

RECONSTRUCTING AESTHETICS

edited by Agnes Heller and Ferenc Fehér



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Reconstructing Aesthetics

Writings of the Budapest School

EDITED BY

Agnes Heller

and

Ferenc Fehér

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1

The Necessity and the Irreformability of Aesthetics

FERENC FEHÉR AND AGNES HELLER

I

Aesthetics as an independent philosophical discipline is the product of bourgeois society. This sentence does not maintain either the nonsensical thesis that philosophers prior to bourgeois society did not meditate upon the existence and nature of art, of the 'aesthetic', of the 'aesthetic sphere', nor does it deny that from Plotinus to the various Christian ontologies there existed systems of thought which, departing from different premises, characterized the world after the fashion of the aesthetic, which created a quasi-aesthetics out of ontology and thereby, we may say, produced a philosophical aesthetics as well. Aesthetics, however, as a relatively separate part of a philosophical system, which is unimaginable without the whole (the system) is a child of bourgeois society, and at the same time its existence is tied to the recognition that bourgeois society *in statu nascendi* is essentially problematic. Thus we have circumscribed the period of its birth. It is the fermenting crisis of the mid-eighteenth century that brings forth its first representative *oeuvres*; while the age of the revolution, its conclusion and the subsequent process of intellectual summarization complete the formula.

The first among the factors which 'provoked' the unfolding of 'separate' aesthetics as a specialized discipline of philosophy, was the emergence of a particular activity oriented towards beauty, and its objectification. This activity has an independent function, that is, it is not a by-product of other types of activities, not a mediating vehicle of various ideologies, not a maid-servant of theology and religious belief, and not an articulation of

2 Ferenc Fehér and Agnes Heller

communal self-consciousness, but independent of all these (though perhaps expressive of some of them), it is a self-reliant activity.

Here, of course, two periods have to be distinguished. In the first, and, chronologically earlier period the detachment of all 'high cultures' from all types of everyday and productive activities, and the separation of the artist, the 'specialized artisan' (even if a highly respected one) from the other social strata is simultaneous with or, more precisely, is a part of, the general development of civilization.

The second is actually the period of the problem under discussion here and it involves the universalization of bourgeois activities based on the predominance of purposive rationality. In a certain sense this age is the result of a development in which 'production according to the measure of beauty' — in Marx's opinion a fundamental potentiality inherently possessed by productive man — not only becomes obsolete, but becomes definitely hostile to the spirit of the age, to the rational spirit of computable effectivity. This is the age of bourgeois society *sensu stricto* when from within high culture a special 'branch of production' must be yielded in order to compensate for beauty vanished from the world.

This functional independence of aesthetics can be evaluated negatively as it was done by Rousseau in *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, in an entirely utopian manner, intended to recapture the independence of aesthetics and to dissolve objectified aesthetics into the spontaneous homogeneity of popular life void of all mediations. The functionally independent activity may be defined through its connection with other activity functions and then directly inserted into a system, as was done by Kant, when he placed judgement, the 'organ' of aesthetical activity, as a mediator between cognitive and practical reason. Finally, a role of eminence may be bestowed upon aesthetics (more precisely, upon the historical period most adequate for human activities giving rise to the aesthetic sphere) within a general philosophy of history, as was the case with Hegel who conceived of Greek antiquity as the aesthetical epoch *sui generis*. In all these and many other cases the entry of aesthetics, and of aesthetic activity into the philosophical system (regardless whether the latter is elaborated with the strictest systematicity or is coherent only by 'being-in-itself') and its relative functional independence within the system is, in any case, the acknowledgment of the status quo; namely the manifestation of the fact that the objectification of beauty is in one way or the other a *separate type of activity*, which, exactly because of its being separated within the general system of activities, is in need of an explanation.

The second factor is the lack of the *sensus communis* based on 'organic communities' developing 'organically' in bourgeois society. We need not demonstrate in detail the existence of *sensus communis* with regard to the past as we could not do it within the given limits anyway. Suffice it to mention its antithesis; the modern bourgeois epoch that was boundlessly individualized and emancipated from the fetters of all canons and prescriptions, but which in this emancipation became the world-historical epoch of a reckless and supercilious subjective taste directly provoking by its 'vices' the appearance of philosophical aesthetics, as the arbiter in chaos.

