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# AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE AS AN ASPECT OF INTERPRETIVE ACTIVITIES

Every conception of aesthetic experience has to deal with two antagonistic aspects that are inherent to the very notion itself. I will try to outline these two aspects by referring to Kant's explanation of aesthetic experience, which is paradigmatic in this regard (as it is in many regards). On the one hand, Kant conceives of aesthetic experiences as an experience in which the subject is passive. According to Kant, the object affects the subject in a specific way, namely by giving rise to a free play between the imagination and the understanding (Kant 1999: §9). On the other hand, Kant claims that the way the subject is affected is relevant to the subject itself. To experience a free play of imagination and understanding is to experience that cognition is possible, for cognition presupposes that imagination and understanding work together.<sup>1</sup> In Kant's view, aesthetic experiences are experiences of the possibility of cognition and are hence valuable for the subject experiencing them. I may articulate the antagonism between these two aspects that I have conceived of with Kant by asking the question: How is it possible that a subject can learn something about itself through an experience in which it is ultimately passive?

Since not all of us are Kantians and since Kant's explanations rely on presuppositions that we may not all share, it is necessary to articulate these two aspects in a more abstract way. I propose to conceive the first aspect as follows:

*(Primacy of the object)* Aesthetic experiences are experiences in which the objects experienced play the primary role.<sup>2</sup>

The second aspect takes the following shape:

*(Self-reflection of the subject)* Aesthetic experiences are experiences in which a subject is confronted with itself. They reflect the subject in a specific way.

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<sup>1</sup> According to Kant, the free play bestows the subject with "cognition in general" (*Erkenntnis überhaupt*); Kant 1999: § 9.

<sup>2</sup> The concept "primacy of the object" has been coined by Adorno. Adorno 2002: 258.

These two aspects conflict with one another. This conflict can be articulated as follows:

*(The conundrum of aesthetic experience)* How can an experience fundamentally rooted in an object have the effect that a subject is confronted with itself? How is it possible that a subject can reflect on itself if it is merely passive? Let's call this conflict the conundrum of aesthetic experience.<sup>3</sup>

In what follows I will argue that the conundrum of aesthetic experience can be solved if we conceive of aesthetic experiences in a practical way. Aesthetic experiences are based in forms of practice that the subject performs in encountering works of art. My claim seems to contradict a basic conviction about aesthetic experience that I have already brought into play: It seems to contradict the idea that a basic feature of aesthetic experience is that it interrupts ordinary, everyday practices. I don't intend that my claim contradicts the idea that there is a significant discontinuity between ordinary practices, on the one hand, and aesthetic practices, on the other. But, in my view, it is important to challenge a presupposition often uncritically made when explaining the discontinuity in question, namely, the presupposition that activities of a subject are always activities by which the subject is determining something.<sup>4</sup> If we want to grasp the specificity of aesthetic experiences, it is necessary to account for activities in which the subject is both active, insofar as it is engaging in a specific practice, and passive, insofar as it follows the structures of an object. The task is to explain a particular form of practice of the subject. This is precisely what I would like to do in my paper. I will try to develop the concept of activity we need to explain aesthetic experiences in three steps. Firstly, I try to explain in which way works of art are objects that prompt specific activities (part 1). Secondly, I shortly elaborate on the activities in question (part 2). Thirdly and lastly, I introduce the notion of aesthetic experience by articulating a central characteristic of the activities recipients perform in dealing with artworks (part 3).

## 1. Works of Art as Objects That Prompt Specific Activities

Artworks can be characterized as objects in which different elements stand in various relations to other elements. In every artwork, we may discern relevant aspects such as rhythm, constellations of colour, bodily posture or expressed words. Such elements have a special value in how the artwork confronts those who deal with it. But the elements do not stand on their own. They are embedded in a structure which is

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<sup>3</sup> This conundrum may be a reason for philosophies of art to be critical about the very concept of aesthetic experience; for a criticism see, for instance, Carroll 2012: 165-177.

