

Totalizing Aesthetics?

*Aesthetic Theory and the Aestheticization of Everyday Life*¹

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Aesthetic theory and aesthetic practice

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the tradition of aesthetic theory has been profoundly influenced by a cycle of mutual confirmation between philosophical aesthetics and expert cultures associated with the individual art forms. In historically shifting forms the trendsetting currents have legitimized their development of aesthetic theory monoculturally and in reference to teleological philosophies of history. The cultural horizon of aesthetic theory has been limited to high art and the discourses of the art institution, and aesthetics has essentially been identified with artistic beauty and understood as a privileged channel of articulation for a universal, transcendent truth. According to the historical circumstances, the pledge of truth taken by aesthetics has either referred offensively-legitimizing to an early bourgeois emancipatory project or to a tragically lost opportunity whose higher worthiness is heroically maintained against all odds (Bubner 1989; Eagleton 1990; Raffnsøe 1996; Jørgensen 2001).

Contrary to this tradition, this article argues that the relevance of aesthetic theory depends on its ability to comprehend and enter into a dialogue with the development of *aesthetic practice*, and that a relevant reflection on this – in contrast to the tradition in this area – calls for expanding and differentiating the concept of aesthetics.

As a form of discourse, aesthetic practice can initially be understood in the light of the classical origin of the concept of aesthetics, *aisthesis*, which denotes the form of knowledge that takes mankind's concrete, sensuous relation to the world in a broad sense as its starting point – as opposed to the abstract mathematico-logical form of knowledge. In this sense aesthetics can be said to play an extraordinarily prominent role in highly developed modern societies: not just art, but also popular cultural expressions and forms of everyday life are increasingly becoming the object of an awareness whose focus is on the sensuously rooted formation of meaning (Nielsen 1996; Schulze 1992; Welsch 1990; Welsch 1996; Ziehe 1989).

This development is associated with the general increase in prosperity over the past decades, the related unbinding and stimulation of an orientation toward pleasure and sensuous experiences as a central motivating factor for behaviour in late modern society, the increase in the level of education, and broader democratic participation, which has in particular been brought about by popular movements in highly developed modern societies. As

part of these changes a comprehensive *secularization* of aesthetic questions is occurring, so that forms of experience and reflection previously reserved for high art and the discourses of the transcendent search for truth penetrate everyday life and increasingly become an essential element in the creation and formation of the self-understanding and motivations of modern individuals.

Moreover, this development brings about a pronounced tendency towards *pluralization* as regards which sections of the population and which cultural contexts take aesthetic practice into account, and this process contributes to expanding the horizon which a contemporary concept of aesthetics must be able to capture. Of course, the art institution still exists as an essential factor within this horizon, but it lost its monopoly long ago, and it would therefore be a problematic limitation of the field to base a contemporary aesthetic theory exclusively on the classical discourses of the art world.

Contemporary aesthetic practice should furthermore be understood in relation to basic features of modernity. Social practice in modern society is characterized by the secularization and differentiation of a number of relatively autonomous spheres of practice dominated by separate rationalities of action (Habermas 1981). The conceptualization of modernity can therefore not meaningfully be based on a teleological philosophy of history or on a transcendent principle of totality, but must generally conceive of social practice and its dynamics as – partly conflictual – interactive relations between differentiated spheres and rationalities that constantly influence one another but do not form a common perspective.

In contrast to the abstract reflections of philosophical aesthetics on the fundamental potential for universal truth, the idea here is to consider aesthetics in relation to concrete processes and specific contexts, inasmuch as the dialectical interaction between experience and social action, between the psycho-social, biographical dispositions of individuals and groups of individuals and various levels of social institutionalizations of practice serves as the relevant horizon for comprehending the human formation of meaning, including aesthetic meaning.

Aesthetic practice can thus initially be understood as a sub-area of social practice where we relate to artefacts from the perspective of an aesthetic-expressive rationality of action. In this practice, which in contrast to other kinds of practice is characterized by its inherent aim (Seel 1993), a special kind of qualitative, sensuously rooted formation of meaning emerges that is always

historically specific. This formation of meaning takes place in a constant process of creation and transformation that derives its dynamism from the dialectical movement between aesthetic practice and the formation of aesthetic experience as well as from interacting and conflicting with non-aesthetic spheres of practice and experience.

