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Art at the Limits of Perception

The Aesthetic Theory of Wolfgang Welsch

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Introduction
Transcendental or marginal aesthetics

In the face of the evident successes of science, medicine and other objective and technical forms of knowledge and their practical contribution to our way of life, it seems outlandish to persist in asserting the special value of art and the aesthetic. Certainly the task of stating this value is beset by problems. Whether as a means of human self-understanding that is somehow more fundamental than these more instrumental modes of knowledge, an approach to value that is not objectifiable and that cannot be reduced to instrumental terms, or as a way of criticising or intervening in these kinds of approaches to life, it seems to be intrinsic to the aesthetic that it is not readily quantifiable. As such the aesthetic seems to be consigned to make its case again and again, a case which is never self-evident. The alleged promise of the aesthetic extends far beyond the qualities of the art object, as Kant's intrinsically moral 'aesthetic idea' and Schiller's notion of 'aesthetic education' attest, though this promise is often increasingly at pains to break out of specifically aesthetic phenomena. The apotheosis of this paradox in the twentieth century is probably Adorno's 'Wahrheitsgehalt', in which the authentic art object is seen as an only partially accessible refuge from an irredeemably instrumentalised approach to the world. But as much as a panacea, art and the aesthetic are seen as the whipping boys for modernity's problems, even among cultural theorists. Daniel Bell holds aesthetics, which he sees as an intrinsically self-oriented, responsible for the erosion of traditional morality. (See Bell 1976 8) From a different point of view, Herbert Marcuse sees the promises made in the name of aesthetics as a distraction from problems in the real world.

These divergent assessments are compounded by the difficulty of even defining what the term aesthetic means. If we can characterise contemporary self-centredness in terms of the aesthetic, not to mention the idea of our contemporary life-world as (irredeemably)

aestheticised, it has presumably long since expanded beyond the narrow terms of art and beauty. At the same time it does not seem to be consonant with the everydayness of lived experience, in view of the 'critical' or 'counter-cultural' mood that attaches to it, as in Adorno's ideas, and insofar as it still persists in being associated with ways of grounding knowledge and value. At the same time the aesthetic can be taken precisely to eschew any need for grounding – what Welsch calls 'epistemological aestheticisation' (Welsch 1996a 96) – and for some the aesthetic bypasses such questions, offering an alternative to a rational, conceptual and indeed instrumental ways of thinking about and relating to the world. This terminological confusion might be an unproblematic case of Wittgenstein's family likenesses – Wittgenstein himself in the 'Lecture on Ethics' employs the term aesthetic as a catch-all phrase for that which stands outside logically- or empirically-based knowledge: and this quality is something of an enigmatic black-hole in that lecture, pulling all else towards it. Indeed the aesthetic often seems to take the strain for some of the most difficult questions of modernity – questions of value and meaning, and of the nature of reality – and ones that precisely cross the boundaries between the philosophical and the everyday.

The initial impetus for this book is the contribution to aesthetic theory of the contemporary German philosopher and aesthetic theorist, Wolfgang Welsch, and the intersection his work articulates between certain strands of traditional aesthetic theory and contemporary culture. Welsch is the author and editor of some six books and numerous articles on aesthetics, in addition to his work on theories of the postmodern and the nature of rationality. His corpus offers a comprehensive discussion of the disparate concept of the 'aesthetic' in its historical usages from Baumgarten to the present. As far as the aesthetic's increased significance for contemporary culture is concerned, it is seen both as particularly suitable for describing everyday postmodern experience and as the key to ostensibly philosophical issues about what constitutes knowledge. Welsch's ideas are broad in scope, indeed the fact that they have been little treated in secondary literature might in part be due their overly ambitious range, as well as their sometimes cavalier and unsystematic method. Claims are sometimes made about the role of art and the status of aesthetics

without much theoretical argument or empirical support. Potentially significant preceding debates or ideas are barely referenced, and subtleties and complications are often ignored for the sake of broad argument. But in my view his contributions to aesthetics do point to significant and under-thematised areas of aesthetics, such as the focus on the (more or less complex) sensory aspect of the aesthetic, the essentially dialectical nature of the aesthetic, which is at the heart of his ideas on the sensory and non-sensory (in his terms, the 'aesthetic' and 'anaesthetic'), the idea of the aesthetics of the imperceptible, the cognitive significance of the aesthetic (what I mean by this will become clear in what follows), as well as the general 'opening up' of aesthetics to accommodate a theorisation of the interaction between perception and cognition in art and in more everyday phenomena. As such I take these ideas to provide the impetus, if not the tools, for furthering discussion of the scope and significance of aesthetics – and in one variant in particular, art as it explores the boundaries of perception and cognition – in the context of contemporary culture. The key aims of this book are therefore to present Welsch's contribution to aesthetics, contextualised in terms of its debt and continuity with previous investments in the aesthetic, and to assess it in terms of its internal consistency and general plausibility, its ideological investment and finally its usefulness as a way of describing practical examples of art and their interaction with everyday experience.

