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On the use of the aesthetic for a democratic culture: a ten-point appeal

Josef Früchtl

Preliminary remark

The phrase 'use of the aesthetic' raises a first question before we even start: to which aesthetic concept does this manner of speaking refer? The title I have chosen for my deliberations entails (or would like to entail) a provocation which can only have an impact if the aesthetic is comprehended as a particular and dominant concept. The second major question here – what is the relationship between the aesthetic and politics? – in turn implies another question: what kind of politics? The title gives us a clue: the use (of the aesthetic) can be interpreted as a link, albeit only to politics in a democratic form. So, two key questions. And now, ten steps for answering them.

1. Between provocation and ingratiation

Addressing the (political) use of the aesthetic means taking up an old argument between two schools of thought. For the one side, this manner of speaking mounts to a provocation, even a sacrilege, an outrage against something holy. Such talk is the equivalent of outing oneself (unwittingly and nowadays even proudly) as a philistine, for whom the most fitting punishment is genteel contempt. For the other side of the two schools of thought, this manner of speaking amounts to a victory, a triumph of new and practical and especially economic thinking. However, the victor in this triumph is plagued by an enduring suspicion. When aestheticians or, in more traditional terms, lovers of the beautiful and admirers of the sublime, whose whole *raison d'être* is an embracing of the special, when such people suddenly claim that their deeds and the goals behind their actions have a utility, it inevitably looks like importunate aspiration towards a proximity to the former opponent, the camp of utility. It smacks of ingratiation.

Addressing the use of the aesthetic thus initially means hovering between provocation and ingratiation. For now, I would just like to say: provocation is definitely intended, ingratiation certainly is not. Ingratiation does not represent a serious option in this case (or presumably in any case), a fact made immediately obvious by its close proximity to satire. For aestheticians singing a serious song of praise to utility would ultimately be indistinguishable from management consultants and rationalisation experts. And it is easy to imagine what would happen if a management consultancy were to take on the institution of art. Relevant economic proposals, for example for a city orchestra, might then be as follows. The four oboists have long periods of inactivity during the concert. The piece should therefore be shortened and the work shared out more equally among all members of the orchestra. Or: in some movements there is too much repetition. The musical score should thus be thoroughly reworked. If all superfluous passages were to be deleted, the concert would no longer take two hours, but just twenty minutes, meaning that the interval could also be eliminated. Historical records prove that such proposals have not always been satirical, but sometimes quite serious. No doubt, as portrayed in the film *Amadeus*, Mozart really did smile in disbelief after the premiere of his opera *The Abduction from the Seraglio* when Emperor Joseph II, his benefactor and employer, told him that it had too many notes in it or, more bluntly, was too long. His Imperial Highness had fallen asleep in the middle of the piece, proof that it failed to meet the standards in place (both then and now) for amusement.

2. Modernity and autonomy

Ingratiation would thus be ridiculous. Yet provocation is inevitable. Aesthetic and art history has been an integral part of the success story of Modernity for two hundred years. In sociological terms, this means an integral part of the dynamics within a historical process of societal differentiation. An impressive series of theorists, from Kant and especially Hegel via Max Weber and Georg Simmel to Jürgen Habermas and Niklas Luhmann, agrees that, firstly, a new awareness of history has been

asserting itself since the end of the 18th century, future-oriented and centred around an obligation to progress, and that, secondly, the institutions of science, law, politics, economics and so on are increasingly gaining their independence. Specific rules apply within each; and what is true within one sphere on no account automatically applies within the others. The potential for mutual influence is thus limited. The potential, for example, for politics or economics to influence science may still exist to a certain extent, and yet different fundamental rules govern these different spheres. According to Habermas and Luhmann, whereas politics is primarily concerned with power, and economics with cash flow and profit, science is primarily aimed at truth, at knowledge. As a practical consequence, this can mean that the search for truth is consciously or – harder to detect – unconsciously subject to policymakers. But science would abruptly cease to be science if it were to relinquish its guiding principle, its orientation to truth. The term central to this breaking apart of the different spheres is that of societal autonomy. In this respect, Modernity is the epoch which has not only politically aided the breakthrough of individual autonomy, with the French Revolution, but which is also societally aiding the breakthrough of institutional autonomy.

