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## Aesthetics Beyond Aesthetics\*

### Regarding the Contemporary Relevance of the Aesthetic and Recharting the Field of Aesthetics

WOLFGANG WELSCH

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#### Introduction: Outline of the Problems

##### 1. The prevailing presupposition: aesthetics as artistics

What is aesthetics ? The answer given by the encyclopedias is clear. The *Academic American encyclopedia* says: "Aesthetic is the branch of philosophy that aims to establish the general principles of art and beauty." Correspondingly, the Italian *Enciclopedia Filosofica* declares: Estetica e la "disciplina filosofica che ha per oggetto la bellezza e l'arte".<sup>2</sup> The French *Vocabulaire d' Esthetique* defines aesthetics as "etude reflexive du beau" and "philosophi et science de l'art" respectively.<sup>3</sup> And the German *Historisches Worterbuch der Philosophie* says: "Das Wort 'Asthetik' hat sich als Titel des Zweiges der Philosophie eingeburget, in dem sie sich den Kunsten und dem Schonen [...] zuwendet".<sup>4</sup> In short: Aesthetics is artistics, is an exploration of the concept of art with particular attention to beauty.

What, then, could "aesthetics beyond aesthetics" - as advocated in the title of my paper - be? In order to be meaningful, the expression "aesthetics beyond aesthetics" would have to point to something beyond this art-bound understanding of aesthetics, to something beyond artistics. But how could this - although being beyond the established sense of aesthetics - still be a kind of aesthetics? Does the term 'aesthetics' lend itself to a trans- artistic meaning?

Traditionally, this clearly is the case. 'Aesthetics' goes back to the Greek word class *aisthesis*, *aisthanesthai* and *aisthetos* - expressions which designate sensation and perception in general, prior to any artistic meaning. Current usage is not restricted either: in everyday language we use the term 'aesthetic' even more often outside than inside of the artistic sphere, when speaking, for instance, of aesthetic behavior or an aesthetic lifestyle, or of aesthetic peculiarities of media, or an increasing aestheticization of the world.

The *discipline* "aesthetics", however, traditionally didn't thematize sensation and perception. It focused on art alone - and more on conceptual than sensuous problems of art. Mainstream contemporary aesthetics still does so. The academic

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discipline tends to restrict itself to artistics - no matter how uncertain the notion of art itself may have become in the meantime.

Certainly, there have been exceptions and counter-tendencies to this dominant feature. Remember, for example, that Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, the father of aesthetics - he created the term 'aesthetics' in 1735, first lectured on the subject in 1742, and published the first book bearing the title 'Aesthetics' in 1750 - that Baumgarten conceived of aesthetics as a primarily cognitive discipline designed to improve our sensuous capacity for cognition. Among the scope of the new science - which he defined precisely as the "science of sensuous cognition"<sup>5</sup> - he didn't even mention the arts; he certainly used examples from the arts, especially from poetry, but only to illustrate what aesthetic perfection - as the perfection of sensuous knowledge - might be.

Shortly thereafter, however, when between Kant's *Critique of Judgment* of 1790, *The Oldest System-Program of German Idealism* around 1796, and Schelling's *System of Transcendental Idealism* of 1800, aesthetics started an unheard-of career leading it to the top of philosophy, aesthetics was understood exclusively as being the philosophy of the arts. And for centuries this remained the dominant understanding of aesthetics started by philosophers as different as Hegel and Heidegger or Ingarden and Adorno.

There was, to be sure, still a counter-tendency, reaching from Schiller's shift from artistic at first to political and educational art and finally to the "art of life" ("Lebenskunst") through to Marcuse's idea of a new social sensibility, or from Kierkegaard's description of aesthetic existence and Nietzsche's fundamentalization of aesthetic activity through to Dewey's intergration of art into life. But this counter-tendency didn't actually change the design of the discipline. The artistic focus remained dominant, and to a certain extent even these opposing tendencies shared the basic presumption of traditional aesthetics; they too understood art as being the very model of aesthetic practice and as providing paradigms for the shift to the trans-artistic understanding of aesthetics they advocated.

Currently, the discipline still sticks to the artistic restriction. There may be many good reasons to turn to the recognition of an aesthetics beyond artistics, but in trying to foster this tendency for some years, I have in fact found much interest and support outside the discipline - from cultural institutions, or theoreticians in other fields<sup>6</sup> -, but predominantly resistance within the discipline itself. One still assumes it goes without saying that aesthetics has to be artistics. One is still held captive by this traditional picture. And to continue this allusion to Wittgenstein, I am inclined to say: "And we cannot get outside it, for it lies in our discipline and this repeats it to us inexorably."<sup>7</sup>

## 2. Overcoming the traditional presupposition

### *a. The scope of this congress*

The present congress, however, makes an attempt to escape from the aesthetics-artistics equation. The program is quite clear on this point. It suggests bridging "the gap between academic research and phenomena of the everyday world" and analyzing "how aesthetics itself, as a discipline [...], is affected by this challenges". It further suggests that "traditional criteria and models developed to explicate art or beauty are not necessarily adequate for explicating phenomena in the real world", and it urges the placement of aesthetics "in a larger context" and reconsideration of the disciplinary design of aesthetics with particular emphasis on "interdisciplinary approaches".<sup>8</sup> - Some progress, I think, has been made towards this goal during the last days.