<sup>4</sup> This presupposition has most clearly been articulated by Theodor W. Adorno. Adorno / Horkheimer 2002.

realized by the artwork itself. So we may begin with the following conception of an artwork:

(*Artwork*) An artwork determines the value of the elements that are of special meaning within it in its own autonomous, independent way. We have to conceive of what characterizes each artwork in relation to the dynamic that it unfolds between its elements. And that is to say that we have to conceive of the artwork on the basis of its own self-referential constitution.

A further explanation of this conception can begin by departing from the relations between elements within the work: relations between words, between harmonies, between colours, between bodily postures, between different objects in an installation, and so forth. Such relations pervade artworks in the configuration of their elements. These relations have a nature that promises to clarify a good deal: they unfold their own mode of meaning. They contrast, establish boundaries between each other, repeat, form transitions, and much more. Relations within an artwork are configured in a way specific to each work.

Thus, we can grasp many, if not all artworks as being a structural connection between different elements, hence between words, tones or colours. What characterizes such connections is the fact individual elements gain their profile and value from the way they are related to one another: the identity of an element is defined in the artwork through the relations it has to other elements. This is also true in cases where the artwork is made up of elements that exist in some respect independently of it. Let us take the example of a poem. A poem is, in most cases, made up of words within a natural language, and hence in some respects reaches back to existing elements. But they get transformed in the poem. They do not merely have the meaning assigned to them in ordinary language, but rather take on new meanings.

For this reason, recipients of artworks always have to interpretively reveal the meaning of the elements. They cannot simply refer back to the meanings they know, but instead have to understand the elements out of the relations internal to the given poem. Something analogous applies for colours in painting or tones and harmonies in music. Even if we can say in a certain respect that these elements have an existence outside of individual works, they nevertheless receive a different, novel value in each individual artwork. Someone who wants to understand them has to do so internal to the relations developed in the respective work (whereby it is obviously the case that this understanding also depends on artistic conventions, allusions to other artworks, etc.). An artwork is made up not of elements that exist independently of it. Rather, it gives its elements value in and through their reciprocal relations, relations that it first sets into motion as an artwork.

However, the dynamic structure of the artwork described up to now does not simply exist for itself. Added to this dynamic, there also belong practices that recipients develop in encountering artworks. The configuration of artworks is set up in a precise way in relation to these practices. Through their self-relational constitution, they pose a

challenge to the practices of recipients. If this challenge should ever take effect, then recipients have to enter into the artwork and allow themselves to be confronted by its self-relational dynamic. The self-relational dynamic of the artwork is in this sense to be taken as a moment of an interaction with the recipient, as a moment within the interactive relation that constitutes it. The artwork demands to be reenacted and is in its dynamic constitutively bound up with this reenactment. It demands practices by which recipients articulate the structures of the artwork.

The challenge realized by artworks thus has a mainly practical character: A recipient considers the relations within a picture by looking. This leads to specific modes of looking that are oriented toward the self-referentially established relations within the artwork. To put it in a general way:

*(Practices of the recipient)* The recipient has to develop forms of practice that are guided by the self-referentially established relations within an artwork.

In this respect, we can say that artworks demand a certain mode of behavior. Using one of the central concepts from Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, we can characterize this behavior as mimetic.<sup>5</sup> A behavior that appropriates things differently is mimetic. We would understand such a mimetic behavior falsely if we think of it as being mainly passive (as Adorno sometimes suggests). Recipients have to become active in order to be guided by the artwork, such that aesthetic practices always have two sides: on the one hand, they reflect the fact that a dynamic departs from the artwork, which recipients then follow; on the other hand, we are always dealing with new activities internal to these practices, and thus with new approaches and interventions from the recipient. Gadamer writes of this by claiming that a recipient always has to be a fellow player (*Mitspieler*): she has to take up the ball that is passed to her by an artwork and pass it back (Gadamer 1987: 23).

In encountering artworks, recipients are always just as productive as artists themselves, namely, in the way they develop their own activities of reception. If it does not give rise to some activity in the subject, then the artwork's configuration cannot unfold any effect at all. This is especially true of artworks whose configuration is unfamiliar to the recipients. Let us take the example of a painting that is new for someone contemplating it. In such a case, this person will have to develop her visual activities further. If she does not become active in her seeing, she will not be able to follow the painting.<sup>6</sup> This activity always consists in the recipient bringing forth her own impulses in dealing with the artwork, for example by choosing a specific point of departure or bringing up conflicting points within the constellation of the work or comparing the work to established ways of dealing with it. The recipient's own impulses

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<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, Adorno 2002: 53.

