De esthetische revolutie: Ontstaan en ontwikkeling van het moderne kunstbegrip in Verlichting en Romantiek

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This book is about the great aesthetic revolution of the eighteenth century and its aftermath. The aesthetic revolution marks the end of the authority of the classic concept of art and introduces the Romantic modern concept that has dominated the arts ever since. Often considered a reaction to the Enlightenment, the indebtedness of Romanticism to the Enlightenment aesthetics debate also makes it a product of the Lumières. Together Enlightenment and Romanticism are a reaction to and a consequence of the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century that introduced a completely new world view in Europe. In their antagonistic interplay both Enlightenment and Romanticism have determined the modern world that therefore reflects a fundamentally divided character.

This is the larger historical context in which the aesthetic revolution of the eighteenth century takes place. While seemingly independent of the new scientific world view, literary, philosophical, institutional, as well as cultural developments converge in this revolution. It has by no means been a simple, let alone an unequivocal process.

For instance, the aesthetic revolution is connected to an important change in the practice and reception of the arts at the end of the seventeenth century. Generally speaking, since that time works of art are no longer primarily created on assignment and they lose their representative and sacred functions. The purpose of a painting used to bring the believer closer to God, a piece of music was to sing the praise of prince or city. But while these functions do not disappear right away, a newly emerging public begins to enjoy works of arts for aesthetic pleasure alone.

The rise of a well-to-do public for the arts corresponds with that of the art market, in which works of art are for sale to everyone. The market values works of art in terms of money, which does not necessarily coincide with their aesthetic value. How to assess the latter becomes the main issue in the then emerging enlightened debate on aesthetics. Besides religion, science, and politics, aesthetics is among the most important subjects Enlightenment philosophers care about.

Since the Renaissance the criteria for beauty or, more generally, for accomplished works of arts had been derived from antiquity. The authority of ancient philoso-
The *Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes* for the first time seriously questions the authority of the ancients. The outcome of this dispute, which after several false starts began in 1687, put an end to the self-evident rules of aesthetics. Hence the scope and the intensity of the enlightened aesthetic debate that has to develop new criteria and new categories to deal with the arts. The two most important new categories are taste and genius. These perfectly fit the new art market: the public decides what it considers beautiful or not, while the artist presents himself as a natural genius above and beyond the rules. Problematic, however, is the subjectivity of it all which inevitably leads to a certain relativism. Objective criteria, still existent in the classical concept of art, are no longer available. In addition there is a troubling factor in the nature of the new category of the sublime that is hard to combine with any rule at all.

The Enlightenment aesthetics debate has come to terms with these problems and thus the idea of aesthetic autonomy eventually emerges as the new objective criterion. As a new category bound to profoundly change the order of the fine arts, aesthetic autonomy already announces itself during the *Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes*, both amongst the ‘modernes’, who detect a difference in historical development between poetry and the natural sciences, and amongst the ‘anciens’, who defend the proper character of poetical texts against the uniform rationalism of the ‘modernes’.

It is hard to speak about these things without sounding anachronistic, for the very notion of the ‘fine arts’ first appears in this period. The same applies to the notion of aesthetics, the word itself as well as the independent philosophical discipline. Previously the arts were divided into the free and mechanical arts, and thinking about the beautiful took place as part of a general metaphysics or in separate, primarily technical treatises on the creation of artistic perfection. Art or literature in the modern sense of the word did not yet exist, as both these notions only originated thanks to the invention of aesthetic autonomy.

In the course of the aesthetics debate of the Enlightenment the arts experience an unmistakable increase in standing, especially poetry, traditionally considered the highest of the arts. On their part the Romantics will turn poetry into the ‘spirit’ of all arts. This increase is a reaction to the condescending way ‘modernes’ like Fontenelle and La Motte during the Querelle had treated poetry, which in their view was in many
respects inferior to prose. For them the proper era of poetry was the distant past, not the ‘philosophical’ present, let alone the future. The beginning of civilisation was the golden age of poetry as suggested by the classical idea that the gods had civilized humankind by means of the singing of the poets. But now philosophy and the sciences had become the harbingers of civilization and in the wake of their continuous progress left poetry and the arts far behind.

Yet, the outcome of the Querelle remains ambiguous. It results in a future oriented belief in progress on the one hand, but on the other in historical relativism (‘historicism’) that stimulates a particular interest in the past. Besides historiography poetry also benefits from the latter. If poetry apparently had been so important at the beginning of history as the source of civilization, why should it not be capable of continuing its important role?