### *b. From aesthetics to art criticism*

Let me refer just to the initial step made by Arthur Danto. I take his opening presentation to represent an attack on the core of traditional aesthetics. Certainly, his suggestion to shift from aesthetics to art criticism doesn't question the traditional frame: we should still talk about art (and perhaps solely about art). But Danto refutes the traditional understanding as to how this frame is to be filled. Traditionally, the goal of aesthetics was to establish the proper concept of art- its universal und everlasting concept. Hence aesthetics could be - and was even supposed to be - explicated without considering individual works of art or historically different types of art. Schelling, for example, frankly expressed this when he declared that a philosophy of art had to treat only "art as such" and "in no way empirical art"<sup>9</sup> - his own philosophy of art representing, as he continues, "a mere repetition" of his "system of philosophy", this time with respect to art, just as in the next instance with respect to nature or society.<sup>10</sup>

However inappropriate this strategy may appear to us today - and mostly appeared to artists (Musil for example decided such aesthetics as the attempt to find the universal brick fitting each work of art and being suitable for the whole building of aesthetics<sup>11</sup>) - Schelling indeed expressed a basic belief of traditional aesthetics: that there is such a thing as an essential and universal concept of art, and that establishing this concept would constitute and fulfil the task of aesthetics. This was the immanent reason why aesthetics apparently didn't have to closely consider singular works of art, but make do with just some initial knowledge of some works of art,<sup>12</sup> taking these as a starting point for the development of aesthetics' intuition of the concept of art in general.

Of course, this traditional strategy is untenable.<sup>13</sup> The practice of art doesn't consist in exemplifying a universal notion of art, but involves the creation of new versions and concepts of art. And the new concept certainly has some aspects in common with the concepts formerly dominant, but definitely differs from it in other, no less important aspects. This is obvious in every shift from one style or paradigm to another. Hence paradigms are connected by some overlaps from one concept to the next - by "family resemblances" -, but not by a universal feature applicable to all of them or constituting an essential core of all works of art. There is no such thing as an essence of art.

So the traditional approach is basically mistaken. It is based on a misunderstanding of the conceptual status of art - with this misunderstanding even constituting the very core of traditional aesthetics. In this sense, insight into the genesis of different concepts of art through art itself, and into their family resemblance - instead of a supposed essential unity - reveals the fundamental flaw of traditional, globalizing aesthetics and requires the shift to a different, pluralistic type of aesthetics.

I would like to take this to be the crucial argument which refutes traditional aesthetics and which justifies, and even requires the shift from aesthetics for example to art criticism as advocated by Prof. Danto.

### *c. Towards a broader design of the discipline*

But the reorganization of aesthetic which we currently have to consider might reach even further. Thus far, I have only discussed the paradigm shift due within the classical frame of aesthetics, within artistics. We can't any longer be held captive by art's essentialistic picture. But it might be time to get rid of the traditional frame itself - to be no longer held captive by the equation of aesthetics and artistics. The inner pluralization of artistics - the shift from a mono-conceptual analysis of art to poly-conceptual art criticism - might have to be supplemented by an outer pluralization of aesthetics - by an opening up of field of the discipline to trans-artistic questions. This is what I will advocate in this paper.

In the first part I will try to develop the main topics of an aesthetics beyond aesthetics. In the second part I will try to clarify its conceptual admissibility and suggest how to rechart the territory of aesthetics. I will advocate aesthetics' opening out beyond art and the development of a cross-disciplinary structure of the discipline. This structure, of course, still includes questions of art, but now encompasses trans-artistic questions as well. And this, as we shall see, is important for the analysis of art itself. Art can more adequately be dealt with in the perspective of an aesthetics which is not restricted to the analysis of art alone.

## I. Some Main Themes and the Relevance of an Aesthetics beyond Aesthetics

There are, generally speaking, two groups of reasons for a broadening of aesthetics: the first refers to the contemporary *fashioning of reality*, the second to the contemporary *understanding of reality*.<sup>14</sup>

### I. Aesthetic fashioning of reality - embellishment

#### a. Globalized aestheticization

Today, we are living amidst an aestheticization of the real world formerly unheard-of.<sup>15</sup> Embellishment and styling are to be found everywhere. They extend from the individuals' appearance to the urban and public sphere, and from economy through to ecology.

