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*Aesthetic Experience – a topic at the cross-roads  
between philosophy and psychology*

To deal with the topic of aesthetic experience on a congress dedicated to »Aesthetics as Philosophy« provokes some critical remarks from a psychologist. I think that, due to the subjective nature of experience, it cannot be grasped adequately by a mere philosophical explanation. This is the reason why I want to contribute to this congress and in particular to the discussions of this section dealing with aesthetic experience some critical reflections on the role of philosophy and psychology in investigating aesthetic experience.

At this point I want to stress that this should not be understood as an attempt to renew the controversy dominating the aesthetic discussion at the beginning of our century, namely whether aesthetics should be grounded on a philosophy of values or on the base of empirical psychology and whether it should be regarded a philosophical or a psychological discipline (cf. Allesch 1987). Such »questiones iuris« usually remain unsolved, as Richard MUELLER -FREIENFELS stated already in 1925, however voluminous volumes might be published about them. It is not my intention to declare whether aesthetics should be part of philosophy *or* psychology, however, I want to stress some arguments why aesthetics should be conceived as an interdisciplinary project, and why I think that aesthetic experience is a distinctive topic to exemplify this suggestion.

Let me start with a question that has been a central topic of aesthetic discussion since aesthetics exists as a particular discipline, namely: What makes an experience an aesthetic experience? You know that there are two types of answers in the history of our discipline: The one, more objectivistic answer, points to the particular aesthetic nature of the aesthetic object. This means that the psychic or mental processes by which an aesthetic object is perceived do not essentially differ from other processes of perception. Thus, psychology that tries to explain the nature of these processes would not be able to contribute any substantial evidence about the aesthetic aspect of aesthetic experience.

The other, more subjectivistic answer, points to the fact that it depends on the intention of the beholder or listener whether a perceived object may be experienced as an aesthetic object. In this case, psychology has to be

regarded as a key discipline for the understanding and explanation of aesthetic experience since it actually refers to these subjective intentions and motivations which will enable or impede the realisation of an aesthetic experience.

This was the reason why Theodor LIPPS, one of the most engaged partisans of psychological aesthetics at the beginning of our century, claimed aesthetics to be a psychological discipline at all since, as he argued, its duty was to explain under which circumstances any object might be recognised as beautiful and this is actually what a psychological theory of experience was to achieve.

You know that this extreme argumentation in favour of a psychological conceptualisation of aesthetics is not held any more in recent theorising, not even in the contemporary psychology of art. On the one hand, also psychology of art accepted that there exists a certain kind of autonomy of aesthetic objects which cannot be explained by the particularities of subjective experiencing. On the other hand, it was in particular the contribution of phenomenological theories in aesthetics – I want to stress the work of Moritz GEIGER as a paradigm – which revealed the complex structure of aesthetic experience and convincingly suggested that what we call an aesthetic object is formed by the activity of a subject but constitutes a relation to a reality that itself constitutes the possibilities of the subject to face and to experience reality.

However, I think that it is not possible to outline a theory of aesthetic experience without regarding some fundamental evidence of psychology on the nature of human experience. I concede that it may depend on the kind of psychology which is taken into consideration whether this interdisciplinary approach will lead us to a satisfactory result. I think that some mistakes and resentments of aestheticians against a psychological interpretation of aesthetic phenomena does not result from an essential incompatibility of psychology and aesthetics but from the fact that they have dealt with a wrong or incompatible psychology.

Thus I concede that a psychological theory which is constructed in the classical behavioristic manner or in that more modern way of information processing theories will not be able to cover the particularities of aesthetic experience. But this is a type of psychology the capability of which to explain the nature of human experiencing should be questioned in general, that means not only with respect to aesthetic phenomena. I think that experience as performed by a human being living in a cultural context and conscious of its historic nature, that means being able or even forced to reflect on where it comes from and where it is to go, is totally different from the

kind of experience that can be modelled by those information processing activities as performed by a computer, however perfect and complicated it may be.

