"Introduction"

Aesthetics and Its Discontents

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Introduction

Aesthetics has a bad reputation. Hardly a year passes by without a new book proclaiming either that its time is over or that its harmful effects are being perpetuated. In either case the accusation is the same. Aesthetics is charged with being the captious discourse by which philosophy, or a certain type of philosophy, hijacks the meaning of artworks and judgements of taste for its own benefit.

Though the accusation is constant, its grounds vary. Twenty or thirty years ago, the thrust of the trial could be summed up in Bourdieu's terms: namely, that 'disinterested' aesthetic judgement, Kant having set down its formula, is the site *par excellence* of the 'denegation of the social'.[1] Aesthetic distance, it was claimed, served to conceal a social reality marked by a radical separation between the 'tastes of necessity', affiliated with the popular habitus, and the games of cultural distinction reserved for those who had the means for them. In the Anglo-Saxon world, the same inspiration motivated works on the cultural or social history of art. Some showed us that behind

[1] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007 (French original, 1979).

pure art's illusion and avant-garde proclamations there exists a reality of economic, political and ideological constraints laying out the conditions for artistic practice.[2] Others hailed the advent of the postmodern as inaugurating a break with the illusions of avant-gardism.[3]

This form of critique has almost totally gone out of fashion. For twenty years now, dominant intellectual opinion has unceasingly denounced all forms of 'social' explanation for their ruinous complicity with the utopias of emancipation, adjudged responsible for totalitarian horror. And, just as it sings of the return of pure politics, it celebrates anew the pure encounter with the unconditioned event of the work. One could have thought that this new turn of thought would clear aesthetics of wrongdoing. Apparently, this is not the case. The accusation was simply turned around. Aesthetics came to be seen as the perverse discourse which bars this encounter and which subjects works, or our appreciations thereof, to a machine of thought conceived for other ends: the philosophical absolute, the religion of the poem or the dream of social emancipation. This diagnosis can easily be underpinned by antagonistic theories. Jean-Marie Schaeffer's *Adieu à l'esthétique* (2000)[4] in this sense echoes Alain Badiou's *Petit Manuel d'inesthétique* (1998). Their respective types of thinking are nonetheless antipodal to one another. Schaeffer, basing himself on the analytic tradition, mounts a distinction between the concrete analysis of aesthetic attitudes and the erring way of speculative aesthetics. This

[2] Among the numerous works published in this vein by social and cultural art historians, there are two particularly notable books by: Timothy J. Clark, *The Absolute Bourgeois: Artists and Politics in France, 1848–1851*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1973; and *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1973.

[3] Hal Foster, ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, New York: The New Press, 1998.

[4] Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *Adieu à l'esthétique*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2000.

latter he thinks replaced the study of aesthetic conducts and artistic practices with a romantic concept of the artistic absolute so that it could resolve the false problem tormenting it: the reconciliation of the intelligible and the sensible. Badiou, for his part, starts out from wholly opposite principles. In the name of the Platonic Idea of which artworks are events, he dismisses a type of aesthetics which subordinates their truth to an (anti-)philosophy that is caught up in romantic celebrations of the poem's sensuous truth. Even so, the latter's Platonism and the former's anti-Platonism are one in denouncing aesthetics as a confused type of thinking involving a Romantic confounding of pure thought, sensible affects and artistic practices. To this 'confusion' both thinkers respond by proposing a principle of separation that puts elements and discourse in their respective places. In defending, against 'philosophical aesthetics', the rights of (the good) philosophy, they still mould themselves on the discourse of the anti-philosopher sociologist, contrasting the reality of attitudes and practices to speculative illusion. They are therefore one with dominant opinion, the main concern of which is to extract the glorious sensuous presence of art out from under the suffocating discourse *on* art which tends to become its very reality.

