

***Iwona Lorenc***

*Institute of Philosophy*

*Warsaw University*

*i.lorenc@uw.edu.pl*

## **“THEORETICAL TURN” IN POST-AVANT-GARDE ART AND THE AESTHETICS OF DE-DIFFERENTIATION**

**Abstract:** In this article I use the term “theoretical turn” to refer to phenomena in contemporary art that incorporate theory into their body and mode of action. I understand this incorporation similarly to Arthur Danto, Robert Jausse and Scott Lash. Within the domain of aesthetics these developments are related to a new philosophical, conceptual framework, open to the changes taking place in contemporary culture (particularly its mediatisation and aestheticisation). This involves de-differentiation and the blurring of borders between the aesthetic and the non-aesthetic rather than the Kantian criteria of differentiation. It acknowledges the tendencies of late modernity (e.g. the avant-gardes) to autonomise the aesthetic and rewrites them as a temporary element of cultural transformations. The aesthetic no longer occupies a separate domain; it concedes the existence of borders, but at the same time, points to the processes in which they dissolve.

**Keywords:** aestheticisation, aesthetic indistinction, aesthetic de-differentiation, aesthetics differentiation, death of art, theoretical turn in art

### **Introduction. Aestheticisation and de-differentiation**

In one of his interviews, Arthur Danto emphasised the decisive importance of Duchamp’s anti-aestheticism, not only for the progress of art, but also for the philosophical reflection on art. It was Duchamp and other artists who came after him, like Andy Warhol, who – argued Danto – gave impulse to the great debate over the insufficiency of traditional conceptual tools that aestheticians and art philosophers had been using to problematize art’s sense and essence. He pointed out that Warhol was the first artist to stumble upon perceptual indistinction, and posed the following problem: there are two identical objects, one of them is a work of art and the other is not. We cannot tell them apart just

by looking at them. How do we differentiate between them? Art in its traditional sense has ended and the process of change could be observed everywhere, epitomized by the work of John Cage, the Judson Dance Group, minimalists, and Robert Morris. It was a common trend as it occurred south of 14<sup>th</sup> street in Manhattan. This was the time of bizarre experiments and new emerging questions: what is the difference between noise and music? What is the difference between a brick and a work of art that is a brick? What is the difference between a pile of felt and a work of art? These questions were coming up all the time.<sup>1</sup>

The blurring of borders between art and non-art that has been taking place before our eyes is a manifestation of a larger process in which social fields and cultural experiences merge and the old Kantian confidence in their mutual exclusion is overturned. If there are new “ivory towers” being built, enclaves for “the insiders”, they immediately end their autonomous existence in the commercialised universality of the technologically stimulated cultural transmission. Newness and originality are still valued, though they are treated without the old “reverence” so specific to the first avant-garde; they have become short-lived coins. We are observing similar lack of freshness in the programme of making humanity happy through the idea of aestheticisation.

Saying that the world is undergoing the process of aestheticisation seems to be implying that it is, or at least should be, becoming more beautiful. Judging from sociological phenomena, from the increasingly popular beauty treatments (cosmetics, fitness, plastic surgery) or the approach towards architecture, both public and private – the meaning that we ascribe to aestheticisation is becoming an important element of the axiology of our times. At the same time, the shallowness of today’s aestheticisation is becoming an object of critique for those studying contemporary cultural transformations, and an example of distance tinted with irony for the arts.

Global projects of aestheticisation as a path to common happiness are – as we know – not a new idea. Such movements as Arts and Crafts in England, or Bauhaus in Germany, aimed at integrating aesthetic values with everyday life, continuing the old Schillerian idea of the aesthetic formation of human harmony. Today this dream has been undergoing a far-reaching transformation, meaning not only its shallowing due to of a certain type of everyday life practices.

