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THE AESTHETIC REVOLUTION  
AND ITS OUTCOMES

*Emplotments of Autonomy and Heteronomy*

**A**T THE END of the fifteenth of his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Mankind* Schiller states a paradox and makes a promise. He declares that ‘Man is only completely human when he plays’, and assures us that this paradox is capable ‘of bearing the whole edifice of the art of the beautiful and of the still more difficult art of living’. We could reformulate this thought as follows: there exists a specific sensory experience—the aesthetic—that holds the promise of both a new world of Art and a new life for individuals and the community. There are different ways of coming to terms with this statement and this promise. You can say that they virtually define the ‘aesthetic illusion’ as a device which merely serves to mask the reality that aesthetic judgement is structured by class domination. In my view that is not the most productive approach. You can say, conversely, that the statement and the promise were only too true, and that we have experienced the reality of that ‘art of living’ and of that ‘play’, as much in totalitarian attempts at making the community into a work of art as in the everyday aestheticized life of a liberal society and its commercial entertainment. Caricatural as it may appear, I believe this attitude is more pertinent. The point is that neither the statement nor the promise were ineffectual. At stake here is not the ‘influence’ of a thinker, but the efficacy of a plot—one that reframes the division of the forms of our experience.

This plot has taken shape in theoretical discourses and in practical attitudes, in modes of individual perception and in social institutions—museums, libraries, educational programmes; and in commercial inventions as well. My aim is to try to understand the principle of its efficacy, and of its various and antithetical mutations. How can the notion of ‘aesthetics’ as a specific experience lead at once to the idea of a pure world of art and of the self-suppression of art in life, to the tradition of avant-garde radicalism and to aestheticization of common existence? In a sense, the whole problem lies in a very small preposition. Schiller says that aesthetic experience will bear the edifice of the art of the beautiful *and* of the art of living. The entire question of the ‘politics of aesthetics’—in other words, of the aesthetic regime of art—turns on this short conjunction. The aesthetic experience is effective inasmuch as it is the experience of that *and*. It grounds the autonomy of art, to the extent that it connects it to the hope of ‘changing life’. Matters would be easy if we could merely say—naïvely—that the beauties of art must be subtracted from any politicization, or—knowingly—that the alleged autonomy of art disguises its dependence upon domination. Unfortunately this is not the case: Schiller says that the ‘play drive’—*Spieltrieb*—will reconstruct both the edifice of art and the edifice of life.

Militant workers of the 1840s break out of the circle of domination by reading and writing not popular and militant, but ‘high’ literature. The bourgeois critics of the 1860s denounce Flaubert’s posture of ‘art for art’s sake’ as the embodiment of democracy. Mallarmé wants to separate the ‘essential language’ of poetry from common speech, yet claims that it is poetry which gives the community the ‘seal’ it lacks. Rodchenko takes his photographs of Soviet workers or gymnasts from an overhead angle which squashes their bodies and movements, to construct the surface of an egalitarian equivalence of art and life. Adorno says that art must be entirely self-contained, the better to make the blotch of the unconscious appear and denounce the lie of autonomized art. Lyotard contends that the task of the avant-garde is to isolate art from cultural demand so that it may testify all the more starkly to the heteronomy of thought. We could extend the list *ad infinitum*. All these positions reveal the same basic emplotment of an *and*, the same knot binding together autonomy and heteronomy.

Understanding the ‘politics’ proper to the aesthetic regime of art means understanding the way autonomy and heteronomy are originally linked

in Schiller's formula.<sup>1</sup> This may be summed up in three points. Firstly, the autonomy staged by the aesthetic regime of art is not that of the work of art, but of a mode of experience. Secondly, the 'aesthetic experience' is one of heterogeneity, such that for the subject of that experience it is also the dismissal of a certain autonomy. Thirdly, the object of that experience is 'aesthetic', in so far as it is not—or at least not only—art. Such is the threefold relation that Schiller sets up in what we can call the 'original scene' of aesthetics.

### *Sensorium of the goddess*

At the end of the fifteenth letter, he places himself and his readers in front of a specimen of 'free appearance', a Greek statue known as the Juno Ludovisi. The statue is 'self-contained', and 'dwells in itself', as befits the traits of the divinity: her 'idleness', her distance from any care or duty, from any purpose or volition. The goddess is such because she wears no trace of will or aim. Obviously, the qualities of the goddess are those of the statue as well. The statue thus comes paradoxically to figure what has not been made, what was never an object of will. In other words: it embodies the qualities of what is not a work of art. (We should note in passing that formulas of the type 'this is' or 'this is not' a work of art, 'this is' or 'this is not a pipe', have to be traced back to this originary scene, if we want to make of them more than hackneyed jokes.)

