

# The Aesthetic Turn

## The Cultivation and Propagation of Aesthetic Experience after its Declaration of Independence

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## **THE AESTHETIC TURN**

### ***The Cultivation and Propagation of Aesthetic Experience after its Declaration of Independence***

Sverre Raffnsøe

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Sverre Raffnsøe

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## Keywords:

aesthetics, aesthetic autonomy, aesthetic experience, beauty, the sublime, romanticism, fiction, poetics, Plato, Baumgarten, Boileau, Kant, Schiller, Hegel, Schelling, Schlegel, Athenaeum, Chateaubriand, de Musset, Gautier, Poe, Baudelaire, Heidegger, Lyotard, Rancière

## **I. The genie of aestheticism**

A spirit has been conjured up and walks about in the Occident: the genie of aestheticism. In our day, a decisive, overarching and comprehensive, turn to the aesthetic is making itself felt, particularly markedly in the parts of the world affected by and looking to Western ways of life, but similarly to different extents across the globe. As a result of this long-standing and sustained aesthetic turn, aesthetic perception and aesthetically creative activity have become ubiquitously present and momentous. An ongoing and probably long-lasting aesthetization manifests itself and becomes a matter of vital importance across a number of traditionally well-established divides; and this testifies to the fact that the aesthetic has begun to assume a substantial and increasing role and exert a decisive influence upon a number of practices, and in a number of spheres, where it used to have an essentially subordinate role.

The turn to the aesthetic and aesthetization is a broad and sweeping, all-extensive and all-influencing, contemporary shift, transversally affecting and decisively changing the game in and across a number of traditionally distinguished sectors or fields.

While political theory establishes that political practice and theory at local, national and trans-national level have become increasingly aestheticized and conscious of the decisive importance of aesthetic dimensions (Kompridis 2014; Amin, Ash., Thrift, N.J., 2013; Panagia 2006; Ranciere 2005, 13; Edkins, Jenny., Kear, Adrian., 2013), the aesthetic dimensions of governmental, managerial, organizational and entrepreneurial practice have increasingly come to the fore, both in theory and practice (Raffnsøe 2019, forthcoming; Hjorth & Steyaert 2004; Hjorth & Steyaert 2009; Thyssen 2011). Equally, the importance of the aesthetic is recognized as decisive in and for cultural theory, cultural institutions, governance and popular culture (Bennett 2013; Grossberg, Nelson, and Treichler 1992; Hart 1992, 277-294; Grossberg 2010) as well as in media and media theory and in urban planning, focusing on creative cities and the creation of affective atmospheres.

Concomitantly, the importance of the aesthetic element in marketing and public relations, in modern work life, for value creation, and for the economy more generally is asserted in manifold ways (Slowinska 2014; Böhme 2003, 71-82; Florida 2002; Boltanski & Chiapello 2005; Lazzarato 2002). Economic and aesthetic processes of innovation, creativity and value creation become closely interlinked, interpenetrate and mutually re-inforce each other to such an extent that it is warranted to speak not only of aesthetic production and consumption but also of aesthetic capitalism (Murphy and Fuente 2014) and aesthetic economy (Kanth 2015).

While aesthetic approaches to the mobilization and modulation of motivation and to the establishment and affection of processes of innovation abound in the workplace, aesthetic processes of self-fashioning and self-management, self-improvement and self-expression proliferate everywhere. Accordingly, “a new aesthetic paradigm” characterized by the “aptitude of (such) processes of creation to auto-affirm themselves as existential nuclei” and by the privileged position of “the aesthetic power of feeling” within the present assemblages is falling into place (Guattari 1995: 106). In turn, the entrance and integration of subjects characterized by an affective apprehension of the world and an aestheticized relationship of the self to the self noticeably alters the meaning and role of politics as previously indicated.

In general, social processes have transversally become so thoroughly affected by aesthetic effects and so thoroughly mobilized, modulated and mediated aesthetically that it warrants the claim of an increasingly thoroughly sustained “aesthetization of the social,” voiced by contemporary observers (Reckwitz 2011: 334). According to Peter Sloterdijk, aesthetization of the globe has reached a point where the world may seem to have become a total work of art, “a crystal palace” or a world exhibition, that feigns to be so spacious and commodious that is able to include everything within its sphere and that you may never have to or be able to leave it (Sloterdijk 2005: 265-76; Sloterdijk 2004: 344-50; Sloterdijk 2001).

The appearance of the very vigorous and compelling, yet somewhat enigmatic and inscrutable genie of aestheticism also raises a number of pressing questions. What is this spirit already acknowledged by the powers in power to be itself a power? What does its appearance indicate? How did it come about? How are we affected by it? How come that this genie keeps returning and appearing ubiquitously over and over again? How come that we are so fascinated by it and keeps returning to it? What does it signal and give us to understand?

To face these and related questions, the following text seeks to address the spirit and spectre of aestheticism and further investigate the ongoing turn to the aesthetic. In this manner, it follows Marcellus’ exhortation to his learned friend Horatio in the opening scene of *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, as they are both beseeched by a still intriguing ghost that manifests in a haunting and enigmatic way: “Thou art a scholar, speak to it, Horatio!” (Act 1, Scene 1).

As will hopefully become increasingly clear, however, interpellating and questioning the spectre of aestheticism differs radically from investigating a specific subject area as a self-contained object which can be taken up in isolation and examined from a distance (Raffnsøe 2013). Rather, following the ghost’s exhortation “to remember me” by lending “serious hearing to what I shall unfold” (Act 1, Scene 5), a request put forward by the ghost’s very insistence, may lead to discoveries seriously implicating the interlocutor, to

such a degree that it not only changes his past and present existence but also forces the interlocutor to undergo change, as Hamlet experiences in the ensuing play. Forcing the spectre to halt and account for itself, the inquirer may discover that he/she needs to begin giving a different account of her/himself, and that that the manners of and conditions for giving an account of oneself have already been altered. At the same time, the very examination and substantiation of the spirit and the spectre disclosing itself is what may prevent us from being haunted in unforeseen ways.

## II. Aesthetic transitions

To speak to, question and make the present spectre of aestheticism speak, the present article faces and examines its genesis. In what follows, I will try to provide an overview of the crucial stages in the history of philosophic aesthetics in the Western societies. It is in and through this history that the spectre of aestheticism has come into existence; and insofar as this history is still with us today, it continues to conjure up the spirit.

The main part of this article describes crucial changes as they have taken place since Plato and up till the present day, with an emphasis upon the decisive aesthetic turn in German idealism and the last 200 years. As classical poetics and the aesthetic output of the classical age make clear, a prescriptive approach to aesthetic sensibilities and expression was prevalent until the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Ideally, aesthetic works, experience and sensibility were supposed to live up to, represent and disseminate a generally binding normative foundation (Shusterman 2006, 2-3:237-38; Rancière 2009: 28-29). The beginnings of modern aesthetics in the latter half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century included receptive and reflective relationships to a liberated and irreducible aesthetic sphere.

After a relatively short investigation of the classical normative approach to aesthetics in Plato, Boileau and Baumgarten that presents a contrast to subsequent development in part III, the article turns to the declaration of aesthetic independence as it is pronounced in German idealism. The development of an independent aesthetic level or sphere and the strengthening of its characteristics occurring from Kant, Schiller, and Hegel until the Romantic age and modern literature is developed in some detail in part IV “The receptive and reflexive approach to idealist aesthetics” and part V “The sublime experience.”

The coming about of a special aesthetic level liberated from reflecting and reenacting a universal normative basis does not result in it becoming inconsequential, but rather that the aesthetic level gains in importance. The consequence of the liberation was that aesthetic effects may be employed in a multitude unanticipated ways. This is described in the final part VI “The changed aesthetic experience of the contemporary age.” However, the declaration of independence of the aesthetic also results in the aesthetic becoming an irreducible existential issue in a new sense. This is because we must increasingly (re)locate, transgress, and

restate ourselves without knowing ourselves in advance. In extension of this, the article will therefore conclude by posing the question: How does aesthetic experience function today? The article hereby sketches how the transformation of aesthetic experience has decisive implications for individuals and organizations when they employ aesthetic effects and speak to aesthetic experience.

The aesthetic is no longer a lesser category that is put to use to represent or channel something more basic. It has itself become the general and overall medium that we are located and come about in. Aesthetics may still to some extent remain an applied art, but we have begun using the aesthetic in a new way, where it is no longer perceived as a means to a higher end over and above it. The precondition for how to make use of the aesthetic has changed, and this has far-reaching consequences not only for the aesthetic.