Aestheticisation is also a way of perceiving the world, and an approach towards it. The adjective “aesthetic” denotes a kind of subjective experience (a form of attention, opinion or judgement): it should be distanced, light, disinterested, aimed not even at what is being shown, but on the showing itself and the experience accompanying it. What used to be characteristic of

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<sup>1</sup> See: Interview: “Art and analysis”. Peter Osborne & Arthur Danto. *Radical Philosophy* 90, 1998.

experiencing art is diffusing into the experience of the world. This phenomenon, with roots in the distant traditions of modernity, has been recently acquiring new meanings and, as regards contemporary artistic practices, is a sphere of mutual permeation of art and life. Artists and thinkers who participated in these practices, and at the same time co-created them, included Wordsworth, Coleridge, Emerson, Thoreau, Cage, Sourieau, and many more. The silent performance of John Cage is not an act of the depreciation of art; it reveals its beyond-artistic existence and influence, dissolving the traditional definitions and fixed borders between art and non-art. It points our attention towards the new way in which the old concept of aisthesis realises itself as an act of embodying sense. Cage himself emphasised in his commentaries in 1981 that the work of art no longer resided in the art itself, but it was rather a way of experiencing our surroundings.

Contemporary art aims to change the way in which we see reality. It is a school of sensory sensitivity, it "trains" our ability to perceive. Some scholars, including Danto, note that art is often lost in the process. The integration with life resulting from such practices is, in a way, the "death of art". On the other hand, other authors claim that the unity of art and life can be beneficial. John Dewey, distancing himself from the elitist model of art, pointed out that art is the highest realisation of life; it is the art of life that cannot be reduced to the traditional "fine art" formula.

The process of aestheticisation, in a broad sense, is accompanied by new technologies and new arts. It is said that with the arrival of multimedia techniques and virtual arts, aestheticisation has been divesting the world of its sense of reality. The world loses its load of definiteness, its seriousness; we experience an increased lightness of being. This process has been described by various scholars, from Baudrillard to Paul Virilio. Therefore, one of the more important questions is how the perception and experience of beauty changes in the times which seem to devalue it. The contemporary forms of the aestheticisation of reality may perhaps be a practical way of preserving and sustaining this value despite, or maybe because of, the lack of faith in its metaphysical actuality.

The blurring of the borders between art and non-art, their de-differentiation, is an important aspect of the aestheticisation process. This de-differentiation is taking the form of a "theoretical turn", both in the arts and the aesthetics that accounts for the arts. Aestheticisation is not only a blurring of the borders between art and non-art, but also between art and philosophy. De-differentiation of art and non-art is a bilateral process: researchers mention not only an incorporation of theory into art, but also the diffusion of the aesthetic into the everyday experience, or even cognitive structures. In this article I am going to examine the issue of de-differentiation and permeation of theory into art, with

reference to several influential theoretical stances. Among these, an important role will be played by Wolfgang Iser.

In his *Aesthetics beyond aesthetics* Iser attempts to take the title discipline outside the traditional philosophy of art, which – according to him – could not cope with either art or the aesthetic. He claims that aesthetics thus wasted the critical and correctional potential it has towards philosophical rationalisation.<sup>2</sup> In a way, this wasted potential of Baumgarten and Kant has been brought back in the late modernity, or – as some may say – “our post-modern modernity”. Iser argues that the fundamental structures (and not just the surface aspects) of contemporary thought has had the aesthetic quality incorporated in them for a long time. The main argument the German philosopher makes in this respect is that aesthetics has found its way into the foundations of thinking. That is why – according to Iser – aesthetics should reach outside the conventional philosophy of art and encompass all aesthetic phenomena, including sensual perception, certain aspects of everyday experience, and political and ethical problems.<sup>3</sup> Aesthetics should engage in the interpretation of both the artistic and the non-artistic phenomena, especially the art that reaches outside what is human – towards the transhuman. Iser’s project involves the blurring of these borders too. By the way, this most recent interest of contemporary aesthetics incorporates itself well into interdisciplinary studies, particularly those involving biotechnology, biophysics and Information Technology. Only a philosopher equipped with the interdisciplinary tools that will allow him to look into the mechanisms of interaction between the fields of experience will be able to see the anticipatory role of art in the processes they observe and bring out art’s new formula reflecting the cultural reality of dissolving and shifting borders.