The *individuals* are undergoing a comprehensive styling of body, soul, and behaviour. In beauty salons and fitness centres they pursue the aesthetic perfection of their bodies, in meditation courses and New-Age-seminars they practice the aestheticization of their souls, and etiquette-training equips them for aesthetically desirable behaviour. The *homo aestheticus* has become the new role-model. In *urban areas*, as good as everything has been subjected to a face-lift over the last years - at least in the rich western societies. Take shopping-malls as an example. The *economy*, too, largely profits from the consumers' tendency not to actually acquire an article, but rather to buy oneself, by its means, into the aesthetic lifestyle to which advertising strategies have linked the article. Even *ecology*, often considered to be economy's opponent, is in aesthetic regards its partner. It favors a styling of the environment corresponding to aesthetic ideas like beauty or complexity. If rich industrial societies were able to do completely as they wish, they would transform the human, urban, industrial and natural environment in *toto* into a hyper-aesthetic scenario.<sup>16</sup> *Genetic engineering*, which links ecological and individual styling, is another case in point. You know how much this technology is going to be used in order to adjust all kinds of life according to our wishes; it is also capable of providing just the type of children we want, according to our aesthetic expectations - and genetic technology is largely guided by aesthetic patterns. It's a kind of genetic cosmetic surgery. We people of today, thrown into the world as we are, have great trouble in attaining the ideal of *homo aestheticus*; future generations however should have it easier straight away: genetic engineering, this new branch of aestheticization, will have come to their aid ahead of them. There is certainly no need to expand further on these tendencies towards embellishment and a globalized aestheticization - the phenomena are all too obvious. Let me instead consider the relevance of these developments for aesthetics.

This phenomena do not actually constitute new domains of the aesthetic. Aesthetic orientation and activity has always borne upon the real world, however little the discipline aesthetics may have taken this into account. What's new today, is the extent and the rank of such aestheticizing activities. Aestheticization is becoming a global and primary strategy.

*b. The impact on contemporary aesthetics*

This tendency must, I think, influence contemporary as well as traditional aesthetics. The *impact on contemporary aesthetics* consists in making the reflexion on this phenomena obligatory, as they represent not only an expansion of the aesthetic, but at the same time alter the arrangement and estimation of the aesthetic. Hence aesthetics - as the reflective authority of the aesthetic - today must also analyze the state of the aesthetic in fields such as living environment and politics, economy and ecology, ethics and science. It must, in short, take the new states of the aesthetics into account. This in no way means that the current globalization and fundamentalization of the aesthetic is simply to be sanctioned, rather it belongs to the agenda for sufficient aesthetic diagnosis and critique today.<sup>17</sup>

*c. The relation to traditional aesthetics*

The *impact on traditional aesthetics* becomes evident when we ask whether tradition has ever advocated a globalization of the aesthetic. It clerly has. Some prominent aesthetic programs of the past have definitively envisaged a globalized aestheticization, which they even expected to guarrantee the final accomplishment of all our tasks on earth and the definitive happiness of mankind. Remember, for example, how the *Oldest System-Program of German Idealism* anticipated that the mediating power of the aesthetic, bringing together the rational and the sensuos, would make "the enlightened and the unenlightened [...] join hands", so that "eternal unity reigns among us", this being "the last, the greatest work of mankind". Or consider, how mediators of aesthetic ideas like the Arts-and-Crafts-Movement, Werkbund and Bauhaus - mediators insofar as they tried to realize aesthetic values advocated by aesthetics in the everyday world - were convinced that globalized aestheticization would altogether improve our world.

In this way, old aesthetic dreams are being realized in the present aestheticization. But the irritating fact - which requires explanation - is that the results are quite different from the original expectations. They are - say the least - disappointing. What was meant to endow our world with beauty, ends up in mere prettiness, and finally generates indifference or even disgust - at least among aesthetically sensitive people. In any case, nobody would dare to call the present

aestheticization an accomplishment. Something must be wrong with this realization of old aesthetic dreams. Either this realization misapplies the old programs, or these venerable and beloved programs themselves must have contained a flaw which has remained hidden so far, and which is now being revealed. Sometimes realizations - even partial ones - can be revealing. This, I suppose, is the case with the current aestheticization.

#### *d. Some flaws in globalized aestheticization*

So, what are the reasons for the disappointment in the present aestheticization? What are the critical points to be raised by an aesthetic reflexion on these processes? Let me mention three points.

First: Fashioning everything as a beautiful compromises the quality of the beautiful. Ubiquitous beauty loses its distinctive character and turns into mere prettiness or becomes simply meaningless. You can't make what's exceptional a standard without changing its quality.