The same logic can also be seen in reflections on art grounded in other philosophies or anti-philosophies. In Jean-François Lyotard's work, for example, a contrast is set up between idealist aesthetics and the sublime strike of the pictorial line or of the musical timbre. All these discourses similarly criticize the confusion of aesthetics. At the same time, more than one of them gives us to see that aesthetic 'confusion' also involves another stake, whether it be: the realities of class division beneath the illusion of disinterested judgement (Bourdieu); a parallel between the events of the poem and those of politics (Badiou); the shock of the sovereign Other as opposed to the modernist illusions of thought as that which fashions a world (Lyotard); or a denunciation of the complicity between

aesthetic utopia and totalitarian utopia (the chorus of subcontractors). Conceptual distinction is not for nothing a homonym of social *distinction*. Clearly there are stakes linked to the confusions, or rather the distinctions, of aesthetics that concern the social order and its transformations.

The following pages make a simple argument against these theses of 'distinction': that the confusion they denounce, in the name of a thought that puts each thing in its proper element, is in fact the very knot by which thoughts, practices and affects are instituted and assigned a territory or a 'specific' object. If 'aesthetics' is the name of a confusion, this 'confusion' is nevertheless one that permits us to identify what pertains to art, i.e. its objects, modes of experience and forms of thought – the very things we profess to be isolating by denouncing aesthetics. By undoing this knot so that we can better discern practices of art or aesthetic effects in their singularity, we are thus perhaps fated to missing that very singularity.

Let us take an example. Schaeffer wants to denounce the confusion from which Romanticism suffers by showing us that aesthetic conducts are actually independent of the artworks and judgements to which they give rise. To this end he makes use of a brief passage from Stendhal's autobiographical *Vie de Henry Brulard* (1835), in which the author evokes the first – insignificant – noises that marked him as a child: ringing church bells, a water pump, a neighbour's flute. Schaeffer compares these memories with those of a Chinese writer, Shen Fu, who wrote of the mountains he saw in molehills while lying on the ground as a child. In these memories, Schaeffer claims to see evidence of a cross-cultural 'aesthetic attitude' that is not directed toward artworks. However, they can just as easily be taken as proof to the contrary. Stendhal's contribution to the invention of a literary genre that works to blur boundaries – that of the life of the artist as work – established what was to become the exemplary form of new fictional narration: the juxtaposition of sensory micro-

events, forming a cross-temporal resonance that contrasts with the former chains of voluntary actions and of their desired and undesired effects. Far from demonstrating the independence of aesthetic attitudes with respect to artworks, Stendhal testifies to an aesthetic regime in which the distinction between those things that belong to art and those that belong to ordinary life is blurred. The raw noise of the water pump that, as a writer, he inserted in his autobiography is the very same that Proust held aloft as the strike of the new Platonic Idea, albeit at the price of fusing it with the song of Chateaubriand's thrush. It is also that of the air-raid sirens, introduced into a composition by Varèse in his *Ionisation*.[4a] It is this noise whose frontier with music has unceasingly blended in with music itself throughout the twentieth century, just as it blended in with the literary muses throughout the nineteenth.

Far from revealing the 'confusion' of aesthetic theory, Stendhal's water pump testifies precisely to something that this theory strives in its way to interpret: the ruin of the old canons that set art objects apart from those of ordinary life, the new form – at once more intimate and more enigmatic – taken by the relation between the conscious productions of art and the involuntary forms of sensory experience in which their effects are manifest. This is precisely what Kant's, Schelling's and Hegel's 'speculations' record: for the first, an 'aesthetic idea' and theory of genius as marks of the relationless relation between the concepts of art and the 'concept-less' character of aesthetic experience; for the second, a theorization of art concerning the unity of a conscious process and an unconscious process; and for the third, the metamorphoses of beauty between an Olympian god's blank gaze and the genre scenes of Netherlandish painting or Murillo's little beggars. In his reflections on the sensations he experienced as a young

[4a] *Ionisation* (1929–31) is scored for thirteen percussion instruments, some indefinite and others relatively definite in pitch; there are also two sirens, one high and one low.

child in the years 1787–8, Stendhal even obliges us by saying what provided the background for such speculations: namely, the new education of the senses informed by the insignificant noises and events of ordinary life, precisely the type of education becoming of a young republican, called upon to celebrate his age of reason in the era in which the French Revolution would celebrate the reign of Reason.