The more progress of civilization is critically viewed, as a result of Rousseau’s cultural criticism, among others, the more the appreciation of poetry increases. Critics such as Hamann, Hemsterhuis, and Herder even regard poetry as the remedy for the ills of modern times. Although they have not yet any idea of aesthetic autonomy, their revaluation of poetry and the arts contributes to its emergence. Combined with aesthetic autonomy, their revaluation subsequently becomes the inspiration for the romantic ‘aesthetic revolution’ destined to correct the failures of the modern enlightened world and thus prepare a new ‘golden age’.

The eighteenth century reappraisal of poetry and the other fine arts is better understood when it is seen against the background of the scientific revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Thanks to Copernicus, Galilei, Kepler, Descartes, Huygens, and Newton the closed cosmos transforms into an infinite universe. For the first time humankind becomes fully aware of the inhumanity of the universe and at the same time discovers the possibility of creating itself a ‘world’ on earth by means of science and technology. In this respect the new science is two-faced: it confronts man with his restrictions as well as his possibilities. The big problem of the new science is the abolition of any final causality; science is unable to answer questions about the why and the wherefore. To obtain a livable human world, therefore, this deficiency needs to be rectified. Increasingly humankind becomes aware of the fact that a human world only exists in as far as they create it themselves.

This has to be taken less in a material than in an ideal sense: a ‘world’ comes into being thanks to gods, religions, meaningful and inspired connections, theodicies, world views, philosophies of history, and so forth. The emphasis is on creativity – that is, if we take the Greek origin of the word literally, on ‘poetry’, poiesis. The creation of civilisation, which traditionally was attributed to poetry, also creates meaning, exactly that which allows humankind to feel at home on earth. The increasing awareness of the indispensability of poetry, of creativity, is due not least to the Enlightenment criticism of revelation, miracles, and other supernatural phenomena.
Time and again it turns out to be active man himself who is responsible, man as a creative, ‘poetical’ being. People do not only realize that poetry and the arts are of equal standing with religion, morals, science, and philosophy, but also that poetry actually is their source.

The autonomous position given to the arts at the end of the eighteenth century is a response to this insight. Immanuel Kant introduces the concept of ‘autonomy’ in aesthetics in the first part of his *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (1790), in which autonomy appears as the necessary condition of the pure judgment of taste. Prior to Kant, Karl Philipp Moritz proposed a theory of the autonomy of art, but without using the term. The new concept of art emerges partly through mutual influence, partly through different minds having the same thoughts at the same time. It is the origin of what we still call ‘art’ and ‘literature’ today. Admittedly, these are difficult, confusing notions, because they simultaneously can mean so many other things; the older meanings never completely disappeared. Yet if asked whether a certain painting is ‘art’ or a certain text is ‘literature’, everyone today understands what the question means, whereas in the seventeenth century one would have been at a loss. The emergence of the qualitative concept of art marks the turning point in the aesthetic revolution of the eighteenth century.

The concept of the autonomy of the fine arts as ‘art’ emphasizes the new importance attributed to these arts. At the same time aesthetic autonomy is also an attempt to regain an objective criterion with which to discriminate between good and bad works of art. With Moritz, Goethe, and Schiller autonomy becomes the key difference between true art and the products of the new mass culture, between real artists and their commercial colleagues whose main concern is entertainment and financial gain instead of pure art. Together with the autonomy of art emerges the dichotomy of high and low culture that remains a problem up to the present.

Autonomy also separates art from the rest of society, with widely diverse consequences for its function and meaning within society. On the one hand autonomy deprives the arts of their traditional self-evident social functions, on the other its independence implies that art possibly is not or is less contaminated by the ills of the modern world. In his letters on the aesthetic education of humankind Schiller interprets autonomy, which he also calls ‘immunity’, in this way. Autonomy, independence of the fine arts, does not necessarily lead to isolation and social sterility; on the contrary, it can serve as a conscious engagement, an engagement or commitment to transform society and make a better world.

This possibility is evident in the exalted plans and ambitions of the early German Romantics. All reservations about political and social engagement, typical for Schiller and Goethe, disappear in favour of an ‘aesthetic revolution’, that is supposed to transform the arts as well as society. Poetry should become social, society should become poetical, according to Friedrich Schlegel. The poets and thinkers of the
Frühromantik again fully endorse the transforming, civilising force of poetry. And again the gods seem to bring civilization to humankind through the singing of the poets.