Correspondingly, the spectator who experiences the free play of the aesthetic in front of the 'free appearance' enjoys an autonomy of a very special kind. It is not the autonomy of free Reason, subduing the

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<sup>1</sup> I distinguish between three regimes of art. In the ethical regime, works of art have no autonomy. They are viewed as images to be questioned for their truth and for their effect on the ethos of individuals and the community. Plato's *Republic* offers a perfect model of this regime. In the representational regime, works of art belong to the sphere of imitation, and so are no longer subject to the laws of truth or the common rules of utility. They are not so much copies of reality as ways of imposing a form on matter. As such, they are subject to a set of intrinsic norms: a hierarchy of genres, adequation of expression to subject matter, correspondence between the arts, etc. The aesthetic regime overthrows this normativity and the relationship between form and matter on which it is based. Works of art are now defined as such, by belonging to a specific sensorium that stands out as an exception from the normal regime of the sensible, which presents us with an immediate adequation of thought and sensible materiality. For further detail, see Jacques Rancière, *Le Partage du sensible. Esthétique et Politique*, Paris 2000.

anarchy of sensation. It is the suspension of that kind of autonomy. It is an autonomy strictly related to a withdrawal of power. The 'free appearance' stands in front of us, unapproachable, unavailable to our knowledge, our aims and desires. The subject is promised the possession of a new world by this figure that he cannot possess in any way. The goddess and the spectator, the free play and the free appearance, are caught up together in a specific sensorium, cancelling the oppositions of activity and passivity, will and resistance. The 'autonomy of art' and the 'promise of politics' are not counterposed. The autonomy is the autonomy of the experience, not of the work of art. To put it differently, the artwork participates in the sensorium of autonomy inasmuch as it is not a work of art.

Now this 'not being a work of art' immediately takes on a new meaning. The free appearance of the statue is the appearance of what has not been aimed at as art. This means that it is the appearance of a form of life in which art is not art. The 'self-containment' of the Greek statue turns out to be the 'self-sufficiency' of a collective life that does not rend itself into separate spheres of activities, of a community where art and life, art and politics, life and politics are not severed one from another. Such is supposed to have been the Greek people whose autonomy of life is expressed in the self-containment of the statue. The accuracy or otherwise of that vision of ancient Greece is not at issue here. What is at stake is the shift in the idea of autonomy, as it is linked to that of heteronomy. At first autonomy was tied to the 'unavailability' of the object of aesthetic experience. Then it turns out to be the autonomy of a life in which art has no separate existence—in which its productions are in fact self-expressions of life. 'Free appearance', as the encounter of a heterogeneity, is no more. It ceases to be a suspension of the oppositions of form and matter, of activity and passivity, and becomes the product of a human mind which seeks to transform the surface of sensory appearances into a new sensorium that is the mirror of its own activity. The last letters of Schiller unfold this plot, as primitive man gradually learns to cast an aesthetic gaze on his arms and tools or on his own body, to separate the pleasure of appearance from the functionality of objects. Aesthetic play thus becomes a work of aestheticization. The plot of a 'free play', suspending the power of active form over passive matter and promising a still unheard-of state of equality, becomes another plot, in which form subjugates matter, and the self-education of mankind is its emancipation from materiality, as it transforms the world into its own sensorium.

So the original scene of aesthetics reveals a contradiction that is not the opposition of art versus politics, high art versus popular culture, or art versus the aestheticization of life. All these oppositions are particular features and interpretations of a more basic contradiction. In the aesthetic regime of art, art is art to the extent that it is something else than art. It is always 'aestheticized', meaning that it is always posed as a 'form of life'. The key formula of the aesthetic regime of art is that art is an autonomous form of life. This is a formula, however, that can be read in two different ways: autonomy can be stressed over life, or life over autonomy—and these lines of interpretation can be opposed, or they can intersect.

Such oppositions and intersections can be traced as the interplay between three major scenarios. Art can become life. Life can become art. Art and life can exchange their properties. These three scenarios yield three configurations of the aesthetic, emplotted in three versions of temporality. According to the logic of the *and*, each is also a variant of the politics of aesthetics, or what we should rather call its 'metapolitics'—that is, its way of producing its own politics, proposing to politics rearrangements of its space, reconfiguring art as a political issue, or asserting itself as true politics.