In short, Welsch's project attempts to combine a renewal of certain historical strands of philosophical aesthetics, initially the 'sensory' nature of the aesthetic experience as well as art and the aesthetic's allegedly 'plural' quality, with a characterisation of post-modern society as essentially 'aestheticised'. Welsch's interest in the sensory coincides with what I will identify as resurgence in interest in the constitutive nature of the 'material' aspect of reality, which begins with Aristotle and maintains a strong thread in modern social and cultural theory. This more recent interest has many – not necessarily compatible – aspects, ranging from Marx's materialist concerns that centre on the essentially economic basis of social relations, through Nietzsche's vitalist calls that turn against the legacy of the Enlightenment *in toto*, to phenomenology, which asserts the primacy

of the sensory in our experience of the world. The question for Welsch, who claims to want to broaden aesthetics from its narrow epistemological basis, but whose first book begins on the fairly philosophical terrain of Aristotle's *Sinneslehre*, will be where his ideas are located in this disparate collection.

Of course the purely sensory nature of the aesthetic on its own has not sustained interest in it for the last two hundred and fifty years. For Kant, aesthetics only becomes interesting in the context of his transcendental project, namely as a source of answers to the question of the (for him necessarily super-sensory) basis to knowledge and experience. Archetypal for the 'super-sensory' interest in the aesthetic realm are Kant's revolutionary ideas on beauty and the sublime: the latter will play a part in my discussion of Welsch's ideas in chapter three. The sublime has been an important and recurrent locus of the indeterminacy that has been central to theorisations of the aesthetic in the modern period. The freedom it is seen in various ways to indicate or guarantee is emblematic of the aesthetic, and precisely distinguishes it from sensory experience. But as well as the sensory, the aesthetic is often opposed to determinate conceptual thought, which is seen to entail, in Andrew Bowie's words, 'a possible repression of my particular imaginative relationship to the object'. (Bowie 2003a 34) As such the 'unsayable' quality that the sublime comes to be associated with, namely that which cannot be presented determinately or conceptually, will be seen to have two aspects, one essentially affirmative and one negative. Both will be discussed in chapter two, in the context of the competing claims of the sensory and super-sensory aesthetic, and both will be relevant for my discussions of art and the aesthetics as a surfeit and an absence of sensory experience. The question for Welsch's ideas on the sensory will be: if such determinacy characterises the repressive aspect of thought, does this allow a role for the sensory, traditionally the indeterminate precursor of thought, in resurrecting a more critical kind of indeterminacy? Can the conception of the aesthetic as sensory ever live up to the more sophisticated accounts of the role of the aesthetic in grounding thought and conceptualising resistance to repressive models of thought? At the same time this question of the status of the sensory might go to the heart of what is at stake in philosophical

aesthetics and what is specific to the 'aesthetic' experience. Rather than Kant's merely discarded and forgotten husk of the experience, abandoned once the transcendental kernel has been obtained, I will assess the critical value of the specifically sensory nature of aesthetic experience as it is deployed in certain artworks.

Certainly much modern art, from Impressionism onwards, has focused our attention on the building blocks of sensation and perception. This focus can be seen as a response to the changing nature of everyday sensory experience in the modern age, in which our relationship to time and space has been destabilised in important ways by such phenomena as telephony, television and photography. (See Fischer-Lichte 1995 1-3) Welsch's formulations are on the same terrain when he characterises non-perception as in some respects *more* characteristic of our experience of a reality that has been technologically altered, underlying his conception of postmodern reality as characterised by a bewildering oscillation between sensory excess and sensory absence.