To understand at once what 'aesthetics' means and what motivates the animosity its name provokes today, the arguments of anti-aesthetic discourse must therefore be turned on their heads. This can be summed up in four points.

What aesthetic 'confusion' initially tells us is that there is no such thing as art in general, no more than there are conducts or aesthetic sentiments in general. Aesthetics was born as a discourse two centuries ago. It was in this same era that art, in its indeterminate singularity, was first set in contrast to the list of fine, or liberal, arts. Indeed, if art is to exist it is not enough for there to be painters or musicians, dancers or actors. If aesthetic sentiment is to arise, it is not sufficient that pleasure is taken in seeing or hearing their work. For art to exist, what is required is a specific gaze and form of thought to identify it. This identification itself presupposes a complex process of differentiation. For a statue or a painting to be adjudged art, two apparently contradictory conditions are required. The work in question must be seen as the product of an art and not as a simple image that is to be judged solely in accordance with the legitimacy of its principle or its factual resemblance. But it must also be seen as something that is more than just the product of an art, more than the rule-bound exercise of a *savoir-faire*. Insofar as it is seen as the mere accomplishment of a religious or therapeutic ritual, dance is not an art. But nor is it if it consists merely in the exercise of a corporeal virtuosity. Something else is required if it is to be counted as an art. This 'something else' was, until Stendhal's time, called a *story* [*histoire*]. For the theoreticians of poetry in the eighteenth century, knowing whether or not the art of dance was one of the fine arts involved answering a simple question: does dance tell a story? Is it a *mimesis*? *Mimesis*, in fact, distinguished the artist's know-how as much from the artisan's as from the entertainer's. The fine arts were so named because the law of *mimesis* defined them as a regulated relation between a way of doing – a *poiesis* – and a way of being which is affected by it – an *aisthesis*. This threefold relation, whose guarantee was called 'human nature', defined a regime for the identification of arts that I have proposed to call the representative regime. The moment when art substitutes its singularity for the plurality of fine arts, and produces, in order to think it, the discourse that came to be called aesthetics, is the moment when a knot came undone: this knot had tied together a productive nature, a sensible nature and a legislative nature called *mimesis* or representation.

Aesthetics is above all the discourse that announces this break with the threefold relation enshrining the order of fine arts. The end of *mimesis* is not the end of figuration. It is the end of the mimetic legislation whereby a productive nature and a sensible nature were made to fit. With this end, the muses cede their place to music, that is to a relation without mediation between the calculus of the work and the pure sensible affect, which is also an immediate relation between the technical device and the song of inner life:[5] for

[5] 'But, from what sort of magic potion does the aroma of this brilliant apparition rise up? – I look, – and find nothing but a wretched web of numerical proportions, represented concretely on perforated wood, on constructions of gut string and brass wire. – This is almost more wondrous, and I should like to believe that the invisible harp of God sounds along with our notes and contributes the heavenly power to the human web of digits.' Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder, *Confessions and Fantasies*, trans. and with intro. by Mary Hurst Schubert, London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1971, pp. 179–80 (German original, 1799). Elsewhere I have discussed the meaning of this 'apparition': cf. 'Metamorphosis of the Muses', in *Sonic Process: A New Geography of Sounds*, Barcelona and Actar: Museu d'Art Contemporani 2002.

instance, the horn solo which forms the soul of Fiordiligi's words,[5a] but also the neighbour's flute and the water pump which shape the soul of an artist. *Poiesis* and *aisthesis* stand henceforth in immediate relation to each other. But they relate to one another through the very gap of their ground. They can only be brought to agree by a human nature that is either lost or by a humanity to come. From Kant to Adorno, including Schiller, Hegel, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, the object of aesthetic discourse has only ever been to think through this discordant relation. What this discourse has thereby striven to articulate is not the fantasy of speculative minds, but the new and paradoxical regime for identifying what is recognizable as art. I have proposed to call this regime the aesthetic regime of art.

