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THE LOST EXPERIENCE OF ART

Aesthetics is a contradictory science. It sets out to achieve an oxymoron, namely to render perfect what by nature is imperfect. Baumgarten's conception of the term was in fact based on reaching the *perfectio* of the *cognitio sensitiva*. For Baumgarten it was an epistemological question. Yet it is easy to see the powerful allusion behind it: well before the Romantics and Schelling appeared, aesthetics seemed to promise a *plenitudo realitatis*, a fullness of being. Those who pursue beauty aim for synaesthetic perfection when regarding an object, which offers itself up to the senses with all its fragrance, entirety and perceptive fullness. The object is not, from this point of view, an aesthetic object in the modern sense of the term, namely something that gives us pleasure to look at, but rather acts as an intermediary that coalesces our sensations and enables us to apprehend the fullness of the world. When we perceive something beautiful we appreciate the completeness of the world. Beauty shows us how full and complete the forms of the world are by showing us the characteristics of our perception of the object, a perception which involves all the senses. At a closer look, the object perceived is identified as beautiful because it enables us to perceive it synaesthetically, using all of our sensory organs.

The result of this process is a contradictory form of knowledge that is both "clear and confused", as opposed to the "clear and distinct" nature of conceptual knowledge. In short, it is a type of knowledge that regards form. This kind of knowledge involves a simultaneous apprehension of the object, in contrast to conceptual knowledge, which offers an analytical, sequential knowledge of the object: a form of knowledge that interrupts the synthetic unity of the object, or what we could call its "aesthetic unity". The aesthetic nature is therefore evidently connected to the overall apprehension of the object, the fact that we apprehend all of it at once. In this context the object is something that imposes itself. And it is equipped with a self-reflexive structure that constantly transcends itself, continually denying what we thought it was. It is paradoxical, but this beauty immediately emerges as a modern beauty, an astounding, sublime event. It is a sublime beauty because it always takes us beyond what we already are and have. And this is the premise of aesthetics that inevitably has to reckon with the limits of the observer and his or her viewpoint. Not to mention the ever-transcendent

nature of the object. To frame it in contemporary terms, the aesthetic approach is one that takes or should take account of the neuronal make-up of the beholder, his or her physical presence, and it is also aware that the images we have in mind are created above all by ourselves (see Breidbach 2013). But we can go further: it strongly claims that its form of knowledge is universally valid, as Kant predicted, even though it depends on an experience that is *only* subjective.

Let us think for example of the attitude that might be taken by someone looking at a Greek vase in an important museum. The observer forms a complete perception of the object, based on the formal aspect that shows through the case where it is kept to safeguard its contemplative function – as distinct from its usage – and on analytical knowledge of the object. This complete perception enables us to arrive at a representation that opens in the direction of something that is not what we had in mind or had always thought. We are directed towards new experiences that do not coincide with our previous schemas, and we are heading in a direction we perceive as new and that is therefore vague and uncertain.

The *perfectio sensitiva* is therefore bound up with a perceptive perfection that has an undeniably erotic element. This is something that also recalls Goethe's early morphological theories. Which do not, however, coincide with what later occurred. Our experience of beauty, and therefore also artistic beauty, is basically an experience of sympathy in which the individual not only contemplates the object but also abandons him or herself almost devotedly to it, so much so that it is difficult to describe it purely as an "object". While, exactly as in an erotic experience, it is never possible to say exactly which senses are involved, because the more it is suffused with senses which are not necessarily "in place", the richer the experience proves to be. In the act of love it really is possible to see with your sense of touch, touch with your eyes and so on... this evokes Goethe's vision once more, as broad as it is rich in captivating ambiguities.