However, it is not this classical idea, but philosophy that motivates the Romantic belief in poetry. Since Kant had demonstrated the impossibility of the absolute truth of ‘dogmatic’ metaphysics, the Romantics, by their critique of Fichte’s Wissenschaftslehre, come to the insight that only poetry could offer a way out. At a certain point every philosopher has to transform himself into a poet, Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis argue, and Schelling discovers in art the new ‘Organon’ of philosophy. Poetry appears to be indispensable for philosophy, and this is what justifies the renewed belief in poetry on which the social engagement of the early Romantics is founded. Here the extremely high expectations attached to engagement find their origin and their intellectual support.

Although it never becomes completely clear how they imagined the future after their ‘aesthetic revolution’, there is no doubt that the concept of poetry embraced by Romantics like Schlegel and Novalis implies much more than only verse writing. The whole of society had to be ‘poetized’ or ‘romanticised’, the final goal or ideal being the recovery of the ‘golden age’. Such an ‘aesthetic revolution’ never really materialized, at least not outside the autonomous domain of art. Nevertheless, these Romantic ambitions and ideals have remained an important part of the Romantic modern concept of art, still dominant today. Even when the true faith is lacking, these ambitions and ideals are still amply honoured as part of the current concept of art. Art is critical, subversive, and ground-breaking, art offers insights not to be had elsewhere, the artist is a kind of seer or prophet (hence his presence in so many talk shows to explain and comment on world news), art transforms humankind and their world.

The engagement of the Frühromantik can be summarized as the intention to create a meaningful humane ‘world’. Enlightened modernity cannot do this satisfactorily on its own, according to the Romantics. Modern life suffers from the division of labour, from empty functionality, nihilism, reduction of man to his physical, material substratum at the expense of his higher ideal self, estrangement from himself, his fellow man and nature – for all these modern ills the Romantic ‘aesthetic revolution’ was intended to be the remedy. They are all symbolically connected by the inhumanity of the infinite universe, in which humankind cannot feel at home unless poetry succeeds in transforming it into a ‘world’. How is this to be done? By creating, also symbolically, unity and harmony between man and universe, not for once and all, but through a permanent ‘poetical’ creativity present in every human being – this is the real issue of the ‘aesthetic revolution’ of the Frühromantik.

Inevitably this ‘revolutionary’ engagement would put romantic art in a position of competition with other social forces striving for a similar goal, such as religion,
politics, economy, science, and technology. This is a competition between social domains or ‘spheres of value’ (Weber) that, like art, have gained a similar autonomous status. Yet, they are never completely independent from each other; if that were the case, there would be no society. In fact their autonomy is always relative, expressing itself in rivalry for hegemony.

Religion exercised hegemony for a very long time in the pre-modern world. One still should not underestimate its importance, as is also the case with politics whose hegemony acquired during the French Revolution lasted until deep into the twentieth century. Since the end of the Cold War hegemony seems to have been shared by an alliance of the domains of economy, science, and technology, although it would be unwise to exclude the return of politics. The most visible form of this alliance is commercial mass culture, which successfully creates our present ‘world’ through television, internet, and social media.

Art and literature adapt themselves to this situation – and are threatened by it, witness the frequent complaints about the rule of money and mass media. By themselves these complaints are not new. Competition with economy, media, and mass culture has always been a part of autonomous art. The qualitative concept of art, Art and Literature with capital A and L, were invented to keep commercial mass culture at a distance, with variable success, but an invasion of commerce and mass media always remains a real possibility and more than that. From the beginning commerce has been an intrinsic part of the artistic domain simply because art and literature have to be sold. Besides disillusionment with the failure of Romantic engagement this fact reinforces the tendency towards splendid isolation, better known as l’art pour l’art, the paroxysmal intensification of the aesthetic autonomy on which the Romantic modern concept of art is founded.

It is important to properly distinguish between these things, no matter how much they are interconnected. Autonomy is often confused with l’art pour l’art, but the latter is only one possible consequence of the former. Once aesthetic autonomy is invented, both Romantic engagement and l’art pour l’art become possible. Both are part of the Romantic modern concept of art, which presents itself in the Frühromantik for the first time in mature form. For this reason I consider the early German Romantics and their ‘aesthetic revolution’, as well as the beginnings of l’art pour l’art, as the conclusion of the great aesthetic revolution of the eighteenth century when the classical concept of art is replaced by the new Romantic modern concept. Since 1800 the pattern is more or less clear, the associations that were proclaimed still resonate in the concepts of ‘art’ and ‘literature’. Here a new chapter in the history of the arts begins. And so does another book.