This brings us to the second point. 'Aesthetics' is not the name of a discipline. It is the name of a specific regime for the identification of art. Philosophers since Kant have attempted to grasp this regime in thought, but they did not invent it. When Hegel, in his *Aesthetik*, unfolds the history of forms of art as a history of the forms of mind, he takes cognizance of a contradictory mutation in the status of works.[5b] On the one hand, the discoveries of archaeology restore Greek antiquities to their place, and reinstate their distance by casting doubt on the classical age's conception of civilized Greece. With these discoveries, a new historicity comes to frame works, one made of proximities, of ruptures and of reprises, and which contrasted sharply with the normative and evolutionary model governing the classical relation of the Ancients to the Moderns. At the same time, however, paintings and sculptures were severed from their functions of religious illustration and of decorating seigniorial and monarchic grandeurs by a revolutionary rupture

[5a] The allusion here is to Fiordiligi's aria 'Come scoglio' from Mozart's opera *Così fan tutte* (1790).

[5b] Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2 vols., 1979 (German original, 1835–8).

which isolated them in the space of the – real or imaginary – museum. This rupture accelerated the constitution of a new, undifferentiated public to replace the designated addressees of representative works. Furthermore, the imperial and revolutionary pillaging of objects from conquered countries shook up the products of various schools and genres. The effect of these displacements was to accentuate the sensible singularity of works and to undermine not only their representative value but also the hierarchy of subjects and genres according to which they were classified and judged. Hegel's philosophical revalorization of Netherlandish genre painting, following its public and commercial promotion, signals the beginning of this slow erosion of the figurative subject, of this century-long movement that pushes the subject into the background of the picture to make appear, in its place, the gesture of the painter and the manifestation of pictorial matter. Thus began the movement by which the picture was transformed into an archive of its own process, preparing the way for the spectacular pictorial revolutions of the following century.

Similarly, when Schelling defined art as the union of two processes, one conscious, the other unconscious, he consolidated the perspectival inversion contained in the advent of 'philological' readings of poems – starting with Giambattista Vico through to Johann Gottfried Herder and Friedrich Wolf – as well as in cultural phenomena such as the passion for the fake Ossian. Much more than as the intentional realizations of an art guided by poetic rules, the great poetic models came to be read as expressions of an anonymous collective power. Jean-Marie Schaeffer professes astonishment that, in its celebration of art, philosophical aesthetics has forgotten something that Kant himself had already emphasized: the importance of aesthetic conducts pertaining to the spectacles of nature. But there has been no forgetting. Since Kant, aesthetics has unceasingly endeavoured to think through the new status

of artworks, a status in which they are perceived as works of nature or, in other words, as the operation of a non-human nature not subject to the will of a creator. Many theorists have sought to associate the concept of genius with the sacredness of the unique artist; what it actually expresses, on the contrary, is this very equivalence between the willed and the unwilled, and the recognition and appreciation of works *of art* emergent with the ruining of criteria of perfection in *the arts*.

The philosophers who initiated aesthetics did not invent this slow revolution in the forms of presentation and perception in which works for an undifferentiated public are isolated and simultaneously linked to an anonymous power: people, civilization or history. Neither did they invent the break with the hierarchical order that had defined which subjects and forms of expression were deemed worthy of inclusion in the domain of a given art. They did not invent the new writing made up of sensory micro-events, that new privilege of the minute, of the instantaneous and the discontinuous to which the *Vie de Henry Brulard* attests, and which was accompanied by the introduction of every vile thing and person into the temple of art; this would mark literature and painting before enabling photography and cinema to become arts. They did not invent, in sum, all those reconfigurations of the relations between the scriptural and the visual, pure and applied art, and the forms of art and those of public or everyday commercial life – all of which define the aesthetic regime of art. They did not invent them but they did elaborate the regime of intelligibility within which they could be thought. They grasped and conceptualized the fracturing of the regime of identification in which the products of art were perceived and thought, the rupturing of the model of adequation between *poiesis* and *aisthesis* established by the norms of *mimesis*. Under the name of aesthetics, they above all grasped and conceived a fundamental displacement: namely, that the things of art would henceforth be identified less according to criteria of