And one of these institutions is art. Fundamentally, it is no longer subject to criteria which are foreign to art. A work of art, its quality, its value, is no longer determined by the institution of morality, for example, which in Europe used to mean the governors of Christian religion, nor by the institution of politics, formerly the nobility and royalty, nor by the institution of economics, personified in the early bourgeoisie by wealthy merchants. Whether or not a work of art is art, is now determined solely by the institution of art itself, in other words by that various and diffuse discussion group made up of artists, critics, museum proprietors, professors and all those who count themselves as connoisseurs and lovers of art.

3. On German culture

The breaking apart of the artistic and scientific spheres was immensely significant, particularly in Germany. As the history books have long taught us, the country was less economically and politically developed at the end of the 18th century than its Western European counterparts. It is certainly true to say that intellectual contemporaries did not view their situation as progressive. While England was busy becoming an internationally oriented word trade power, on the back of an economic revolution, and France was undergoing a dramatic political revolution, Germany remained economically stuck in traditional structures and politically stuck in small-state despotism. When Schiller, one of the rebels among the German intellectuals at the time, travelled from Stuttgart to Mannheim for the premiere of his first work *The Robbers* on 13th January 1782, he had to cross a state border. For a regimental doctor like Schiller this meant first obtaining permission from above, in the shape of by Karl Eugen, Duke of Württemberg, for whom an obligation to submission and courtly luxury (leading to corresponding debts) typically went hand in hand with such permission. Not even enlightened rulers like Frederick II of Prussia or Joseph II of Austria made an exception (Peter-André Alt, 17).

Against this background, the familiar pattern of complementary culture began to form in Germany. It adhered to the following formula: pessimism of action and optimism of spirit, political-practical resignation and theoretical-aesthetical inspiration, poorness in deeds and richness in thoughts. To an extent, philosophical German Idealism and Weimar Classicism caught up with the revolution in spirit, yet they never demolished the specifically German tendency towards inwardness. 'Bildung' and 'Kultur' became German terms which are impossible or at least very difficult to translate properly into other languages. They are just too steeped in pathos and significance, inadequately captured by terms such as 'upbringing', 'education' or 'civilisation'. From a German point of view, anyone can be civilised, but not everyone can be cultured. The former is concerned with material wealth, technology and grooming, in other words it is an attribute which can be bought and strategically applied; the latter, however, is an attribute which has to be painstakingly acquired. As shown by Georg Bollenbeck and more recently by Wolf Lepenies, the theory of a German *Sonderweg* within the history of Europe can also be illustrated at this level.

4. The dialectic of culture and its sophistication

Admittedly, the concept of culture in the bourgeois interpretation that developed was not, in this

simple and compensatory function, how the former representatives of culture had imagined it. For them it had far more of a sophisticated twist, with an assigned significance which Hegel described using the term dialectic. And yet the firstling rights here are held by Schiller, who was more than ten years older than Hegel. In his famous *On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters*, he describes beauty within a socio-political framework from the outset. He was the first to attribute a decidedly political function to aesthetics, or deliberations about beauty, art and the sublime. Schiller justifies without exception any attempt by a people, by whom he means the French, to reshape a state instinctively formed, accepted without question and governed by traditions into a moral state geared to autonomy as a form of self-legislation, in other words to turn the state idealistically on its head, to turn it on reason, and in this sense to start a revolution. But he is aware of terror as a danger inherent to revolution. The execution of the French king, the climate of conspiracy and repression, of thinking in black and white categories of friend or foe, ultimately leading the Jacobin leaders themselves, Danton and Robespierre, to the scaffold – all of this had happened just a year or two before Schiller wrote his *Letters*. This revolutionary, idealistic aim should therefore be realised in evolutionary terms.