### De-differentiation

Referencing Hans Blumenberg’s “epochal threshold”, Robert Jaus points out the particular merits of the avant-garde in characterising the new modes of experience after 1912.<sup>4</sup> He writes that the concept of the avant-garde was essential in forming the identity of the Italian Futurists, French Cubists or

<sup>2</sup> Iser, Wolfgang “Aesthetics Beyond Aesthetics: Towards a New Form of the Discipline”. In: F. Halsall, J. Jansen & T. O’Connor (eds.), *Rediscovering Aesthetics*. Stanford University Press, 2009, pp. 178-192.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> According to Jaus, the epochal threshold would not have happened if not for Baudelaire’s transformation of receding Romanticism into the emerging aestheticism that, in the imaginary museum of arts, wants to have unlimited access to all the past epochs (cf. Jaus, Hans Robert and Roetz, Lisa C. “The Literary Process of Modernism from Rousseau to Adorno”. *Cultural Critique* No. 11, Winter 1988-1989, pp. 27-61). In consequence, the historical distance

Orphists, German expressionists, but also Russian and American avant-garde movements.<sup>5</sup>

Jauss points out that after 1912 there was a break between auratic and post-auratic art. The post-auratic art emerged from the rubble of the belief that it was possible to return to the old, integral forms of experiencing the world. The price paid for modernity was the self-alienation of the subject, fragmented in time and space. Contemporary art turns, therefore, towards the presentation of the contingent, fragmented experience of the everyday reality – one that should recognise and aesthetically reveal the subject through a second alienation of the alienated reality. Contemporary art negates the boundaries of reality, questions the status of aesthetics and provokes the reader to reflect on whether and how fiction and reality can be differentiated in today's world. Breaking with the closed, still organic form of the autonomous work of art opens the post-auratic art to productive reception.<sup>6</sup>

These processes, described by Jauss, are part of a larger movement, within which the late modernity turns against the divides and the borders it has built itself. Anti-realism and giving up any reference to meaning are important tendencies in contemporary art and have added – on the one hand – to the strengthening of the borders between art and non-art (as it happened with abstract painting), and, on the other hand, to the collapse of these borders (as in the case of happening and action painting).

Scott Lash points out that the differentiation of art forms from the real world has been a trait of modern art since the Renaissance. He contrasts differentiation with the contemporary processes of de-differentiation, using the German term *Entdifferenzierung*.<sup>7</sup> Lash characterises the important elements of de-differentiation, such as the lack of aura in the work of art, negation of the difference between author and viewer, and the blurring of borders between art and theory, fine art and popular art, the cultural and the social. According to Lash, inspired by the famous text *Discours, figure* by Francois Lyotard, the term that corroborates de-differentiation is "the figural". Although the "differentiating" contemporary discourse favours meaning relations, "the figural" relates to the aesthetics of desire and sensation. In this realm – Lash points out – the

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collapses, together with the authority of the times past. History becomes an instrument and an object of manipulation, an element of the game played on the cultural market. The "aura", inseparably linked to the temporal depth of experience, is destroyed, all schools of aesthetics become parallel and mutually oppositional at the same time.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> See: Lash, Scott "Discourse or Figure? Postmodernism as a 'Regime of Signification'". *Theory, Culture & Society*, June 1988 vol. 5 no. 2, pp. 311-336.

hermeneutics of art is supported, and sometimes even replaced by an “erotics of art”. Contemporary forms of art: music, sculpture, dance, architecture, painting, show the desire “on the surface of representation”, not discriminating between life and “text”. They are a complement to life as understood by Nietzsche, articulations of the pleasure principle.

It is not just in the writings of Lash, however, that we find de-differentiation indicated as the leading tendency in contemporary art, but also in those of Susan Sonntag and Lyotard. This “aesthetics of de-differentiation” is situated in a polemic tension with both hermeneutics (together with the primacy it gives to meaning, setting “text” against reality) and critical theory, which it replaces with an affirmative stance. Aesthetic analysis is a complement to art, and art – a complement to life.

Rosalind Krauss, who wrote in a similar manner about photography, points to its “surreal” character. As in surrealism, where reality itself becomes a signifier, photography creates “impressions of the real”. Artaud’s theatre, which Lash mentions in the context of de-differentiation processes, refers not so much to life, as it actually is life, it is life’s complement. Counter to the avant-garde claims, art is not an autonomous enclave, separated from life.

One of the most important areas undergoing de-differentiation in contemporary art is cinema. Lash emphasises the similarity between cinematic experience and a dream: the primary process and sexuality explode on the surface of representation<sup>8</sup> – cinematic reception is a distraction rather than concentration of attention. Many aestheticians and philosophers of art have pointed towards similar readings of the importance of cinema in the creation of new experiences blurring the old borders of experience.