Aesthetic artefacts and the experiences to which they give rise are characterized by the stylizing reduction of the complexity and the ambivalences of modernity. The diffuse mixture of various incompatible forms of practice and experience in modern everyday life – which interfere with and disrupt one another, resulting in distraction and a loss of orientation – is transformed into clearly profiled forms, feelings and conflicts in the experiential space of aesthetic practice. The heterogeneous and ambivalent experience of modernity is subjected to a stylized synthesization that makes it accessible to intense experience as well as focused contemplation. Hence, the complexity-reducing starting point of aesthetic practice in everyday experience paves the way for a special type of autonomous formation of meaning that can assume a multiplicity of forms.

The encounter and the process of exchange between artefact and recipient constitute the crucial elements in aesthetic practice. This is where dialectical communication takes place between the artefact as an aesthetic construction and the recipient's biographical experience in the broadest sense – including conscious as well as subconscious layers of experience. The process is conditioned in particular by the institutionalized patterns for the formation of aesthetic experience – the genre conventions – that the aesthetic construction of the works takes into account and that are inscribed in the recipients' biographical experience of aesthetic artefacts and thus part of the structure of expectations with which they encounter the works. This structure of expectations can then be confirmed or challenged and reshaped in various ways in the encounter between a concrete artefact and an individual recipient's specific biographical ballast.

The process of exchange can be conceptualized as a *projecting dialogue* (Benjamin 1936/1974) between the recipient and the work – an understanding that can be useful to consider in connection with the Kantian concept of *aesthetic experience*.² According to Kant, a movement between the particular and the universal, which can never achieve closure, characterizes the process of aesthetic experience. In contrast to the *determining judgement's* restless subjugation of the particular to a universal concept, the

2 Unlike English, German distinguishes between qualities of 'experience': sensuous-emotional ('Erlebnis') and intellectual-contemplative ('Erfahrung'). The successful process of aesthetic experience is characterized by the presence and interaction of both qualities.

reflective judgement at work in the process of aesthetic experience is characterized by considering the particular – that is, the aesthetic artefact – as so particular that it cannot be subsumed under an existing universal concept. The process of aesthetic experience is thus in its structure a constant exploratory movement between an object that cannot be fully determined and a universal concept that does not exist (Kant 1790/1963; Bubner 1989).

The exploratory movement of the reception process between particular and universal takes the shape of a dialogue in which the recipient projects into the concrete artefact a vaguely defined expectation of meaning that draws on his or her biographical experience and is framed by the genre conventions of the art institution and the tradition of aesthetic practice. The artefact ‘answers’ and thus has a subtle, qualifying effect on the horizon of expectation of the process of aesthetic experience, after which this modified horizon of expectation becomes the starting point for a new projection of meaning into the artefact – and so on and so forth.

Aesthetics and the question of quality

In this line of thinking, which is developed here with affinity to the tradition of Critical Theory, the question of *aesthetic quality* is linked to the process of aesthetic experience – that is, not to the artefact in an isolated sense, but to the dialogue to which it invites. In other words, quality is a question of the extent to which the concrete projecting dialogue brings individuals in contact with previously unknown layers of intellectual-contemplative experience and forms of sensuous-emotional experience, thus expanding their conscious resources and their insight into themselves and the world. Since we are always dealing with a specific dialogue between a specific individual and a specific work, one cannot determine in advance the potential of a work to catalyze a high-quality aesthetic experience, but it is possible to indicate the features that can initially serve as productive invitations for the dialogue.