And this, as Schiller repeatedly attempts to show, requires beauty and art. For Schiller, the ability of beauty and art to assume an intermediary role – as the means and the middle – between an instinctively formed and a sensibly organised society is essentially justified through the idea that beauty and art are forming a sphere in their own right, in other words becoming autonomous and thus triggering a double dialectic, an apparent double paradox. Firstly, Schiller recognises that the moment art liberates itself from social necessities, it also becomes socially meaningless. Schiller is writing his *Letters* as an artist, and as an artist he is under pressure to provide a justification. Politics and economics question the very right to independent existence which art is in the process of developing. If, in the 1790s, it is revolution which is forcing its way powerfully into the foreground from a political perspective, from an economic one it is that principle which has been an adversary of art ever since: ‘*Utility* is the great idol of the time, to which all powers do homage and all subjects are subservient’. Art has no other choice but to vanish from the ‘noisy Vanity Fair of our time’ (Schiller 2004, 4 (2nd letter)). That is the first, ultimately negative dialectic of autonomisation, the dialectic of liberation and meaninglessness.

Secondly, Schiller recognises that, if at all, art can only regain its socio-cultural import if it never again relinquishes its autonomy. This is the second, ultimately positive dialectic of autonomisation. Schiller debates it using that classic pair of concepts *Schein & Sein* (appearance vs. Being or substance). Only when art acknowledges itself as appearance, as merely playing with reality and truth rather than pretending to *be* reality and truth, can it have an impact on reality. If the aesthetic sphere is to be able to intervene in and change reality, then the two have to remain separate (Ibid, 9th letter & 26th letter). Since the mid-19th century this position has been known as ‘*l’art pour l’art*» (art for art’s sake). Art recedes into itself, distances itself from the utilitarian know-how and morality prevailing at the time, and in so doing adopts a stance which is contrary to society. It is then no longer subject to the laws of society, but follows its own laws autonomously, and this alone puts it in a position from which to exercise criticism, even if this social criticism may be limited to holding up a mirror without comment. Theodor W. Adorno, the last great aesthete in the tradition of the civilian concept of culture, saw it this way. The dialecticians of the bourgeois-normative concept of culture thus link two fundamental positions within aesthetics, and in particular within literature, which are generally and apodictically handled as opposites: the position which describes art or literature as societal self-reflection for the good of individual and collective *Bildung*, and that which describes art or literature as an autonomous system of works or texts which is separate from other societal spheres.

5. Another provocation

Bearing this in mind, any talk of the utility of the aesthetic must inevitably appear as a provocation. However, I would like to recall a different philosophical tradition, that of Friedrich Nietzsche and American pragmatism. Many people will no doubt see this coupling as yet another provocation. Uniting this German bourgeois-apocalyptic critic of culture, who may have coined the catchphrase *Gay Science*, but who himself was far too enslaved in his struggle against a repressive Christianity, immersing himself in mammoth projects such as the *Übermensch* and the Eternal Return, uniting this European tragedian philosopher with a genuinely US-American cultural achievement, namely a

school of thought oriented to the solution of everyday problems, one which is keen to experiment, sometimes even to roll up its sleeves, is not actually as far-fetched as it might initially seem. The history of ideas shows us, for example, that it was Thomas Mann who first proposed this alliance in a speech about 'the German Republic' in 1922, four years after his ultraconservative *Reflections of an Unpolitical Man*, linking Novalis to Walt Whitman (Lepenies, 56, esp. 63). As a matter of fact, the text which made Nietzsche famous, *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music*, already contained a principle which he, otherwise changeable, was never again to relinquish, namely that the spiritual-cultural sphere, primarily art, philosophy and science, is geared to the sphere of *action*. Art's predominant function is thus to make life bearable, to drape an illusion of beauty over the ugly and the unbearable (Nietzsche, 11). Here art does not become part of life; its achievement is far more its ability to stabilise life, to compensate. According to Nietzsche, we could no less live without the aesthetic, without art, than we could live without the air that we breathe. He also evaluates science according to its 'uses and disadvantages for life', as stated in his work on history. And primarily life means action, in Ancient Greek *pragma*.

6. Erosion of the bourgeois concept of culture

From a pragmatic point of view, there is nothing provocative about 'the utility of the aesthetic'. The term is only provocative from the standpoint of German Idealism and the educated middle-classes. This standpoint has ceased to be convincing, for more than merely theoretical reasons. Not only does the philosophical-pragmatic tradition have good arguments with which to counter those of German Idealism.¹ But societal shifts have also led to an erosion of the bourgeois concept of culture. And it is this context attributing a relevance to the concept of aestheticisation (of life, as well as of thinking) which is more than merely semantics and the history of ideas.