The detachment of art from everyday life is the third factor in the emergence of philosophical aesthetics as a specialized branch. This means that the life-evidence of art vanishes and its specific social function has to be given a foundation; that is, the greatest paradox has to be provided with rational foundation. This paradox can be formulated in the following way. On the one hand, art and beauty are accepted with increasingly less tolerance in the system of needs of an atomized and specialized everyday life void of communities and of public activity. Art is *ipso facto* non-atomistic, but intersubjective, non-specialized and approachable without special skill or knowledge; and common since communicable. Through its communicability, art creates human contact; it constitutes an ideal community and a kind of public life. Yet, on the other hand, the need for art does exist, and exactly as a need for a 'counter-image' of a given everyday life, as the need for forlorn totality, for the forlorn public and collective character of life, and as the need for the cathartic experience: the 'elevation' above alienated everyday life. The attempts to solve this paradox constitute the recurrent fundamental motive of the philosophical aesthetics of the last two centuries.

In the theoretical foundation of the life-evidence of art, the main preoccupation of philosophical aesthetics, the attempt at the solution of the 'fundamental paradox' assumed new dimensions. The first of them is this. The circumstance has to be explained also theoretically, why the work of art, the activity oriented towards the objectification of beauty, assumes amidst the ever-increasing alienation of life-relations a specifically new function: that of the conservation of the 'species values' (*gattungsmässige Werte*). Of course, art as a depository of the 'species values' instead of life, a life becoming increasingly void of values is a highly problematic achievement of a new period of world history which has to justify even the *raison d'être* of such depositories by the help of

philosophical aesthetics. This can be done only by multiplying the fundamental artistic paradox, as the conservation of the 'species values' is a very ambiguous function. On the one hand, depository is, *per definitionem*, a value preserver, on the other, a substitute for life. Hence the often cited Rilke postulate: *Du mußt dein Leben ändern*. The work of art, however, conserves (or at least it may conserve) the atomization of life just as well. The work itself is nothing but a 'beautiful appearance' which, with the passing of the effects, may just as well reintroduce us into life, feeding into the recipient the false feeling of assurance of having fulfilled his duty in the intermezzi of reception, as, according to the general postulate, it may guide him out of it, in the direction of a real transformation. That is why works of art (and the complementary philosophical-aesthetic theories) that radically negate modern bourgeois society declare war upon this claim of totality — again in an ambiguous way and reproducing the paradox. As a rule, the appearance of totality (the appearance-totality) can be denied only together with the *claim* of totality, more precisely in a way that this claim is transformed into a bare *ought*, with which the existing is pinned to the wall.

The second dimension of the multiplication of the fundamental paradox is the dilemma of the historicity versus validity of the work of art, so clearly exposed by the famous remark by Marx about the paragon-like character of the Homeric epic poems that it needs no more details.¹ Only one additional remark is necessary here: the *work of art* as one of the most important battlefields of the interpretation of the validity of values demonstrates in itself why it is precisely philosophical aesthetics that is developed by bourgeois society.

Finally, the universalization of commodity production creates a new situation for the work of art. The artistic reception obeys the regularities of the commodity realization, that is it is realized in terms of supply and demand, accidental to the structure of the work of art, and the fact or even the widespread character of the reception betrays but very little about its quality (its profundity, cathartic impact, its positive function or the function of a 'substitute-for-life', etc.). This circumstance requires in any case the philosophical interpretation of the impact of the work of art, as an act constituting the work of art.

II

Another paradox: just because the task of aesthetics is the foundation of

the specific function of the aesthetical activity (creation) and reception, it has never been — from the mid-eighteenth century onwards continuously — ‘pure’ aesthetics any more (in the sense as the line leading from the *Poetics* of Aristotle to Boileau’s catalogue of canonic regulations was constituted by ‘pure’ aesthetics, ‘pure’ ones, which articulated and systematized aesthetical judgements free of all kinds of sociological elements). Aesthetics has been from this time on a kind of general philosophy which evaluates and interprets the ‘aesthetic sphere’, the ‘aesthetics’, the ‘objectified beauty’, arts within this framework on the basis of general ideological and general theoretical preferences inferred from its own system. The answer to the question, ‘What is the place of the aesthetic (of the objectified beauty, of art, of arts) in life, in history?’ is inseparably connected with the response given to the second question: ‘What is the place of the aesthetical in the philosophical system?’