### *Constituting the new collective world*

The first scenario is that of 'art becoming life'. In this schema art is taken to be not only an expression of life but a form of its self-education. What this means is that, beyond its destruction of the representational regime, the aesthetic regime of art comes to terms with the ethical regime of images in a two-pronged relationship. It rejects its partitioning of times and spaces, sites and functions. But it ratifies its basic principle: matters of art are matters of education. As self-education art is the formation of a new sensorium—one which signifies, in actuality, a new ethos. Taken to an extreme, this means that the 'aesthetic self-education of humanity' will frame a new collective ethos. The politics of aesthetics proves to be the right way to achieve what was pursued in vain by the aesthetics of politics, with its polemical configuration of the common world. Aesthetics promises a non-polemical, consensual framing of the common world. Ultimately the alternative to politics turns out to be aestheticization, viewed as the constitution of a new collective ethos. This scenario was first set out in the little draft associated

with Hegel, Hölderlin and Schelling, known as the 'Oldest System-Programme of German Idealism'. The scenario makes politics vanish in the sheer opposition between the dead mechanism of the State and the living power of the community, framed by the power of living thought. The vocation of poetry—the task of 'aesthetic education'—is to render ideas sensible by turning them into living images, creating an equivalent of ancient mythology, as the fabric of a common experience shared by the elite and by the common people. In their words: 'mythology must become philosophy to make common people reasonable and philosophy must become mythology to make philosophers sensible'.

This draft would not be just a forgotten dream of the 1790s. It laid the basis for a new idea of revolution. Even though Marx never read the draft, we can discern the same plot in his well-known texts of the 1840s. The coming Revolution will be at once the consummation and abolition of philosophy; no longer merely 'formal' and 'political', it will be a 'human' revolution. The human revolution is an offspring of the aesthetic paradigm. That is why there could be a juncture between the Marxist vanguard and the artistic avant-garde in the 1920s, as each side was attached to the same programme: the construction of new forms of life, in which the self-suppression of politics would match the self-suppression of art. Pushed to this extreme the originary logic of the 'aesthetic state' is reversed. Free appearance was an appearance that did not refer to any 'truth' lying behind or beneath it. But when it becomes the expression of a certain life, it refers again to a truth to which it bears witness. In the next step, this embodied truth is opposed to the lie of appearances. When the aesthetic revolution assumes the shape of a 'human' revolution cancelling the 'formal' one, the originary logic has been overturned. The autonomy of the idle divinity, its unavailability had once promised a new age of equality. Now the fulfilment of that promise is identified with the act of a subject who does away with all such appearances, which were only the dream of something he must now possess as reality.

But we should not for all that simply equate the scenario of art becoming life with the disasters of the 'aesthetic absolute', embodied in the totalitarian figure of the collectivity as a work of art. The same scenario can be traced in more sober attempts to make art the form of life. We may think, for instance, of the way the theory and practice of the Arts and Crafts movement tied a sense of eternal beauty, and a mediæval dream

of handicrafts and artisan guilds, to concern with the exploitation of the working class and the tenor of everyday life, and to issues of functionality. William Morris was among the first to claim that an armchair is beautiful if it provides a restful seat, rather than satisfying the pictorial fantasies of its owner. Or let us take Mallarmé, a poet often viewed as the incarnation of artistic purism. Those who cherish his phrase ‘this mad gesture of writing’ as a formula for the ‘intransitivity’ of the text often forget the end of his sentence, which assigns the poet the task of ‘recreating everything, out of reminiscences, to show that we actually are at the place we have to be.’ The allegedly ‘pure’ practice of writing is linked to the need to create forms that participate in a general reframing of the human abode, so that the productions of the poet are, in the same breath, compared both to ceremonies of collective life, like the fireworks of Bastille Day, and to private ornaments of the household.

It is no coincidence that in Kant’s *Critique of Judgement* significant examples of aesthetic apprehension were taken from painted décors that were ‘free beauty’ in so far as they represented no subject, but simply contributed to the enjoyment of a place of sociability. We know how far the transformations of art and its visibility were linked to controversies over the ornament. Polemical programmes to reduce all ornamentation to function, in the style of Loos, or to extol its autonomous signifying power, in the manner of Riegl or Worringer, appealed to the same basic principle: art is first of all a matter of dwelling in a common world. That is why the same discussions about the ornament could support ideas both of abstract painting and of industrial design. The notion of ‘art becoming life’ does not simply foster demiurgic projects of a ‘new life’. It also weaves a common temporality of art, which can be summed up in a simple formula: a new life needs a new art. ‘Pure’ art and ‘committed’ art, ‘fine’ art and ‘applied’ art, alike partake of this temporality. Of course, they understand and fulfil it in very different ways. In 1897, when Mallarmé wrote his *Un coup de dés*, he wanted the arrangement of lines and size of characters on the page to match the form of his idea—the fall of the dice. Some years later Peter Behrens designed the lamps and kettles, trademark and catalogues of the German General Electricity Company. What have they in common?