### **III. The normative ‘poetic’ approach to aesthetics in Plato, Baumgarten and Boileau**

The contemporary meaning of aesthetics is connected to and developed from a very long historical trajectory that extends several hundred years. Initially it is possible to characterize this change as a change in the status of the aesthetic plane. There has been a development, over the course of several hundred years, which can be described as a release or liberation of the aesthetical plane, whereby it has been relived from its task of serving and mediating other deeper standards. Aesthetics must no longer express and live up to a universal normative foundation. This liberation of the aesthetical is indicated in the various attempts at conceptualizing aesthetic phenomena, perhaps most noticeably in the distinction between older poetics and younger aesthetics.

Poetics took its outset in the idea of a given ‘true’ or ‘correct’ order and could from this appear as a lawgiver. It seeks to determine the rules or laws without which an activity cannot be said to have happened properly, wherefore it must live up to those very laws. In the poet Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux’s (1636-1711) *Ars Poétique* from 1674, there is still an attempt to formulate the rules, which the aesthetic must follow (Boileau 2010). In this manner, he remains located in extension of a normative tradition of poetics, which reaches back to antiquity. Already Aristotle (384-322 BC) called his work on the Greek tragedy and comedy *Poetika* (Aristotle 1999, 26-141).

By contrast, subsequent and more recent aesthetics was, however, a retrospective examination of a given area. It seeks to determine, which rules or logos applies to it. Whereas poetics was understood as normative and constitutive for its ‘object’, aesthetics is receptive and reflective. When Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (1714-62) employs the concept of ‘aesthetics’ as the first, in describing an independent discipline

(Baumgarten 1750-58/1983), he hereby indicates the initial steps in a liberation of the aesthetic, which results in it taking the shape of a post hoc, retrospective reflection<sup>1</sup>

With Baumgarten and over the next 300 years, aesthetics became an increasingly independent activity. All the while, aesthetics was secreted as an autonomous level (characterized by its own logic and subject to its own regularities) and not heteronomous (i.e. subject to an alien normativity).<sup>2</sup> This change and its implications will be taken up in greater detail in this article by tracing the various intermediary, historical stages of the development.

It was a characteristic of poetics that it related to the aesthetic by indicating a more comprehensive context. It took an outset in an accepted and basic normative truth and involved the idea of possessing knowledge about the nature of reality, where this truth had such a character that it gave reality as a whole order and direction. Understanding the truth hereby seemed to guide and commit our way of living. The normative truth retained the idea of another world however. Thus, truth not only involved commitment, but also generated space for the hope of another and better world than the one immediately inhabited, since this other world was conceived as having a relative surplus. Plato's notion that our world had an inherent ideality, the theory of forms, was the idea of such a basic normative truth.

For Plato, all being is ordered around a supernatural foundation which rests upon an inherent metaphysics. Being identifies the original presentation of something foundational, the presentation of a certain quiddity, that we must take for granted. For Plato all of reality can be understood as the presentation of such a

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<sup>1</sup> In accordance with this historic change, term 'poetics' is still in use today, but has acquired a somewhat different meaning. 'Poetics' has come to refer to the study of linguistic techniques, procedures, and practices in poetry and literature, but now above all as a post hoc and not a prae hoc activity. It examines an already ongoing aesthetic creation to determine the processes and rules involved, but with a special reference to the very act of making poetry or writing literature in the future that will not necessarily have to follow the same, already established and given rules. In this sense one may speak of *Yeats' Poetry and Poetics* (Sidnell 1996). Here poetics has attained the same status as aesthetics, namely a reflection that allows you to become affected, re-examine, develop and move on.

<sup>2</sup> The fact that aesthetics becomes independent is for instance seen in the framing of pictures (Schapiro 1973). The frame indicates a boundary between the image and the world, whereby the image attains its own laws that are separate from those of the surrounding world (Lebensztejn 1981). Conceived as an ontological marker, framing constituted an innovation with regard to the scenarios and figures that had been painted on church walls. Often these were not even framed and were not to be conceived as a separate realm to be distinguished from the real world (Gumbrecht 2007). In this medieval universe people would get together to tell each other heroic eposes or hagiographies as we know it from *Beowulf* (Mitchell et al. 1998) and *La Chanson de Roland* (Duggan, Joseph J. 2005), *The Life of Saint Christopher* (in Voragine 1260?) or *The Life of Stefan Lazarevic* by Constantine of Kostenets. These were stories about how great men or women were subject to trials of character and became inspirations to others in terms of strength, virtue or sanctity. Whether the events had actually taken place was less important for this exemplary character. The modern distinction between the real and the literary world had not yet become important. However, with the differentiation of the aesthetic, which was subsequently initiated, there occurs a movement from general *exempla*, or role models, to the manifestation of an independent pictorial matter expressing a specific sensorium and permitting to make specific aesthetic experiences. At the same time the distinction between fact and fiction likewise becomes important.



foundation; ideally it would involve an adequate representation of the original presentation. Plato's concept of truth hereby becomes a form of correspondence truth (Heidegger 1930-31/1975). Truth is the adequate representation of a more primordial being (Heidegger 1930-31/1942/1978: 175-236, 176-78).

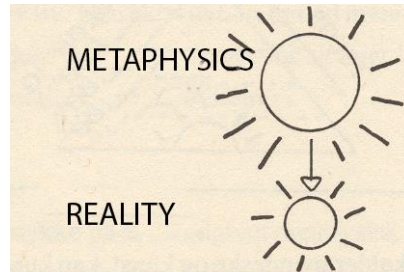


Figure 1

However, this results in a problem of representation or presentation, since not everything seems to be a complete or adequate representation of the original foundational being (Derrida 1972b, 69-198; cfr. Also Derrida 1972a 7-67: 22, 31, 61). There occur distortions and concealments when the original presentation is represented in our world. Accordingly, Plato urges utmost caution in the use of representation and rendering and at times subjects them to severe criticism. In *Phaidrus* (276a), Plato finds fault with writing since it is a simple “bastard” (Plato 1914: 567) and a mere “imperfect depiction (or epitome, eidolon)” of a more legitimate brother, “the living and breathing word” or speech, which in turn remains an imperfect rendering of the idea. In *The Republic*, Plato voices a critique of rendering or representation, since it must be understood as mimesis: as an imitation or a mere re-rendering of the original representation. Here (395b-c), Socrates admonishes the guardians of the state that they should “practice nothing else unless it has relevance to the state” and underlines that “if they do imitate, then they must imitate those things which are appropriate from earliest childhood: brave, temperate men, pious, free, and all such things” (Plato 2013a 259). In this context, Socrates consequently stresses the need for caution against comedy and tragedy in so far as they may often seem to imitate less blameless courses of life or emotional attitudes (Plato 2013a 257-59). Towards the end of the Republic (595a), Socrates stresses that it is important “not to allow anything in which is in any way imitative” (Plato 2013b: 391). In particular, he here levels criticism at not only the tragic poets, but poets in general, at least insofar as they are likened to the painter who only creates a picture which is a mere representation or imitation of the bed that a craftsman has created and not a true presentation of the idea of the bed that the craftsman must take as his starting point if he is to make a proper bed (595-608; Plato 2013b 390-441). Like the painter, the poet is prone to make a copy of a copy and is thus likely to lead us astray from what we ought to commit ourselves to.

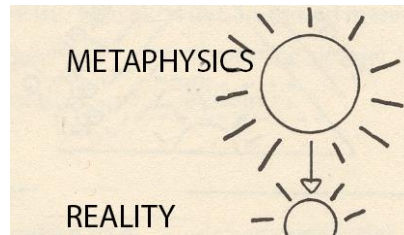


Figure 2

Nevertheless, distorted representations can be conceived relatively easily by philosophy, since it is able to conceive the various imperfect representations as partial revelations of the original foundation. Classical, antique philosophy thus employs a supplemental concept of correspondence truth. This is a concept of truth as unveiling or disclosure (Heidegger, Martin, Mörchén, Hermann,, 1988; Heidegger 1947, 5-52). The things of the world can thus be true in a more derived sense insofar as they involve a limited representation of the original foundation. Plato's world is thus a hierarchical, coherent universe. Everything has the foundation as its telos or end goal – it strives towards it. And everything in the universe is ordered according to how adequately or appropriately its revelation of the foundation is.