With the exception of Kant, who took the standpoint that beauty — as opposed to knowledge and morality — has no metaphysics, only a critique (as a consequence, he formulated the complex of aesthetics exclusively from the viewpoint of reception), every significant aesthetics is at the same time a type of philosophy of history as well, from Hegel through Schelling to Kierkegaard and Lukács. Historiosophical foundation is no ‘alien body’ in the organism of these aesthetical systems, no ‘prolegomena’, which will be followed by proper explication. The historiosophical character, that is the recognition of the problematical character of the bourgeois present — to put the minimum formulation of the critical attitude — lays a foundation for the two constituents which were mentioned previously as the indispensable substantial-functional characteristics of modern aesthetical systems and those of modern works of art: historicity and the task of the defence of the species values.

It ensues from the above train of thought that aesthetics always ‘locates’ art (or the arts) and activity oriented towards their creation in the hierarchy of the type of activities and of objectifications, and this ‘location’ is the function of the relation of the thinker in question to bourgeois society. Does he consider it to be the untranscendable, even if deeply problematic, climax of human development, or is he striving for its real or mystical transcendence? The decision of the young Schelling — placing the aesthetical on the summit of philosophical hierarchy — was in close connection with his idea regarded by Marx as ‘the sincere thought of his youth’, which borrowed its power and panorganic ontological vehemence in the case of the philosopher, not at all committed politically, from the great experiment having taken place ‘outside his philosophy’ oriented to

the transcendence of the bourgeois hierarchy, to establish an organic-collectivistic society. The decision of the aged Hegel, however, which places the realm of the aesthetic in his *Aesthetics* — in spite of his admiration felt for the work of art — at a very low level on the pilgrimage of the Absolute Spirit, is no simple repetition of the verdict of early Enlightenment, namely, that aesthetical perception is nothing but a *perception confuse*. This is the formulation of the lessons of a world-historical crisis situation: the age of Greek Antiquity, the proper period of the aesthetic, has irrevocably been passed, simultaneously its place in the hierarchy of the type of activities has been reduced to a lower rank. This 'degradation' of the aesthetic does not at all mean a lack of 'the aesthetical sense' with a gigantic thinker, but a decision of historiosophical character.

Here, however, a restriction and a distinction seem to be necessary. Every aesthetical theory of an historiosophical character locates the arts in the system of human activities, but not each of them creates a hierarchy within the system. The hierarchic or non-hierarchic character depends on the historiosophical perspective. In the present, a perspective which adopts the standpoint of the *Entzauberung der Welt*, of depriving the world, either in a bitter or in an affirmative manner, of its aesthetic magic, which takes sides — either in a disillusioned or in a technocratically self-complacent way — with the degradation of the aesthetic, is just as much imaginable (such a position has actually been formulated) as the opposite one, for which the choice, the hierarchy in itself, is a scandal. Hierarchy is, however, unavoidable for aesthetics within its own world. To its most general question: What is art, and what is it good for? various responses are given by the works of art as 'individuals' and as groups — that is, as genres. There is the obligation to choose among them, to create a hierarchy of the answers.

Therefore if aesthetics, as an historiosophical discipline, is faithful to its own principles, then it has to order the various arts into a kind of hierarchy according to its ever-given conception, consequently the aesthetical value of various arts, although not always in an explicit form, will depend on the philosophical system. Aesthetics of an historiosophical origin and character implies, then, not only the value-free and sociological statement and interpretation according to which certain periods are capable of creating works representing historically valid species values in certain branches of art for some reason or other, while other periods are — again because of pertinent concrete causes — incapable of creating such in the