Second: The strategy of globalized aestheticization dialectically falls victim to itself. It ends up in anaestheticization. The globalized aesthetic is experienced as annoying and even as terror. Aesthetic indifference then becomes a sensible and almost inevitable attitude to escape from the importunity of the ubiquitous aesthetic. Anaestheticization - that we refuse even to perceive the divinely embellished environment - becomes a survival strategy.<sup>18</sup>

Third: What arises instead, is a desire for the non-aesthetic - a desire for interruptions, breaks, and the axing of embellishment. If there were a task for art in public space today, it would consist not in introducing ever more beauty into already over-embellished environment, but precisely in stopping, in interrupting this aestheticization-machinery by creating aesthetic fallow areas and deserts in the midst of the hyperaesthetic.<sup>19,20</sup>

#### *e. Repercussions for traditional aesthetics*

These critical experiences with the contemporary realization of the old aesthetic dreams of embellishing the world must in turn influence our assessment of traditional aesthetics.

Aesthetics used to praise beauty and embellishment and believed to have good reasons for this. But it never considered the consequences of the globalized embellishment which it advocated and which we are experiencing today. It never seemed even conceivable for traditional aesthetics that globalized embellishment might disfigure the world - instead of consummating, or even redeeming it. Moreover, traditional aesthetics' praise of beauty has provided effective support

for the current processes of aestheticization. And its passion for beauty prevented people from considering the negative effects of aestheticization, even after they had become obvious. The driving, legitimating and heroizing power of traditional aesthetics is at least partly responsible for the modern tendency toward aestheticization as well as for the blindness towards its counter-effects.

Hence triple criticism of traditional aesthetics applies. First : The simple praise of beauty calls for criticism. Either by distinguishing between lesser and greater beauty - the former being indeed so close to mere prettiness that it could be envisaged as a good common to both "the enlightened and the unenlightened", and be put into practice by the current strategies of embellishment; with only the latter being an exceptional and moving phenomenon - the one which Rilke called the beginning of what's frightening. Or, by considering that beauty is a value only in opposition to standard non-beauty, losing its distinctiveness however by its very propagation.

Second: One of the flaws of traditional aesthetics was to promote beauty alone (or predominantly), and to neglect other aesthetic values, or, in other words: to forget its own discovery that *variatio delectat* - and not a single aesthetic quality alone. This mistake becomes painfully clear through the present embellishment. Aesthetic - possibly the proper discipline of plurality - had turned monistic and failed to recognize that homogenization is - in aesthetic regards, too - systematically wrong.

Third: The efficacy of traditional aesthetics in the household of our cultural beliefs and desires, which seems to go without saying needs to be called into question. It is a task of current aesthetics to point out the mistakes in traditional aesthetic concepts vis-a-vis with their contemporary realization. Aesthetics has every ground to become critical of itself.

To sum up this point: The current aestheticization not only presents new problems and tasks for contemporary aesthetics, but also has critical repercussions for traditional aesthetics - this being partly responsible and broadly supportive of flaws in the current aestheticization processes. Therefore, the phenomena of aesthetics beyond aesthetics concern not only those who are willing to broaden the range of aesthetics, but are likewise an obligatory and revealing issue for those who still adhere to aesthetics' conventional frame. There is no way of ignoring the aesthetics outside of aesthetics if you want to develop a valid version of aesthetics inside aesthetics today.

## 2. Aesthetic comprehension of reality

A second group of arguments in favor of the turn to an aesthetics beyond aesthetics refers to the current comprehension of reality. This has, I will argue, become more and more aesthetic.

There is an obvious predominance of image and aesthetic features today not only in the current shaping of reality, but in the current mediation of reality as well. It stretches from the meditation of single objects or subjects and the meditation of our daily news to our basic understanding of reality. Think of the pictorial dominance in advertisement and in the selfpresentation of companies, or of your own photographic appearance in the World Wide Web. Consider how the pictorial requirements of television not only select what might count as news, but recently also influence the presentation of news outside television in the printmedia. And, finally, consider the change in our comprehension of reality. In earlier times, to count as being real, things had to be calculable; today they have to be aesthetically presentable. Aesthetics has become the new currency in the reality trade.

Again, I don't want to look at these phenomena in too much detail. They are all too familiar and have often been analyzed. Instead, I want to consider the impact of these developments on aesthetics and to point out some of the new tasks of aesthetics in face of these developments.

For reason of time I concentrate on just one point - on what I call the derealization of reality - and two of its consequences - the reconfiguration of *aisthesis*, and the revalidation of experiences outside the electronic media.