A work with an open and undetermined structure encourages the free mobility of aesthetic experience (Eco 1981; Iser 1988; Kyndrup 1992), just as multiple meanings are an aesthetic feature that appeals to the reflective judgement. Correspondingly, it is relevant whether the way in which the work organizes imagination brings the processes of sensuous-emotional experience and intellectual reflection into a clinch, and whether its thematic

and formal potential for meaning deals with the ambivalences and the reflexivity of the modern life-world at a level of complexity that is sufficient to give the process of aesthetic experience a qualified response – or, on the contrary, whether the projecting dialogue is led into repetitive patterns in which the ambivalences and the conflictuality of the modern world are neutralized in the shape of a harmonizing aesthetic construction.

So in a perspective of aesthetic experience the crucial criterion for quality is whether the projecting dialogue with a given aesthetic artefact creates a dialectical exchange between processes of immediate experience and processes of reflection in the recipients, and expands their sensuous, emotional and intellectual capacity to competently deal with modern life in all its complexity. So the successful process of aesthetic experience unfolds a potential for empowerment in the recipient, but this potential has, as should be noticed, an unspecific, undirected character. As Rüdiger Bubner has expressed it, aesthetic experience “sets us free without establishing what for” (Bubner 1989:92).

The concept of quality is hereby linked to a modernized concept of *Bildung*.³ This concept can no longer be based on the teleological and universalizing understanding of the problematics of the subject and of identity formation from the classical tradition of *Bildung*, but must comprehend these as secular entities in process that develop and change in interaction with specific contexts. Correspondingly, a contemporary conception of *Bildung* cannot refer to the cultural forms of a social elite and an accompanying canon of works.

On the premises of cultural modernity and cultural democracy, *Bildung* is a question of human growth processes and processes of empowerment in the broadest sense – and there are no forms of culture/identity and categories of aesthetic artefacts that intrinsically have a monopoly on representing contemporary *Bildung*: the concrete processes of aesthetic experience that encourage the growth and empowerment of concrete individuals are what is important. The only general definition we can attach to contemporary processes of *Bildung* is that they always involve challenge and the subtle and reflexive reshaping of established self-conceptions and worlds of meaning, including reflection on the individual’s rootedness in a binding sociality. The successful process of aesthetic experience has special potentials as regards *Bildung*, insofar as it, more broadly than a purely cognitive learning process, has a sensibilizing effect and opens up individuals’ horizons for a complex – emotional as well as

³ ‘*Bildung*’ is a key concept in German philosophy. It conceptualizes human growth processes, which integrate the development of individuals’ sensuous, emotional and intellectual potentials and make them capable of reflecting on themselves in terms of their embeddedness in and obligation toward the social and cultural context.

intellectual – treatment of the conflicts and ambivalences of the modern life-world.

In other words, in this perspective the recent tendencies in the world of culture to erase the distinction between high art and popular culture, between non-commercial and commercial culture, and between professional artists and amateurs does not in itself and as a matter of necessity make qualitative distinctions impossible. The present condition merely means that it is no longer possible for a single cultural form or a certain artistic tradition to a priori monopolize cultural and aesthetic quality. In the processes of aesthetic experience to which aesthetic artefacts give rise, their quality depends on the potential for *Bildung* – and here it is basically inconsequential whether the particular artefact carries the art institution's seal of approval or stems from popular culture, whether it is created by a professional artist or an amateur, or whether commercial considerations have played a role in its creation. It is the receiving individuals' concrete aesthetic practice with the work that determines, for instance, whether the commercial interest prevails, inhibiting the free mobility of the aesthetic dialogue. Correspondingly, it is in the concrete dialogue that it becomes clear whether the originator of the work – professional artist or not – has achieved an aesthetic expression that challenges established conceptual and imaginative patterns and encourages the formation of new meanings in a promising way.

Aestheticization of everyday life

The projecting dialogue of aesthetic practice is however not limited to the exchange with aesthetic artefacts. It also manifests itself as a particular kind of experience in which we exchange with broader life-world contexts. In this connection, Reinhard Knodt has introduced the concept of *atmospheric projection* (Knodt 1994) in order to understand the process that extends the process of aesthetic experience to things and circumstances outside the distinct sphere of aesthetic practice, thus contributing to an aestheticization of everyday life as such. The process thereby differentiates to a certain extent the modern formation of society, but along with the aestheticization of practically everything, the art world and the cultural sector still exist as differentiated spheres for aesthetic practice in a classic sense. So rather than the divisions into spheres being totally eradicated, we see the co-existence – and continuous mutual influence – between a relatively well-defined aesthetic practice with artefacts constructed

for this specific purpose and an amorphous extension of the aesthetic-expressive rationality of experience and action into the entire collective space of meaning.