Since the late 1960s, social scientists have observed how, first in the USA and then throughout the Western world, a hedonistic and even narcissistic way of life has slowly been asserting itself. Capitalism seems to have squeezed dry those Protestant foundations examined by Max Weber and to be in need now of a re-evaluation in hedonistic terms. As a complementary phenomenon, capitalism appears to favour a narcissistic personality which attempts to conceal any inner emptiness by investing its entire mental energy in upholding a positive picture of itself, an illusionary image (Daniel Bell 1976, Christopher Lasch 1979). 'We want it all, and we want it now!'. The slogan of the protest and flower power generation was carried by beat and rock music, yet paved the way for comprehensive societal-cultural change. Gerhard Schulze examined this phenomenon in detail for the situation in Germany and coined a term very popular with the media: *Erlebnisgesellschaft* (event-oriented society). This is a society which craves enjoyment, craves positive experiences. A prerequisite is the affluent society proclaimed by national economist Kenneth Galbraith as early as 1952. Of course, this society cannot be reduced to consumption-oriented hedonism. Rather, it is guided by the eudaemonistic motive of the correct life. The question of how one should live has become common property. Schulze offers a convincing presentation of how enjoyment crystallised according to various patterns in the Germany of the late 1980s. In essence, these were patterns of high and trivial culture, but also that of so-called *Spannungskultur* (excitement culture), an area in which one 'energises oneself', in which excitement or action are sought as a constant state, an area which first began to assert itself in the 1950s, with rock 'n' roll, Elvis Presley and co. In addition, Schulze shows that this triple pattern of high, trivial and excitement culture is further differentiated depending on various criteria (age, profession, social status, etc.) and can be described more precisely in terms of so-called 'milieus'. Of particular interest here are the 'integration' and 'self-expression milieus', for here, albeit in different ways, the crossover between the high and the trivial is located: Mozart and Verdi, as well as Miles Davis and the Rolling Stones; Charles Baudelaire, as well as Karl May and Donald Duck; Cézanne, as well as Billy Wilder and Quentin Tarantino (Schulze 1992, 142, 150, 153, 277).

For Schulze - and I agree with him - 'aestheticisation of the lifeworld' does not mean that hedonistic striving 'to make every day a permanent party', nor is this striving 'paradoxical' from a sociological point of view. It only appears so in simplistic philosophical descriptions (Bubner 1989, 152).² This aestheticisation does not mean that a culture has asserted itself as a way of life in which perception, in the Greek sense of *aisthesis* and thus sensitisation in a comprehensive sense, has become key either. Neither the hedonism nor the *aisthesis* versions of aestheticisation are appropriate. At least the second version visualises the ambivalences of this concept more clearly,

the *de*-sensitisation, in other words the '*an*-aestheticisation' which accompanies that 'postmodern' spreading of aestheticisation; this in turn means the ambivalences of this anaestheticisation which, on the one hand, numbs and dulls, but, on the other hand, also protects the subject in its ability to perceive (Welsch 1990, 14, 18). Georg Simmel analysed this in his famous essay *The Metropolis and Mental Life* (1903) using the term '*blasé*', a term which has since been replaced by '*cool*' (Früchtl 2009, 148, 165). Finally, the *aisthesis* version of the aestheticisation concept, using the term '*aesthetic thinking*', clearly refers to an additional element of relevance: epistemological defundamentalisation.

7. A culture with no centre

With regard to this additional element, Richard Rorty provided us with a convincing reconstruction based on the history of ideas. He, too, believed that the French Revolution and philosophical-literary Romanticism in the so-called Western world have led to a fundamentally new view asserting itself, one which in particular introduces a new slant on the time-honoured concept of truth. All those instances of high culture, for which truth has always meant the existence of something in its own right, independently of the subject, all those instances of religion, of traditional philosophy and of science have receded into the background. Instead, for the past two hundred years, politics and art have determined what is played out on the stage of cultural knowledge. The '*heroes*' of Modernity, both male and female, are the politician (to some extent revolutionary, world-changing) – Rorty would have enjoyed the figure of Barack Obama – and the artist (outlook-changing), not the saint, the philosopher or the scientist. The ideal pursued by these modern heroes is not adaptation to something which supposedly exists beyond them – reality, truth – but creation of a new, and in each case different reality (Rorty 1989, 3, 8, 9).

