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On Bitter-Juicy Philosophizing Via Aesthetics

For the late Iga Ciszewska who should be with us.

1

There is no compulsory, inner or outer, requirement to practice philosophizing aesthetics. True indeed that the roots of this discipline are philosophic and also in the middle of the XVIIIth century when it reached its sovereignty and name, the process took place within philosophy in the case of Baumgarten and Sulzer. However, even then Lessing's and Diderot's intellectual endeavours and achievements were of a different nature. And later, as is well-known, i.e. in the XIXth century, aesthetics underwent a long period of trying and testing its science-like potential. With changing forms and assumptions this trend endures till our day. Not to necessarily philosophize amounts, e.g. to practice art or literary criticism, ask about the values and their criteria with reference to psychological or sociological norms, accept or question what according to the ruling conventions, institutionally (art academies, museums, galleries, professional publications, etc.) is acknowledged as a standard aesthetic vocabulary, share the interest in the same prevailing themes and motifs, and analyze what the given seminal categories meant and mean now; all that we observe everywhere and note at the congress debates. In one word – one can easily and securely live and prosper without engaging aesthetics, treated as the equivalent of philosophy of art, in the philosophizing enquiries and meditations. To philosophize or not is a matter of conscious choice and option. But when we start with such a premise, we have to lay down what we understand by this peculiar activity. In the next section of my paper I shall undertake this task, distinguishing four-fold the philosophizing practice with regard to our domain. This will form the main body of my reflections. In the final section I shall consider the problem which seems to me fundamental, namely why today, at the present cultural juncture, philosophizing *via* aesthetics in a definite way should be recommendable and primary, as well as why it has to be bitter-juicy as the title of my essay foretells.

2

A

Of the four discerned kinds of philosophizing *via* aesthetics the first which is to be listed used to be the most frequent and continues to be such. It rests on the more or less adequate, direct relationship of given aesthetic ideas, consequential to a system of thought. In this sense we assign a certain thinker to the family of Kantism or phenomenology, hermeneutics or Marxism. This dependence on adopted presumptions and axioms was and is variously exercised. It can be revealed by mere extension of the concepts and solutions presented by one of the great minds, say Dewey or Heidegger, or Lukács. However, it may also be an interpretation of the philosophical fundamentals applied to the field of aesthetics, say of Husserl who himself in counterdistinction to Ingarden left this domain of problems almost untouched. Still another example could be practicing, for instance, a Wittgensteinian philosophy of art. Wittgenstein articulated some opinions on art and aesthetic experience, but no doubt, they invite the scholars who want to be the followers of his *Philosophical Investigations* to reconstruct, complete and develop them. This kind of philosophizing is notoriously less appreciated because it is admitted in general that it is mostly the repetition of the notions already sifted and digested. Unjustly so as there is no end of creative potentiality in enriching heritage by re-interpretation (if only it possesses vital significance).

B

Another version of philosophizing attitude and approach stems from examining the foundations and sense of aesthetics. It was already born in the beginnings of our century and instigated by the turning-point in humanities which was brought by Dilthey and later by Rickert. The question which has to be put concerned first the understanding instead of explanatory procedures as the proper means (method) to command the intricacies and secrets of the artistic realm. However, soon it appeared that even understanding may be fallacious. Bullough was forced to ponder whether any theoretical strategems are able to meet the peculiarities of the aesthetic phenomena. This crisis was never fully overcome but cunningly silenced, stating that the aesthetic theory and its subject-matter are never entirely compatible and such un-correspondence is to be assented to by all scholars, natural scientists included. The meta-aesthetic consciousness was awakened again several decades after the hinted-above discussion took place. It now took a radical shape on behalf of the doubts raised by the very subject of

study. Once the idea of art grew to be dubious, which commenced with the fifties, philosophy of art became suspect as well. Philosophizing touched upon the possible precariousness of aesthetics, its scholarly exhaustion or replacing its hitherto practice by meta-aesthetic reflection. The latter was to embrace revising the ambitions and the triumphs of aesthetics, uncovering the sources of its defeats, meditations on another discipline (theory of culture?) which could take over its dowry while facing the increasing, global predomination of mass culture, etc. Anyway, philosophizing engaged in this variety of checking one's own balance-sheets had to be engaged in thinking on the civilisational and cultural vicissitudes of our day. And so it happened.