This general tendency to aestheticize is a prominent characteristic of highly developed modern societies and as such an unavoidable theme for current aesthetic theory. It calls for a concept of aesthetics that transcends the horizon of high art and opens up for the entire breadth of aesthetic formation of meaning that is created and recognized as such by current social practice. Along with this expansion, a current concept of aesthetics must be able to differentiate between and operate with the different discursive articulations of aesthetics as high art, artefacts from popular culture, and the more diffuse process of general aestheticization.⁴

In practice the tendency to aestheticize expresses itself by increasingly intensifying the forms of everyday life and equipping them with a dimension of meaning that appeals to the imagination and sensual desire. Objects of everyday life break out of their anonymous functionality and are profiled as forms, as staged, and in this way encourage the projecting, dialogical exchange of the process of aesthetic experience.

The background for this tendency to aestheticize is complex. It has developed in a dialectic between a number of processes that are closely knit in social and cultural practice but that can meaningfully be separated for analytical purposes. Firstly, it is a question of the advancing process of individualization nourished partly by the amount of rights that is increasingly being extended to individual citizens – the result of the social and cultural struggles of the past decades – and partly by the securing of the individual's material existence, which the general increase in prosperity guarantees. As an integral part of the same process, the unbinding of the individual from traditional, obligating communities engenders a comprehensive problematic of orientation and identity formation that modern individuals must constantly deal with.

In ongoing identity-seeking processes drawing on the entire register of cognitive, moral and aesthetic types of rationality, every single individual works on balancing and stabilizing his or her relations to the world on constantly changing premises. This identity work contains wide-ranging potentials for empowerment and processes of *Bildung*, but it also constitutes a considerable strain on individuals, and the main tendency is therefore for individuals to look for relief by channeling their identity work into collective frameworks.

⁴ Martin Seel has developed a similar distinction based on a philosophical-aesthetic perspective (Seel 2003).

The result of the far-reaching disintegration of the class-specific life-worlds and their tangible collective points of orientation that has characterized the process of modernization since the 1960s is that today individuals primarily orient themselves according to *life-style* delineations (Schulze 1992; Nielsen 1993). Life-style groups negatively differentiate themselves from one another and in this way create clarity in the disintegrated cultural world of modernity. As taste-based communities of aesthetic fascination, life-style groups simultaneously comply with the need for aesthetic experiences, a need that assumes a key position among the behavioural motivations of modern individuals. In other words, every single life style proposes how to create a collective orientation by way of aesthetic projection, and in this sense the aesthetic preferences of a life style can also be said to be 'genred', just as the continuous innovations in the staging of life styles are in a relation of exchange with the meaning formation of the media, fashion, art, and other aesthetic artefacts.

This tendency to aestheticize is not a universal principle for the formation of modern communities, but by virtue of its distinct channeling of the need for orientation and experiences it is becoming progressively more important in the organization of interhuman communication. However, one should not be blind to the fact that this expanding tendency towards the formation of aestheticized communities potentially contains problematic perspectives for the further development of democracy: the life-style groups' reciprocal delimitation based on their taste preferences has a particularizing quality and outlines a future perspective that is more marked by irreconcilable oppositions between ghettoized, self-absoluting life-style communities than by universalistic public interaction. On this level the tendency to aestheticize is thus inscribed in a general displacement of emphasis in social practice, the role of the citizen and civil society being in danger of getting forced into the background behind the role of the consumer and the market.

Secondly, we see a promotion of the culture industry's general tendency to aestheticize their effort to make capital out of modern individuals' identity work and their accompanying need for social orientation and sensuous experiences. Since the 1960s, the intensification of virtually everything into effective appeals to buy has been the primary growth strategy through which the culture industry has addressed these needs and at the same time contributed to shaping the articulations and self-conceptions of modern individuals. In this respect the industry is now accom-

panied by parts of the political world, which has also become aware of the political capital that can be made out of spectacular aesthetic staging, 'events', and so forth.