given branches of art. Nor does it merely catalogue the 'rival' branches these periods may develop. Genuinely historiosophically-spirited aesthetics is haughty enough, that is it is convinced enough of the value of its general ordering principles to create a hierarchy of arts and branches of arts only by creating a hierarchy of historical epochs. Lyric poetry occupied in Hegel's system the first rank of the hierarchy exactly because it is the infant of developed subjectivity, completed inwardness, namely, bourgeois society. And Hegel is — in spite of all the critical accents, despite his clear and bitter insight into this world — an evolutionist, who considers bourgeois society to be the proper place for the homecoming of the Absolute Spirit. Lukács, on the other hand, is indifferent towards lyric poetry — just as much in his youth as in his maturity and old age. He places higher the so-called objective genres: epic and drama, precisely because epic and drama are the manifestations of the crisis of a world situation, at the same time its victims as well, and they testify by their own fate the thesis which is one of the most important purposes of the philosophers: capitalism is a mortal enemy of the objectifications of culture. The same statement cannot be proclaimed — at least not so unambiguously, with not such an explicit evidence — in regard to lyric poetry and music. On the other hand, that is why Adorno proves to be so 'music-centred', so susceptible to lyric poetry, and so silent before the great 'objective' genres. He, who hated capitalism, did not acknowledge a cultural period worthy of developed individuality prior to it, and considered the attempts at surpassing the given world, 'the transcendence of bourgeois coolness', to be partly an elevated, partly a futile and dangerous illusion. Thus, he could find in these great genres of inwardness the intellectual and sensuous gratification rendered by this world just as much as the world's passionate critique. The elevated hierarchical position of lyric poetry and music was an historiosophical judgement of 'negative dialectics'.

Let us follow historiosophical aesthetics *ad absurdum*, up to the final point of its judgements and prejudices. Its hierarchic decision 'places' not only the various arts and branches of arts according to the premises of the philosophy of history: it is the given historiosophical principle that decides among artists and the turns of the philosophy of history often mean a change in the assessment of the concrete work of art. The negative example, Lessing's flat refusal of the *tragédie classique*, originates obviously from theoretical preconceptions. But the positive instance, that of the

warmest predilection is of an historiosophical origin to a no lesser degree: Kierkegaard's verdict that anoints *Don Giovanni* the prince and paragon of all music is tied to the historiosophical — in his case it is more precise to say quasi-historiosophical — decision by which he 'locates' the aesthetic state in the hierarchy of life (giving thereby incidentally a radically reverse value accent to the conception of sensuality borrowed from Feuerbach) which was going to be the inspiring muse of the Wagnerian music. It is similarly an historiosophical preconception that drives Novalis to injustice in his critique of *Wilhelm Meister* (although injustice paired with an extraordinarily deep insight), it is the change of the historiosophical conception again that moves Friedrich Schlegel to change his previous assessment of this work. Finally, Lukács draws with a calm daring the final and untenably intolerant conclusion of a very ancient principle of historiosophically-spirited aesthetics. In his correspondence with Béla Balázs, the Hungarian poet and aesthetician of film, Lukács argues in the following manner: Since my philosophy of history has changed, Tolstoy has taken the place of Dostoyevsky, Fielding that of Sterne, Balzac that of Flaubert, in my assessment of art.

III

The theory of art of bourgeois society, philosophical aesthetics, can only be grasped in its *differentia specifica*, if it is compared with the theory of art of pre-capitalist periods. The first result of the comparison is the following: the theories of art of epochs antecedent to bourgeois society (which are not aesthetics in the above sense) mostly regarded artistic ability as a *special* capacity, but did not regard art (the 'aesthetical', the 'objectified beauty', etc.) as a domain or sphere of life to which special functions are assigned. Suffice it to mention the notion of *kalokagathia*: beauty is inherent in life, accordingly undifferentiated (and often undifferentiable) from greatness, from morality, from regulation of behaviour, from religious ideas, etc. As a consequence of this undifferentiated mixture there was no theoretical need to lay a philosophical foundation for art. This was just as much superfluous with regard to aesthetic judgement: aesthetic judgement was founded empirically by a generally existent and generally acknowledged *sensus communis*. Another paradox: the value judgements of an empirical *sensus communis*, unconscious of its own philosophical foundation and not

needing it, were more profoundly based than the aesthetical choices of the modern age, made, as a rule, the more developed, the more 'organized' a society is, increasingly by 'connoisseurs'.