'ways of doing', and more in terms of 'ways of sensible being'.[6]

These philosophers conceived this revolution as a challenge for thought. This is the third point: our contemporaries strive in vain to denounce the term aesthetics, since those who honoured it were the first to do so. 'It is time we got completely rid of that expression which, ever since Kant, is ever and always to be read in the writings of amateurs of philosophy, even though its absurdity has often been recognized. . . . Aesthetics has become a veritable *qualitas occulta* – hidden behind this incomprehensible word there are many nonsensical assertions and vicious circles in arguments that should have been exposed long ago.' This radical declaration is not the feat of a supercilious champion of Anglo-Saxon analytic philosophy. It features in the *Vorlesungen über Schöne Literatur und Kunst* (1809–11) by August Wilhelm von Schlegel, the elder of those diabolical brothers so gravely accused of being responsible for fostering the fatal illusions of speculative and Romantic aesthetics.[7] The discontent with aesthetics is as old as aesthetics itself. Hegel said, in his turn, that the word 'aesthetics', which refers to sensibility, is not appropriate for expressing thought about art, then adopting it again with the excuse that its use was so established. Yesterday's excuse is as superfluous as today's accusation. The in-appropriation is constitutive. Aesthetics is not a domain of thought whose object is 'sensibility'. It is a way of thinking the paradoxical sensorium that henceforth made it possible to define the things of art. This sensorium

[6] 'Aesthetics' designates two things in this work: a general regime of the visibility and the intelligibility of art and a mode of interpretative discourse that itself belongs to the forms of this regime. The context and its specific intelligence will suffice in what follows to indicate to the reader the sense of the word adequate to such and such an occurrence.

[7] August Wilhelm von Schlegel, *Vorlesungen über Schöne Literatur und Kunst*, in *Kritische Ausgabe der Vorlesungen*, 3 vols., Paderborn: F. Schöningh, 1809–11, vol. I, pp. 182–3.

is that of a lost human nature, which is to say of a lost norm of adequation between an active faculty and a receptive faculty. What has come to replace this lost norm of adequation is an immediate union: the concept-less union of the opposition between pure, voluntary activity and pure passivity. The origin of art, said Hegel, resides in the act of the child who skims stones, transforming the surface of the water, that of 'natural' appearances, into a surface for the manifestation of his lone will. But this child, who skims stones, is also a child whose artistic ability is born of the pure contingency of proximate noises, of the mixed noises of artless nature and material life. This child cannot be conceived in both aspects without contradiction. But whoever sets out to suppress the contradiction in thought thereby also suppresses art and the aesthetic sentiment that one believes one is preserving.

What complicates things and raises the stakes for thought is that a 'human' nature is always simultaneously a 'social' nature. This is the fourth point. The human nature of the representative order linked the rules of art to the laws of sensibility and the emotions of the latter to the perfections of art. But there was a division correlative to this linking whereby artworks were tied to celebrating worldly dignities, the dignity of their forms were attached to the dignity of their subjects and different sensible faculties attributed to those situated in different places. 'The man of taste', said Voltaire, 'has a different pair of eyes, a different pair of ears, a different sense of tact to that of the coarse man.'[8] Nature, which yoked works to sensibilities, tied them to a division of the sensible which put artists in their place and set those concerned by art apart from those that it did not concern. So, Bourdieu was right despite himself. The word 'aesthetics' says, in fact, that

[8] Voltaire; 'Goût', in *Dictionnaire philosophique*, Paris, 1827, vol. III, p. 279. (Bear in mind that the *Dictionnaire philosophique* cited here is a fictive collection. Most of the elements of this article on taste are in fact borrowed from the sixth part of *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie* of 1771.)