From Rorty's point of view, then, Modernity (he also sometimes refers to Postmodernity) displays no animosity towards art. Far more, Modernity is the era of '*aestheticised culture*', and that means of a way of living which has to, and can relinquish firm foundations, unshakeable justifications, permanently valid truths (Ibid., 53). An aesthetic culture or lifeworld – and in this point I totally agree with Rorty – is a legitimatorily destabilised culture or, in positive terms: a legitimatorily mobile and open culture with many different underlying forms of justification. It can only be perceived of as in '*crisis*' if a one-dimensional concept of justification is assumed. The aestheticised lifeworld is a fallibilistic culture: the scientifically studied attitude, legitimised epistemologically by Peirce and Popper, whereby all our knowledge is refutable, revisable and temporary, is habitualised. At the same time, the label '*aesthetic*' is correct insofar as art, the beautiful and aesthetic evaluation have always rejected *strict* claims to justification in the European-Western tradition; insofar as, therefore, the aesthetic is epistemologically fundamentally antifundamentalistic.

Admittedly, it is important to speak in terms of an *epistemological* anti-fundamentalism, for morally-practically, as well as politically, the aesthetic stance is not free of *fundamentalism* (because it is built on a *fundamentum inconcussum* (Descartes) called authenticity). The history of the aesthetic avant-garde since the mid-19th century has documented this strikingly. Indeed, the aesthetic avant-garde has something in common with the political avant-garde, even in its terroristic variants, namely that '*fundamentalism of the attack*', an attitude stating that, for those who are '*determined*' or '*authentic*' and insofar fundamentalist, who are still intent on attacking, the story is not over yet (Sloterdijk 2006, 285).³ As ultimately becomes clear, this has consequences for any envisaged utility of the aesthetic.

For a human being able to think historically, pragmatically and ultimately democratically, there can be no certainty, for a number of reasons, that the era of the aesthetic, of the epistemically antifundamentalistic, will dominate from now on. Fundamentalism in its *religious* guise has become far too intrusive over the last few years for that; but also for reasons of *principle*, art cannot be the everlasting centre of a modern lifestyle. Firstly, history is subject to the law of time, and thus to transitoriness and changeability. Secondly, from a pragmatic point of view, the '*best type of culture*' is one '*with a constantly changing focus, depending on which person or group of persons last achieved something exciting, original and useful*'. Finally, thirdly, only a '*culture with no centre*' is appropriate to a democratic society (Rorty 1993, 5).

For, according to this model, a democratic society is characterised by the principles of freedom and

equality, of autonomy and pluralism. Dominance here can only ever be temporary, namely only as long as its subjects, i.e. us, assign a dominance to certain subjects, associations and institutions.

Accordingly, and this is true not only for Rorty, a society is modern when it permits competition or argument, maybe even a battle between different cultural dimensions. In a modern society it is principally possible for the aesthetic dimension to be at the centre of general interest from time to time. And, indeed, the last time it was at the centre was in the late 1960s and early 1970s, in a union with (revolutionary) politics. At this time, under the label of postmodern thinking, the renaissance of the aesthetic also began in philosophical and then cultural *theory*, continuing until the early 1990s. Indeed, the proclaimed revolution of 1968 was at its core a *cultural* revolution, a real one, not a Maoist faked and repressive one; it was a fundamental change to our habits. Thus, as inferred already, a hedonistic-eudaemonistic society intent on *self-realisation* stands in the sign of the aesthetic when it successfully reconciles popular culture and art or, to use Schulze's terminology: when it establishes a *Spannungskultur* (suspense and friction culture). Its heroes have names like Andy Warhol and Joseph Beuys, the Beatles and Madonna, Woody Allen and Steven Spielberg. This reconciliation has been so successful that today anything can be 'pop': a politician (Bill Clinton, Barack Obama), a sportsman (Boris Becker, David Beckham), a philosopher (Jacques Derrida, Slavoj Žižek), a manager (once Jürgen Schrempp was promoted in this way), even a pope (John Paul II). 'Pop' is a person or a thing with an image, an artificial picture, which can be exploited.