<sup>6</sup> The claim that visual art teaches the recipients to develop their visual activities in a new way has most prominently been advanced by Maurice Merleau-Ponty; see Merleau-Ponty 1993: 121-149.

also have a special relevance, since it is by way of them that the recipient acts within the framework of a history of receptions.

## 2. Interpretive Activities

Now that the dynamic context characteristic of art stands before us, we can illuminate those activities that are unfolded by recipients in a more precise way. I characterize them as interpretive activities, since they lead to a practical understanding of the configuration of a work. For example, when new colour combinations or materials are deployed in a painting, we see the interpretive aspect of the activities of perception. Recipients have to adapt themselves to specific colours and ways of painting, so that they do not simply see colours and combinations of colours that vaguely make them feel something, but are rather compelled to unfold their own activities of seeing. Such activities involve creativity; that is, experimental ways of interacting, new approaches, and so on. In this sense, receptive activities are to be grasped as interpretive practices. To put it generally:

*(Interpretive activity)* An interpretive activity in relation to a work of art is an activity that retraces a configuration of elements in the artwork in such a way as to articulate this configuration.

I am characterizing the process of dealing with an artwork as articulation because in such a process it is a matter of orienting one's own activity towards the relations contained in the artwork. Speaking of interpretive activities remains, however, too general. We will have to consider more precisely what practices enable recipients of artworks to articulate the constellations of elements in specific artworks. Which activities are involved? That is, which activities can we conceive of as being interpretive activities? I will approach this question by superficially distinguishing four types of receptive activity in a schematic manner: bodily, perceptive, emotional and symbolic:

(a) In explaining interpretation, bodily activities usually get left out. Nevertheless, in dealing with many artworks, they play a central role. They typically come to bear in the reception of music, but also in works of architecture and plastic arts.

(b) Unlike bodily activities, we often pay attention to the role of perception in dealing with artworks. However, such accounts usually do not pay proper attention to the active quality of perceptions.

(c) Another form of activity has increasingly become an object of theoretical exploration in recent times. Recipients find themselves constantly challenged emotionally in the process of dealing with artworks, especially with narrative artworks.

(d) As stated, we usually consider symbolic, especially linguistic activities as interpretations, although we often run the risk of losing sight of the articulating aspect of these activities. Recipients often follow artworks through linguistic articulation, or in the case of music, through singing along or other forms of vocal articulation.

With all such activities, recipients articulate the constellations unfolded in artworks. In any event, we are dealing with practices that recipients develop in the face of challenges posed by artworks. Since it would burst the confines of this paper to analyze each of the mentioned kinds of practice, I will only aim at making the functional similarity of these practices comprehensible, since this is often overlooked in discussions on aesthetics. We primarily consider interpretation as an articulation in words, and we grasp this as a distanced cognitive way of dealing with the artwork. Such an understanding may be common, but it is problematic in a double sense: first, a linguistic interpretation of an artwork is not necessarily a distanced, cognitive way of dealing with the work, since an interpretation can only succeed if a recipient enters into the configuration of the work with her linguistic interpretation, that is, only if she follows this configuration despite the fact that her activities and perspectives are independent of the artwork itself. Second, such a linguistic articulation is only one among those forms of practice that articulate an artwork interpretively. In order to gain a full notion of these practices, we have to consider linguistic interpretation in connection with other practices.

### 3. Aesthetic Experience

The conception of interpretive activities developed thus far gives us a clue of how to conceive of aesthetic experiences. Aesthetic experiences must not be thought of as experiences which result out of the affection an object causes in a subject. Aesthetic experiences have to be explained in terms of the way the object affects the activities of recipients – it has to be explained in terms of what these activities have in common.<sup>7</sup> It is characteristic of the activities recipients perform in encountering works of art that these activities are guided by the constellations of the artworks themselves. Nevertheless, the activities are activities of the recipients. But they are guided in their activities. This is to say: They experience a specific form of dependence on the object. But this is not precise enough, since it does not capture the dimension of activity on the recipient's side. So we have to say: The recipients experience a sort of dependence in (their) independence. In their activities, subjects are independent. But if their activities are guided by an object, the result is an experience of dependence in independence.