This question of the relationship of art and the aesthetic to our experience of everyday reality – what Heidegger calls '[d]ie durchschnittliche Alltäglichkeit' (Heidegger 1986 181) – also touches on issues that are pivotal to both the philosophical and political significance of art and aesthetics, which will be relevant for my treatment of Welsch's ideas.[1] One such issue concerns the question of whether these qualities of the sensory or the indeterminate admit of *ideological* analysis, or whether in fact the aesthetic describes that aspect of art that precisely cannot be reduced to ideological terms. (See Bowie 2003b 78) The implication of this latter position – and Welsch will assert a version of this idea himself – is that ideological interrogations of the artwork can only be framed in terms that are

1 Heidegger himself thinks that capturing this 'average everydayness' as a whole ('Die Ganzheit des Strukturganzen' [Heidegger 1986 181]) cannot be done phenomenologically, which he characterises as looking at a piecemeal 'Zusammenbauen der Elemente'. (Heidegger 1986 181) He seems to take two alternative paths to capturing this 'Ganzheit': firstly, via his concept of *Dasein*, and secondly, later, via the artwork, which offers a 'Durchblick durch dieses Ganze auf ein ursprünglich einheitliches Phänomen, das im Ganzen schon liegt'. (Heidegger 1986 181)

already ideologically informed, as such obscuring the political import of a work of art. Underlying the exclusion of ideological questions seems to be the sense that the ideological interrogation is deleterious to the indeterminacy that the aesthetic 'does best', or at least does harm to the indeterminate nature of the aesthetic experience. This significance of the aesthetic allegedly beyond any ideological position has been reasserted in recent years (see Joughin & Malpas 2003), but can this exclusion of ideological questions convincingly evade the criticism that this position is already ideologically invested, not to say ideologically problematic? Certainly this seems to involve a balancing act, as Bowie points out. On the one hand 'there are dimensions of cultural articulation which transcend what we can say about them'. (Bowie 2003b 78) On the other hand,

> it should be remembered that the 'non-identical' of aesthetic experience, its resistance to explanation, would be mere mystification without the attempt to render it more generally accessible through critical dialogue and the development of cultural communication. (Bowie 2003b 77)

This mystification is something that Welsch's ideas on imperceptible art arguably run the risk of, as I will discuss in relation to Marcuse's sceptical view of the 'aestheticist' position in chapter four. I will also ask whether and in what ways this aestheticist tendency is compatible with Welsch's ideas of a broader conception of the status and relevance of the aesthetic.

Another aspect of this issue of the relationship between the aesthetic and the everyday is the tension between art's increasing reflexivity and the artwork's openness to and inseparability from the life-world that generates it and allows it to mean anything at all. What I mean by reflexivity here will become clear in the discussions that follow, but it refers among other things to the association of the aesthetic with the early Romantic recognition that knowledge finds no absolute ground beyond an infinite process of reflection – the connection to the 'aestheticisation of epistemology' is clear – and to art's related turn inwards such that it meditates above all on the status and concept of art. At the same time, Bowie reference above to 'critical dialogue' suggests that the aesthetic nature of such artworks

also precisely demands mediation by criticism. This echoes Benjamin's sense in the *Kunstkritik* essay that (good) art is that which opens itself to criticism (see Benjamin 1974 I 1 65), as well as Nietzsche's similar remarks about the incomplete artwork. (See Nietzsche 1973 V 2 110) Both reflect an essentially Romantic openness to the external world, and this sense of art as part of a significatory (and sensory) network will be an important one in my discussion of aesthetics and art at the limits of perception.

Another key question is whether the aesthetic's significance has to be a *philosophical* significance or in what ways this indeterminacy is fruitful in terms of a more everyday consciousness divested of its philosophical implications. Whilst it is all very well to conclude that art is not *best* equipped to present themes, what is the cost when we relinquish the presentation of objects and issues to concepts, and only the 'highest' principles to such indeterminate modes of presentation? Might not such a restriction of aesthetics' field of influence unwittingly reinforce the rationalisation of everyday life? As Bowie again puts it,

> (t)he notion of the unrepresentability of the most essential aspect of our existence compels one to ask whether art can ultimately only sustain itself at the expense of any substantial relationship to the empirical content of social life. (Bowie 2003a 45)

Joughin and Malpas refer to the relegation of the specificity of the aesthetic experience by those on the right and the left of the political divide (see Joughin & Malpas 2003 5), but is it too glib to suggest that the 'new aestheticist' position that annexes aesthetic experience to transcendental conclusions enacts a similar relegation of the particularity of experience?