Arthur Danto regards cinema as being of crucial importance in the history of art. This is due to a shift from the perception mediated by meaning to the unmediated perception of the moving image. Cinema is situated on the edge of the new epoch which Danto calls “post-historical”. Unlike the previous stages of art history that aimed to perfect the instruments mediating meaning, the unmediated perception of cinema crowns the progressive model of art and signals the moment it ingresses into the new paradigm. The perfecting of mimetic imaging has reached its end. Further development of art will focus not so much on representational progress, but on the constitution of art by its “world” – including its theory.

Among perceptually indistinguishable objects, only those that are perceived to be art can be elevated into “the artworld”. In order to perceive something as a work of art (to distinguish art from non-art) one needs to refer to

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

art theory, to knowledge about art, to support oneself with philosophical and critical reflection. In this way – as Leszek Sosnowski rightly points out – the traditional relation between art and theory is reversed: in the earlier historical periods, the existence of theory resulted from the existence of art. But now, in the post-historical era, the existence of art is a result of the existence of theory. In this new reality theory becomes a necessary condition transforming an object into art.<sup>9</sup> Danto writes it clearly: the historical epoch of art has come to an end the moment it became clear what art was and what it meant. Artists opened the way for philosophy and at this point this task needs to be passed into the hands of philosophers.<sup>10</sup> To put it another way and to comment on Danto's proposition – the same rule of indistinction that ascribes constitutive meaning to theory, establishes its relationship with art.

I agree with the author of *The Artworld* that art is "embodied meaning". This meaning has its roots in our genuine relationships with the world and with other people, from interpersonal relations, to a network of symbolic links, to a constitutive role of theory for art – including the philosophical reflection on art. Theory does not "hang over" artefacts and phenomena that are thought to be art as an external, cold, conceptual instrumentation, but it constitutes its invigorating complement. This also means that it allows us to understand the unbreakable bond between the realm of experience Danto calls the "artworld" and other experiences of contemporary culture, everyday life, and human existence. Simply, it allows us to disentangle fragments of this great plexus, at least to the point where its artistic articulations become legible, or – to use a stronger word – where they can come into existence.

### **Indistinction and de-differentiation phenomena and their meaning for the philosophical reflection on art**

I understand de-differentiation, one of the focal points of this article, as a process inherent in the late-modern loss of foundations. I believe it means a revocation of the divisions of experience that are generated by these foundations. Interchangeability and blending together of the indicative with the essential – in the sphere of cultural, artistic or philosophical interpretation – are important aspects of this process. As a result, the tension between the "logic of sense" and "logic of surface", specific to these fields, lingers. This tension has been, most notably, portrayed by postmodernist philosophers such as Derrida, Lyotard, or

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<sup>9</sup> Sosnowski, Leszek *Filozoficzny świat sztuki Athura Danto, Wstęp* in: A.C. Danto, *Świat sztuki. Pisma z filozofii sztuki*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Kraków 2006, p. 28 [my translation].

<sup>10</sup> See Danto, *ibid.*

Deleuze, although it has become the object of self-reflection of a large part of late-modern philosophy, starting from Nietzsche.

On the one hand, the phenomena appearing in these fields are perceived to be “events” in the self-revealing phenomenal field. On the other hand, it is noted that they generate their own “micrologic” rules of sense and indications of a critical erasure of existing distributions of meaning. De-differentiation is therefore a dynamic process of encountering, constructing and, at the same time, revoking the existing cultural formations of sense. A process that could not be taking place were it not for the differentiation of the domains of experience. De-differentiation can “work” only together with differentiation, particularly in the realm of the aesthetic.

