin, for example) preferred to employ as self-designating terms notions other than aesthetics. This was a consequence of the situation in academia where usually aesthetics formed a part of university philosophy programs. At the universities until the late sixties (or longer), traditional and conservative aesthetic criteria that arose from classical and formalist avant-garde tastes usually ruled. In the sixties and seventies such aesthetics was dominant also among the members of the International Association for Aesthetics (IAA).

Contrary to the Continental tradition, the subject of analytic aesthetics was both art and beauty in general – and therefore also nature. In the sixties, with the rise of structuralism, semiotics and related theories of the sign, phenomenological aesthetics – of Maurice Merleau-Ponty or Mikel Dufrenne, for example – lost its central place in French and partly also in German philosophical “empires” (to employ a term of Richard Shusterman) and was replaced by structuralism, poststructuralism and critical theory, the latter being this time understood in the broadest possible sense and as such employed mostly outside France. Being so often in the twentieth century, and in the 1960s and 1970s as well, French theory was the most influential among the national traditions on the Continent. In this respect the import and influence of French theoretic and philosophical traditions were just the opposite of those of French art whose import and influence were after World War II in their global role replaced by the American art.

Until late 1970s aesthetics was national and regional, on the one hand, and academic on the other. It usually dealt with abstractions that arose not from the knowledge of art but from the needs of aesthetic theories, thereby making aesthetics an easy prey of less rigid but more empirical transdisciplinary and borderline studies such as the newly emergent theories of the 1960s. Such situation was already present in art much earlier, causing the American abstract expressionist painter Barnett Newman to condescendingly remark that “aesthetics is to art what ornithology is to the birds.”

All this showed that contrary to the eighteenth century, when aesthetics spread quickly across Europe, in the late twentieth century it became a rigid, traditionalistic, and conservative discipline without clear method or subjectmatter. The first six or seven decades of the twentieth century were a period in which aesthetics did not find its particular and relevant place within the humanities and even philosophy. One important reason for this situation was the fact that during that period philosophy consisted mainly of holistic philosophical theories wherein aesthetics usually didn't have a place of its own but had to be – to be able to carry the designation aesthetics – extracted from an all-englobing philosophical *Weltanschauung*. Such was the case of Heidegger's, Merleau-Ponty's or Sartre's philosophy.

The situation changed with the arrival of postmodernism and postmodern theory. Not only did the non-modernist or even anti-modernist forms of art emerge, but also the aesthetics as philosophy of art and beauty was rapidly replaced by psychoanalysis, deconstruction, and philosophized forms of Marxism and semiotics. A special role was played by Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, Louis Althusser, Jean-François Lyotard and other, mostly French authors, whose discourses in their form and content ran counter the prevalent academic theories of the time. After having been brought up in the tradition of analytic philosophy or phenomenology some of our colleagues from across the globe encountered difficulties when they started to study and understand these authors. Suddenly their students knew of postmodern theory more than they, as their teachers, did. Similarly those from the language departments were often more knowledgeable in postmodern philosophy than those from the philosophy departments. This occurred because such “unorthodox” influences entered national and linguistic environments via language departments (French, for example) and not philosophy departments that tended to be more isolated and thus less prone to the influences from foreign theories. This situation changed in a single generation, spreading Continental influence around the globe.

2000 AND AFTER

Let me jump to the year 2000. By that time on the Continent aesthetics as primarily philosophy of art started to be questioned – not because it would turn analytical, but because of the two decades long view that art was nearing its end and, furthermore, because of the emerging influence of the interpretation of aesthetics as philosophy of the sensible – or of both. While there exist on the globe vast academic and cultural territories where traditional disciplinary

aesthetics continues to be pursued and where “traditional” designates also willful ignorance or avoidance of the mentioned division, it is probably warranted to claim that at this moment this kind of aesthetics is at the forefront of current reflection upon aesthetics and as aesthetics, even though the place and the import of the sensible on the one hand and that of art on the other, are not yet equal.

Nonetheless, this “other” aesthetics, namely that which reaches also beyond the realm of art, is acquiring an important voice. Even more, this kind of aesthetics has caught the attention of artists and critics, as well as many of those who so far were not interested in aesthetics and were thus newcomers to the field.

Let me mention one instance of such aesthetics, namely that of Jacques Rancière who became a particular source of this unexpected attention directed at aesthetics: his special merit for some became the import he ascribed to politics and aesthetics – especially in their mutual relationship. Rancière also became known for the particular characteristics of his interpretation of this tandem and of art, its autonomy and heteronomy, its function in the processes of emancipation, as well as of his criticism of categories such as modernism and postmodernism.

We should not forget that a few other authors have also been important in recent aesthetics and have also visibly overturned its roots, even if they have not always designated their endeavors by that name. I am thinking of Thierry de Duve, Boris Groys as well as Arthur Danto, Alain Badiou and Nicolas Bourriaud. Each of these authors proposed his own description or prescription of the essence or nature of art and artwork.

Nonetheless, it was Rancière who most radically opened a new vista onto aesthetics and its relation to art. Furthermore in his own theoretical practice he took into consideration novels, theater etc., thereby bringing literature once again into the fold of the broad notion of “art” in singular for literature has in recent decades drifted onto its own path, separating itself from arts other than those of the spoken written word. Risking to exaggerate, I would claim that Rancière has visibly reconfigured recent aesthetics and that his theory has at least for the time being become the hegemonic one on the whole globe.

CONCLUSION

In spite of what I may have said in this concluding part of my paper, it appears to me warranted to continue to speak of aesthetics primarily as philosophy of art. This does not exclude the sensible in its different guises as the object of our scrutiny, yet the latter remains – as of now – only partly explained and only partly applied to various situations. Until this is accomplished, it will be difficult to speak of the two segments of aesthetics – one focused on the sensible and the other on art – as equally important and equally relevant.