### *a. Derealization of reality*

By "derealization of reality" I mean the fact that reality - as nowadays primarily mediated by television - is deeply affected by this type of mediation.<sup>21</sup> Reality tends to lose its weight, to shift from compulsoriness, it undergoes a strange and momentous kind of levitation.

This is largely due to peculiarities of media aesthetics. These generally favor weightlessness and the free mobility of bodies and images. Think of the trailers for television programs. Everything is subject to possible manipulation, and within those media 'manipulation' is no longer a normative, but just a descriptive term. Whatever enters television, enters a realm of transformability instead of constancy. If there is a "lightness of being" anywhere, then it is in the electronic realm.

Furthermore, we not only know and see that everything is manipulable, but we also have knowledge of factual manipulations. Remember the Gulf War reports which sometimes showed technological fakes and never showed victims. Or consider our knowledge about pixel technology. You never know whether you are witnessing the real thing or a fake, and this, of course, affects our belief in the alleged reality. Well, "What You See Is What You Get", but you won't get what you shouldn't see, and you can never be sure whether the gift is reality's or just the channel's.

Experiences of this kind first of all engender a weakening of our belief in media-reality. The difference between the representation and the simulation of reality becomes less and less evident and tends to lose its relevance. Accordingly, the media increasingly present their pictures in modes of virtuality and playfulness.<sup>22,23</sup>

All this, however, doesn't make us turn away from the media. Despite being aware that the images may be fakes, we nevertheless stay turned. We obviously prefer the consequence of changing our comprehension of reality and follow the road of derealization.

Secondly, this attitude towards media-reality extends more and more to ordinary reality too, this being increasingly presented, shaped and perceived according to media's features. With television being the main bestower and the role-model for reality, derealization spreads everywhere. Reality loses its impressiveness, and gravity, tends towards levitation and becomes less obligating. Already the importunity of media's presentation of reality obviously doesn't create affection any more, but rather its opposite: indifference. Seeing the same images - however impressively they may be arranged or intended to be - on different channels the same evening or repeatedly during a couple of days, reduces their impact. Sensationalism plus repetition creates indifference. Hence our attitude towards reality - inside and outside of the media - becomes more and more as if it were simulation altogether.<sup>24</sup> We don't take reality to be all that real any more. And amidst this suspension of realness we behave, judge and act quite differently. Our behavioral patterns are becoming simulatory and interchangeable. Many of the embarrassing phenomena in today's daily life are related to this ongoing softening of our comprehension of reality - but so is some progress in liberty, I would argue, as well.

Reflexion on this processes - as they are engendered by peculiarities of media aesthetics - is an obligatory theme for a contemporary aesthetics which doesn't want to ignore, but to actually take into account the present state and the relevance of the aesthetic.

## *b. Reconfiguration of 'aisthesis'*

Let me turn to the next point, the reconfiguration of *aisthesis*. One interesting consequence of the current media dominance is a questioning of the primacy of vision, which has characterized occidental culture since the Greeks, and is culminating in the television age. Today's critique of this ocularcentrism is due to other reasons too, but the experience of media is a prominent factor in it.

Vision was traditionally favored for its hallmarks of distance, precision and universality, for its capacity for determination, and for its close link with cognition. From Heraclitus via Leonardo da Vinci to Merleau-Ponty, vision was considered our most excellent and noble sense.

But meanwhile, the features underlying this privilege - dominative features of perception and cognition - have been questioned by philosophers like Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Foucault or Derrida and by the feminist critique (think of Irigaray). And presently we are experiencing that vision is in fact no longer the reliable sense for contact with reality that it once was taken to be - not in a world indemonstrable physics, and no longer in the world of media.

At the same time, other senses have met with intensified interest (paralleled by the suspicion that the traditional primacy of vision might have done them injustice). Hearing, for example, is being appreciated more and more for its - anti-metaphysical - proximity to momentariness instead of permanent being, for its essentially social character - in contrast to the individualistic feature of vision -, and for its being linked to emotional experience and feeling - in opposition to the emotionless mastery of phenomena by vision.

Touch, too, has found its advocates, both due to new development in media technology as analyzed by Marshall McLuhan and Derrick de Kerckhove,<sup>25</sup> and to its highly bodily character - this again in contrast to the 'pure', uninvolved character of vision.

What has been taking place more and more ever since, is a breakdown of the traditional hierarchy of the senses - with vision on top, followed by hearing through to smell - and a recognition of the sensuous realm which no longer shows a definite hierarchy, but tends either to an equitable assessment of the senses, or - what I would prefer - to different, purpose-related hierarchical sets.