this social nature was lost along with the other one. Sociology was born precisely of the desire to reconstitute that lost social nature. The hatred of 'aesthetics' is, for this reason, consubstantial with it. Sociology in Bourdieu's time had doubtless left behind its original dreams of social reorganization. For the good of science, however, it has continued to desire what the representative order desired, for the good of social and poetic distinctions: that separate classes have distinct senses. Aesthetics is the thought of the new disorder. This disorder does not only imply that the hierarchy of subjects and of publics becomes blurred. It implies that artworks no longer refer to those who commissioned them, to those whose image they established and grandeur they celebrated. Artworks henceforth relate to the 'genius' of peoples and present themselves, at least in principle, to the gaze of anyone at all. Human nature and social nature cease to be mutual guarantees. Inventive activity and sensible emotion encounter one another 'freely', as two aspects of a nature which no longer attests to any hierarchy of active intelligence over sensible passivity. This gap separating nature from itself is the site of an unprecedented equality. And this equality is inscribed in a history, which, in exchange for the loss, carries a new promise. The young girl of whom Hegel speaks, the one who succeeds the Muses, offers us the fruits picked from the tree, the veiled memory, 'without effectiveness', of the life that carried the artworks.[9] But, precisely, these works are such only because their world, the world of nature fulfilling itself in culture, *is* no longer, or perhaps never *was*, except in the retrospection of thought. There perhaps was – no doubt there never was – a Greek morning on which the fruits of art collected on the tree of life. But with the loss of this hypothetical good, what at any rate began

[9] Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller and with foreword by J.N. Findlay, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979 (German original, 1807). 'The girl who succeeds the Muses' is the title of an essay by Jean-Luc Nancy, who discusses this passage in *The Muses*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997, pp. 41–55.

to vanish was the order whereby a human nature that legislates on art was tied to a social nature that determined place in society and the 'sense' appropriate to that place. The revolutionary reign of nature thereby becomes a vain dream. But what emerges as a response to this impossible dream is the promise carried by the loss itself, that is by the suspension of the rules by which human nature is accorded with social nature: the humanity to come, which Schiller saw announced in aesthetic 'free play'; the 'infinite taste of the Republic,' which Baudelaire sensed in the songs of Pierre Dupont; the 'promise that we could not live an instant without,' which Adorno saw renewed in the very veil-wrapped sonority of the chords at the beginning of Mahler's First Symphony.

'Aesthetics' is the word that expresses the singular knot that, posing a problem for thought, formed two centuries ago between the sublimities of art and the noise of a water pump, between a veiled timbre of chords and the promise of a new humanity. The discontent and resentment that it elicits today effectively still revolves around these two relations: first, the scandal of an art which, in its forms and its sites of exhibition, welcomes the 'anything goes' aspect of objects of use and images of profane life; and second, the exorbitant and misleading promises of an aesthetic revolution which endeavoured to transform art's forms into the forms of a new life. Aesthetics is held responsible both for the 'anything goes' aspect of art and for having misled us with its fallacious promises of the philosophical absolute and social revolution. My intention is not to 'defend' aesthetics but to contribute to clarifying what the word means, insofar as it is a regime of the functioning of art and a matrix of discourse, a form for identifying the specificity of art and a redistribution of the relations between the forms of sensory experience. More particularly, the following pages set out to define the way in which a regime for identifying art is linked to the promise of an art that would be no more than an art or would no longer be art. They seek, in a nutshell, to show how aesthetics, as a regime for identifying art, carries a politics, or metapolitics, within it. By analysing the forms and the transformations of this politics, they seek to understand the discontent or the resentment that the word elicits today. The stake here, however, is not merely to understand the meaning of a word. Tracing the history of aesthetic 'confusion' also involves trying to clarify another confusion that the critique of aesthetics fosters, one that buries art's operations along with political practices underneath the indistinctness of ethics. The stake here does not only concern those objects that fall within the sphere of art, but also the ways in which, today, our world is given to perceiving itself and in which the powers that be assert their legitimacy.

This book is based in part on seminars given between 1995 and 2001 at Université Paris-VIII and at the Collège International de Philosophie, and also on seminars and conferences that I have given over recent years at the invitation of many institutions, both in France and elsewhere. I provide some references in the book's footnotes. But to mention all the institutions and all the various occasions that enabled me to elaborate and amend the arguments presented here would unfortunately require too long a list. May all those who stimulated this work, and who welcomed it and discussed its results, please find in it the expression of my gratitude.