The answer, I believe, is a certain conception of design. The poet wants to replace the representational subject-matter of poetry with the design of a general form, to make the poem like a choreography or the unfolding

of a fan. He calls these general forms 'types'. The engineer-designer wants to create objects whose form fits their use and advertisements which offer exact information about them, without commercial embellishment. He also calls these forms 'types'. He thinks of himself as an artist, inasmuch as he attempts to create a culture of everyday life that is in keeping with the progress of industrial production and artistic design, rather than with the routines of commerce and petty-bourgeois consumption. His types are symbols of common life. But so are Mallarmé's. They are part of the project of building, above the level of the monetary economy, a symbolic economy that would display a collective 'justice' or 'magnificence', a celebration of the human abode replacing the forlorn ceremonies of throne and religion. Far from each other as the symbolist poet and the functionalist engineer may seem, they share the idea that forms of art should be modes of collective education. Both industrial production and artistic creation are committed to doing something else than what they do—to create not only objects but a sensorium, a new partition of the perceptible.

### *Framing the life of art*

Such is the first scenario. The second is the schema of 'life becoming art' or the 'life of art'. This scenario may be given the title of a book by the French art historian Elie Faure, *The Spirit of Forms: the life of art* as the development of a series of forms in which life becomes art. This is in fact the plot of the Museum, conceived not as a building and an institution but as a mode of rendering visible and intelligible the 'life of art'. We know that the birth of such museums around 1800 unleashed bitter disputes. Their opponents argued that the works of art should not be torn away from their setting, the physical and spiritual soil that gave birth to them. Now and then this polemic is renewed today: the museum denounced as a mausoleum dedicated to the contemplation of dead icons, separated from the life of art. Others hold that, on the contrary, museums have to be blank surfaces so that spectators can be confronted with the artwork itself, undistracted by the ongoing culturalization and historicization of art.

Both, in my view, are mistaken. There is no opposition between life and mausoleum, blank surface and historicized artefact. From the beginning the scenario of the art museum has been that of an aesthetic condition in which the Juno Ludovisi is not so much the work of a master sculptor as

a 'living form', expressive both of the independence of 'free appearance' and of the vital spirit of a community. Our museums of fine arts don't display pure specimens of fine art. They display historicized art: Fra Angelico between Giotto and Masaccio, framing an idea of Florentine princely splendour and religious fervour; Rembrandt between Hals and Vermeer, featuring Dutch domestic and civic life, the rise of the bourgeoisie, and so on. They exhibit a time-space of art as so many moments of the incarnation of thought.

To frame this plot was the first task of the discourse named 'aesthetics', and we know how Hegel, after Schelling, completed it. The principle of the framing is clear: the properties of the aesthetic experience are transferred to the work of art itself, cancelling their projection into a new life and invalidating the aesthetic revolution. The 'spirit of forms' becomes the inverted image of the aesthetic revolution. This reworking involves two main moves. First, the equivalence of activity and passivity, form and matter, that characterized the 'aesthetic experience' turns out to be the status of the artwork itself, now posited as an identity of consciousness and unconsciousness, will and un-will. Second, this identity of contraries at the same stroke lends works of art their historicity. The 'political' character of aesthetic experience is, as it were, reversed and encapsulated in the historicity of the statue. The statue is a living form. But the meaning of the link between art and life has shifted. The statue, in Hegel's view, is art not so much because it is the expression of a collective freedom, but rather because it figures the distance between that collective life and the way it can express itself. The Greek statue, according to him, is the work of an artist expressing an idea of which he is aware and unaware at the same time. He wants to embody the idea of divinity in a figure of stone. But what he can express is only the idea of the divinity that he can feel and that the stone can express. The autonomous form of the statue embodies divinity as the Greeks could at best conceive of it—that is, deprived of interiority. It does not matter whether we subscribe to this judgement or not. What matters is that, in this scenario, the limit of the artist, of his idea and of his people, is also the condition for the success of the work of art. Art is living so long as it expresses a thought unclear to itself in a matter that resists it. It lives inasmuch as it is something else than art, that is a belief and a way of life.

This plot of the spirit of forms results in an ambiguous historicity of art. On the one hand, it creates an autonomous life of art as an expression of

history, open to new kinds of development. When Kandinsky claims for a new abstract expression an inner necessity, which revives the impulses and forms of primitive art, he holds fast to the spirit of forms and opposes its legacy to academicism. On the other hand, the plot of the life of art entails a verdict of death. The statue is autonomous in so far as the will that produces it is heteronomous. When art is no more than art, it vanishes. When the content of thought is transparent to itself and when no matter resists it, this success means the end of art. When the artist does what he wants, Hegel states, he reverts to merely affixing to paper or canvas a trademark.