Modern psychology has become more and more aware of this fact during the last two decades but not all theoretical approaches have realised this development to the same amount. I want to outline now what kind of psychology would be necessary in order to cope with the particularities of aesthetic experience and in what manner a psychological theory of experience could be helpful for investigating this type of aesthetic problems.

Let me start with the argument that, if you consider aesthetics as the science of *aisth sis*, that means, of sensorial experience and not in the traditional sense as the science of art and beauty you inevitably will cross the borderline to the central domain of psychology. It points to the crucial ambiguity of the discipline denoted by the term »aesthetics« that, in order to emancipate from a theory of »experience in general« (as performed, for example, by KANT in his transcendental aesthetics as a part of his *Critique of Pure Reason*) it was to focus, in its historical shaping as a scientific discipline, its interest to a certain aspect or type of experience, namely what we refer to by the modern wording »aesthetic«.

I think that aesthetics has to find its proper position between two extremes: It can neither be conceived as a science of sensorial experience in general, nor should it stick to the traditional concepts of beauty and the arts as, for example, Wolfgang WELSCH convincingly argued in his plenary lecture on »Aesthetics beyond aesthetics« at our last congress in Lahti.

It is exactly this focusing on a certain 'aesthetic' type of experience that leads us back to our central question: what makes an aesthetic experience an aesthetic experience, or: how shall we pragmatically define the term 'aesthetic' in order to denote a type of experience which meets what we intend by the recent understanding of the realm of our discipline?

Now I would like to change my point of view again to that of a psychologist and ask for a useful psychological concept such as »experience«. The behaviorist doctrine which excluded all mental phenomena which cannot objectively be observed from the realm of science was not able to conceive and was not even interested in a concept like »experience«. Whatever experience might be and whatever might happen in our mind was reduced to the 'response' as the observable outcome of inner processes. The cognitive turn in psychology which started in the early fifties of our century, rejected the anti-mentalistic ban and made the mental processing which had been excluded by the behaviorists the central subject of psychology. However, until the seventies cognitive psychology understood perception as »information

processing«, i. e. in that mechanical sense in which information is processed by a technical system, since the booming information technology nurtured the expectation that mental processes could be modelled by the same kind of information processing which a computer performs.

It was a Gestalt psychologist who was also very engaged in aesthetic investigations, namely Rudolf ARNHEIM, who already in 1969, in his book *Visual Thinking*, stressed his conviction that human experience fundamentally differs from computerised data processing since it starts from the field of conscience, i. e. it proceeds from the whole to the parts and not from single data to a mechanically »computed« result. In the same way, but as early as 1935 another scholar of the Gestalt psychology school, namely the psychiatrist Erwin STRAUS in his important book *The sense of the senses* had suggested that »man thinks and not the brain«. It is exactly this question for »the sense of the senses« that leads psychology beyond the limits of a narrow-minded mentalism which would not be able to conceptualise »experience« in other than mechanistic terms.

In his famous outline of semiotics, *La struttura assente*, Umberto Eco distinguishes between »the world of signals« and »the world of sense«, where the world of signals is characterised by that type of information processing which can be carried out also by machines while the shift from the world of signals to the world of sense reflects the progression from the mechanical processing of a machine to the subjective world of a human being. This shift leads to another type of representation of the perceived outside world or even to another type of perception which is much closer to the meaning of the term »experience« than to a term such as »mental representation« as preferred by the cognitive psychology of the eighties.

Although we have to assume that what we phenomenologically denote with the term 'experience' is based on a certain physical representation as performed by biochemical processes in our brain, there is no evidence for the existence of phenomena comparable with human experience on the level of technical systems. And there are a lot of reasons to assume that this is not a problem of complexity but the result of a fundamental difference between biological systems created by evolutionary processes and technical systems designed by man.

You may realise the difference between technical signal-detection and human experience also by reflecting the meaning of aesthetic concepts like musicality. A sophisticated technical system like a high-tech tape recorder may achieve much more precise results in analysing frequencies than human beings but we would not assess this perfection as an outcome of its musicality. What we expect from a perfect tape recorder is not musicality

but high fidelity: it would, in fact, be an awful experience if a tape recorder did not represent the acoustical structure of music by a perfectly determined representation but, for example, amplify the volume of the cello part according to its immanent aesthetic interpretation.