With regard to this rearrangement of *aisthesis*, we are living through an eminent change in cultural features and demands. Aesthetics - as the reflective discipline of the aesthetic realm - should consider the new states of *aisthesis*

and their connection with the change in cultural patterns. By analyzing these transformations, it could possibly also help us to enhance these processes in a appropriate way. Here lies one of aesthetics' proper contemporary tasks, which also offers the chance to move from being a rather dusty old discipline to being an interesting area of discussion and contemporary analysis.

### *c. Revalidation of non-electronic experiences*

Another consequence of media experience and the derealization tendency consists in a revalidation of experiences outside electronic media. The general feature is the following: In contrast to the peculiarities of media-reality (or media-derealization) we begin to turn to a new appreciation of non-electronic reality and experience putting particular emphasis on those characteristics which are inimitable and unsubstitutable by media-experience.

The highly developed electronic world doesn't simply overcome or absorb traditional forms of experiences - as some media-freaks claim -, it also gives rise to a new evaluation of their peculiarities. What is taking place today, is a complimentary revalidation of ordinary experience in contrast of media-experience. This, to my knowledge, hasn't been sufficiently recognized in the discussions of recent years.

In contrast to universal mobility and changeability in the media-world we are to value anew resistability and unchangeability, the persistence of the concerts as opposed to the free play information, the massivity of matter as opposed to the levitation of imagery. In contrast to arbitrary repeatability, uniqueness gains value afresh. The electronic omnipresence awakens the yearning for another presence, for the unrepeatable presence of *hic et nunc*, for the singular event. As opposed to the mutual social electronic imaginary, we are again learning to value our own imagination, unavailable to others. And the body possesses a sovereignty and intransigence of its own. Think of Nadolny's "Discovery of Slowness".<sup>26</sup> or of Handke's "Essay on Weariness".<sup>27</sup> - Altogether matter, body, individuality and uniqueness are gaining new relevance.

In order not to be misunderstood: Of course I don't intend these tendencies as simple counter-program to the artificial paradises of electronic worlds, but rather as a program complimentary to them. Neither do these values negate the fascination of electronic worlds - they do however come in as a counter-pole -, nor is the concern one of a simple return to sensuous experience, such as applied in pre-electronic times. The revalidations are far more tinted and etched by experience of the electronic world. And there are obvious interconnections between electronic and non- electronic experience. Sometimes natural experience is just

the thing electronic freaks are aiming at, too. My favorite example is the extraordinary Californian sunsets - beloved especially of the electronic freaks of Silicon Valley, who in the evening drive to the coast to watch these sunsets and then turn to the artificial worlds of Internet.

According to the prevalent media-tendency on the one hand and the revalidation of non-electronic experience on the other hand, our *aisthesis* is becoming profoundly twofold. It pursues, roughly speaking, both media-fascination and non-media-goals as well. And there is nothing wrong in this duality. On the contrary, this is an interesting case of the present turn to plurality in general. We are - and should be - able to wander between different types of reality experience. The present *aisthesis* is the domain where this is perhaps the most easily and successfully done.

#### *d. Resume*

Having, in my introductory remarks argued that the discipline of aesthetics should transcend the traditional equation of aesthetics and art, I have in this first part considered the impact of the current aestheticization processes on contemporary as well as traditional aesthetics, and meanwhile pointed to three specific domains of an aesthetics beyond aesthetics.

The deralization of reality, the reconfiguration of *aisthesis*, and the revalidation of ordinary experience are important issues for any contemporary aesthetics which tries to do justice to its name. Aesthetics would, I think, criminally hurt itself, if it left the discussion of these issues to sociologists, psychologists, or the feuilletons alone.

## II. Recharting the Field of Aesthetics

In the second part of my paper I now want to address three remaining questions with respect to my suggestion to rechart the territory of aesthetics by opening it up beyond traditional aesthetics. First: Why is it conceptually sound for the discipline to comprehend all dimensions and meanings of the aesthetic? Second: Why does the opening up of aesthetics bring with it advantages for the discipline, even with respect to its narrower scope of analyzing art? And third: What would the disciplinary structure of an aesthetics beyond aesthetics be like?

### 1. Conceptual clarifications

#### *a. The polyvalence of the term 'aesthetic'*

Some colleagues object to the possibility of an aesthetics beyond aesthetics that the difference of meanings of the term 'aesthetic' inside and outside aesthetics

would make a discipline trying to cover all of them hopelessly ambiguous and a victim of mere equivocations.

There certainly exists a considerable variety of different meanings to the term. The expression 'aesthetic' can refer to art and beauty in particular, or to *aisthesis* in general, or it may designate a type of unobliged existence, or refer to an ontology of virtuality, fictionality, and suspension.

But does this polyvalent grammar of the expression indeed condemn it to being unusable? Ought one to drop the expression because inexactitude in a concept is synonymous with its unusability?