The plot of the so-called 'end of art' is not simply a personal theorization by Hegel. It clings to the plot of the life of art as 'the spirit of forms'. That spirit is the 'heterogeneous sensible', the identity of art and non-art. The plot has it that when art ceases to be non-art, it is no longer art either. Poetry is poetry, says Hegel, so long as prose is confused with poetry. When prose is only prose, there is no more heterogeneous sensible. The statements and furnishings of collective life are only the statements and furnishings of collective life. So the formula of art becoming life is invalidated: a new life does not need a new art. On the contrary, the specificity of the new life is that it does not need art. The whole history of art forms and of the politics of aesthetics in the aesthetic regime of art could be staged as the clash of these two formulæ: a new life needs a new art; the new life does not need art.

### *Metamorphoses of the curiosity shop*

In that perspective the key problem becomes how to reassess the 'heterogeneous sensible'. This concerns not only artists, but the very idea of a new life. The whole affair of the 'fetishism of the commodity' must, I think, be reconsidered from this point of view: Marx needs to prove that the commodity has a secret, that it ciphers a point of heterogeneity in the commerce of everyday life. Revolution is possible because the commodity, like the Juno Ludovisi, has a double nature—it is a work of art that escapes when we try to seize hold of it. The reason is that the plot of the 'end of art' determines a configuration of modernity as a new partition of the perceptible, with no point of heterogeneity. In this partition, rationalization of the different spheres of activity becomes a response both to the old hierarchical orders and to the 'aesthetic revolution'. The

whole motto of the politics of the aesthetic regime, then, can be spelled out as follows: let us save the 'heterogeneous sensible'.

There are two ways of saving it, each involving a specific politics, with its own link between autonomy and heteronomy. The first is the scenario of 'art and life exchanging their properties', proper to what can be called, in a broad sense, Romantic poetics. It is often thought that Romantic poetics involved a sacralization of art and of the artist, but this is a one-sided view. The principle of 'Romanticism' is rather to be found in a multiplication of the temporalities of art that renders its boundaries permeable. Multiplying its lines of temporality means complicating and ultimately dismissing the straightforward scenarios of art becoming life or life becoming art, of the 'end' of art; and replacing them with scenarios of latency and re-actualization. This is the burden of Schlegel's idea of 'progressive universal poetry'. It does not mean any straightforward march of progress. On the contrary, 'romanticizing' the works of the past means taking them as metamorphic elements, sleeping and awakening, susceptible to different reactualizations, according to new lines of temporality. The works of the past can be considered as forms for new contents or raw materials for new formations. They can be re-viewed, re-framed, re-read, re-made. It is thus that museums exorcized the rigid plot of the 'spirit of forms' leading to the 'end of arts', and helped to frame new visibilities of art, leading to new practices. Artistic ruptures became possible, too, because the museum offered a multiplication of the temporalities of art, allowing for instance Manet to become a painter of modern life by re-painting Velázquez and Titian.

Now this multi-temporality also means a permeability of the boundaries of art. Being a matter of art turns out to be a kind of metamorphic status. The works of the past may fall asleep and cease to be artworks, they may be awakened and take on a new life in various ways. They make thereby for a continuum of metamorphic forms. According to the same logic, common objects may cross the border and enter the realm of artistic combination. They can do so all the more easily in that the artistic and the historic are now linked together, such that each object can be withdrawn from its condition of common use and viewed as a poetic body wearing the traces of its history. In this way the argument of the 'end of art' can be overturned. In the year that Hegel died, Balzac published his novel *La Peau de chagrin*. At the beginning of the novel, the hero Raphael enters the show-rooms of a large curiosity shop where old statues and

paintings are mingled with old-fashioned furniture, gadgets and household goods. There, Balzac writes, 'this ocean of furnishings, inventions, works of art and relics made for him an endless poem'. The paraphernalia of the shop is also a medley of objects and ages, of artworks and accessories. Each of these objects is like a fossil, wearing on its body the history of an era or a civilization. A little further on, Balzac remarks that the great poet of the new age is not a poet as we understand the term: it is not Byron but Cuvier, the naturalist who could reconstitute forests out of petrified traces and races of giants out of scattered bones.

In the show-rooms of Romanticism, the power of the Juno Ludovisi is transferred to any article of ordinary life which can become a poetic object, a fabric of hieroglyphs, ciphering a history. The old curiosity shop makes the museum of fine arts and the ethnographic museum equivalent. It dismisses the argument of prosaic use or commodification. If the end of art is to become a commodity, the end of a commodity is to become art. By becoming obsolete, unavailable for everyday consumption, any commodity or familiar article becomes available for art, as a body ciphering a history and an object of 'disinterested pleasure'. It is re-aestheticized in a new way. The 'heterogeneous sensible' is everywhere. The prose of everyday life becomes a huge, fantastic poem. Any object can cross the border and repopulate the realm of aesthetic experience.