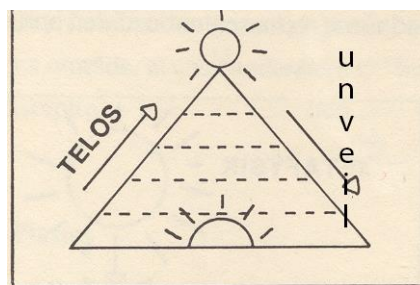


Figure 3

In extension of this the term 'the beautiful' does not only concern specific aesthetic objects for Plato. It is a particular way, whereby a higher being or metaphysics appears or is presented in the common reality. In the beautiful representation something higher shines through in such a way that reality seems to indicate the higher being or truth. Since the being that mediates itself in its appearance is beautiful, Plato is therefore able, in *Phaidros* (250d), to characterize beauty as that which "is most clearly seen and loveliest" (Plato 1914: 485).<sup>3</sup> The beautiful is experienced as a mutual penetration of or 'correspondence' between the metaphysical

<sup>3</sup> The expression "most clearly seen" translated in the Loeb edition seeks to render the Greek term "ta ekphainestaton," which is a substantivized adjective in the superlative form originating in the middle voice of the Greek verb 'phaino', usually translated as 'shining' or 'bringing forth into the light.' Consequently, a more fitting translation would be 'the most forth-shining' or 'that which presents itself most clearly or most manifestly.' Hegel still uses the term in the wider metaphysical sense when he defines the beautiful as "das sinnliche Scheinen der Idee (the sensual shining forth or rendering of the idea)" in *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik* (Hegel 1817-1829/1970a: 151).

and sense reality, which results in the indication of something 'higher'. As long as the beautiful denotes the luminous nature of metaphysics or being, it will remain in a close relation to the good and the true.

The entities we currently call, 'aesthetic,' 'art,' and even an 'individual' can only be imagined in this kind of universe. They only exist within the given constraints of that universe. Humans, aesthetics, and art only attain a specific identity insofar as they are reflected in the more basic subject, namely the original basis of forms.

This view of reality as being a comprehensive and connected foundation was the outset for philosophy for a very long time. What is given as the foundation of being changed over time, but philosophy long expected to find such a basis as that given in Plato's theory of forms. Even during absolutism the idea was that society rested upon a foundational and divine cosmic order. Because the basic truth was universal, it also constituted a commitment to aesthetic aspects of being. In poetics this universal validity was given as universal validity of general rules to be followed by aesthetics. According to Nicolas Boileau's *Art Poétique*, the maxims still applied, as is evident in his letters where he states: Nothing is beautiful but the true: the true alone is agreeable; It must reign everywhere, even in the fable: The well-turned falsity of all fiction serves only to make the truth more readily seen.<sup>4</sup> That truth was not immediately accessible to everybody was clear from the innumerable controversies about it. The normative truth was an emphatic truth. It transcended what was accessible to ordinary people, and therefore also came across as esoteric. And yet it was clear to the initiated that truth left an imprint on reality as a whole.

In *Aesthetica*, Baumgarten still operated with such an overarching concept of being as a normative and hierarchical connection. However, he also begins to develop a sensitivity to the fact that aesthetics can contribute to the context with more than mere rational cognition of the whole to which it seems at first subordinated (Baumgarten 1750-58/1983; Shusterman 2006). At that time, however, faith in the obvious and universal subject had already been challenged for some time. Yet the consequence of this development does not appear more fully until the aesthetics of Immanuel Kant.

#### IV. The receptive and reflexive approach to idealist aesthetics

At Kant's time, an inner gradual decomposition or disintegration of the comprehensive system of representations that had been dominant so far had taken effect for some time. The foundation, which the previous representational system build upon, does not last forever and calls for a new basis that does not

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<sup>4</sup> "Rien n'est beau que le vrai : le vrai seul est aimable;  
Il doit régner partout, et même dans la fable :  
De toute fiction l'adroite fausseté  
Ne tend qu'à faire aux yeux briller la vérité" (Boileau 1821: 111-12).

necessarily have a similar transmitted, intuitive and comprehensive appeal to us. But all the while there is a strengthening of another basis for human existence that was under way within and below the previous approaches. At this point, an existence where mankind creates his or her own basis for life has been in the making for quite some time. This basis is sought out in activities such as labour, science, technology, and has roots that go far back in time (Heidegger 1935/1980: 73-110), but which only come to dominate societal life at a relatively late stage (Raffnsøe 2016). These are all activities whereby humans move beyond their containment in and dependence upon an overarching nature and supernatural beings in order to attain mastery over life to such a degree that we become subject of our own life and existence (Heidegger 1935/1980: 73-110).

### **Immanuel Kant (1724-1804)**

When it is no longer possible to draw upon a given metaphysical basis or foundation, the previous order threatens to collapse and communication between various segments of society, which was assured through this state of affairs, risked collapsing. Kant's philosophy may be viewed as an attempt to reflect upon the dissolution of the previously given metaphysical order and on man's becoming the foundation of his own existence through this process. Kant's work can be viewed as an attempt to instigate a new order on the basis of this transition, i.e. as laying the groundwork for a new order that emphasizes man as the basis (cfr. also Kant 1783/1978: 51-61). This philosophy confirms and considers the circumstance that man is becoming the subject of being. The humane has now become the centre of man's own attention (Raffnsøe 2016).

This historic watershed was initially reached and marked with Kant's *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (Kant 1781/1976a-b). In his first Critique, Kant seeks to show how the world can appear as an ordered totality by taking an outset in the human subject, partly by determining the limits for understanding reality on these terms. For Kant, the world appears as ordered in force of human categories and modes of perception (Kant 1781/1976a: 67-307).

Kant seeks to construct the basis for a novel order, which, is fundamentally different from the previous teleological-cosmological order. For this reason, it also attains a very different character: It is far more instable; also it is difficult to retain the notion of reality as a unified totality.

The instability and fragility of the new edifice is first and foremost due to the fact that it is no longer erected on the basis of an infinite metaphysical subject, but rather on the basis of a limited and finite human subject, which is only able to represent reality to itself. As a consequence, the world appears ordered primarily in

force of human perceptions; and for Kant these are always successive. According to Kant, we organize our reality through a sequence of perceptions to be furthered ordered and cognized through rational categories.

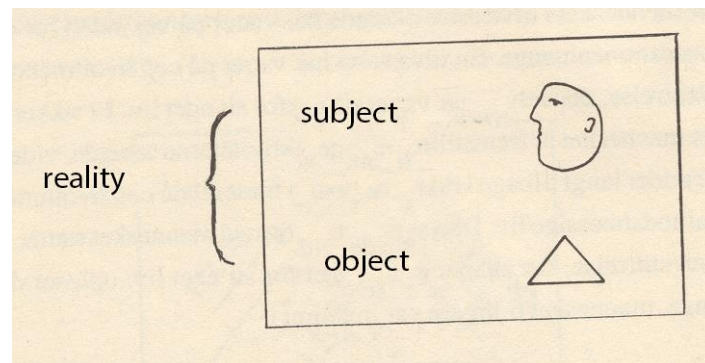


FIGURE 4

An inversion occurs in regard to Plato. Where ordered reality happened through a pre-given metaphysical system in Plato's perspective, reality is now the add-on, which we from this human outset are forced to work towards. The consequence of this is first and foremost that order can only be constituted through a continuous effort on behalf of the human subject. Furthermore, it means that total order can never be established or reached. Rather, order becomes a regulative principle for the human subject (Kant 1781/1976a: 267-85). This subject is from now on concerned with the never ceasing task of creating an ordered reality, which is only ever partially complete. Finally, the human subject is only able to implement an ordering of reality in terms of how that reality appears to man.

In this sense there appears baselessness, at least in comparison with the Platonic outset. When we, as limited subjects, determine reality, we always do so as it appears to us and are never able to attain reality in itself. The reality which is founded on the human subject and its representation appear in a wider perspective as limited and unfounded. It is given the character of a limited reality that appears in a void.

This shows that the previous holistic metaphysic is not merely replaced by a different metaphysic with Kant. There is rather a loss of metaphysics: the previous totality contained a surplus, something more, for which there is no room in Kant's view of reality. At the same time this surplus cannot just be rejected as empty talk and illusion. The new conception of man that appears also has a need to make a declaration about the complete and actual status of reality, such that its reality appears less unfounded. There is for Kant therefore "Naturanlage zur Metaphysik" (Kant 1781/1976a: 60), or natural inclination towards metaphysics in the new kind of man which is only able to conceive of reality in epistemological terms.

We can only talk about the character of such a super-natural reality when the outset is man. Luckily, however, this is still possible. Man is not only able to imagine such a different ordered reality behind reality, but also has a substantial idea about how such a reality must be.

In order to give voice to this other kind of subjectivity, Kant publishes *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten* in 1785 and *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft* in 1788. In these works, Kant articulates the subject's inner idea or notion of how the world should and ought to be.