This statement, of course, cannot hold true without certain qualifications. First of all, today we generally do not accept the argumentation with which the art theory of a given age (most certainly expressing a *sensus communis*) laid the foundation for its judgements. Who would accept now as the cause of the difference in artistic quality the factor mentioned by Aristotle, namely, that superior people represent superior deeds, while inferior people represent inferior deeds? Second, the present recipient chooses and forms his hierarchy according to his own preferences of a *Weltanschauung*, namely the preferences of the *Weltanschauung* of his own age. Consequently he does not accept necessarily the value hierarchy of a once-existing *sensus communis*. To mention only the best-known counter-example: while admiration for Raphael reached its highest point of exaltation with such connoisseurs as Winckelmann and Goethe, the whole post-Romantic period is pre-Raphaelite, irrespective of how in fact Raphael's works were appreciated at this time. Finally, not even the very few available data demonstrate a monolithic uniformity within the once existing *sensus communis*. Euripides — so highly appreciated by Aristotle — was, for instance, very rarely awarded a first prize by the audience of the theatrical festivities in Athens. In the final analysis, that epoch approved (since it did not reject) the high opinion of Sophocles, who on the occasion of the death of his younger fellow playwright let the Chorus appear on stage in the veil of mourning. Later on, it accepted the judgement of Aristotle, but not even the most homogeneous *sensus communis* was exempt from certain inner conflicts, preparing thereby the 'dispersion', that is the infinite variety of the judgement of taste.

The decisive argument, however, with which we can argue for the infallibility, or rather for the durability of the judgements of the once-existing *sensus communis* is the circumstance, not to be underestimated, that in a very great number of instances even the hierarchy was accepted by posterity. The decisive argument here is the following: the value hierarchy formulated by the once-existing *sensus communis* may have been changed, but the domain of values never changed. All the painters who played a part in the hierarchy drawn up in Vasari's book, may be rearranged on the value scale, but *they* will be put on the list, no others. This statement is valid both in a positive and negative sense: everyone who had been taken into account by the *sensus communis* known to us

finds adherents in an ever-given posterity; and no one, of whom we know that had been unanimously refused by his own age, has ever returned into the circulation of aesthetical experiences. (Vasari is therefore a unique source, since from him we can hear about the refusals too.) Of course, for the sake of logical completeness, the annihilation of works of art and that of documents recording artistic judgements, our fragmentary knowledge in regard to them should also be taken into account. Thus it is always conceivable that we may discover a work of art which was not appreciated by its own epoch, but which becomes highly esteemed in the present. Practically, however, all such discoveries verified at least the dominant canon in those cases when we have been left no recorded judgement about the concrete work of art in question.

The status of the concrete judgements incorporated in the aesthetics of the bourgeois age is entirely different. First of all, they are not the most superior, most 'refined' expressions of a universally dominant *sensus communis*, but the results of an individual ideological decision and of the postulates of a particular philosophical system. Second, as a consequence of the previously mentioned situation — and not because of the lack of capacities of the modern critic of art — modern philosophical aesthetics contains at least just as much 'fallacy' as 'truth', in the simple sense that during the process in which 'object content' became antiquated and 'reality content' emerged, a major part of their judgements have been refuted. The two concepts were invented and distinguished by Walter Benjamin. 'Object content' (*Sachgehalt*) is the dimension of meaning of the work of art, which adheres most closely to the present, grows out of it, 'tells' something to it. 'Reality content' (*Wahrheitsgehalt*) is more continuous, it is conceivable — at least in principle — in any given later epoch, independently of the concrete environment, it is connected with the general evolution of the human species. Of course, this evolution has a 'quasi-natural' being-in-itself only for a naturalistic epistemology. This is a *constructed* continuity created from the standpoint of the present. Therefore every judgement which discovers a certain 'reality content' beyond the 'object content' which is discovered in the work and which is bound up to the present of the genesis of the work, runs a general risk: there is no guarantee that the constructed continuity will be a continuity possessing real existence, that its discovered 'reality content' will enter the unbroken concatenation of artistic pleasure and will not simply remain the recipient's subjective and transitory judgement of taste.