We know what came out of this shop. Forty years later, the power of the Juno Ludovisi would be transferred to the vegetables, the sausages and the merchants of Les Halles by Zola and Claude Lantier, the Impressionist painter he invents, in *Le Ventre de Paris*. Then there will be, among many others, the collages of Dada or Surrealism, Pop Art and our current exhibitions of recycled commodities or video clips. The most outstanding metamorphosis of Balzac's repository is, of course, the window of the old-fashioned umbrella-shop in the Passage de l'Opéra, in which Aragon recognizes a dream of German mermaids. The mermaid of *Le Paysan de Paris* is the Juno Ludovisi as well, the 'unavailable' goddess promising, through her unavailability, a new sensible world. Benjamin will recognize her in his own way: the arcade of outdated commodities holds the promise of the future. He will only add that the arcade has to be closed, made unavailable, in order that the promise may be kept.

There is thus a dialectic within Romantic poetics of the permeability of art and life. This poetics makes everything available to play the part

of the heterogeneous, unavailable sensible. By making what is ordinary extraordinary, it makes what is extraordinary ordinary, too. From this contradiction, it makes a kind of politics—or metapolitics—of its own. That metapolitics is a hermeneutic of signs. ‘Prosaic’ objects become signs of history, which have to be deciphered. So the poet becomes not only a naturalist or an archaeologist, excavating the fossils and unpacking their poetic potential. He also becomes a kind of symptomatologist, delving into the dark underside or the unconscious of a society to decipher the messages engraved in the very flesh of ordinary things. The new poetics frames a new hermeneutics, taking upon itself the task of making society conscious of its own secrets, by leaving the noisy stage of political claims and doctrines and sinking to the depths of the social, to disclose the enigmas and fantasies hidden in the intimate realities of everyday life. It is in the wake of such a poetics that the commodity could be featured as a phantasmagoria: a thing that looks trivial at first sight, but on a closer look is revealed as a tissue of hieroglyphs and a puzzle of theological quibbles.

### *Infinite reduplication?*

Marx’s analysis of the commodity is part of the Romantic plot which denies the ‘end of art’ as the homogenization of the sensible world. We could say that the Marxian commodity steps out of the Balzacian shop. That is why the fetishism of the commodity could allow Benjamin to account for the structure of Baudelaire’s imagery through the topography of the Parisian arcades and the character of the *flâneur*. For Baudelaire loitered not so much in the arcades themselves as in the plot of the shop as a new sensorium, as a place of exchange between everyday life and the realm of art. The *explicans* and the *explicandum* are part of the same poetical plot. That is why they fit so well; too well, perhaps. Such is more widely the case for the discourse of *Kulturkritik* in its various figures—a discourse which purports to speak the truth about art, about the illusions of aesthetics and their social underpinnings, about the dependency of art upon common culture and commodification. But the very procedures through which it tries to disclose what art and aesthetics truly are were first framed on the aesthetic stage. They are figures of the same poem. The critique of culture can be seen as the epistemological face of Romantic poetics, the rationalization of its way of exchanging the signs of art and the signs of life. *Kulturkritik* wants to cast on the productions of Romantic poetics the gaze of disenchanting reason.

But that disenchantment itself is part of the Romantic re-enchantment that has widened *ad infinitum* the sensorium of art as the field of disused objects encrypting a culture, extending to infinity, too, the realm of fantasies to be deciphered and formatting the procedures of that decryption.

So Romantic poetics resists the entropy of the 'end of art' and its 'de-aestheticization'. But its own procedures of re-aestheticization are threatened by another kind of entropy. They are jeopardized by their own success. The danger in this case is not that everything becomes prosaic. It is that everything becomes artistic—that the process of exchange, of crossing the border reaches a point where the border becomes completely blurred, where nothing, however prosaic, escapes the domain of art. This is what happens when art exhibitions present us with mere reduplications of objects of consumption and commercial videos, labelling them as such, on the assumption that these artefacts offer a radical critique of commodification by the very fact that they are the exact reduplication of commodities. This indiscernibility turns out to be the indiscernibility of the critical discourse, doomed either to participate in the labelling or to denounce it *ad infinitum* in the assertion that the sensorium of art and the sensorium of everyday life are nothing more than the eternal reproduction of the 'spectacle' in which domination is both mirrored and denied.

This denunciation in turn soon becomes part of the play. An interesting case of this double discourse is the recent exhibition, first presented in the United States as *Let's Entertain*, then in France as *Beyond the Spectacle*. The Parisian exhibition played on three levels: first, the Pop anti-high-culture provocation; second, Guy Debord's critique of entertainment as spectacle, meaning the triumph of alienated life; third, the identification of 'entertainment' with the Debordian concept of 'play' as the antidote to 'appearance'. The encounter between free play and free appearance was reduced to a confrontation between a billiard table, a bar-football table and a merry-go-round, and the neo-classical busts of Jeff Koons and his wife.