C

After the period of anti- and/or (post-) aesthetics which, as expected, began to wane with the end of the 80s and was rapidly exchanged for so called post-modernism (trying in different fashions to reinstate the legitimacy and authority of aesthetic studies), interest in philosophizing meditations became rather poor. This occurred to be natural as the initiative to face directly the problem of mass culture predominating on the social scene belonged to the sociologists. They spurred research on consumerism and its mainstays. An instructive specimen of this type of reflection is presented by Mike Featherstone in *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism* (1991), who set forth the idea of the global aesthetization as the very symptom of the continuing transformation and the breakthrough in dealing with the artistic-aesthetic values. His reasoning ran as follows: When the main vehicle and propelling factor of social circulation grew to be consumption and with it advertising and marketing, all goods (chiefly the material) called for styling because they had to be quickly sold and thus leave room to newer samples. But not only the pursuit after the highest profit determined this kind of behaviour. Democracy brought more education, improved on the whole taste, and created a new class of managers (here the author draws on Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural intermediaries). As the information and symbolic sphere advanced to the rank of one of the essential commodities, no wonder that the entire environment began to undergo the aesthetic-oriented change. Everything was to attract the senses by its prettiness, the streets as well as the interiors had to be beautified, and supermarkets and walls became the focus of artistically conceived entertainment. Featherstone writes about the carnivalisation of culture. What in medieval times was a Great Ritual Break, a Feast making one conscious of everyday grey realities, what much later the avant-garde, since Dada, treated as the Big Provocation to undermine the *status quo*, today we read, is a colloquial surrounding. The

more fragmentary, simultaneous and multi-faceted stimulations attack our mind and the more we get entangled in the network of ubiquitous media, the clearer we begin to understand that the life is shaped now by various spectacles and by hedonistic needs. We realize, furthermore, that within the domain of constant shows and omnivorous pleasures, the aesthetic ones build the topical body of our well-being. Once we agree that today mass culture and consumerism plus carnivalisation make the very sense of our existence, instead of philosophizing *via* aesthetics we should – Featherstone justly concludes and proves it splendidly by his scrutiny – rather concentrate on the theory of culture. It is the mainstay of fundamental questions and potential answers to them.

This phenomenon of global aesthetization met sharp counter-arguments. Jean Baudrillard, one among many, pointed to the effect of anaesthetizing everything when any event or any object becomes beautified. The xero (zero) result of such manoeuvres was reaffirmed in another manner by Odo Marquard. And precisely this objection made the springboard of Wolfgang Iser, who campaigned against this superficial and trivial all-over aesthetics in defence of the philosophizing approach which should consider aesthetics most seriously as our epoch turns it into the chief organon (instrument) of philosophy. In two books: *Ästhetisches Denken* (1990) and *Grenzgänge der Ästhetik* (1996) his argumentation is not so much addressed against the styling of our environment, our dresses, our behaviour, etc. (as he finds all these facts natural and somewhat, though flattening, prolonging the old notion of *homo aestheticus*), as towards enhancing a strong demarcation line between the shallow display of cosmeticized realities and deep aesthetics (*Tief-Ästhetik*) which reaches to the sources of our being. Iser maintains that from Nietzsche till Foucault and the Parisian School of deconstruction we experienced an epistemological watershed. Our Cartesian epistemology got shaken, Logos rules no more. Rationality was revealed in its many shades and aspects, blended with irrational elements. Art, true, remained the basic field of discovering the drawbacks of Reason, abstract thinking, schematic divisions, etc. but more important than the boldest avant-garde revelations was and is the direct contact through our senses, emotions and imagination with the world founded on *aisthesis*. This should be understood not in the Kantian (*Schein*) but in the Aristotelian fashion. This *aisthesis* uncovers the riddles of our cognition, the passages between different powers of mind, their co-mingling, the interplay of the known and the obscure (*der blinde Fleck*), the transversality of the discourse which is rarely linear, while being most often multi-faceted. Hence too, the *aisthesis* becomes the organon of philosophizing which is far