On the other hand – also thanks to aesthetic practices acquired and transmitted in this form by the philosophic theory of art – we are accustomed to perceiving objects by referring to *qualia*, genuine abstractions. In this direction the perceptions produced are incomplete, in general pertaining to only one of the senses, in line with a system of correspondences by means of which colour is assigned purely to the sight, sound to the hearing etc. The initial theories of aesthetics appear to promise something which is fundamentally different. Through the idea or ideal of *perfectio sensitiva* we are directed towards a synaesthetic experience in which each sense is connected to the others, with the aim of capturing the perceivable fullness of the object, and, as a consequence, the world.

We should therefore examine the dawn of aesthetics with Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, in Germany in the mid eighteenth century. As is known, at the start of his work Baumgarten describes aesthetics as a sort of possible synthesis, albeit still premature, of the entire universe of knowledge:

A e s t h e t i c a (theoria liberalium artium, gnoseologia inferior, ars pulchre cogitandi, ars analogi rationis,) est scientia cognitionis sensitivae (Baumgarten 1970: 1)

This definition is as significant as it is concise. In our eyes it also appears profoundly strategic. Firstly it should be observed that this definition draws together two spheres destined to become progressively autonomous, namely the sphere of positive, philosophical and scientific knowledge, and that of the object of *Aestheticus*. We should then note an element that might appear disorienting to us, namely that we are dealing with an intuition that is already a form of knowledge. More specifically we are dealing with the knowledge of image, where the genitive is construed as both objective and subjective: a perception that has an intrinsic force of reasoning (Baumgarten 1970: § 26), of a universal nature (Baumgarten 1970: § 27), in such a way that even what we would now call a scientific device cannot be without «omni venustati cognitionis» (Baumgarten 1970: § 42, 17). Against a background of this kind, here summarised very concisely, aesthetic knowledge is analogous to rational knowledge, «analogon rationis».

The advent of aesthetics thus coincided with a new form of knowledge that drew the totality of its meaning from perception. We will later examine how. But we can say that we are dealing with a perceptive utopia that takes us from the fullness of perception to the fullness of the world. If erotic perception is the form of perception in which the eye too comes to “hear”, we could say that the advent of aesthetics heralded an erotic utopia regarding the perception of the object as a “loving” totality with its own meaning. From this point of view a merely partial perception of the object, received through only one of the senses, would be a sort of failure, an incomplete, non-transparent opening onto a world, in other words: incomprehensible.

But if perception splinters, following the autonomous, basically schizophrenic directions of the five senses, this is because the world itself can no longer be apprehended as a whole with its own meaning. The relationship between the perception entrusted to the five senses and the question of the meaning of things is, in this context, anything but irrelevant. Thanks to this divided, abstract perception, the world itself has lost meaning, becoming opaque and increasingly similar to the dense, impenetrable surface described by Sartre in *Nausea*. The transition described using Sartre’s metaphor, is undoubtedly a very lengthy one. But if we wish to examine this in the long run, we can see that the rationalization of the world appropriates the aesthetic sphere and the objects that belong to it, as we can see in the end result of this process: Hegel’s diagnosis regarding the “end of art” (see Vercellone 2013). This means that for Hegel the universal is no longer anchored to the perceivable; for us that the rational world has detached from what we perceive with our senses, and that reality has become a little less consistent and perhaps a little more schizophrenic, separating into its *qualia*.

Seen in this way there is no doubt that we are dealing with a progressive rationalization of the aesthetic, as opposed to Baumgarten’s original vision of an

aestheticization of logic. This naturally has powerful consequences both with regard to reality, or in any case, the idea we have of it, and with regard to logic. It is not a case of denial but a dilation of the limits of rationality. It is in the very arena of aesthetics that rationality realises its limits, and also senses the necessity to go beyond itself. It is not difficult to read this destiny in the developments of eighteenth and nineteenth century aesthetics, which opened a path that continues to this day.

Along this path, art echoes the perceptive fragmentation that characterises this “normal” relationship with the world. In accordance with this, from Batteux to Hegel, and from the latter to Adorno we are faced with aesthetic theories that base the system of the arts, and therefore the aesthetic experience, on the related senses: painting is a question of light and colour, music of hearing and so on.