The dependence I am talking about is often misconceived as aimlessness. Someone who has an aesthetic experience is fundamentally oriented towards the constellation of an object or an event. In this sense, we may say that the experience is caused by the object. This is the reason that the course of the experience is not foreseeable for those who have it. The continuity of their activities is oriented by the configuration of the

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<sup>7</sup> This conception of aesthetic experience is non-minimalistic in the sense defended by Jerrold Levinson; see Levinson 2015.

object, which makes it appear as if the activities were aimless. But if we look closer, the impression of aimlessness vanishes. Because of the dependence of the recipients' activities, their goals are not determined on their own, but are set by the object. This causes the impression that the recipients – despite their own activity – follow an indeterminate movement. But this is not the sole impression they get. They will often also have the impression of posing questions to themselves and to the object, of understanding something, and of making an assessment of the artwork, etc. These different impressions have to be explained at once, and this is possible if we account for the impression of an indeterminate movement in terms of the dependence of the activities of the recipients. This allows us to say that the activities are determinate as well.

Before saying something about how this explanation of aesthetic experience may help us to overcome some standard problems and presuppositions in the explanation of aesthetic experience, I will first return to the conundrum of aesthetic experience with which I started. It is now possible to solve this conundrum, because we have gained an explanation of aesthetic experience that combines two aspects. Put schematically: the aspect of dependence and the aspect of independence. By saying that recipients of an artwork experience the dependence of their activities on the constellation of the artwork, we explain the way in which the object is primary in aesthetic experiences. But this primacy can only take place if the recipients unfold their own activities. And these activities allow us to address the second aspect of aesthetic experience: the experience as being the reflection of a subject. The activities of the recipient are the basis upon which the very primacy of the object over those activities makes possible the self-reflection of the subject in aesthetic experience. The subject is reflected in its activities. Thus, the conundrum is removed by an insight which I may articulate as follows:

*(No conundrum claim)* The passivity of the subject in aesthetic experiences takes place only if the subject is active on her own part. Dealing with a challenging object reflects the subject in her activities.

To sharpen the specificity of aesthetic experience, it is helpful to rely on the concept of experience which Hegel (Hegel 1977: 55) and Gadamer have developed. In his interpretation of Hegel, Gadamer has claimed that experiences always have a negative aspect (Gadamer 1990: 353f ). The paradigmatic case of an experience is thus an experience which someone makes – not an experience which someone has. If one makes an experience, convictions are revised or transformed. If convictions are negated, new convictions are formed. To make an experience, it is thus necessary to put one's convictions at stake. Whoever encapsulates himself with his convictions is not able to make experiences. He is doomed to stay by the same old opinions. One has to be active and put one's convictions at risk to make experiences.

This holds for aesthetic experiences as well. Aesthetic experiences are bound up with activities that someone enacts. With the activities developed in dealing with a work of art, he puts some of his forms of practice at stake. This is just what the concept of

“dependence in independence” says. Through their activities, recipients follow the constellations of works of art and allow themselves to be guided by these constellations. The activities are thus challenged in an incalculable way.

On the basis of these reflections, it is possible to deal with problems which are widespread in many explanations of aesthetic experience. These problems have a common structure, which is related to the conundrum of aesthetic experience, namely a structure which results out of a tendency to conceive of aesthetic experience as an indeterminate happening. This tendency is the reason that the explanations in question have problems in accounting for the determinate aspects of aesthetic experiences. By “determinate aspects”, I mean for instance that a colour is identified, that a musical theme is recognized, that the subject matter of the artwork is grasped, and so on. So, aesthetic experiences have to be understood as combining indeterminate and determinate aspects. And this is what lots of positions miss. I will shortly discuss three arguments: first the explanation of the specificity of aesthetic experiences in general, second the conception of aesthetic as implying self-loss, and third the conception of aesthetic experiences as contemplative experiences.