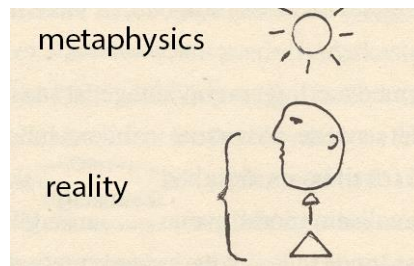


FIGURE 5

Nevertheless, this opens up a schism in Kant's philosophy. The later works do allow a surplus in regard to reality as it is given according to a critique of pure reason, but becomes difficult to articulate the connection or the relationship between reality as it is established in the first critique and the world as it ought to be according to the second critique. On the one hand there is a super-natural reality, or some demands on how the world must be, or the world as it ought to be according to the human subject. On the other hand we find reality: the world as it actually is according to the subject. This means that the world, as it can be ordered with an outset in the human subject, is not an all-comprising totality as was the case with Plato. The new order is distributive (Nancy 1976); it is made up of separate parts with no substantial or solid connection to each other. This predicament once again implies that mankind finds itself in a powerless position. The human subject cannot help picturing the being of the world to itself in a different and more fundamental way and cannot let this conception or representation of the world go; but neither does the human subject find itself able to insinuate this hyperreality in the world and make it real. Consequently, the world - when it is based on the human subject - does not permit the subject to express its inner-most subjectivity.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Kant's introduction to the *Kritik der Urteilskraft* points out that "an immense gulf is fixed between the domain of the concept of nature, the sensible, and the domain of the concept of freedom, the supersensible, (eine unübersehbare Kluft zwischen dem Gebiete des Naturbegriffs als dem Sinnlichen und dem Gebiete des Freiheitsbegriffs als dem Übersinnlichen) so that no transition from the sensible to the supersensible (and hence by means of the theoretical use of reason) is possible, just as if they were two different worlds, the first of which cannot have any influence on the second (Kant 1790/1978: 83; Kant 1987: 14-15 (Einleitung)).

If Kant is to avoid this schism – which means that the world falls apart and that the foundation of man dwindles away – a third perspective is needed. This must show the possibility of uniting the two opposed positions. This third perspective is sought, equally with an outset in the human subject in *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (1790).

In this third perspective, the subject withdraws from its surrounding world (reality and metaphysics). It orients itself towards its own inner workings and through this discovers some inner states conveying pleasure or delight. In this manner, the subject identifies a few moments of happiness in an otherwise indifferent world. These happy moments are connected with the experience of certain objects. This may be the perception of beautiful flowers (for instance tulips), birds (humming birds or birds of paradise), or sea shells (see Kant 1790/1978: 146-49 Kant 1987: 76-78 (§ 16)). All these perceptions have an experience of a friendly or 'humane' nature in common. This is a kind of nature which occurs in a peaceful garden. It does not threaten us, but rather seems to be at our disposal – to be there for us and our inner desires.

For Kant it hereby suggests that these sensory perceptions appeal to us because we seem to be able to do with nature as we actually want to in our heart of hearts. The feeling of pleasure is caused by the impression that the objects of sensation seem to be freely at our disposal. Thus they do not seem to oppose or resist that we might realize our inner morality in and through our actions. What is perceived indicates that the moral imperative can gain a footing in perceived reality.

In this way Kant sees what is sensed as a perception or as a limited representation of something higher, which is given in the inner subject and which the human subject can graft on or transplant to its own experiences. Perception is hereby given symbolic importance: It represents a comprehensive system of representation, which is otherwise not present. Perceived reality therefore momentarily appears as a reality that is subject to the laws of morality. These are happy or privileged moments, since man's lost belonging to a complete teleology, which was previously a given but not anymore, seems restored for a short moment. Mankind is hereby granted participation in a cohesion which ascribes meaning and direction to being, since it orients towards a centre and a goal. A teleological-cosmological order re-appears for a short while.

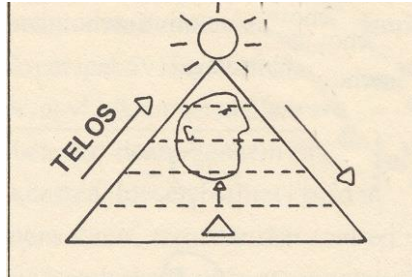


FIGURE 6

The world becomes beautiful for a moment, since it seems to be in correspondence with and reflect the metaphysical assumptions we truly desire. This is why the aesthetic experience pleases us. For a short moment everything confirms that man can be the subject of his world and install a comprehensive normative order on that basis. The teleological order is, however, only experienced for a short while, where after the individual returns to reality and the ruptured world.

For sensation to carry the impress of pleasure and delight, it must occur in relative autonomy. It must be autonomous or liberated from external purpose. According to Immanuel Kant, cognition does not please us because perceptions are here always already subject to human purpose. In cognition, consequently, perception does not subject itself 'freely', but is forced, wherefore subjection becomes a given and a matter of course. Liberated from the usual external purposes, experience (even though it is not to be considered as a cognition) is able to 'please us' by offering itself up as being at our disposal. The perceived hereby indicates that nature naturally, unforced and unrestrained, off itself offers itself up to our purposes of itself; yet, at the same time, the perceived can only be interpreted as being at our disposal from these purposes. As a consequence, representation or perception is hereby liberated with hindsight or with a certain purpose: It is set free with the firm conviction that it will end up confirming a given metaphysical order. In spite of our inner metaphysic's challenges in asserting itself and manifesting itself, the validity of inner practical reason remains unchallenged. Autonomy is therefore only to be conceived as relative; it is provisional and made to be dissolved.

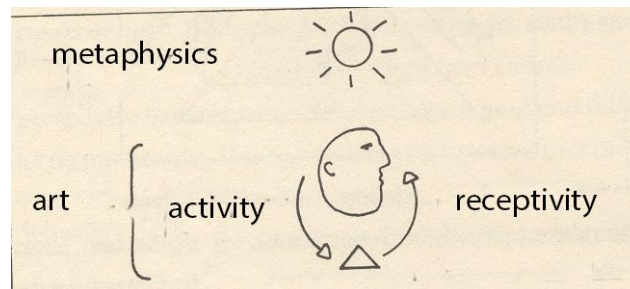
For Kant the good, the true, and the beautiful are hereby far more separated than was the case for Plato. The question about what is true is initially determined when we examine reality, such as it is represented and retained in communal cognition in reason. By contrast, the question of the good, which we ought to follow, is primarily determined through the insight attained when we, as sensible human beings, examine moral considerations and how they force themselves upon us in the form of categorical imperatives that we need to comply with (Kant 1788/1978: 59-80). The beautiful, however, appears or is concealed in the



aesthetic movement, which requires a suspension of both reason and moral intuition (Kant 1790/1978: 115-131).

In *Kritik der Urteilskraft (Critique of Judgment)* Kant primarily takes up human aesthetic perception, while he relatively far on in the work (§44-53) considers objects we would currently view as art under the category “Deduction of aesthetic judgments”. This is done apparently in passing in a kind of appendix. Art thus still plays only a minor role as an additional confirmation of what Kant thought he has already shown in general in regard to the perception of external beautiful, natural objects. In the appendix, he shows that this demonstration can also be made for the particular kind of objects produced and shaped by humans, insofar as it is also possible to lay down a third perspective, which is able to bridge the gap between reality and morality.

In art, I take an outset in my inner aesthetic subjectivity and produce objects that give me pleasure and delight. Here, the subject thus is able to (re-)stage the confirmation of the third perspective through a direct intervention in and transformation of reality. Thus, reality is re-produced or re-rendered as beautiful to such a degree that it appears as suitable for moral advancement.



FIGURE

7

In this sense, inner subjectivity appears as the guiding point for art. Here man actively and freely shapes and recreates reality, keeping the subject’s inner morality in mind, such that its sense perceptions confirm that human agency can be felt in the world. For Kant there is no great need for the additional confirmation of art. The more important issue is for the perception of free and beautiful nature to show that reality can confirm the subject without active human intervention. For Kant, the subject still - in general - possesses a self-confidence that means it can mirror itself in external and wild nature and, through that, generate cohesion in its world. The contemplation of art still seems to permit yet another confirmation of a more general capability and state of affairs, but within a particular and limited realm. This realm has already been preconditioned for this re-affirmation insofar as it is established through the direct intervention of the human subject. Consequently, this final re-affirmation is tainted by a circularity.

## Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805)

Nevertheless, it later becomes increasingly urgent for the human subject to directly address and systematically stage a third, unifying perspective in order to generate and maintain cohesion in the world. This active effort is apparently motivated by a sense of increasing incompatibility between reality and man's inner, practical metaphysics. The events of the French Revolution probably emphasized this schism, since it was viewed as an attempt to let man's inner subjectivity determine history. When this revolution failed, it became reasonable to interpret this outcome as proof that man's inner morality and reality could not be united.