This path manifested itself in the works of Charles Batteux and went on to form the main direction in modern aesthetic theory, which, not coincidentally, culminated in the nineteenth century philosophy of art, regardless of all the discussions on the watershed that separates the two.

It has often been insisted, so much so that the distinction has become outdated and obsolete, that eighteenth century aesthetics is based on subjective sentiment, inspired by rationalism, while in the nineteenth century a genuine philosophy of art formed.¹ In actual fact the distinction ends up concealing the profound unity of a dimension that came into being by comparing perception and concept, image and reality to the constant detriment of the first two terms of the question.

And resulting in the abstraction that is known as aesthetic experience. This is what is expressed in *Les beaux arts réduits à un même principe* by Charles Batteux, where the principle of imitation is authoritatively identified as the aesthetic ideal and code for reference to the object. Artistic imitation, which Batteux regards as the work of genius, is naturally the imitation of something. It might seem banal, but this self-evident statement conceals a radical shift. The objective genitive imposes a traumatic turning point which reveals the recesses of idealizing imitation. A singular paradox arises by means of which imitation both idealises its object and ruptures its sensory unity according to the art in question, using means of expression that address one single sense or another. In this way, namely in so far as the imitation refers to a creative medium that relates to *one* of the senses, the idealised pretence also and always becomes a rationalizing de-realization of the object represented:

Quelle est donc la fonction des arts? C'est de transporter les traits qui sont dans la nature, & de les présenter dans des objets à qui ils ne sont point naturels. C'est ainsi que le ciseau du statuaire montre un héros dans un bloc de marbre. Le peintre par ses couleurs, fait sortir de la toile tous les objets visibles. Le musicien par des sons artificiels fait gronder l'orage, tandis que tout est calme; et le poète enfin par son invention et par l'harmonie de ses vers, remplit notre esprit d'images feintes

¹See Baeumler 1926; Szondi 1974; Franzini 2002.

et notre cœur de sentimens factices, souvent plus charmans que s'ils étoient vrais & naturels. D'où je conclus, que les arts, dans ce qui est proprement art, ne sont que des imitations, des ressemblances qui ne sont point la nature, mais qui paroissent l'être; & qu'ainsi la matière des beaux arts n'est point le vrai, mais seulement le vrai-semblable. Cette conséquence est assez importante pour être développée & prouvée sur le champ par l'application.

Qu'est-ce que la peinture? Une imitation des objets visibles. Elle n'a rien de réel, rien de vrai, tout est phantôme chez elle, & sa perfection ne dépend que de sa ressemblance avec la réalité.[...] De tout ce que nous venons de dire, il résulte, que la poésie ne subsiste que par l'imitation. Il en est de même de la peinture, de la danse, de la musique: rien n'est réel dans leurs ouvrages: tout y est imaginé, feint, copié, artificiel. C'est ce qui fait leur caractère essentiel par opposition à la nature (Batteux 1746: 13-14; 22)

The evolution of the philosophy of perception, which characterised the origins of aesthetics in the eighteenth century, into the nineteenth century philosophy of art did not merely mark a historic schism repeatedly emphasized in the classic historiography of aesthetics (see Baeumler 1926). There is an underlying common thread connecting the two eras, according to which aesthetic consciousness is a purely contemplative consciousness, which produces a purely “aesthetic” experience. The previous considerations apprise us of the fact that the aesthetic consciousness is a contemplative consciousness not in terms of positive prerogatives, but in so far as it is unable to really access the object in its entirety. And this takes place on the basis of the premises that shape its formation. In other words it derives from the fragmentation of the overall perception of the object into its components in the aesthetic experience. The *perceptum* gets divided into *qualia*, evoking the model of scientific examination.