This is the reason why psychological theorising on human perception during the last decades increasingly started to abandon the use of technical models of information processing for the explanation of the processes of human experience. The PDP-model of human perception (where 'PDP' stands for »parallel distributed processing«) as proposed by RUMELHART & McCLELLAND in 1986, explicitly asked the question: »What makes people smarter than machines«, thus starting from the difference and not from the analogy between computer and human mind.

However, also these most recent branches of cognitive psychology cannot actually meet the particularity of aesthetic experience since they do not differentiate between perception as an objective function of the human mind and that subjective becoming aware of our personal existence in a meaningful world which may be better designated by the word »experience« than by the term »perception«. If we recur to this »humanistic« or »experiential« approach as GIFFORD called it in his outline of *Environmental Psychology* (1987) we have to realise that the cognitive approach widely ignored some essential aspects of human existence, namely the impact of emotions, the complexity of man-environment relations and man's involvement in culture.

It is, to my opinion, in particular the recent development of psychology of culture that offers a plausible solution for these deficiencies but, in addition to that, leads to a concept of human experience in cultural context that might be regarded as a useful psychological contribution to an interdisciplinary theory of aesthetic experience. I want to outline two examples in order to support this statement.

The first example is the symbolic action theory as developed by Ernst E. BOESCH, the nestor of German cultural psychology.

Already in 1980, in his book *Kultur und Handlung*, BOESCH coined the formula that culture is »the biotope of man«. In 1991, BOESCH reformulated his theoretical concept in an English reader entitled »Symbolic Action Theory and Cultural Psychology«. BOESCH conceives the cultural environment as a »limiting system« which, on the one hand, stimulates, and, on the other hand, impedes a certain type of action. This cultural significance of actions is, mainly, mediated by the symbolic meaning of the objects that form the action field of a concrete situation. Strictly speaking, BOESCH argues, we do not perceive objects as physical objects, but as options for real (BOESCH<sup>1</sup>

says: *praxic*) or imagined acting, which may have objective purposes as well as subjective-functional meaning (for example the remembering of similar personal experiences). The objects of the human »field of action« are, »from a psychological point of view, not objects per se but representatives of systems and processes that go beyond the object itself«. What we perceive as the »form« of an object, is not just something »formal« like height, volume or texture but something that is »formed« by cultural traditions of perceiving as well as by subjective desires and potentialities of action. In this context, aesthetic objects play an exceptional role.

It was in a small essay, *Zwischen Angst und Triumph* (*Between anxiety and triumph*), published in 1975 that Ernst BOESCH for the first time explicitly tried to apply his symbolic action theory to the phenomenon of aesthetic experience. In this essay BOESCH argues that the aesthetic plays an important role in the process of the self which, in its lifelong attempt to cope with itself and the world, oscillates between encouragement and discouragement. Whatever makes the world more familiar to us is an encouraging experience. Aesthetic experience means, according to BOESCH, recognising our self within a world of symbolic forms which is »by no means to be limited to the work of art« but »may be stimulated by our fellow-beings, by nature, or even by an idea of particularly pregnant potency« (1975, p. 73).

In order to explain that, BOESCH sets up a rather risky but typical analogy between listening to music and skiing: Both activities have in common the pleasure of following an external structure by adequately reproducing and responding to the »figures« perceived. It is the stimulating experience to cope with reality, of being able to transform a formal idea into an adequate, harmonised movement of body and mind, that makes both activities in a comparable manner a possible subject of an aesthetic experience.