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8. Cultural science and political model

At this juncture I would like to make two comments. The first refers to the cognitive or scientific status of the *theory* accompanying the cultural revolution, in other words the status of what in Germany has been called *Kulturwissenschaft* (cultural science) since the 1990s. Part of the *cultural turn* was indeed the fact that within the *Geisteswissenschaften* (moral sciences, humanities), so called since the mid-19th century, and in particular the literary sciences, the distinction between text and context, and thus between literary and non-literary texts could no longer be maintained. The cultural turn thus completed at a theoretical level what was also taking place at a socio-cultural level: a *crossover* of previously separate areas. Regarding the concept of cultural science I am convinced, however, that all attempts to lend it a methodical foundation are bound to fail. In the post-postmodern age, this would amount to a desire to sweep under the carpet a learning effect reinforced or maybe even brought about by (rightly or wrongly named) Postmodernity. Refundamentalisation is not an option. Rather, cultural scientific thinking, analogously to philosophy, has several dimensions, or so my suggestion; it speaks several languages, so to speak: the languages of science, of aesthetic literature, of politics, of the everyday and of autobiography. It strives to achieve conceptual, analytical and argumentative clarity, yet also creatively introduces new terms, works with metaphors and describes case studies according to literary example; it does not turn a blind eye to political convictions, it draws upon common sense and reflects its own experience. Those seeking a good grounding will reduce this multidimensionality to a scientific dimension. Instead, however, one could also say, in the manner of Rorty, that the dimension at the centre of cultural scientific thinking is changeable: sometimes it is the scientific dimension, sometimes the political, sometimes the aesthetic, etc. And these dimensions of course also require internal differentiation: within the scientific dimension, it was philology that was key to Dilthey, history that was key to Rickert, while in our own time (overlapping with the political dimension) it has been Marxism, psychoanalysis, ethnology and, most recently, image science. In this sense, epistemically antifundamentalistic decentralised cultural science is a *democratic* science.

My second comment refers to the model of politics which I am using as orientation. Firstly, it clearly demonstrates the pertinent characteristics of Liberalism. Accordingly, politics ensures citizens a freedom to pursue their own interests (especially economic and ethical ones). It is focussed on individual and private autonomy and, through a recourse to rights, ultimately guarantees morally legitimised human rights. But politics, in particular democratic politics, is always a dual carriageway. It covers not only the institutional sphere (political parties, an elected parliament, a government, in an extended sense bureaucratic administration, what is known as 'the state'), but also the sphere which is partly spontaneous, chaotic and anarchic, partly regulated by the mass media (the press and television), in which the hotly contested commodity of public opinion emerges. In terms of democratic theory, this dual carriage corresponds to that of Liberalism and

Republicanism. Whereas the former focuses on individual autonomy, as has already been said, the latter focuses on collective autonomy. Here politics is a matter of group self-determination. 'We, the assembled', as one can read in the paroles in corresponding pamphlets and resolutions, 'call upon the town council/ the government to ...' It can even sometimes be heard ringing through the streets: 'We are the people.' The Republican model privileges the non-institutional political sphere.

Neither of these two models of democracy and politics can, on its own, stake a claim to a primacy, however. It is only together that they can help the (utopistically charged, normative) idea of democracy to become a reality. The next question would be whether this merger requires a synthesis or has to be accepted as a theoretically insoluble equilibrium of tensions which requires constant rebalancing.⁵ It should be clear that anyone pleading for a culture without a centre would tend towards the second alternative. And it should also be clear that within this framework a concept of politics such as that currently represented by Jacques Rancière must appear one-sided and ultimately romantic. For Rancière, institutionalised politics falls under the term 'police'. He does point out the broad, administrative meaning of this term, but he also, like Foucault, brings it into play with rhetoric and polemic; he is well aware of the affective-mobilising effect of this term in our times. He does concede the indispensability of (police) politics, but only as a necessary evil. He makes no normative mention of a mutual porosity or complementarity of the two political models: institutionalised politics and the so-called 'political'. And, as for all French philosophers close to so-called Postmodernism, the background for this one-sidedness is a metaphysics which, in the tradition of Schopenhauer, maintains the primacy of the non-fixed, of eternal becoming and permanent change.⁶