It is in this direction that the definitive primacy of the aesthetic experience came into being. In the same direction lies the path towards aestheticism as an experience of a weak form of art that has no efficacy on reality. In this process the perception of the object contradictorily and paradoxically coincides with the abstraction of and from the object itself. And in this context imitation appears as the basis of the rationalistic formalization of the object. The maturing of aesthetic knowledge therefore seems to proceed hand in hand with that of the scientific method, which defines the object on the basis of its *qualia*, interrupting what could temporarily be described as its integrity or, in more learned terms, its living unity. This is replaced by the analytic unity of the object that cannot be acquired through perception, but only *post hoc*.

Now let us return to the correspondence between the five senses and the individual arts. Batteux leaves us in no doubt that things are moving in precisely that direction:

On peut diviser la nature par rapport aux beaux arts en deux parties: l'une qu'on saisit par les yeux, et l'autre, par le ministère des oreilles: car les autres sens sont stériles pour les beaux arts. La première partie est l'objet de la peinture qui représente sur un plan tout ce qui est visible. Elle est celui de la sculpture qui le représente en relief; & enfin celui de l'art du geste qui est une branche des deux autres arts que je viens de nommer, & qui n'en diffère, dans ce qu'il embrasse, que parce que le sujet à qui on attache les gestes dans la danse est naturel & vivant, au lieu que la toile du

peintre et le marbre du sculpteur ne le sont point. La seconde partie est l'objet de la musique considérée seule & comme un chant; en second lieu de la poésie qui emploie la parole, mais la parole mesurée & calculée dans tous ses tons. Ainsi la peinture imite la belle nature par les couleurs, la sculpture par les reliefs, la danse par les mouvemens et par les attitudes du corps. La musique l'imite par les sons inarticulés, et la poésie enfin par la parole mesurée. Voilà les caractères distinctifs des arts principaux (Batteux 1746: 37-39).

The presence of the object in its perceivable entirety is therefore distanced, as is also evident from the fact that the senses that perceive it close up are excluded from the aesthetic experience. It is no coincidence, from this point of view, that the sense of touch and the sense of smell, which enable us to interact with an object close to us, are not considered at all. Perhaps only Herder in *Plastik*, who attributes the perception of sculpture to the touch, appears to remember the all-inclusive nature of the aesthetic experience.² This notion was re-launched, like a utopian vision, with the idea of the total work of art. The great systems of German idealism took up the idea of the partial perception of the object in relation to the different senses. This heralded the advent of aesthetics as the experience of an object to be considered *only* in terms of its artistic worth, fatally connected to Hegel's idea of the "end" or "death of art".

The process taking shape here will naturally lead to having to make a virtue out of necessity. It thus occurs that an evident limitation connected to the artistic medium comes to represent a functional, strategic characteristic of the art in question. Naturally the consequences regarding the conception of the image that derives from this limitation are also of great interest. Indeed, because we are dealing with a limited medium, not capable of evoking the entirety of the reality reproduced, its products are a mere pretence. Art therefore acquires its universally acknowledged status of self-declared pure appearance. And if it did not announce its own unreality, the aesthetic experience would become a hallucinatory one. This rekindles an ancient fear that appeared in the competition between Zeuxis and Parrhasius described by Pliny the Elder, in which the two painters sought to produce the most realistic image.³ In other words, the best illusion.

From this point of view the perceived world is thus presented as a faithful mirror of the strategic equilibriums of the ego. A universe of images capable of integrating all the elements of sensory perception would generate a deviation, a misleading delusion that would distort the nature of the perceived world, even calling our very identities into question. And given that the ego cannot exist without an axiological framework, the moral universe would also be upturned, almost as a consequence. Overwhelmed by illusionism, by the transformation of the perceived world into image, the ego would be

² See Herder 1993. About the hierarchy of senses in *aesthetica* consideration see Korsmeyer 1999: in particular 11-38.

³ See Pliny the Elder 79-77 a.C.: XXXV, 65-66.

completely disorientated and enter into a nihilistic crisis (see Vercellone 2009: 3-30). In actual fact on closer inspection all of this depends on the ontological status attributed to reality and pretence as well as their reciprocal dividing line. Crossing that line represents a threat and a challenge to the subjective identity.