Thirdly, the development of mass media has played a key role in bringing about the general tendency to aestheticize. Or rather: the development and functioning of mass media are in this perspective a symptom of basic developmental characteristics of societal relations as such (Giddens 1991). In the modern space of relations, individuals are – primarily via the institutions of market and state – interlinked in chains of interdependency of a global scope. These relations do not manifest themselves in a tangible way in the life of the individual, and one of the primary tasks of modern mass media is therefore to mediate the knowledge to the individual citizens that is necessary in order for them to form an overall view and participate in the public debate in a qualified manner.

In this process of communication the mass media transform abstract relations into concrete entities that the general everyday consciousness is able to handle. This concretizing reduction of complexity also makes use of cognitive and moral discourses, but a basic operation of aesthetic practice, the transformation of intangible relations and structures of meaning into tangible ones, is fundamental to the way modern mass media process reality; and as the complexity of the social relations to be illuminated increases, so too does the importance of the aesthetic reduction of complexity – not just for media communication but for the functionality of modern society itself.

The reason for this is that the more or less globalized formal systems and institutions that regulate large parts of the social practice of modernity are entirely dependent on the *trust* the average citizen places in them (Giddens 1991), and since this trust is becoming increasingly difficult to establish in fact-oriented, cognitive discourses due to the complexity and incalculability of the international economic and political systems, aesthetics tends to take over. The factual question of reliability and sustainability in the globalized economic, political, and ecological processes on which our future depends is transformed under these conditions into the question of emotional trust in the agreeable, likeable, effective, authoritative politician or executive who through his or her sheer appearance on the screen guarantees that everything is shipshape – or can quickly be put in order if only this confidence-inspiring individual is awarded more power or more money.

This tendency to aestheticize politics implies the obvious dan-

ger that the associated appeal to individuals in their capacity as passive clients and consumers marginalizes the role of the critical, publicly reasoning citizen on which the democratic process subsists. Likewise, the central position of the media in the societal reduction of complexity gives nourishment to a 'reversal of reality' in which it is not processes and relations between citizens but rather the medial representation as such that becomes the guarantee for, for instance, the reality and the perspectives of a political project. The ultimate perspective in the tendency to aestheticize is, in other words, fatal for democracy, and hence there is good reason to continuously subject the development to critical reflection.

Having pointed out this fundamental element of danger, for the sake of proportions it is nevertheless important to maintain that so far there seems to be no basis for unequivocal diagnoses of decline, first of all because in other respects it is possible to argue that democratic public opinion functions more openly and with greater social breadth today than ever before – not least by virtue of the struggles of the new social movements for decentralized influence (Nielsen 1991). Secondly, it must be maintained that it is not aestheticization as such that threatens to subvert the position of the critical citizen. As outlined above, one of the fundamental conditions for the media's communication of experience in the modern space of relations is the transformation of intangible relations into tangible ones, and this necessarily involves an element of aesthetic reduction of complexity. The crux of the matter is whether media communication lets the aesthetic appeal to the immediate, private preferences of the individual stand alone: in which case it is a question of the recipient being addressed as a consumer and encouraged to engage in an *uninformed* relation of trust with the incalculable institutions of modernity. Or whether the aesthetic reduction of complexity is put in a productive interplay with cognitive and moral discourses' struggles with the complexity of modernity: this would involve the possibility of establishing an *informed* relation of trust with the institutions in the modern space of relations – not in the sense that everything then becomes transparent for everyday consciousness, but in the sense that the individual is addressed in its role as a citizen and is encouraged to participate and take a position as a critically reasoning and active social subject.