### *Entropies of the avant-garde*

Such outcomes prompt the second response to the dilemma of the de-aestheticization of art—the alternative way of reasserting the power of the 'heterogeneous sensible'. This is the exact opposite of the first. It

maintains that the dead-end of art lies in the romantic blurring of its borders. It argues the need for a separation of art from the forms of aestheticization of common life. The claim may be made purely for the sake of art itself, but it may also be made for the sake of the emancipatory power of art. In either case, it is the same basic claim: the sensoria are to be separated. The first manifesto against kitsch, far prior to the existence of the word, can be found in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*. The whole plot of the novel is, in fact, one of differentiation between the artist and his character, whose chief crime is to wish to bring art into her life. She who wants to aestheticize her life, who makes art a matter of life, deserves death—literarily speaking. The cruelty of the novelist will become the rigour of the philosopher when Adorno lays the same charge against the equivalent of Madame Bovary—Stravinsky, the musician who thinks that any kind of harmony or disharmony is available and mixes classical chords and modern dissonances, jazz and primitive rhythms, for the excitement of his bourgeois audience. There is an extraordinary pathos in the tone of the passage in *Philosophy of Modern Music* where Adorno states that some chords of nineteenth-century salon music are no longer audible, unless, he adds, 'everything be trickery'. If those chords are still available, can still be heard, the political promise of the aesthetic scene is proved a lie, and the path to emancipation is lost.

Whether the quest is for art alone or for emancipation through art, the stage is the same. On this stage, art must tear itself away from the territory of aestheticized life and draw a new borderline, which cannot be crossed. This is a position that we cannot simply assign to avant-garde insistence on the autonomy of art. For this autonomy proves to be in fact a double heteronomy. If Madame Bovary has to die, Flaubert has to disappear. First he has to make the sensorium of literature akin to the sensorium of those things that do not feel: pebbles, shells or grains of dust. To do this, he has to make his prose indistinguishable from that of his characters, the prose of everyday life. In the same way the autonomy of Schönberg's music, as conceptualized by Adorno, is a double heteronomy: in order to denounce the capitalist division of labour and the adornments of commodification, it has to take that division of labour yet further, to be still more technical, more 'inhuman' than the products of capitalist mass production. But this inhumanity, in turn, makes the blotch of what has been repressed appear and disrupt the perfect technical arrangement of the work. The 'autonomy' of the avant-garde work of art becomes the tension between two heteronomies, between

the bonds that tie Ulysses to his mast and the song of the sirens against which he stops his ears.

We can also give to these two positions the names of a pair of Greek divinities, Apollo and Dionysus. Their opposition is not simply a construct of the philosophy of the young Nietzsche. It is the dialectic of the 'spirit of forms' in general. The aesthetic identification of consciousness and unconsciousness, *logos* and *pathos*, can be interpreted in two ways. Either the spirit of forms is the *logos* that weaves its way through its own opacity and the resistance of the materials, in order to become the smile of the statue or the light of the canvas—this is the Apollonian plot—or it is identified with a *pathos* that disrupts the forms of *doxa*, and makes art the inscription of a power that is chaos, radical alterity. Art inscribes on the surface of the work the immanence of *pathos* in the *logos*, of the unthinkable in thought. This is the Dionysian plot. Both are plots of heteronomy. Even the perfection of the Greek statue in Hegel's *Aesthetics* is the form of an inadequacy. The same holds all the more for Schönberg's perfect construction. In order that 'avant-garde' art stay faithful to the promise of the aesthetic scene it has to stress more and more the power of heteronomy that underpins its autonomy.

### *Defeat of the imagination?*

This inner necessity leads to another kind of entropy, which makes the task of autonomous avant-garde art akin to that of giving witness to sheer heteronomy. This entropy is perfectly exemplified by the 'aesthetics of the sublime' of Jean-François Lyotard. At first sight this is a radicalization of the dialectic of avant-garde art which twists into a reversal of its logic. The avant-garde must indefinitely draw the dividing-line that separates art from commodity culture, inscribe interminably the link of art to the 'heterogeneous sensible'. But it must do so in order to invalidate indefinitely the 'trickery' of the aesthetic promise itself, to denounce both the promises of revolutionary avant-gardism and the entropy of commodity aestheticization. The avant-garde is endowed with the paradoxical duty of bearing witness to an immemorial dependency of human thought that makes any promise of emancipation a deception.