away from the Schellingian concept. There – art endowed with intellectual intuition had to speak out the truth of being; here – the paradoxes and paralogsms of our existence become unveiled thanks to taking into account the theory in its various forms and its constant dialogue with practice, sensibility with regard to the concrete, accidental, precarious, many-facial, episodic, as well as putting the metaphoric-narrative language on an equal footing with the analytico-synthetic discourse. Aesthetizing is grasped then fundamentally as philosophizing. There is no mere play with words and no perverse coquetry when Welsch introduces the term *Sinnwahrnehmung* in the function of his key-concept. Perception coalesces with penetrating the profound sediments of being; aesthetics embraces both.

D

The last kind I am keen to distinguish is the outcome of critical learning from the three hitherto outlined. It presumes that there is at hand no single system of thought on which aesthetic thinking could and should depend. It is inclined to preserve the post-aesthetic attitude in the context of permanent alertness, i.e. to resist the dogma-like pretences of knowing for certain that philosophy of art is eternal, very important and useful (as the wisest guide of art and its corollaries) as well as well-armed because of its equipment which it collected over the long ages. However, it bids farewell to post-aesthetics. All its seminal arguments were already told, and no one will today applaud the entire aesthetic heritage and apply amnesty to its obvious errors. In one word, to continue it without a break would be a loss of energy. As for Welsch's idea, it is of priceless value but raises objection because of the arbitrary interpretation of *aisthesis* which remains fuzzy and shifting of the entire weight of argumentation to aesthetics as the organon of philosophy. What Welsch indeed and rightly has in mind is actually the rehabilitation of mythos and the watchful control of what Logos seizes. Let us leave aside the question of the transversal reason which demands separate discussion. The very concept of another philosophizing is to be by all means confirmed, but why should it be reduced *via* the preponderance of mythos to *aisthesis* (and additionally replacing art) remains unclear. Anyhow, we are on the old territory of philosophy rearranging its household, resetting its axiology, dismissing its marshals, etc. That is why the return to philosophizing without restoring any extra-privileges upon aesthetics seems far more justified than almost identifying aesthetics and philosophy.

In this variety of philosophizing, among others, *via* aesthetics, the all-over aesthetization of the world and chiefly as Welsch has it, of post-modern epistemology becomes one of the salient issues. But this problem has to be

put in the critical light. *Aisthesis* is by its nature passive. Should not the cultural self-therapy concentrate on being creative in a special sense? This continues on with a much broader discussion of the flood of mass culture and the vulgarization of *homo aestheticus*. Philosophizing of this kind amounts to meditation upon where we are at the present-day point of culture and civilisation. It is a two-channelled meditation – thanks to and through the glasses of the most eloquent and best works of art and on the ground of the ubiquitous media with their vanity fair, with Madonnas, Jacksons, cyber-space, and all sorts of simulacra, which were described and commented on by Featherstone (but alas, without any distance). The meditation on our destiny, our axiological foundations, our challenge against the one-sided, trivial logocentrism, our re-assessing the sensual and carnal richness, and our ability to dissent in the struggle with so-called neo-tribalism (Maffesoli). All these questions could be put beyond the realm of art, beyond everyday multifaceted spectacles, and the aesthetic experiences, cheap or precious. That is one of the main pieces of evidence that the genuine philosophizing of our days cannot and should not be grasped as absolutized *aisthesis* on diverse levels. Nonetheless, for us because of the special vantage point this complicates matters first of all, because it entails asking incessantly: »What is aesthetics for?« instead of repeatedly drilling the theme »What is aesthetics?« Already at the XIIth International Congress for Aesthetics in Madrid (1992) in my plenary appearance, I laid stress on the proper hierarchy of the two approaches. I cited Marquard and followed him in this respect because while everything gets turned (from bottom to top and vice versa) and the feeling of crisis knocks on all minds, to dwell on definitions seems to be a miserable occupation.