9. On the use of the aesthetic

To return to my main theory, the utility of the aesthetic thus consists, firstly, in its fundamental ability to provide the best comparable solution to the problem of a certain era *within* an already established democratic culture. This is the case when that culture (determined by the majority or in the guise of a dominant subculture) is convinced that in the given circumstances the aesthetic has more to offer than other cultural-intellectual dimensions, more than religion or (empirical and discursive) science. Within a practising democracy, the aesthetic dimension will never find itself on the defensive on principle. Were this to be the case, it would be detrimental to democratic culture, which lives from competition and battles between alternatives.

Secondly, the aesthetic can also be shown to have a utility for a democratic culture when it is *not* at the centre. Here the argument is as follows: since democracy (according to the models of Liberalism and Republicanism, with their tensions of mutual reference) is founded on freedom and equality, autonomy and pluralism, individual and collective self-determination, it is incompatible with any form of coercion. The only coercion with any validity is that strange 'non-coercive coercion' (Habermas) involved in convincing and persuading (whereby this non-coercive coercion is different for convincing than for persuading, if it is indeed possible to make a strict division between the two). And yet the *willingness* to allow the convictions and experiences of others potentially to become one's own, in other words the willingness to let others get under our skin and maybe even teach us a lesson, depends – not solely, but partially – on our ability to have *aesthetic* experiences. For at least two reasons.

One has been mentioned already: insofar as dealing with the aesthetic means having fundamental epistemic training in anti-fundamentalism, not relying on unshakeable foundations, but on the contrary permitting oneself to become confused or even shaken, as well as learning to live with weak justifications, then the aesthetic in general, and art in particular, provides an inexhaustive potential to irritate and stimulate. The second reason is that, since the beginning of Modernity (dated differently by different art genres), aesthetic experiences have essentially been geared towards the *new*. Aesthetic experiences, or so the topos nowadays, are *specialised* in enabling us to see the world afresh, to disclose it, always in a new way and always abruptly. And since the new irritates per se – as that which cannot (yet) be pigeonholed within our usual understanding, which by definition cannot be deduced from the old like one logical sentence from another, emerging instead as the result of a (sometimes small, sometimes large) leap, brought about by unexpected problems, surprising constellations, mistakes or conscious violations – aesthetic experiences are a source of irritation. Having aesthetic experiences thus means training an *irritation competence*, an

ability to give oneself permission to be unsettled, provoked and challenged.

To summarise then, a utility of the aesthetic is, firstly, principally possible in a democratically habituated society by virtue of the principle of pluralism. Since the aesthetic is principally located at the same level as other intellectual dimensions – the societal-cultural situation at the time determines which of the dimensions will take precedence. Secondly, a utility of the aesthetic is principally possible by virtue of the catchwords epistemic anti-fundamentalism and irritation competence. Experiencing things and situations aesthetically means to relish being irritated by them and to be able to justify this maybe not definitively, but definitely.

10. On the use of modesty

And yet – as must also be clearly stated – a simple intrinsic connection between the aesthetic and a democratic culture cannot be upheld. It is not possible to say: *because* the aesthetic gives us a principle training in epistemic anti-fundamentalism, it is of use, but *to the extent* that it trains us *without hindrance*. Therefore, I am not saying that the aesthetic is *necessarily* of use to a democratic culture, but *potentially*. It *can* be of use democratically, but does not *have* to be. There are too many famous counterexamples: de Sade, Baudelaire, Céline, the French interpretation of evil (which also includes Lautreamont, Bataille, Blanchot and Genet), D’Annunzio, Ernst Jünger, not to forget Nietzsche and Heidegger. All of them aesthetes, yet not democrats (which, by the way, has nothing to do with their works). As has already been hinted at, the reason behind this limited utility of the aesthetic is that epistemic anti-fundamentalism can be thwarted by moral-practical and political fundamentalism.