(a) Many explanations of aesthetic experience presuppose that aesthetic experiences gain their specificity insofar as they are experiences of something specific. Lots of philosophies of aesthetic experience hold that we have to explain the specificity which comes into play with aesthetic experiences. They presuppose that aesthetic experiences are about something which is specific or refer to something which is specific. A good example is the position of Martin Seel, who argues that aesthetic experiences are experiences of appearances – not of appearances (Seel 2005). The basic idea of explanations of this kind is to specify aesthetic experiences by saying that these experiences are about or refer to something which is indeterminate. Roughly stated: Aesthetic experiences are experiences of the indeterminate.

But such explanations are problematic, for they account neither for the determinateness and plurality of works of art, nor for the activities by which recipients deal with them. They make it look like aesthetic experiences just have the specificity of being indeterminate. But aesthetic experiences have determinate aspects and are bound up with different practices, media, materials, and so on. Thus, an account of aesthetic experience has to combine both the indeterminacy and the determinacy and plurality of art. I think that this is what my account provides. If we say that aesthetic experiences are experiences of a dependence in independence and hence intrinsically connected with interpretive activities, we explain the indeterminacy of aesthetic experiences in terms of dependence, and thus explain them in a way that allows us to combine this indeterminacy with the determinacy and plurality of interpretive activities. Aesthetic experience is understood as a dimension that is realized in very different activities.



(b) A common thought of some philosophies of art going back at least to Schopenhauer is that aesthetic experiences have to be conceived as experiences of self-loss.<sup>8</sup> To give an idea of this conception, one can say: In dealing with art, the structures of subjectivity are dispersed. But such an explanation is not capable of giving an adequate account of the way in which recipients of artworks put some of their practices and thereby themselves at stake. To put oneself at stake does not mean a loss of self – a loss of self would only be realized if what could be put at stake ceased to exist and hence could not be put at stake any more. If aesthetic experiences are explained as implying self-loss, it is not possible to explain why recipients have to be active in their dealings with works of art. What it means that recipients put themselves at stake by being active in their dealings with works of art has to be explained differently. They let themselves be altered in their activities – they risk being altered in their very subjectivity.

(c) On the basis of the foregoing reflections, it is possible to assess another idea widespread in aesthetics, namely the idea that aesthetic experiences are contemplative experiences. As for many things, Kant has paved the way for our understanding of the idea in question. The free play of the faculties, that is, of the understanding and the imagination, is a contemplative play. We may highlight the contemplative character of it by saying that an object is conceptually traversed in an indefinite way. Through this traversal, no fixed, determinate concept is formulated. It is possible to free Kant's explanation from the idealistic approach which Kant holds and understand the free play in terms of practices. Someone who makes aesthetic experiences moves over an indeterminate amount of details of an object. As Martin Seel has it: Someone who makes aesthetic experiences perceives the object "in the momentary plenitude of its appearances" (Seel 2005: 46). One goes through an indeterminate amount of aspects of the object, in a movement which is not directed towards a goal but which, to say it with Kant, "strengthens and reproduces itself" (Kant 1999: §12).

An explanation on these lines is always confronted with the general problem which I have highlighted, namely to make intelligible how aesthetic experiences can be conceived as determinate. If aesthetic experiences are grasped as being contemplative, it is problematic to account for their determinate aspects. How can aesthetic experiences be determinate if they are fundamentally indeterminate? Someone who begins his analysis with the concept of contemplation only has the possibility to retrospectively add some aspects to a concept of aesthetic experience which is itself not capable of accounting for them.

But we have learned how to avoid an explanation like this: Aesthetic experiences are bound up with determinate aspects. According to the explanations developed thus far, we can account for the intuition which leads to the concept of contemplation. Experiences are aesthetic if we make an experience of dependence in independence.

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<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, Schopenhauer 1989: vol. 1, § 68.

Because they are essentially based on activities and because these activities are always determinate, aesthetic experiences are determinate as well. Their specificity is based on the dependence which is characteristic of interpretive activities.

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