This demonstration takes the shape of a radical re-reading of Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, of a reframing of the aesthetic sensorium which

stands as an implicit refutation of Schiller's vision, a kind of counter-originary scene. The whole 'duty' of modern art is deduced by Lyotard from the Kantian analysis of the sublime as a radical experience of disagreement, in which the synthetic power of imagination is defeated by the experience of an infinite, which sets up a gap between the sensible and the supersensible. In Lyotard's analysis this defines the space of modern art as the manifestation of the unrepresentable, of the 'loss of a steady relation between the sensible and the intelligible'. It is a paradoxical assertion: firstly, because the sublime in Kant's account does not define the space of art, but marks the transition from aesthetic to ethical experience; and secondly, because the experience of disharmony between Reason and Imagination tends towards the discovery of a higher harmony—the self-perception of the subject as a member of the supersensible world of Reason and Freedom.

Lyotard wants to oppose the Kantian gap of the sublime to Hegelian aestheticization. But he has to borrow from Hegel his concept of the sublime, as the impossibility of an adequation between thought and its sensible presentation. He has to borrow from the plot of the 'spirit of forms' the principle of a counter-construction of the originary scene, to allow for a counter-reading of the plot of the 'life of forms'. Of course this confusion is not a casual misreading. It is a way of blocking the originary path from aesthetics to politics, of imposing at the same cross-road a one-way detour leading from aesthetics to ethics. In this fashion the opposition of the aesthetic regime of art to the representational regime can be ascribed to the sheer opposition of the art of the unrepresentable to the art of representation. 'Modern' works of art then have to become ethical witnesses to the unrepresentable. Strictly speaking, however, it is in the representational regime that you can find unrepresentable subject matters, meaning those for which form and matter cannot be fitted together in any way. The 'loss of a steady relation' between the sensible and the intelligible is not the loss of the power of relating, it is the multiplication of its forms. In the aesthetic regime of art nothing is 'unrepresentable'.

Much has been written to the effect that the Holocaust is unrepresentable, that it allows only for witness and not for art. But the claim is refuted by the work of the witnesses. For example, the paratactic writing of Primo Levi or Robert Antelme has been taken as the sheer mode of testimony befitting the experience of Nazi de-humanization. But this

paratactic style, made up of a concatenation of little perceptions and sensations, was one of the major features of the literary revolution of the nineteenth century. The short notations at the beginning of Antelme's book *L'Espèce humaine*, describing the latrines and setting the scene of the camp at Buchenwald, answer to the same pattern as the description of Emma Bovary's farmyard. Similarly, Claude Lanzmann's film *Shoah* has been seen as bearing witness to the unrepresentable. But what Lanzmann counterposes to the representational plot of the US television series *The Holocaust* is another cinematographic plot—the narrative of a present inquiry reconstructing an enigmatic or an erased past, which can be traced back to Orson Welles's Rosebud in *Citizen Kane*. The argument of the 'unrepresentable' does not fit the experience of artistic practice. Rather, it fulfils the desire that there be something unrepresentable, something unavailable, in order to inscribe in the practice of art the necessity of the ethical detour. The ethics of the unrepresentable might still be an inverted form of the aesthetic promise.

In sketching out these entropic scenarios of the politics of aesthetics, I may seem to propose a pessimistic view of things. That is not at all my purpose. Undeniably, a certain melancholy about the destiny of art and of its political commitments is expressed in many ways today, especially in my country, France. The air is thick with declarations about the end of art, the end of the image, the reign of communications and advertisements, the impossibility of art after Auschwitz, nostalgia for the lost paradise of incarnate presence, indictment of aesthetic utopias for spawning totalitarianism or commodification. My purpose has not been to join this mourning choir. On the contrary I think that we can distance ourselves from this current mood if we understand that the 'end of art' is not a mischievous destiny of 'modernity', but the reverse side of the life of art. To the extent that the aesthetic formula ties art to non-art from the start, it sets up that life between two vanishing points: art becoming mere life or art becoming mere art. I said that 'pushed to the extreme', each of these scenarios entailed its own entropy, its own end of art. But the life of art in the aesthetic regime of art consists precisely of a shuttling between these scenarios, playing an autonomy against a heteronomy and a heteronomy against an autonomy, playing one linkage between art and non-art against another such linkage.

Each of these scenarios involves a certain metapolitics: art refuting the hierarchical divisions of the perceptible and framing a common senso-

rium; or art replacing politics as a configuration of the sensible world; or art becoming a kind of social hermeneutics; or even art becoming, in its very isolation, the guardian of the promise of emancipation. Each of these positions may be held and has been held. This means that there is a certain undecidability in the 'politics of aesthetics'. There is a meta-politics of aesthetics which frames the possibilities of art. Aesthetic art promises a political accomplishment that it cannot satisfy, and thrives on that ambiguity. That is why those who want to isolate it from politics are somewhat beside the point. It is also why those who want it to fulfil its political promise are condemned to a certain melancholy.