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INTRODUCTION: AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE AND INTERPRETATION

This is a research course on aesthetic experience. As you know, all the courses in this series will explore aesthetic experience in different ways and from different angles. Now, experience is a difficult and problematic term. One of the advocates of aesthetic experience, the founder of reception theory, Hans Robert Jauss, was after a long debate compelled to develop a very complex concept of aesthetic experience as productive aesthetic praxis (*poiesis*), as a receptive praxis (*aisthesis*) and as a communicative praxis (*katharsis*), which perhaps undermines reception theory.

Undoubtedly aesthetic experience is not *one* thing, it is not a univocal concept – neither is the concept of experience itself. The ordinary uses of the concept of experience, as well as its historical development – its *Begriffsgeschichte* – defy easy summaries. In *Wahrheit und Methode* Gadamer calls the concept “one of the most obscure that we have”: “Der Begriff der Erfahrung scheint mir – so paradox es klingt – zu den unaufgeklärten Begriffen zu gehören, die wir besitzen”. That does not prevent Gadamer from exploring the essence of hermeneutic experience or – even more important to our theme in the course – relying upon his own experiences with works of art.

One of the difficulties with the concept of experience is its subjective connotations. As different thinkers as Heidegger, Adorno, Gadamer, Benjamin, Foucault and Derrida agree on this. “Perhaps experience is the element in which art dies”, Heidegger says in *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes*. Experience here is “*Erlebnis*”, lived experience. It is not *Erfahrung*. (As you know, German has two words for experience, “*Erfahrung*” and “*Erlebnis*” – as have the Scandinavian languages: “*erfaring*” and “*opplevelse*”). *Erfahrung*, related to “*fahren*”, to travel, is a journey that transforms the one making the journey, and Heidegger likes to think of his own philosophy as a “path” along which he travels. Such a journey is not without dangers, as the Latin root of experience reveals: *experiri*, contains *periculum*, peril, serious danger. Although Heidegger was also sceptical of various philosophical uses of *Erfahrung*, he – much like

Adorno, and for that matter, Dewey – favoured an experience in which we undergo something at the same time as we are acting. “To undergo an experience of something”, Heidegger says in *Unterwegs zur Sprache*, “means that this something befalls us, strikes us, comes over us, overwhelms and transforms us”.

Thus Heidegger is not against experience in general. The same goes for Adorno, in many ways Heidegger’s antipode. Although being hostile to the *lebensphilosophical* connotations of the concept (*Erlebnis*) and also of positing experience as fundamental, experience can be said to be the central concept not only in Adorno’s aesthetic theory, but in his thought as such. In Adorno’s aesthetic writings there are many examples taken from his own aesthetic experience. He generally characterizes aesthetic experience in mimetic terms, as *mitvollziehen*, *nachvollziehen*, *nachfabren* (to reaccomplish, follow along). To avoid subjectivism or a one-sided reception theory, he talks – with Nietzsche – about “*Erschütterung vom Werk*” – being shattered by the work. He does not tone down the subjective, spontaneous, element of experience; on the contrary, he emphasizes it, to be an element of the sensuous, somatic, personal and even idiosyncratic. But the more this subjective pole of experience is emphasized, the more objectivity has to be reinforced. For Adorno aesthetic experience is both wholly dependent on a genuine, spontaneous subjective response, and rigorously determined by the primacy of the object (*Vorrang des Objekts*). “Real aesthetic experience”, says Adorno, “requires self-abnegation” and submission to “the objective constitution of the artwork itself”.

Gadamer expresses himself much in the same way: He insists that “the work of art has its true being in the fact that it becomes an experience changing the person experiencing it”. This experience, he says, “is not the subjectivity of the person who experiences it, but the work itself”.

For this emphatic, drastic transformational experience, there are many versions: ontological experience (Heidegger), absolute experience (Scholem on Benjamin), *an* experience (Dewey), inner experience (Bataille), Foucault’s *se déprendre de soi même*, the abnegation of self or self-laceration. Some are trying to overcome the subject/object opposition, others, as Adorno, are trying to emphasize both elements so strongly that the extremes touch each other.

To appeal to one’s own experience can be both an authoritarian and an exclusive gesture. But experience is not necessarily self-affirmation. It can be, as Foucault would say, self-laceration. And this is the condition for others to appropriate ones experience. In an essay which is central to our theme, “The Limits of Limit-Experience”, Martin Jay cites Foucault: “An experience is, of

course, something one has alone; but it cannot have its full impact unless the individual manages to escape from pure subjectivity in such a way that others can – I won't say re-experience exactly – but at least cross paths with it or retrace it.”

What this series of courses is concerned with, is not only to explore diverse forms the concept of aesthetic experience can have and the theoretical functions of these forms. The ideological sting, so to say, of the theme, is to point to the importance of aesthetic experience when dealing with texts, works of art, nature. It is not always obvious that aesthetic experience plays a part in aesthetic disciplines. This can be the case both for more factually orientated and more theoretically orientated research. Research can be so poor in experience that one wonders what started it all, what its interest really was. At least it is well hidden. Perhaps it is due to lack of affinity – which seems incomprehensible when art is concerned. But more often I think this reticence is caused by the fear of not being sufficiently scientific or methodological. Experience becomes a remainder or is wholly excluded.

The situation is not always better in aesthetics. Aesthetic theory can be completely devoid of experience. I am not only thinking of its often abstract, dry and dreary character. For there are many pitfalls here. For aesthetics to become experiential, it is not enough to reel off examples. And aesthetics does not necessarily become close to experience when thematizing aesthetic experience.

This of course also points to the importance of having experience in the ordinary sense of the word, which was the Greek concept of experience: the familiar, well acquainted knowledge of the particular or peculiar. This is not to say that experience increases or becomes more authentic as the years go by. If we aged academics should succumb to the temptation that we automatically are the most experienced, we should remind ourselves of the young Walter Benjamin, who launched a new, “metaphysical” (as he said) experience against the established one and that of the adults. Or we should perhaps take note of Oscar Wilde's almost Popperian insight that experience is the name one gives to one's mistakes. But be that as it might – it is not an exaggeration to say, when it comes to art and the humanities, that without experience, there is only idle interpretation.

This leads me to the more restricted theme of this year's course: “Aesthetic Experience *and Interpretation*”. The relation between aesthetic experience and interpretation has many aspects. A central one, from a more phi-

losophical point of view, but with clear consequences for aesthetics, is the fact that the concept of interpretation seems, in some directions in aesthetics which lead the fashion, to eschew the concept of aesthetic experience. The concept of interpretation simply replaces experience, because, as for Arthur Danto, the appeal to aesthetic experience is centered on first-person phenomenology, and, moreover, does not keep up with actual developments in art itself.

I hope we will have the opportunity to discuss this demise of aesthetic experience; whether it is – as I think it is – an anaesthetizing of aesthetics, which perhaps also includes an anaesthetizing of art. In Danto and others it comes to a totalization of interpretation.

I think the seminar will show how the constellation between aesthetic experience and interpretation goes both ways. We will have examples of how interpretation influences experience, and how experience can start new interpretations. Art or cultural products are themselves a shaping of experience, so experience of them is experience *of* experience. Certainly the relation or intertwining between aesthetic experience and *historical* experience is a core point in the course. We can see from the abstracts sent in that the relation between aesthetic experience and interpretation will be discussed from at least four perspectives: an historical, an analytical, a phenomenological (in a broad sense), and a critical one.