At the heart of these discussions of indeterminacy and ideology is of course the crucial and vexed issue of aesthetic *autonomy*, which goes back to Kant's ideas on the disinterested nature of judgment and the indeterminacy of the sublime experience. I will discuss the significance of the sensory aspect of the aesthetic for ideas of aesthetic autonomy in greater detail in chapter two, but it is worth noting here that the conceptualisation of the aesthetic in sensory terms might also

be taken as signalling the intention of dismantling, if not autonomy, then certainly the aesthetic mode's fundamental difference from other modes of perception. The risk is that one thereby kills the golden goose, but there seems to be a fine line between dismantling the difference between the special capacity of the aesthetic and everyday experience and encouraging their interaction. The restriction of aesthetics' importance to that which does not admit of ideological questions might in this respect pander to the society of the specialist. This characteristic of modern society is something that Habermas in his essay 'Modernity – an Incomplete Project' sees art as potentially militating against: his notion of 'unconstrained interaction' between what he calls the 'aesthetic-expressive' sphere and 'reified everyday praxis' (Habermas 1985b 11-12) might need a more nuanced discussion of the ways this interaction can happen, and what effects art can hope to have, particularly if one of the aspects of this reified life-world is its aestheticisation, but I second Habermas' assertion that the virtues of the aesthetic sphere autonomous nature are best deployed where 'aesthetic experience is drawn into an individual life history and is absorbed into ordinary life'. (Habermas 1985b 12) One issue for my discussion will be whether and how the reconfiguration of aesthetics as a study of (albeit a special kind of) sense perception allows an analysis of the way the experience of art interacts with everyday experience. Whether Welsch's ideas on art fulfil this possibility, or merely pave the way for its conceptualisation, will be discussed. Moreover, Habermas' idea of the 'absorption' of the aesthetic experience into ordinary life implies for me the significance of the moment of the *reception* of the work. I will say more about the contested status of this point of the 'aesthetic event' in chapter two, and the examples of art which I will analyse in the final chapters, and in particular the dramas by Samuel Beckett, Peter Handke and Heiner Müller, will be seen to demand and in some senses depend on *active* completion by the audience.

The recipient is also crucial to my discussions of the role of the sensory inasmuch as they are the point at which art is able to mediate with both the habits and the cultural contents of everyday perception. Might a more *marginal* reading of the aesthetic not offer aesthetic indeterminacy more scope for interaction with everyday habits and

norms of perception? In particular I will suggest that a more fruitful interaction of the indeterminate and art might be sought in terms of the modernist aesthetic of *defamiliarisation*. Such art might be seen to allow freedom from determinate thought, deployed in the evident freedom of expression from the constraints of conventional understanding and linguistic usage that has been the decisive feature of modernist art.

The sense of the aesthetic as caught between its empirical cognitive effect and its transcendental value, between perception and rational recuperation, might be read as emblematic of the aesthetic's *dialectical* nature. This is certainly a recurrent theme in Welsch's ideas, and an important continuity between eighteenth century ideas and twentieth century modernist ideas of the importance of the aesthetic, crucial to which is the sense of the aesthetic as a meditation on *limits*, whether of sense perception, representation to mind or within the artwork. Emblematic of this discussion of limits is Welsch's interest in the sublime, though I will argue that he does not do justice to the conception of the sublime as a meditation on limits. It may be symptomatic of this dialectical instability that elements of the transcendental and elements of marginal aesthetics are evident in Welsch's formulations. We have already referred to his key category of the 'anaesthetic' in terms of a seemingly autonomous aesthetics of the imperceptible. But I will show that his use of the concept is wide-ranging, in some of its variations add a certain cognitive complexity, and moreover thematise the norms and habits of perception that we have referred to above.

This will be the terrain of this book, on which I will seek to present and assess Welsch's ideas on the intersection of philosophical aesthetics and contemporary culture. In the first chapter I will begin with a more detailed presentation of the main points of his theories of contemporary culture, his ideas on art, and his ideas for the discipline of aesthetics. This will be followed in chapter two by a fuller discussion of the issues sketched above, with reference to his historical precursors in philosophical aesthetics, namely Baumgarten, Kant, and the Russian Formalists. The concern there will be to trace the function and significance of sense-perception – and in particular the absence of the sensory – in philosophical aesthetics, as well as

stating what I see as the pivotal role of the cognitive faculties of the subject in the modern discipline of aesthetics. In chapter three I will turn to Welsch's ideas on the sublime, with particular reference to its historical treatment by Kant and Schiller, and to the two thinkers whose ideas on the sublime Welsch appropriates, Adorno and Jean-François Lyotard. In chapter four I will discuss in greater depth Welsch's own variant of the sublime, and a pivotal concept for my assessment of his ideas, the 'anaesthetic'. In the fifth chapter I will attempt an application of Welsch's anaesthetics to examples of art, focussing in particular on recent drama as operating at the limits of perception (and indeed representation). Finally, in chapter six I will depart from Welsch's ideas for art, though not his terms, to ask whether the seemingly opposite idea of excessive perception in art, again exemplified in recent drama, might not offer a more fruitful and convincing alternative to addressing some of the issues which motivate Welsch's turn to the anaesthetic, whilst remaining true to the re-conceptualisation of the aesthetics in terms of sense perception.