More modesty is therefore called for. It is possible to relish being irritated by things and situations and still *morally not* to acknowledge the irritating element. It is possible to be aware of the fundamental unsubstantiability of aesthetic experiences and nevertheless to maintain that there is an ‘eternal’ truth locked inside a work of art which can only be fathomed by ‘great’ individuals. Talk of ‘great individuals’ tends to be anti-democratic. It reminds us yet again that within the realm of the aesthetic the watchword is *originality*, and not, as in the realm of democratic politics, *equality*. In this respect we once again have an aesthetic tendency towards radicalism and extremism, we have contempt for compromise, for the average and the mediocre. There is no clear path leading directly from the aesthetic to democracy. Ultimately Rousseau is proven right over Schiller. In his eleventh letter on aesthetic education, Schiller used a transcendental philosophical line of argumentation because in his tenth letter he had to acknowledge Rousseau’s argument that it is impossible to make a compelling moral connection between art and politics empirically, from the history of (European) humanity. If Schiller’s back door of German Idealism is closed to us today, we then, however, have to content ourselves with this fact on two accounts. Whether or not an aesthetic experience is useful to a democratic culture depends, firstly, on (historical and cultural) circumstances which cannot be determined solely by the realm of aesthetic experiences and, secondly, on the fact that the fundamentalistic element of the aesthetic attitude does not hinder the antifundamentalistic element, in other words that any conflict within the aesthetic attitude itself is always sorted out. But, to conclude, I would like to reiterate that aesthetic experiences still have enough to offer, also and especially for a democratic culture, and that to a certain extent this achievement does indeed deserve the epithet ‘aestheticisation’.

(Translated into English by Sarah L. Kirkby)

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1. [1](#). For example the argument that there is no such thing called 'theory' separated strictly from practice and that thinking in categorical differences therefore should be replaced by thinking in gradual differences.
2. [2](#). Bubner appeals in favour of maintaining the compensatory function of the aesthetic, not with Nietzsche, but with Gehlen (Bubner, 150).
3. [3](#). Concerning the violent and even terrorist aspects of the aesthetic avant-garde see an article of Luca di Blasi in which he asserts, in a pretty exaggerating language, though, that the avant-gardists were, or 'could' be seen, as 'nothing but half-hearted would-be terrorists'. The German Newspaper which printed de Blasis article demonstrated the assertion with a picture of the movie *Media Burn* of the artist group 'Ant Farm' from 1975, showing a white car crashing into a wall of TV-screens. Di Blasi himself mentions André Bretons famous words: 'The most simple action of a surrealist is to take his guns and to bang indiscriminately and wildly into the passers-by' (Luca di Blasi, 'Die besten Videos drehte al-Qaida', in *DIE ZEIT* Nr. 34 v. 14. August 2003).
4. [4](#). It will come as no surprise that so much cultural-revolutionary success has generated a counter-movement loaded with resentment. Today the 68ers are blamed for everything. If a black hole simultaneously appears in the constellation of Virgo, the after-effects may even be fatal. Well, at least if you believe the tabloids.
5. [5](#). Habermas, for example, presents his discourse theoretical, proceduralistic model as the result of a mutual critique of the Liberalist and Republican models. Cf. Jürgen Habermas: 'Drei normative Modelle der Demokratie' in *Die Einbeziehung des Anderen. Studien zur politischen Theorie*, Frankfurt/M. 1996, 277-292; also Habermas' concept of civilian society in Jürgen Habermas. *Faktizität und Geltung. Beiträge zur Diskurstheorie des Rechts und des demokratischen Rechtsstaats*, Frankfurt/M. 1992, 435.
6. [6](#). I am reacting here, albeit sketchily, to a critical comparison made by Anja Streiter and other participants during a conference on 'Aestheticisation' - Past and Present Diagnosis of a Crisis' now published as 'Ästhetisierung'. *Der Streit um das Ästhetische in Politik, Religion und Erkenntnis*, hg. v. Ilka Brombach u.a., Zürich 2010, 133.

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