As a consequence, art is given a far more central position in thought after Kant's critical philosophy, since fine art is viewed as a means of actively staging a third perspective and thus uniting morality and reality. This development can be found in the theoretical writings of Schiller during the 1790s. In a number of letters addressed to his friend Christian Gottfried Körner towards the end of 1792 and early 1793, Schiller further scrutinized and sought to critically correct Kant's aesthetics after his having become acquainted with *Kritik der Urteilskraft* in 1791 (Schiller 1792-93/1971: 139). Even though Schiller's plans to rewrite and integrate the letters into a major work entitled *Kallias oder Über die Schönheit* was never realized, a selection of the letters have later been published under the same title (Schiller 1792-93/1971). Somewhat later, Schiller began publishing *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen* in his own journal *Die Horen* from 1795 and onwards, based on a number of letters written to his patron prince Friedrich Christian von Augustenburg in 1793 (Schiller 1775-1801/2000). There appears the idea of an increasingly close relation between art and philosophy, setting them off from the rest of society. Art is given the task of positing a third unifying perspective on reality with the help of philosophy.

The outset for the creation of art is, for Schiller, that we in the schism between morality and reality take the side of sensible morality (Schiller 1792-93/1971), but 'improve' existing reality through re-cultivation of being in art, which is not in itself directly moral (Schiller 1775-1801/2000). Since art, in classicism, recreates a reality that is in opposition to morality, it presents itself as a reality that requires moral intervention. Thus, if we cultivated all of reality completely and made all of life into art, reality would be primed for the introduction of our inner morality. However, philosophy ensures that the third unifying perspective is oriented towards inner practical human metaphysics.

The experience of an exclusive proximity between philosophy and art, which distinguishes these two from other areas of being, therefore also constitutes a distribution of labour. By imagining a division of labour and collaboration between art and philosophy, art also becomes an autonomous entity with its own logic and

potential for something unique, which cannot be granted by any other area of being. At the same time philosophical aesthetics is founded as a discipline that takes up the concern for art. Indeed, for quite some time it becomes the core philosophical discipline. In his *Vorschule der Ästhetik*, 1804 Jean Paul (Johan Paul Friedrich Richter, 1763-1825) is thus able to note that: “There is nothing more abundant in our time than aestheticians” (Jean Paul 1990: 22).

### Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831)

In his lectures on aesthetics in the 1820s, Hegel still seeks to keep art and philosophy in proximity with each other.<sup>6</sup> Close proximity between the two is established in a joint effort to claim man’s inner subjectivity as the fulcrum of the world. Nonetheless, the close partnership begins to experience some tension and threaten to break up. The opposition between reality (or “the prose of the world” (Hegel 1817-1829/1970a: 199) and inner morality seems to be strengthened to such a degree that a third, neutral position, which bridges the gap seems untenable. Schiller and Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling (1775-1854) (Schelling 1960) had already given art the task of generating such a third and neutral position in reality. But even the reality, which has been recreated by art, is ultimately not able to reflect morality according to Hegel.

Some level of moral consciousness can be reflected in external reality according to Hegel. This applies to morality at the limited level given in classical Greece. In this regard it is also possible for reality to appear as a complete reflection of reality in the artistic reproduction. Classical art allows the morality of the age to reflect pragmatically in external reality.

At a certain point, however, man attains a level of moral consciousness which can no longer be reflected in external reality. Hegel’s own time is defined by the schism between external reality and man’s internalized morality being heightened to such a degree that morality can no longer be reproduced adequately in the external world. In such a situation it becomes illusory to expect of the imagination about art that it can concern a reproduction of reality that can mirror morality as Schiller attempts. For Hegel, the classical idea of art as a direct and ‘beautiful’ presentation of morality is passé. Since art in this sense no longer expresses the deepest interests of humanity, Hegel accordingly asserts that „art, considered in its highest highest vocation (Bestimmung), is and remains for us a thing of the past (ein Vergangenes)“ (belongs to the past (Hegel 1817-1829/1970a: 25).

Only through own thought is Hegel strangely able to retain external reality as a mirror of the inner foundation. In its interpretation of reality, it is necessary for thought to add something which was not there

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<sup>6</sup> To Heidegger, Hegel’s philosophy of art is accordingly to be considered “the last and most magnificent aesthetics in the West (die letzte und grösste Ästhetik des Abendlandes)” (Heidegger 1936-40/1961a: 100).

to begin with. It must force its perspective on reality. Even the external presentation of art can only be retained as a presentation of morality by the receiver interpreting morality into the materially bounded piece of art. According to Hegel it is now necessary to perceive every work of art as a romantic work of art - as an incomplete presentation. Art can only be retained as an indirect representation of morality through thought, which already takes an outset in inner morality. Since the romantic work of art is able to represent modern secularized reality as an (imperfect) rendering of ideality, it is to be considered a higher and more ambitious form for art that outdistances art in its preceding classical form (Hegel 1817-1829/1970b: 128).

Hegel is the last philosopher who was able to develop a total and substantial conception of being by taking an outset in the human subject and its intimate morality. He was in addition able to retain this outset in spite of challenges. However, hereby the human subjectivity already seems to be on the verge of disappearing as a basis for being and human existence. The inner and substantial subjectivity can only retain itself as a basis for itself through a last monumental effort and in spite of everything.

### The romantic age

At the time when Hegel held his aesthetic lectures, however, the dissolution of substantial subjectivity had already been under way for a while within the third 'neutral' perspective. The developments being made in the field of art must have been instrumental in Hegel reaching the opinion that art as an external presentation of ideality was over. Around 1800 German Jena-romanticism sought to synthesize the opposition between reality and morality by completely integrating both within the third perspective of art and thus make the sphere of art all inclusive.

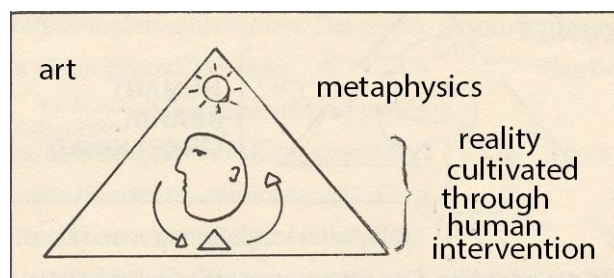


FIGURE 8

For both Kant and Schiller, reality and morality remain a fixed framework around the third perspective and are thereby able to dictate the boundaries of art. This thus becomes a relative autonomy. However, within Jena-romanticism the brothers Friedrich and August Wilhelm Schlegel (1772-1829, 1767-1845) but also Novalis (who's civil name was Friedrich Hardenberg, 1772-1801) sought to integrate this framework within

the third perspective of art, such that the autonomy of art was no longer subject to external dictates. Art thus seeks to reproduce reality without this reproduction being for a certain purpose.

This attempt fails however. The Jena-periodical *Athenæum*, which came out between 1798-1800, often contained ideas for grand and comprehensive projects, which never saw the light of day (Schlegel, 2005). Only small fragments of the projects were published: ruins or rubble from a building which never came into being. The *Gesamtkunstwerk*, within which the romantics wanted to integrate the contradictions of life was never realized and never moves beyond a fragmentary status (Lacoue-Labarthe et al. 1978). If Jena-romanticism had been able to implement its projects and present the metaphysical surplus in full through a poetical *Gesamtkunstwerk*, art would have been able to confirm its own autonomous status as an entity that could grasp the absolute. Instead, it becomes clear through art that inner subjectivity cannot be expressed in external reality, and that reality cannot be united. Thus, through romantic art, we learn that inner subjectivity begins to dwindle away as a substantial basis for life.

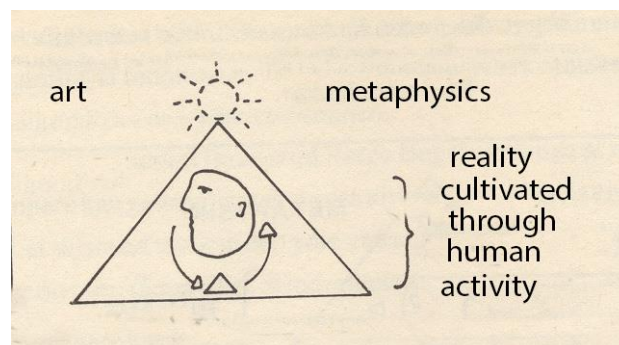


FIGURE 9

For a while, at the beginning and in the middle of the 1800s, art mourns the loss of this unity. Later romanticism and French *mal du siècle* literature may be read as meditations on the lost subject. Early examples of this are found in François René de Chateaubriand's (1768-1848) *René*, which came out in 1802, and Alfred de Musset's (1810-1857) *Confessions d'un enfant du siècle*, published in 1836 (Chateaubriand 1970; Musset 1960).