By analogy with the conceptualization of aesthetic artefacts by the aesthetics of reception, every single appeal of the general process of aestheticization involves an inscribed 'model recipient'

(Eco 1981; Iser 1988) that organizes the addressing of the empirical recipient. Even though this is not a deterministic relation, this model recipient plays a highly conditioning role in the projecting dialogue that empirical recipients can conduct with the appeal, and hence in the scope and quality of the aesthetic experience. It is therefore decisive for the perspectives of the various attempts to form meaning on the basis of aestheticization whether their model recipient is the self-sufficient consumer, the impotent client, or the critically reflecting citizen.

Civil society and the aestheticization of urban spaces

It is thus possible to consider the offer of a projecting exchange with the forms of everyday life emerging from the general tendency to aestheticize and the proposal for reducing complexity made by the media as an element in a comprehensive, empowering process of experience in the individual, and thus as a potential for *Bildung* in the modernized sense outlined above. But if it is merely a question of a permanent carpet bombing of public space with aesthetic appeals that solely addresses the individuals as consumers and whose invitation to dialogue does not reach further than the performed act of purchasing, then the process of aesthetic experience runs idle from the start, and the possibility of *Bildung* and empowerment fades out of sight. In this sense Wolfgang Iser is right in claiming that the comprehensive aestheticization of everyday life turns into an-aestheticization in the sense of de-sensitization and the experience of emptiness (Iser 1990; Iser 1996). But as Iser also points out, this characteristic represents a specific, instrumentalized variant of the tendency to aestheticize, not the tendency itself.⁵

In other words, there is good reason to refrain from totalizing, unequivocating definitions of the phenomenon: the aestheticization of everyday life and public space is on the whole a conflictual process in which monological and dialogical attempts at creating meaning struggle amongst themselves to achieve hegemony – and the developmental conditions of the democratic public sphere will to a large extent be marked by the relationship of dominance between these contending types of appeal. At the same time it should be maintained that the aesthetic reduction of complexity is not a universal principle for the formation of meaning: cognitive-instrumental and moral-practical discourses remain available for public, communicative interaction and can form an essential counterweight to the monological variant of aesthetic discourse.

⁵ Wolfgang Iser himself tends to totalize the tendency to aestheticize in another sense when he – in his differentiation between ‘surface aestheticization’ (criticized for its an-aestheticizing effect) and ‘depth aestheticization’ (which he considers to be a general technological, medial and epistemological condition) – determines our very access to reality as aesthetic (Iser 1996). Here, I shall refrain from further discussing this thesis and merely emphasize that epistemological constructivism does not necessarily give aesthetic discourse monopoly over the construction of meaning. Cognitive and moral-practical discourses can likewise be considered and applied as principles in constructing meaning

An actual strengthening of the democratic public sphere requires, however, active civic participation in public space. It is when the informal, unplanned encounters with strangers in a common space of practice turn into communicative exchange, into dealing dialogically with mutual differences and conflicts in regard to the regulation of common societal matters, that individuals are actually challenged in their dictums and can open themselves to new experiences and empowering learning processes. It is precisely in this kind of communicative exchange in which individuals are referred to each other's company, also in a physico-spatial sense, that a universalistic ethical formation of norms can take shape, and individuals can develop their own capacity for understanding and productively dealing with conflicts in a democratic sense in the immediate context of everyday life.

If these means by which individuals can handle – and constructively take their share of responsibility for – the conflictual social and cultural formation to which they belong are not developed in the physical encounters of everyday life in public spaces, the citizens will not be able to understand and act in a qualified manner in respect to the general, 'distant' conflicts that only manifest themselves in a mediated form in everyday life but that nonetheless have a decisive influence on it (Nielsen 2001: 120 ff.).

That individuals develop experientially based means to dialogically deal with alienation and conflicts is in other words a decisive precondition for the emergence and functioning of democratic civil society. However, the predominant tendency in the development of the public space of modern cities is pulling in an entirely different direction: instead of addressing individuals as citizens the urban space is increasingly equipped with a consumeristic appeal – throwing the individuals into a hedonistic consumer trance rather than encouraging them to interact communicatively.

Already from their start on the drawing board, newly built urban spaces are increasingly designated as consumer zones: they do not lend themselves to informal meetings, communicative interaction or other creative civic appropriations; on the contrary, in their lay-out and facilities they are functionally determined to above all optimally stimulate and service market transactions. Such functionalized urban spaces frame and condition a practice in which the individuals serve as arbitrary objects of projection for each other's diffuse daydreams and resentments and as stages for individuals to monologically present themselves through their life styles.