Another interesting suggestion was outlined by BOESCH in his book *The magic and the beautiful* in 1983, where he characterises the magic and the beautiful as contrasting cultural attitudes to face reality: While the magic attitude towards objects expresses a distancing function, the empathic disposition, which has a particular relation to the aesthetic, stresses being in harmony with the world. The aesthetic attitude thus tends »to expand the validity of the inner images« and »to transform counter-world into I-world«: The »beautiful object« perceived by the aesthetic empathy, as a »symbol of intended order« refers at the same time to the realisation of this order, functioning thus »as a corroboration of the self in much more pivotal and time-encompassing a sense than the merely momentary and concrete success of action« (1983, p. 316).

In *Symbolic Action Theory and Cultural Psychology*, BOESCH introduces the metaphor of »the trace« as a crucial concept in order to conceptualise the essence of aesthetic activity: »The trace extends the impact of *our* action into the external world, and ... it derives its attraction from this ... subjectivizing the external reality.« This means that the aesthetic object forms »a 'bridging object' in the sense of spanning the cleavage between person and matter, and between individual and group; it will, over time, even bridge the gap between present and past« (1991, p. 223).

I think that the metaphor »tracing reality« is a very good expression in order to illustrate how aesthetic experience is conceptualised by the Symbolic Action Theory of BOESCH (cf. Allesch 1993), since it connotes that this kind of experience – and even human experience in general – is more than just »facing reality« and much more than »information processing«.

If we interpret our capacity to trace the possible ways of changing, transforming and transfiguring reality as an essential prerequisite in order to cope with all the more or less important problems of our life, we will understand then why aesthetic experience is able to excite and to gratify by reinforcing our self and, furthermore, as BOESCH puts it, why men »put up with remarkable prices beauty fetches either by direct expenses or by time-consuming activities like ornamenting or dressing«.

I will not go into further details but I hope that you can agree with me that this concept offers very interesting topics for an interdisciplinary discussion on aesthetic experience.

Another interesting concept which I want to outline in a few words is the semiotic-ecological perspective as developed by Alfred LANG, a disciple of BOESCH who, until recently, held a chair for psychology at the University of Berne, Switzerland. LANG (1992) tries to overcome the traditional separation of the individual-related theorising of psychology and the object-related concepts of historical and cultural sciences. For him, culture is »external mind« in the same way as mind is an internal reflection of the cultural world outside. Therefore he tries to conceptualise a semiotic interpretation of the functional circle of the individual and the cultural environment. What happens outside the individual part of the world, namely the development of culture, may be interpreted as a semiotic process as well as what happens in the internal world of the individual, namely building up and restructuring of memory or shaping of habits and attitudes, and the processes of transfer between individual and culture, namely perception and acting. Thus, we may differentiate four aspects of sign formation which form the functional circle between individual and culture, namely

- **IntrOsemiosis** or perception which denotes a semiotic relation between cultural reality and its inner representation shaped by individual perception and cognition,

- **IntrAsemiosis** or internal mental organisation which restructures experience according to previous experiences and builds up the representation in memory. This may also be interpreted as a semiotic process;

- **ExtrOsemiosis** or »action«, which means external formation of structures by man influencing and forming his cultural environment. This type of sign generation also includes creative processes like creating a work of art or executing a scenic or musical performance;

- and finally **ExtrAsemiosis** which denotes the presence of created structures in and the permanent changing of the cultural environment which are not caused by direct influence of individuals. It is what LANG calls the »external soul«, the permanent traces of human activity and creativity in the cultural environment.

We may derive from this model that we will not have to face only what has its place in the external culture as a work of art or the beauty of a landscape but that we may deal with the aesthetic aspects of perception and of creative acting too and even, on part of the internal formation of structures, of fantasy *in terms of semiotic processes*. I think that this model is much closer to some theoretical developments within aesthetics than most former and traditional concepts of psychology.

You, as aestheticians, may be best suited to assess these theoretical ideas. I hope you will agree with me in the view that these are impressive examples in support of my theses that aesthetic experience forms a crucial topic at the cross-roads between aesthetics and psychology and that the investigation of aesthetic experience should be conceived as an interdisciplinary project. It was, also with respect to the limited time, not the aim of this paper to present an elaborated interdisciplinary theory of aesthetic experience, but I hope I was able to convince you that it is an interesting project to be developed in future co-operation.

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