Later in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the value of art for art's sake (*l'art pour l'art*) and the autonomy of the art work was increasingly asserted. In the preface to his novel *Mademoiselle de Maupin* Théophile Gautier (1811-1872) in 1834 states that even as "a novel is not a pair of seamless boots," so is "a drama" is not to be conceived as "a railway," since these kinds of objects are not to be regarded as "things" that "are essentially civilizing and adapted to advance humanity on its path of progress". A little further on, he stresses that, to his mind, this does not necessarily diminish the value of works of art, since "I am one of those to whom superfluity is a

necessity and I like things and persons in an inverse ratio to the services that they render me. I prefer a Chinese vase, strewn with dragons and mandarins, and of no use to me whatever, to a certain utensil which is of service to me.” In this context, Gautier even indicates that “there is nothing truly beautiful but that which can never be of any use whatsoever; everything useful is ugly, for it is the expression of some need, and man's needs are ignoble and disgusting like his own poor and infirm nature. The most useful place in a house is the water-closet” (Gautier 1973: 50, 54). In the same vein, Edgar Allen Poe counters the idea that a poem “should inculcate a moral” by stating “the simple fact” that “would we but permit ourselves to look into our own souls we should immediately there discover that under the sun there neither exists nor can exist any work more thoroughly dignified — more supremely noble than this very poem — this poem per se — this poem which is a poem and nothing more — this poem written solely for the poem’s sake” (Poe 1850).

With these assertions of art for its own sake, we have come a long way since Boileau asserted that “nothing is beautiful but the true” and that “the true alone is agreeable”. The notion of an absolutely autonomous art is established, which increasingly sought its own paths without reference to any external aims. In the absolutely autonomous art there is an increasing reconstitution of reality, which does not rest upon any given basis and does not have a set goal. Rather the reconstitution of reality is taken up so as to seek non-substantial replacements for the lost foundation and lost goals. These are temporary replacements: compensations that are only expected to last a while, whereupon new efforts must be made. This is evident in Charles Baudelaire’s (1821-67) aesthetics of modernity that seeks to force something more than the momentary from modernity’s brief encounters as it finds a ‘poetic beauty’ in and thereby elevates the present (Baudelaire 1990b, 97-200: 195; Baudelaire 1982: 17-19; Baudelaire 1990a, 453-502: 167; Baudelaire 1964: 13). Stéphane Mallarmés’ (1842-1898) ‘pure’ and formal graphic poetry at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century may also be seen as an instantiation of this (Mallarmé 2015).

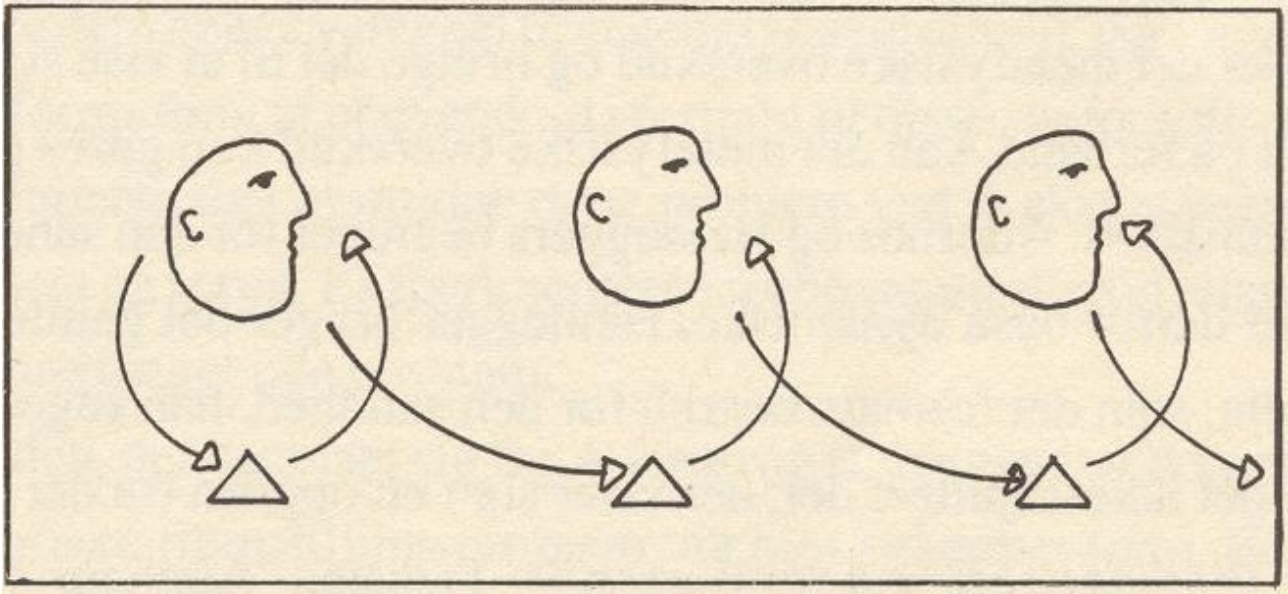


FIGURE 10

## VI. The sublime experience

### The decay of being and the trans-historical

The possibility of and tendency towards experiencing the world as lacking a foundation and direction is, however, already given by human subjectivity giving itself as the basis for its own existence. For Kant, it was necessary for nature to show itself through the representations that occur in the human subject. This however also opens an ambiguous fascination with a natural world that seeks to elude full recognition and to avoid revealing itself in its entirety. This may be seen as Immanuel Kant's re-actualization of the Greek notion of nature as *physis* (Heidegger 1935-36/1980, 1-72: 28).

Nevertheless, in Kant nature as '*physis*', or as 'that which shows itself and eludes us', is a dynamic revelation of meaning. It remains reflected and refracted within the glade the modern human subject has created. Nature here primarily shows itself as the dark production of meaning which eludes our usual 'human' world and thereby exhibits this world's lack of foundations. Nature is described by Kant in a number of passages as a strange and murky body of water with no bottom. Insofar as "it certainly seems that generally fluids are more ancient than solids", the human world appears to rest upon a fleeting basis (Kant 1790/1978: 292; Kant 1987: 223 (§ 58)). In keeping with this conception of nature, Kant in a footnote of *Kritik der Urteilskraft* makes it clear that perhaps nothing more sublime has ever been said, or a thought ever been expressed more sublimely, than in that inscription above the temple of Isis (Mother Nature): "I am all that is, that was, and that will be, and no mortal has lifted my veil" (Kant 1790/1978: 253; Kant 1987: 186).

In Kant's later work, one accordingly notices an ongoing fascination with the processes of crystallization and solidification. The crystal appears as an interesting and beguiling object, since it takes shape in and casts a flickering light in the dark submerged world. While illustrating the "transition from the fluid to the solid state", crystallization also forms an emblem of the transition through which nature presents itself and takes shape (Kant 1790/1978: 291-92; Kant 1987: 222-23). Later on, with *l'art pour l'art* the autonomous work of art can be pictured as such a crystal, or a pearl, which takes shape in the darkness without foundation or direction, as it casts its enchanting lights.

Just at the time when it comes to the fore in Kant's philosophy how man is staging himself as a subject or as the basis of his own existence and being, it also stands to the fore how human life and existence on this basis appears unfounded. A vibrant culture is created, which undermines any attempt at establishing any substantial or binding nature. This sets the basis for a world where any constituted meaning or direction is merely preliminary, even though man is only partially attentive to this at the time.

For a time, it was possible in the Enlightenment and in German Idealism to retain human subjectivity as a substantial basis for existence. Even though inner humanity is challenged as a subject for social exchange in general, it was still – for a while - possible to retain it as a basis for art and the aesthetic. For Kant and Schiller the inner subject can still assert itself quite harmoniously and meaningfully as the fulcrum of aesthetics and art. In this manner, aesthetics and art may come to manifest or represent what ought to be the outset for all societal interaction.

Later, from Hegel and onwards, however, it is no longer able to retain the beautiful and attractive appearance asserted in general by Plato and still preserved within the aesthetic field by Kant and Schiller: that it seems *as if* something higher shines thorough in such a manner that what is experienced *of itself* seems to indicate and confirm a higher being or truth. In Hegel, it is only possible to maintain and attain an outset and a fulcrum in inner subjectivity and a higher being both in general and within art *despite or in defiance of* the fact that they initially disagree with or express an opposition, i.e. through a violent reinterpretation or sublation. Finally, from the age of Romanticism and onwards, it seems no longer possible to express maintain and express human subjectivity as a unifying fulcrum of the world even though art continues to mourn this passing state for some time.