It goes without saying that we are dealing with issues that are both unexpected and unsettling. It really does beg the question of why issues concerning the ontology of the image should affect the unconscious and the preconscious to the point of inducing a state of paralysing terror.

We might be led to think – and this is our *ballon d'essai* – that we are in the presence of spectres that have plagued the entire history of the western world. Or rather with the very essence of a spectre, in so far as this is a *revenant*, a soul returned from death that has crossed back over the Styx. It is a deep-rooted question that is summarised by Hegel in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, which states that the most important thing is “das Tote festzuhalten”. Challenging this premise would mean eradicating the solid foundations of our knowledge. Thus it is that in *The Science of Logic* rationality triumphs over death with the victory of the living concept, while in the *Introduction to The Phenomenology of Spirit* the absolute spirit celebrates the living jubilation of the absolute spirit with infinite, joyful connection of its intertwined members.

Awakening the *mortuum* would therefore mean challenging the principle by means of which what is real has a stable status that is the basis of its knowability. Introducing an element of mutability into this arena implicates putting knowledge, science itself, its stability and the immutability of its laws, at risk. What is dead must therefore at all costs be something that has acquired a definitive status that cannot be modified. Let us explore this hypothesis, because if it is legitimate it has important consequences. On this basis we must admit that only things that are real are effective, and therefore the idea that a “quasi-thing” like an image can exert any kind of influence on the world,⁴ act or dictate action, would mean admitting that it can behave like a subject, giving it the unsettling semblance of a spectre.

This says a lot about the new configuration of aesthetics that came into being in the nineteenth century as the philosophy of art. Let's frame the question in these terms: a “stable” ontology of the discrete reality, what Heidegger describes as the “metaphysics of presence” is necessarily accompanied by an “aesthetic” consciousness and experience of the image that deprives the latter of any kind of virtuality, making it sterile as it were: pure appearance without any kind of influence on its surroundings, destined from the start to be kept in a museum. This also means that if there is any kind of confusion regarding its ontological status, the image can break free from its limits and produce some kind of “real” effect. Which would necessarily be perverse. To avoid this cognitive catastrophe that could threaten the status of our whole world in its essence and

⁴ See Bredekamp 2010; Griffero 2013.

substance, it is therefore necessary to bring forth the aesthetic consciousness. These were probably the machinations behind Kant's idea that beauty is something that gives universal, disinterested pleasure. This formula delivers up a form of beauty that is exempt from all practical concerns, to be stored away safely in a museum devoted to the protection of appearance. With the idea of aesthetic experience – the hidden oxymoron that is the idea of aesthetic object and “aesthetic” experience – where we are dealing with a *res* that is not in any case an object, there is therefore a problem regarding one fundamental structure of the self comprehension of knowledge. In this context the artistic object, aesthetically characterised as a non-thing, a simple objectified appearance, only represents the surfacing, the sign, of a much deeper, perhaps even atavistic process. To sum up: the advent of the aesthetic consciousness and experience thus derives from, highlights and generates a dual abstraction. On one hand modern art is forced to dissociate from life, admitting and declaring its fictitious, unreal status, making modern aesthetics reveal its platonic roots, validating an art which is inexorably embedded in the sphere of illusory mimesis and ineffective experience (see Danto 1997).

On the other hand, and as a consequence of this, the systematic consideration of the single arts reflects the abstract spider's web of the world it is part of. The gaze formulated in the laboratory of aesthetics basically reflects and prefigures what takes place in the so-called real world. It scientifically splits the complete aura of the perceived world, splintering it into unconnected perceptive units which are thus meaningless in the Kantian sense. Aesthetics as the philosophy of art thus bears the idea alluded to by Hegel and developed by Croce, of a “death of art” in the modern universe. It is a symbolic death due to the development of a reasoning that separates the different spheres of our existence, distancing them from the “world of life” and rendering them increasingly abstract, giving rise to what Weber calls the “disenchantment of the world”.

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