In his text titled *Answering the Question: What Is Postmodernism?* that was a reply to a speech Habermas gave in 1980 when he was awarded the Adorno Prize, Lyotard decisively distanced himself from the critique of the unity of aesthetic experience inscribed in Habermasian “unfinished project of modernity”. Lyotard disagrees with Habermas’s attempts to salvage or substitute the lost, impossible totality using the aesthetic – he refuses to treat the aesthetic, and art in particular, as a substitute totality. In the above essay, as well as in *The Sublime and the Avant-Garde, Immaterialität und Postmoderne or Philosophy and Painting in the Age of their Experimentation*, Lyotard emphasises that contemporary art is at the same time the “vanguard”, symptom, and factor of the dissolution of traditional modes of world unification. It bears witness to the disintegration of reality, and in that sense it is pluralistic, heterogeneous, deeply “nihilistic” and, as a consequence – introverted, inclined to experimentation tending towards unexpected possibilities. Contemporary art is open to “events happening” (in the meaning Lyotard ascribes to this concept after Heidegger) and from this perspective sublime rather than beautiful. It cannot therefore play the role of a mythic-poetic escape from the consequences of the disintegration of today’s world; it is not a form of substitute unification. Lyotard, like Adorno, is convinced of the irreversibility of the processes of dissolution of the idea of totality and the social-cultural totalities that embody this idea and that have their philosophical and artistic macronarratives. He is not, however, alone in this stance: one needs only to bring up Foucault and his microphysics of power, Deleusian “chaos” in *Difference and Repetition – close to art informel*, Derridean categories like sign, trope, dissemination, merging, or renunciation of sense.<sup>11</sup>

The collapse of the macronarratives resulted in the collapse of the categories that built them. This includes the ones that form the basis of the famous differentiation between the aesthetic and what does not fit in this domain; also

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<sup>11</sup> See: Welsch, Wolfgang “The birth of postmodern philosophy from the spirit of modern art”. *History of European Ideas* 14 (3), 1992, pp. 379-398.



- looking from a different angle - the differentiation between an aesthetic experience and all the other kinds of experience, or, if one prefers, between art and non-art.

### **It is now time for conclusions:**

It might seem that, inscribed in the cognitively-oriented tradition of post-Kantian aesthetics, aesthetic differentiation has been deemed obsolete. However, as a result of the "theoretical turn" in art initiated by the avant-garde, it was incorporated into contemporary artistic practice. After all, theory with its distinctions is becoming - as Danto points out - an integral element of "the artworld". Be that as it may, this **post-avant-garde differentiation reclaims its formative power only working together with indistinction - an integral part of contemporary shifts in art. The interpenetration of art and life in its various forms de-differentiates the old divisions and introduces the problem of indistinction, at the same time establishing new criteria for differentiating between art and non-art.** However, these are not established along the apriori rules of its theory, relating to universal foundations, but from within the artistic practices that have made theory their integral part. These differentiations cause tension between the dynamism of cultural life and the inertia of its extant theoretical and artistic forms. Jacques Rancière is right in saying that in this aspect there is no clear cut between modernity and post-modernity, that "there is no post-modern break". We are still stuck in modernity, for which "art is art insofar as it is also non-art, or is something other than art."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Rancière, Jacques, *Aesthetics and its Discontents*. Translated by S. Corcoran, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009, p. 36; see also: Rancière, Jacques, *Dissensus, On Politics and Aesthetics*. Translated by S. Corcoran. London and New York: Continuum, 2010, p.118.

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## **„ZWROT TEORETYCZNY” W SZTUCE POAWANGARDOWEJ A ESTETYKA ODRÓŻNICOWANIA (streszczenie)**

W niniejszym artykule używam pojęcia „zwrotu teoretycznego” w stosunku do tych zjawisk sztuki współczesnej, które wcielają teorię w swój byt i sposób oddziaływania.

Inkorporację tę rozumiem w duchu ujęć Arthura Danto, Roberta Jaussa czy Scotha Lasha. W polu estetyki wspomnianym zmianom odpowiada nowa filozoficzna siatka pojęciowa, otwarta na przeobrażenia zachodzące we współczesnej kulturze (zwłaszcza na zjawiska medializacji i estetyzacji). Wydobywa ona raczej aspekt odróżnicowania i zacierania granic między tym, co estetyczne i nieestetyczne niż przejęte po Kancie kryteria odróżniania tego, co estetyczne od tego, co nieestetyczne, zaś charakterystyczne dla późnej nowoczesności (m.in. dla awangard) tendencje do autonomizacji tego, co estetyczne, czyni historycznie uwarunkowanym, przejściowym elementem kulturowych przekształceń. To, co estetyczne nie zajmuje już wydzielonej przestrzeni. Zakłada zarówno istnienie granic, jak i procesy ich zacierania.

**Słowa kluczowe:** estetyzacja, nieodróżnialność estetyczna, odróżnicowanie estetyczne, odróżnienie estetyczne, śmierć sztuki, zwrot teoretyczny w sztuce