When man turns inwards in German Idealism it may be understood as a reaction to a culture that was crumbling in its general foundation. Employing Nietzsche's vocabulary, it is possible to characterize this as a reaction of resentment (Raffnsøe 2007: 78-83); and yet it is still a creative reaction. This was a reaction



against the recurring feeling of discomfort, which came about from the collapse of the classical foundation spurred by the formation of a new, inner basis. However, even this basis required another reaction.

It is worth noting that this introverted reaction of resentment was successful for quite some time. Through this influence on the understanding of man and art, German Idealism became highly important in generating a normative basis for existence. However, the reference to a common internal basis can only work as long as there is agreement on creating and establishing this foundation in human activities – especially art and philosophy. Thus it is efficient so long as it convinces through its expressions.

When agreement on that basis for mankind begins to dissolve, reference to man's inner nature as its fulcrum becomes problematic. The reference is at risk of becoming empty, since there is the agreement on maintaining and expressing it as a reference point, or a transcendental signifier (Derrida 1967), has already ceased to exist. The reference ceases to function, because the language game that allowed it to express something has become defunct (Wittgenstein 1958). It is possible to retain the reaction of resentment, but the resentment loses its power and thus becomes unconvincing (Deleuze 1962).

In retrospect, German Idealism hereby comes to appear as a movement that had its happy moments. It was possible, for a while, to retain a commitment to an idea about a coherent world that was built on a new basis. This made it possible to claim new values, which could serve as an outset for social interaction. On the other hand, German Idealism is slightly tragic. The claim of an inner and ultimately incontrovertible subjectivity to ensure interaction in society also cut off the possibility of other and perhaps better avenues. Thus the construction of an absolute basis turned out to be unfounded and produced a longing within the self.

This tragedy is accentuated in the way whereby Enlightenment and German Idealism's perceptions of *modernity* slide into and are replaced by *modernism*. Modernity is the latest historical epoch which sought to found our world and order it with the substantial and tangible metaphysics that appears in the internalized morality of man. By contrast, modernist literature has, since the beginning of the 1800s, been retelling the story about the decay of the last trans-historical order that allowed a unified world, in ever new ways. The longing that this decay gives rise to becomes important; and it is evident in modernist art since the disillusionment, melancholy and *ennui* of French *mal du siècle* literature originating in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century; but so are the subsequent efforts to create or produce replacements for that which is lost. Thus there appears an awareness that the newly created is not a perfect replacement, but is only able to function as a preliminary and temporary thing which cannot fully stand in the place of the lost order. Modernist literature therefore also reflects a nihilistic experience. We become aware that the norms, which were

previously ascribed the highest value lose this value because they contained an inner tendency to dissolve, all the while we feel unable to replace them with any others of substance.

## **The sublime comes to the fore as an ongoing constitutive aspect of aesthetic experience**

Since the late 1980s and the early 1990s, some have claimed that we have returned to ‘the sublime’ (Courtine 1988) and that “attributed characteristics of the sublime” has been “gradually transferred to the description of aesthetic experience in general” (Kirwan 2005: vii). However, it can also be said that the sublime has been an ongoing constitutive aspect of aesthetic experience that has come to the fore since the age of romanticism. For romanticism, modernism and the time after, the sublime or the elevated is not one experience among others and not an experience that we may return to from time to time. It is the basic experience of modernism itself. The sublime is not only the experience that we lack the ability to conceive and express a substantive inner subjectivity in and of itself, but also the experience that we - in spite of this and in defiance of our impotence in this respect - remain able to reflect this this higher sense of being, exactly in and through our inaptitude and longing. Thus, the sublime is the experience that our relationship to a given metaphysics is no longer a matter of course, but also fraught relationship and a problematic affair insofar as an inner metaphysics can no longer be rendered or represented adequately. Yet the sublime is also the experience that even a breached promise remains a significant relationship insofar as lost metaphysics continues to be represented even in its absence and thus rendered imperfectly.

The sublime begins come to the fore as a decisive or crucial kind of aesthetic experience in Kant’s *Kritik der Urteilskraft* under the title of the “Analytic of the sublime” (Kant 1790/1978: 163-91; Kant 1987: 97-125 (§ 23-29)). In the sublime aesthetic experience, the observer comes into contact with own limitations and therefore displeasure, since these are experiences of things that cannot immediately be contained in the self. However, Kant is invigorated since he is thereby forced to transcend himself. When a person for instance enters *St. Peter’s Basilica* in Rome or contemplates the Egyptian Pyramids up close, this person becomes aware that the mind cannot contain what it sees and is pained by that. However, this also results in the rupturing of our cognitive abilities, whereby we become able to form an idea of the eternal. Because of this transgression of limits and expansion of self we feel pleasure in this “mathematically sublime” (Kant 1790/1978: 169-84; Kant 1987: 103-118 (§ 25-27)). When a person observes erupting volcanoes or an endless ocean in motion it becomes possible, according to Kant, to perceive the “dynamically sublime” (Kant 1790/1978: 184-91; Kant 1987: 119-26 (§ 28-29)). Perception shows an object, the exertion of which is so violent that it could destroy the person. Hereby the object reveals the physical impotence and existential exposure, whereby displeasure is experienced. Nonetheless, in this experience, the perceiver is still able to

come to terms with the situation, whereby pleasure appears in such a way that man is shown to be above mere nature. This pleasure indicates something higher that man strives for and wants without being able to explain or contain it as such. For this reason, the encounter results in pleasure and displeasure at one and the same time.

However, for Kant, the sublime experience is still an exception, and an experience that seems to be examined and discussed in passing. In the aesthetic experience as it is articulated in *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, the world in general (re)appears as beautiful again. In connection with aesthetic experience, it may at times seem, once again, *as if* the world is inherently and unforcedly coherent, as appears to order itself around and point in the direction of a certain kind of higher and better being. For Hegel, romantic thinkers and poets, and then subsequent modernist literature, however, the world is at best experienced as sublime or elevated and eminent every now and then. Although the world is in general incoherent and disparate, certain aesthetic experiences, when willfully and forcefully re-interpreted may strangely and in spite of everything elevate us above this state and above our limitations, such that the world *despite its immediate appearances* still seems to point beyond itself and refer to a higher being. However, this being remains elevated and is no longer exhibited directly, completely and substantially in our world. It is only experienced and rendered indirectly and incompletely. It thus remains something above and beyond the world as we usually know it. It therefore appears as partially absent and incomprehensible, as something that is imminent, outstanding and beyond full mediation, just as Jahve in the Old Testament once appeared as elevated above the world only to manifest himself incompletely via sudden interventions into the world that left certain, not fully comprehensible traces in the history of the Israelites.<sup>7</sup>

Insofar as the sublime being leaves a trace in this world without appearing fully in, it is technically speaking never fully present or presented as a substantial being. Rather, it appears as something that exerts a powerful influence and brings about an effect, without appearing in itself, which entails that we are unable to conceive and retain it. All we can do is to approach it and allow it to appear again and again in ever new ways within

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<sup>7</sup> In *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*, Hegel points out how the sublime has a religious and metaphysical origin. In extension of this, he views Kant's outset in the subjective perspective and its properties as an immediate reduction of the concept of the sublime. At the same time, he agrees with Kant that the elevated being is not given in the objects of nature as such, but only in relationship to nature in us and through this in relationship to external nature. However, this only happens "in our minds (in unserem Gemüte)" insofar as "we become conscious of our superiority to the nature within us and therefore to nature without" (Hegel 1817-1829/1970a: 467). In this context, Hegel defines the sublime as: "the attempt to express the infinite (das Unendliche auszudrücken), without finding in the sphere of phenomena (in dem Bereich der Erscheinungen) an object which proves adequate for this representation (welcher sich für diese Darstellung passend erwiese)" (Hegel 1817-1829/1970a: 467).

the aesthetic experience. Within the aesthetic realm, the sublime can be carried into effect and articulated in an infinite repetitive motion and remediation.

## V. The changed aesthetic experience of the contemporary age

### **The aesthetic declaration of independence: Liberation and desubstantialization**

In this article the ongoing transformation of aesthetic experience has been described by following and articulating the principal stages in a historical development of aesthetical experience that has been pushing the agenda at least in Western societies. The changes and innovations appear relatively early in certain places and environments to subsequently spread. As has been stated, crucial first-hand experience is gained relatively early on and in a sharpened, accentuated, and rigorous form in certain highly intellectual modernist circles; especially in nations such as Germany and France in the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Over time, these experiences have left their esoteric taste behind to become collective property shared in an exoteric form (Lyotard 1986; Lyotard 1992).

As a consequence, the described experiences and transformations might even be said to be indicative and agenda-setting to the extent that they appear as exemplary. Subsequently, they have been disseminated as common knowledge. They have spread to the general public and become prevalent. Generalized and naturalized – yet not necessarily prominent, conspicuous or conscious. The results of these transitions work as preconditions and expectations that we all carry with us and that thus determine how we perceive, understand and relate not only to works of art, but also to aesthetic experience and effects in general.