The problem of aesthetics' semantic ambiguity is as old as the discipline itself. Remember that Baumgarten defined aesthetics as the "science of sensuous cognition".<sup>28</sup> whereas Hegel understood it to be decidedly a "philosophy of art", and "of fine art",<sup>29</sup> to which Konard Fiedler objected: "Aesthetics is not the theory of art", and the "juxtaposition of beauty and art is the *protos pseudos* in the realm of aesthetics"<sup>30</sup>. Almost every aesthetic theorist says something interesting, but each says something different. Wittgenstein once noted: "Anything - and nothing - is right", "this is the position you are in if you look for definitions [...] in aesthetics".<sup>31</sup>

Yet not even within the realm of recognized traditional versions of aesthetics has this ambiguity led aestheticians to despair of the usability of the expression and of the sense of a discipline devoted to it.

#### *b. Family resemblances*

And it didn't have to. Wittgenstein has shown a way out of the alleged conceptual difficulty. He demonstrated that, although coherence in usage is necessary for terms with variant uses, this coherence need not be thanks to a unitary property, but can come about in a different way: through semantic overlap between one usage and the next. The different meanings then have, as Wittgenstein said, "no one thing in common"<sup>32</sup> rather their relationship results from overlaps alone. This is what Wittgenstein called "family resemblances".

It is in exactly this way that the term 'aesthetic' works. Family resemblance characterizes its grammar. In borrowing a passage from Wittgenstein, one could say: "Instead of producing something common to all that we call aesthetic, I am saying these phenomena have no one thing common which makes us use the same word for all, - but they are related to one another in many different ways. And it is because of these relationships, or these relationships, that we call them

all 'aesthetic'.<sup>33</sup> - In this quote from the *Philosophical Investigations* I have only replaced Wittgenstein's word 'language' with 'aesthetic'.

c. *Aesthetics should cover the full range of the expression 'aesthetic'*

The consequences are significant:

First: A coherence in the discipline of aesthetics is possible according with the family resemblances between the different meanings of the term 'aesthetic'. One has to sufficiently differentiate between these usages, but if one does so, one can profit greatly from their variety, analyze the overlaps connecting them and develop an aesthetics which comprehends the full range of the expression 'aesthetic'.

Second: Aesthetics should fully profit from this opportunity. It has no good reasons to restrict itself to artistic. One may, of course, do this in one's own research, just as other aestheticians may primarily refer to non-artistic aspect but as a discipline, aesthetics should comprehend the whole range of such endeavors. And the polyvalence of the term 'aesthetic' is rather a sign of its relevance. It is precisely those concepts which are important that like to be polyvalent, and with respect to such concepts a non-ambiguity commandment has never applied. How else, for example, could there have been an ontology when the expression 'to *on*' (as Aristotle showed in exemplary fashion) is all but hopelessly ambiguous? Or think of the different meanings of *logos* (language, relationship, reason) - ought have forgone the development of a logic on its account? The polyvalence of an expression can be no reason for hindrance to the developing of corresponding discipline, it's just that this must be in a position to distinguish the diverse meanings and to take account of *all* of them.

Hence, a comprehensive aesthetics - as I advocate it - is conceptually possible, and aesthetics should beware of taking selections as its point of departure. It would be wrong and antiquated to give, or want to dictate a single, ultimate concept of the aesthetic. The meaning of a word is not what enamors theoreticians or what they decree - "the meaning of a word is its use in the language", as Wittgenstein pointed out.<sup>34</sup>

To decretorially exclude those parts which don't suit one's preferences, or to declare one certain meaning the basic amongst the diverse meanings of the aesthetic is an imperial gesture which suggests clarity, but de facto draws the field of the aesthetic incorrectly. Bad philosophy flirts with the traditional expectation that one must reduce the multitude of meanings to one basic meaning in all circumstances. But to perform conceptual bulldozing instead of a complex

analysis of the problems, means failing one's duty - in both philosophy and aesthetics.

## 2. Why the discipline should take advantage of an opening up beyond its traditional restrictions

Being conceptually possible, in what way will an opening up of aesthetics beyond its traditional limits prove advantageous to the discipline?

### *a. Interdisciplinary and institutional advantages*

Becoming more complex, it may - admittedly - become more difficult, too. But in no longer being closed around a narrow set of questions, it would acquire contact and interchange with other disciplines, and gain new fields of research. This, I think, constitutes an advantage not only on the level of content, but on the institutional levels as well. The type of aesthetics I advocate will meet greater interest, both for its breadth and its contribution to current problems, and it will meet greater support - also in terms of funding.