Hence, the functional figuration itself of the open spaces of the city does not invite civic activities to take them into possession, but nor do the pronounced aesthetic features of modern urban spaces stimulate communicative interaction and democratic learning processes. Reinhard Knodt's concept of 'atmospheric projection' can be useful in this respect, inasmuch as it conceptualizes the emergence of the quality of experience, the 'atmosphere', of our experiential exchange with everyday contexts and spaces as a projecting dialogue (Knodt 1994).

We project an expected sensuous-emotional experiential quality into the space, which is, however, immediately modified or corrected by the aesthetic characteristics of the space: its architecture, materials, light and sound qualities, openness or closedness, its interplay of balance and movement, and so forth – all of which contribute to modulating the space and consequently also the answer that our projection encounters and continues to work with. The aesthetic qualities of the space thus co-produce to a great extent the atmosphere we experience in a particular context.

In other words, there are qualitative differences between the responses which different spaces and aesthetic contexts of everyday life offer to our projections of meaning. For example, Knodt comments on the qualities of articles for everyday use in this respect: he points out that an involved, meaning-creating exchange with articles for everyday use largely depends on whether the things bear witness to their history, to their process of manufacture, and to the use that was made of them. An article of everyday use on which human practice has left its traces in the shape of patina paves the way for an atmospheric projection of historical connectedness between the producer, prior users, and us as current users. However, this kind of linking and involved experience cannot be catalyzed by things on which human situations of use do not leave their traces, but which instead merely get old and worn out (e.g., veneer or laminated articles and articles made out of plastic or chipboard). The atmospheric projection of meaning has nothing to take hold of and elaborate on in items like this, and our relationship with these things is therefore purely instrumental and devoid of perspectives with regard to our historical and sociocultural connectedness with other people.

If we transfer this reasoning to the modern city, the main tendency is that the aesthetics of plastic and chipboard predominates. The above-mentioned functional reduction of urban spaces to consumer zones manifests itself in their aesthetics as a lack of history: whether they are newly established or restored old urban

spaces, this is an aesthetics that abandons its attachment to everyday human practice in the choice of materials and that only superficially stimulates the senses through the smooth design that the international market place has made a standard everywhere.

The reconstructed Potsdamer Platz in Berlin, with its spectacular UFO aesthetics is a textbook example of this tendency. This aesthetics makes a virtue out of representing an intensified otherness in respect to everyday forms and meanings, but it only amounts to a levelled, coquettish otherness that does not invite an actual exchange, and its fascination is only meant to last until the animated commercial transaction has been carried out. These high lustre facades are devoid of all traces of connecting and obligating historical contexts of practice. This is also true for the typical reconstructed urban space, where the old houses are shined up so that all evidence that people have used them is wiped out, and they are left as de-historicized references to themselves. This aesthetics and the kind of atmospheric projection to which it appeals do not call for the involvement of the citizen in our common history and for participation in public affairs, but merely for the fleeting desire of isolated consumers to mirror themselves in the well-designed sets and their persisting promises of sheer happiness and harmony.

Conclusion: The process of aestheticization is neither unambiguous nor totalizing – it contains inner conflicts between monological and dialogical formations of meaning and it is involved in an ongoing competition with the propositions for reducing complexity formed by the cognitive and moral discourses – but as should now be evident, the consumeristic variant of aestheticization is advancing on a broad front. Inasmuch as public spaces and their predominant traces of meaning constitute crucial conditions for the development of civil society, a primary task for aesthetic practice and aesthetic theory today – based on a democratic cognitive interest – must be to critically reflect this relationship and contribute to challenging and destabilizing the ingratiating, monological postulates of harmony dominating the scene, and also to capture a hegemonic position in the public sphere for critically reflecting dialogue between citizens. This profiled struggle seems to be the current precondition for realizing the fundamental empowering potential held by the process of aesthetic experience.

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