In general, the outcome of the described development is an ongoing liberation of the aesthetic, whether in the form of aesthetic perception and affects, aesthetic objects, aesthetic experiences or artistic effects. During the course of this history, the aesthetic plane of existence has thus radically changed status and role. Whether in the form of art, artistic effects or artistic perception, the aesthetic no longer appears as subordinate and servile (Rancière 2009: 28-29). Rather it has been set free from its previous state of subordination, devoting it to the task of mirroring, representing, or mimicking something more basic and antecedent, whether this be a more foundational level of being, ‘the good’, or ‘truth’. Borrowing phrases from the *American Declaration of Independence*, one could say that, in modernity, the aesthetic has dissolved the traditional political bonds which have traditionally connected it to and subjected it to other spheres to “assume among the powers of the earth a separate and equal station”.

As a consequence of its declaration of independence, the aesthetic has begun to step forth as an independent plane of existence in its own right, which at first glance appears irreducible and unconnected.

As it has also previously been suggested, this experience accordingly leads to the desubstantialization of the aesthetic. Since aesthetic objects, effects or aesthetic perception are no longer on the face of it coupled to a foundation, which is to be represented and which it falls back upon, means that they appear as more fleeting and transitory.

### **The fictionality of the aesthetic: reconfiguration and revivification**

Nevertheless, this liberation does not lead into to a state of complete and unrestrained freedom in which all ties to the surrounding reality are severed. The emancipation of the aesthetic does not mean that the aesthetic becomes a realm apart, merely superfluous or irrelevant to the rest of the world, or even a non-committal pastime or diversion. In this sense, the transition can also be described as the differentiation and isolation of a new sphere that differs from its surroundings in that what transpires here must live up to and satisfy a new set of standards or criteria (Luhmann 1995: 42; Luhmann 1997: 978-80). The aesthetic sphere is related to its surroundings precisely in force of the way in which these criteria differ from and is connected to its surroundings.

Contrary to what intuition or common sense would indicate, one could thus claim that precisely aesthetics' emancipation from its function as a representative, mediator, disseminator or communicator of something more foundational, is what makes the aesthetic pretense or aesthetic appearances seem even more essential and indispensable.

In keeping with the idea of aesthetic autonomy, at first suggested in German idealism by especially Kant and Schiller, aesthetic experience has become autonomized in an increasingly marked way. Aesthetic experience has been set free as a *specific* sphere of experience which shakes and "invalidates the ordinary hierarchies incorporated in everyday sensory experience" (Rancière 2005, 13: 15) as soon as one enters this relocatable sphere or globe (Rancière 2012); and in prolongation hereof the aesthetic stands out as a specific transferrable sphere devoted to making this kind of experience in a particularly marked way.

With the accentuation and dissemination of aesthetic experience, esthetic radiance or glare (Schein), which previously brought forth something mores basic or a higher level of being, has acquired a different status and function. Aesthetic rendering or radiance now appears as a comprehensive and incontrovertible medium, which it is impossible to get behind or raise oneself above. As a consequence, the aesthetic surface has now become even more essential in appearing as a medium that we remain in and which we must come to terms with. The fact that the aesthetical suspension has become disseminated and democratized has resulted in a more free and uncensored use of the aesthetical effects. But this transformation has likewise resulted in our

relationship to these effects becoming more precarious, because the aesthetical appears as an ungovernable and all-inclusive medium in which our very existence as human beings is at stake.

In extension of the described development, the aesthetic no longer appears as a means of representation, but as fiction. Through aesthetic effects and in the aesthetic experience, we project something new, which was not there before and which reaches beyond reality as we have known it hitherto as it appears or shines forth. With the aesthetic, something appears which was not there before and is added to or grafted onto what was already actually there, but in such a manner that something not previously existing is introduced or imagined (Blanchot 1959) that does not necessarily fit into the pre-established bounds of sense or experience (Nancy 1976: 116), but “exceeds the present time” (Barthes 1979: 8). In the fictive universe of the aesthetic, the previous basis of being is thus transformed and fundamentally reconstituted, albeit hypothetically, in an anticipating or forestalling manner (Foucault 1968b, 7-8; Foucault 1968a, 13-26). The aesthetic is thus of fundamental importance, not because it presents a new foundation, but since it changes our previous outset and mindset in essential ways.

In extension of the described transition, the aesthetic Schein thus appears as a plane upon which life is revived and surpasses itself in its hitherto established shape. Accordingly, the aesthetic puts the transcendental movement on centre stage; because within this aesthetic surface it becomes possible to transcend or surpass ourselves.

Hereby aesthetics comes to concern our being and our fundamental attitude. In this effort there occurs an ongoing and open movement – not only about who we are, but also, and perhaps more importantly, who we can and could be. Aesthetics concerns and involves identity, self-comprehension and authenticity, but also and in particular in the form of self-revelation and self-transformation.

### **The relative autonomy of the aesthetic experience**

With the generalization and the ubiquity of aesthetics, it has also become increasingly manifest that this self-revelation or self-transformation is not simply relegated to the confines of a particular aesthetic sphere. Neither can the fictionality or transformativity of the aesthetic simply be conceived as a (limited) end in itself. As has become increasingly conspicuous with time and with the propagation of aesthetics, the aesthetic field was from the outset, as is evident in Kant and Schiller, set free as a specific sphere of experience, but with the ulterior motive of anticipating, articulating, and rendering an alternative general form of sensory experience intelligible. On closer inspection, thus, the autonomy of the aesthetic was from the outset never absolute, but relative (Raffnsøe 1998; Raffnsøe & Pethick 2016). Aesthetic experience and aesthetic objects were meant to point beyond themselves as they anticipated a different manner of perceiving, a different

truth and/or a different manner of being, affecting not only for individual existence but also indicating new modes of existence for collective life in general. As Rancière sums up in retrospect: “Precisely because it was a place where the usual hierarchies which framed everyday life was withdrawn,” “aesthetic experience was taken as the principle of a new form of collective life” (Rancière 2005 13: 21). Yet, it is also a new and reversed form of collective life that may never be fully realized or come to be and that has seemed to constantly recede into the future throughout the history discussed here.

On closer inspection, then, it is simultaneously evident from the very beginning of aesthetic autonomy that the aesthetic sphere does not gain its relative independence, just to be later simply and outright sublated. At the end of the day, aesthetic autonomy is never fully revoked and dissolved into in the alternative state of being that it indicates and incites us to move towards.

As already Kant expresses it, a specific aesthetic sensation and the way it is experienced occasions a general verdict or judgement of taste concerning the object experienced, e.g. that a given rose is beautiful; and accordingly the verdict presupposes that we should all gather in agreement concerning this. Unlike a logically universal judgment, however, the judgment does not “*postulate* everyone’s agreement;” instead, it “merely suggests (or aspires) that everyone should join in or attune (es sinnet nur jedermann diese Einstimmung an),” and it “expects confirmation (Bestätigung) not from concepts from the adhesion or approval (Beitritt) of others” (Kant 1790/1978: 130; Kant 1987: 60 (§ 8)). What brings us joy, after all, in the aesthetic judgment is not a given and existing general agreement or concord, but instead “its subjective condition”: “die allgemeine Mitteilungsfähigkeit des Gemütszustandes,” or the common ability to participate in a state of mind that does not yet exist as a given and share it with and communicate it to others (Kant 1790/1978: 131; Kant 1987: 61 (§ 9)). Accordingly, Kant also later states that the “judgement of taste” “suggests (or aspires) that everyone should back it up or chime in (sinnet jedermann Beistimmung an).” “Hence the *Should* in an aesthetic judgement (...) is still uttered only conditionally. One solicits (werben um) everybody’s joining in (Beistimmung) (Kant 1790/1978: 156; Kant 1987: 86 (§ 19)). The aesthetic sensibility and experience does not permit to grasp an “objective rationality” (Kant 1790/1978: 295; Kant 1987: 225), but indicates an evaluation and a mode of existence that we should share, but does not necessarily share. In this manner, aesthetic experience works as an “indirect” or “symbolic” rendering (Darstellung), permitting to anticipate an alternative (social) reality that we should partake in, but that we can only point towards in the aesthetic and that we may never be able to fully attain and represent in an unmediated form.

This being so, the aesthetic acquires the status of an intermediate state that is essentially anticipatory in character, turned towards the future, and full of expectation and promise. Moreover, since the promise can

only be honoured at the expense of the suspension of aesthetic suspense, the aesthetic takes the form of a persistent and continuous in-between, if a state incessantly kept in suspension.

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