Moreover, it is an exception if modern aesthetic judgement meets

universal acknowledgement, if it is not a direct sign of opportunism. (Whoever would have thought anything like this in the case of Aristotle?) The second, more remarkable, more betraying circumstance is that the judgements — the positive judgements just as much as the negative ones — have to be explicated by the modern aesthetician. While either in its own age or in the present it would have been senseless to demand an explanation of why Vasari regarded Michelangelo as the greatest artist, why he appreciated Giorgione, later, however, regardless of whether we accept or refuse them, we can understand certain standpoints (to mention the negative ones first) only with an explanation. This is so, for example, in the case of Lessing's rejecting attitude towards Racine, Rousseau's annihilating opinion of the French garden or the *Misanthrope*, Lukács's negative criticism of Kafka. And the situation is similar with the positive examples: the rediscovery of certain extremists of mannerism, such as in the case of Arcimboldi and Gorgonzola, was the outcome of the intellectual reproduction of a world-historical experience, in which experience and interpretation are inseparable.

No doubt, ideological, religious, ethical and other preferences played a significant role in the theory of art of pre-capitalist periods transformed into aesthetical standpoints, or 'decisions'. In this respect it would appear that the situation does not differ from the historiosophical primacy over aesthetics of the bourgeois period. Apart from the fact, however, that the term 'historiosophical primacy' is hardly interpretable in the whole pre-capitalist era which had been characterized by a lack of historicity, the ideological, ethical, religious, etc. preferences were not 'philosophical postulates', but themselves parts of the *sensus communis* and in no way individual preferences. The refusal and the prohibition of the pictorial representation of the deity in the whole world of the Old Testament (just as much as in the case of the Mohammedan prohibition stemming from different roots) was a real religious preference and prescription as against the aesthetical sphere. But it was partly a collective preference and prohibition, partly one which did not lay claim to the right of a 'purely aesthetical value judgement.' The Bible did not intend to demonstrate aesthetically that all sculptural representations of Baal were 'ugly'. And when in exceptional cases aesthetical value judgements of general philosophical origin contradicted *sensus communis*, as in the case of Plato's negative evaluation of Homer, the judgement rested on generally accepted ideological-ethical premises, namely on ones that bore the character of *sensus communis*. In the given case the premise of the

judgement was, 'art should instruct to the good'. So at least the judgement itself needed no further interpretation.

It would be, however, a misconception of the situation and an utter act of discrimination against philosophically dominated aesthetics if we left out of consideration the following contradiction. The frequency of 'misjudgements' or of such value judgements which are entirely unacceptable for the later recipient of any ideology (or for that matter, for a contemporary recipient with a different *Weltanschauung*) is only characteristic of philosophical aesthetics in so far as it is forming a judgement about contemporary art or about a work of art which is being linked directly to its own period. At the same time only this aesthetics is capable of conceiving (even if it sometimes misconceives) the art of antecedent periods, since this is the only aesthetics capable of grasping the 'reality content', once the 'object content' has already become antiquated. The reason is obvious. The vision of art of pre-capitalistic ages, lacking any kind of a historical conception, appreciated the works of past epochs, if it was confronted with them at all, on the basis of its own *sensus communis*. It could by no means differentiate between the 'object content', which faded out with the period that generated it, and the 'reality content' emerging from behind the veil of this antiquation.

For the periods in question and their art theory only that art was meaningful which belonged to their life, or only those works of the past which corresponded to their *sensus communis*. Greek gods had to be assimilated so that the Homeric epic poetry and the sculpture of Athens could become an interpretable art and a model for Rome to follow. The most direct 'object content', the religious prescriptions and norms regulating the system of customs had to be present so that art as a complex of experience could function. This circumstance displays the reason for the superiority of modern aesthetical theories, in spite of their frequent 'errors': they recognized the 'message' of 'reality content' behind the faded-out 'object content' of past ages, while conceptions of art of pre-capitalistic ages, which identified their own 'object content' with the 'reality content' (or, more precisely, were never able to distinguish between them) could discover nothing in other 'object contents'; or could do so only where this 'object content' became part and parcel of their own world through some special adaptation. For the aesthetical theories of the bourgeois historical period — as a consequence of the ineradicable mediating role of the individual-ideological standpoint — 'reality content' does not appear 'organically' in 'object content'. This means primarily that