3

It was most certainly evident to my listeners that while characterizing the fourth kind of philosophizing *via* aesthetics, I encapsulated in this characteristic my own viewpoint. The epitome of it consists in emphasizing the reflections on the human whither and thither at the cultural crossroads of our history, when we ponder on the present-day condition and sense of art as well as the aesthetic broadly rendered. In other words, philosophizing does not amount to looking after and building the world-view on *aisthesis*. It means replying by meditation (in whichever way and from different angles) to the present-day civilisational and cultural turn, not forgetting the generalities of our human condition (*en face* being, *Jemeinigkeit*, the other

self, history, transcendence). Philosophizing thus grasped, when it happens *via* aesthetics and art, has its advantages and privileges because both are the most sensitive instruments responding to the challenges of time. Noteworthy, the search after *aisthesis* and its passionate upgrading is the very sign of this extraordinary sensitivity to what occurs around and within us. The bitter-juicy combination of such endeavours still has to be elucidated. I name this species of reflection juicy because any investigatory examinational philosophizing with its dilemmas, paradoxes and aporetic knots makes us lucidly aware of who we are and what is our existential stake. I do not share the belief voiced nowadays more frequently that there occurs the twilight of philosophy burdened always with the task of universalizing and integrating the *Weltbild*. Philosophizing faces this burden but it realizes that it is too heavy for us and never satisfactorily embodied. It is yet a juicy thinking just on behalf of many world-views competing with each other and the impossibility of fixing my final solutions, yet at the same time on being of the irrevocable temptation not to give up the effort of totalizing the understanding of ourselves and the realities around. This reflection *via* art and aesthetics which arrestingly pluralizes the horizons of thought and being is moreover juicy because of the spasmodic consciousness of both the not-quite-certainty where we are heading (what type of labyrinth we are in?), and knowledge of where we are now at the historical and cultural turning-point. With this endowment partly lucid, partly muddled we are forced to choose, i.e. take the responsibility either for our dissent or conformity. I have always opted and continue to opt for resistance to the *status quo* especially when taking into consideration the cripplehood and trivialities of the contemporary civilisation plus culture. It is a juicy feeling to be able not to accept the allegedly fatal transformations which change our lives into all-over popular, dazzling and maddening super-spectacles. Beware, no doomsday is endorsed by me here although my hurrah-optimistic opponents state that I belong to the Don Quixotic family of nostalgic mourners (like Adorno, Steiner, Levinas, the famous Polish artists Czeslaw Milosz and Krzysztof Penderecki, etc.). Granted that I try not to adjust myself to the new post-modern axiology and lust from this deliberate non-adjustment, I draw the most juicy energy of being myself. *Hier steh ich und kann nicht anders!*

Why then the bitterness? Because my vision of *homo aestheticus* breaks again and again, because the counter-powers triumph over their victories and reiterate their gigantic pageantries, because the European cultural identity cherished since the medieval time is menaced, and because the osmotic processes between the best Far East lessons of how to revalue our values and our axiological stock proceed slowly and not rarely with defeats.

Summing up, bitterness because philosophizing in my vein (among others *via* aesthetics and art) is weakly efficient; all-permissive homogenizing consumerism gains more and more scores and most probably will still be the winner in the coming years. Bitterness because philosophizing (in all its dimensions and aspects) is not trusted enough, although, beyond any doubt, it co-moulds our way of being-in-the world. Bitterness because philosophizing *via* art and aesthetics which constitutes the most suitable intercultural and existential bridges, frequently stumbles on its way, falls and is often seen as a laughing stock. But the battle won't stop. We have to stand up again and follow our destiny of bitter-juicy philosophizing. *Spes contra spem.*