As I have attempted to show in this brief historical sketch, aesthetics underwent different stages and established varied relations to its main subjectmatter in the twentieth century, i.e. art. Aesthetics oscillated between art as its exclusive, and art as its partial subjectmatter. As Arthur Danto observed shortly after Barnett Newman's statement from the fifties, that I have mentioned earlier, aesthetics has become – at least in United States – an object of strong interest to these same artists. With the decline of postmodernism and of its body of theories, and with the emergence of contemporary art, a theoretical reflection of these new processes both in art and in theory brought about a renewed interest in aesthetics. A crucial figure was Arthur Danto who was perhaps the only author who successfully blended the analytic and the Continental traditions. His theory of the end of art has furthermore significantly contributed to a particular interpretation of art. All these authors consciously entered a realm of the humanities that we designate as aesthetics. This trend spread even further, for Rancière's theory had direct influence on artistic practice.

With the aim of concluding let me mention another characteristic of recent aesthetics, that is, in recent decades it has been catching up with the developments in philosophy proper as well as with those in the concurrent art. If until the arrival of postmodernism (which for aesthetics meant the early eighties) aesthetics was often ignorant of the concurrent developments in art, then today aesthetics has become firmly connected with the on-going artistic developments. For the time being this appears to be a practice that is here to stay.

NOTES

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- 1 Morten Kyndrup, unpublished manuscript.
- 2 “Appendix: the so-called ‘Oldest System Programme of German Idealism,’” in *Aesthetics and Subjectivity from Kant to Nietzsche*, ed. Andrew Bowie (Manchester: Manchester University Press 2003), 334.
- 3 Ibid., 335.
- 4 Ibid., 335.

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STATUS ESTETIKE DANAS

Aleš Erjavec

U svom radu ću ispitati neke od prekretnica u novijoj istoriji estetike. Tvrdim da su nedavni događaji u estetici ne samo proširili njenu paletu interesa i učinili je savremenijom nasuprot konkurentnoj umetnosti, već su takođe uveli estetiku u oblasti koje prethodno nisu bile njene. U tom smislu, vidim Žaka Ransijera kao glavnu figuru, čiji nedavni spisi nude mogući pokušaj romana – mada takođe rizično. Osim toga, ja ću ispitati neke druge – divergentne, ali i veoma produktivne – estetske teorije poslednjih decenija.

KLJUČNE REČI: ESTETIKA, ISTORIJA, ŽAK RANSIJER, UMETNOST, PREKRETNICE

KOOPTACIJA SENZIBILITETA I SUBVERZIJE LEPOTE

Arnold Berlant

Estetska analiza svakodnevnog života je razvila važan opus čiji značaj prevazilazi akademski. Zbog svoje rasprostranjenosti u iskustvu, estetski senzibilitet ima mnogo manifestacija, kako otvorenih tako i skrivenih. Ovaj rad ispituje neke u velikoj meri skrivene načine na koje su ukus i estetski sud, koji se manifestuju u dojmu, suptilno prisvojeni i eksploatisani. Ja identifikujem i opisujem takve postupke kao kooptaciju (ili prisvajanje) estetskog senzibiliteta, što je fenomen koji ima posledice štetne po zdravlje, društvo, i životnu sredinu. Ovi postupci su oblik negativne estetike koja narušava i manipuliše razumnim iskustvom u interesu masovnog marketinga i političke kontrole. Takve prakse imaju veliki etički značaj i nose društvene i političke implikacije koje ukazuju drugu ulogu estetike, onu kritičku: estetika kao instrument emancipacije u društvenim analizama i političkom kriticizmu.

KLJUČNE REČI: ESTETSKI SENZIBILITET, KOOPTACIJA, NEADEKVATNO OBRAZOVANJE, DOBIT, UKUS

KAKO BRANITI ESTETIKU?

Lev Kreft

Milan Damnjanović (1924-1994) objavio je svoj estetski opus u kontekstu (Jugoslovenskog) marksističkog “prevazilaženja” (Aufhebung) estetike i estetske samokritike izražene kao “kriza estetike”. Da bi se suprotstavio obema ovim kritičnim pozicijama i u isto vreme reformisao sposobnost estetike da tretira sve estetske fenomene, ali i dalje zadržao umetnost u posebnom fokusu, on je uveo problem neposrednosti doživljaja sveta od strane čoveka. U svom članku “Problem neposrednosti i posredovanja u Marksovoj misli” (1970) Damnjanović je želeo da pokaže primat estetske dimenzije u neposrednosti i neposredno posredovanje/razmišljanje koje može da podrži legitimno pravo filozofije da je organizuje kao otvoreni sistem, i solidnost estetike kao disciplinu takvog sistema. Da bi postigao ovaj cilj, predstavio je isprepletenu argumentaciju koja kombinuje njegovo tumačenje Marksove filozofije rada iz pariskih rukopisa i Kapitala sa Plesnerovom esteziologijom i Valerijevom “esthétique”.

Preispitivanje Damnjanovićeve odbrane Celine, filozofske sistematičnosti, i autonomnog položaja estetike kao discipline je prilika da se utvrdi da li je ukazao na pravi smer, bilo uzimajući Plesnera i Valerija kao podršku, ili, uzimajući osnovni filozofski problem neposrednosti / posredovanja kao kamen temeljac statusa estetike.

KLJUČNE REČI: ODBRANA ESTETIKE, MILAN DAMNJANOVIĆ, HELMUT PLESNER, ESTEZOLOGIJA, MARKSISTIČKA ESTETIKA, NEPOSREDNOST I POSREDOVANJE