### *b. Advantages with respect to art - Art transcending the traditional limits of aesthetics*

Ultimately an opening up of aesthetics beyond art is advantageous to the analysis of art itself. Because art always reaches beyond art, refers to extra-artistic phenomena and states of the aesthetics. Therefore transcending the aesthetics-artistic restrictions in favor of an aesthetics beyond aesthetics is obligatory even respect to the traditional nucleus of aesthetics, the analysis of art. - In which ways does art transcend itself?

#### *aa. The work of art related to the world beyond it*

##### *Reference to the state of the aesthetic*

Even when apparently being autonomous, art has always and quite consciously reacted to the state of the aesthetic outside of art, in the world surrounding it. Traditionally, in an aesthetically sparing world, it has championed the Elysium of beauty; when in the modern world sensibility has been under threat, art - heedful of its old bond with the sensuous - has understood itself as the harbinger and rescuer of the sensuous (Matise and Dubuffet being examples); where embellishment is rife, as it is nowadays, art can see its responsibility in countering this and behaving decidedly demurely (*arte provera* and *concept art* being examples).

Today's art in particular struggles with the dominance of media images. It can oppose their importunity, or succumb to it, or experiment with fictions

between traditional artistic patterns and current media perception<sup>36</sup>. Whatever the relationship concerned may be, such artworks require understanding of their specific intervention in the artistic as well as non-artistic states of the aesthetic.<sup>36</sup> There is no sufficient description of art which would not have to include aspects of an aesthetics beyond artistics.

### *Art opening views of the world*

Moreover, the energy of works always transcends their frame or the museum's threshold or the moment of their observation. The works open up perspectives on the world - not only by representing it, but above all by exemplifying new views of the world. It belongs to the key experiences with art (and conversely, to tests as to whether someone actually confers efficacy upon art or would like to banish it in eulogizing about its autonomy) that, upon leaving an exhibition, one is suddenly able to perceive the world with the eyes of the artists, through the optics of his works, in the light of his aesthetics<sup>37</sup>. This is pretty much the natural and undistorted behaviour: to engage art's perceptive form in the perception of reality too, not to shut oneself off to the efficacy of artistic optics, but to operate and experiment with it. The elementary aesthetic experience is not that art is something closed, but rather that it is able to open one's eyes to unaccustomed views of the world.<sup>38</sup> Works of art are often above tools for an amended and intensified perception of reality.

### *Art and everyday perception*

Consider further how forms of perception which today appear natural and self-evident originated historically in process in which art played a pivotal role - romantic art for example had a key role in the perception of the world of mountains. Some parts of our everyday perception are a sediment of generations of art experience. There are always interactions between natural and artistic perception.

### *Art providing models of existence*

Beyond this moulding of forms of perception, works of art can also attain the function of a model for ways of living. This already belonged to the normative demands of classical art and carries on in modernity, after the dissolution of general norms, in the generation of potentials for individual planning - Rilke's description of the archaic torso of Appolo, which he concludes with the line "You must transform your life", provides an impressive description of this phenomena.

Certainly, the border between art and reality outside of art is not easy to lay down, but the entanglements and transitions between the two are no more to be ignored. An aesthetics of art always has to consider the dual character of artistics on the one hand and aesthetics beyond artistics on the other hand. Adorno once noted this in reference to Beethoven: "Nobody can, for example, claim to be conversant with a Beethoven symphony unless he understands the so-called purely musical events and the same time hears in it the echo of the French Revolution. *How* these two moments of aesthetic experience are related is one of the intractable problems of a philosophical approach [...].<sup>39</sup> Consistently this led Adorno to the observation that aesthetic experience is driven "beyond itself".<sup>40</sup>

*bb. Specific constellations of the various dimensions of the aesthetic in single works of art*

#### *Complexity*

Let me, - after art's particular relation to the state of the aesthetic in the world surrounding it, and art's general potency in suggesting new kinds of perception and behaviour - also mention that art in itself always comprises a variety of types of perceptions, some of which are not specifically artistic. For example, one couldn't even recognize the objects in pictures without bringing in day-to-day perceptive competences. Furthermore, the most simple perception of whatever in a painting requires not only contemplation, but imagination and reflexion as well. What one sees during the internal analysis of a painting is never a *factum brutum*, but is perceived in a process which implies an imaginative bringing forth and depends upon preceding and subsequent interpretation. And there is always an interplay with aesthetic experiences of other artworks as well as with non-artistic aesthetic experience.

#### *Modern breaks*

Consider, finally, how modern art in particular has worked out reconfigurations of the perceptual field by questioning the time-honoured definitions and borders of art. Duchamp questioned the dictat of visibleness, Joyce the book form, Pollock the limits of painting, Cage the status of music. It was precisely the avant-garde's program to pass the narrow status of artistics and to open out into an aesthetics. It would be an anachronism to ignore or revoke this through an aesthetic-theoretical constriction.

