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**Displaced feelings. On aesthetic optimism  
and pessimism**

*Rodrigo Duarte*

The terms “aesthetic optimism” and “aesthetic pessimism” have no clear definition or even a wide usage in the history of aesthetics. However, despite not being among the key concepts of the *métier*, such as beauty, sublimity, style, etc., their comprehension is somewhat instantaneous, which, nevertheless, does not prevent us from investigating the characteristics and potentialities of these mutually complementary conceptions.

The instantaneous comprehensibility of aesthetic optimism and pessimism may be due to the fact that what is under discussion here is a kind of “aesthetics of aesthetics”, with a very specific meaning. If aesthetics is traditionally associated with the pleasure or displeasure that certain objects produce in a subject, the aesthetic optimism is related to a kind of satisfaction – not necessarily aesthetic – that aesthetics itself produces in the reflective activity; similarly, the aesthetic pessimism stems from a kind of dissatisfaction that reflection exercise experiences in this respect.

Although it is difficult to give a precise definition of aesthetic optimism, it is possible to underline some characteristics – more specifically four – which can enable the recognition of this conception. From the perspective of *hedoné*, aesthetic optimism admits the possibility of having pleasure in the presence of certain objects, be they natural or artificial.

The second characteristic, a somewhat immediate consequence of the “hedonistic” point of view, is what we could call pedagogic point of view. According to the latter, the

pleasure experienced in certain things is not exhaustive of its resonance, there being an “edifying”, humanizing dimension in the contact with aesthetic objects, be they natural or artificial. And this is mostly due to the fact that the pleasure experienced in the aesthetic evaluation may be – and normally is – accompanied by intellectual resonance.

A third point of view concerning aesthetic optimism – derived especially from the aesthetic pleasure provided by artworks – is that of “contemporaneity”: according to it, there are strong social and historical possibilities of creation, which makes present of art particularly stimulating. The fourth and last point of view, also immediately derived from the previous ones, is that which relates to the future of the works, i.e., with the possibility of their creation and their relevance also in the future. According to aesthetic optimism, from this point of view, there is a future for these artistic creations and it is a promising one.

Not willing to sound redundant, but taking into account the need for clarity, we could proceed in an analogous way in relation to aesthetic pessimism. From the point of view of *hedoné*, it would not be possible, according to this position, to have pleasure in the presence of certain objects, either natural nor artificial. This is a point of view that could also be called “non-aesthetic”, understood as the most extreme case of aesthetic pessimism<sup>1</sup>. Naturally, the core impossibility of pleasure associated with the perception of things makes a virtual pedagogic point of view not applicable from the perspective of radical aesthetic pessimism. If we cannot have sensory satisfaction, one can not speak about a pedagogic, humanizing dimension in the aesthetic experience, be it from nature or art.

Just assuming that aesthetic pessimism is not so radical to the point of not admitting the possibility of pleasure derived especially from artworks, we could pose the question – even for answering it negatively – related to the point of view of presentness, i.e.,

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<sup>1</sup> The most evident example of aesthetic pessimism religiously oriented in the history of philosophy is that of Agrippa von Nettesheim, in his work *The Speech Attacking the Uncertainty and Vanity of the Sciences and the Arts* Agrippa von Nettesheim. Cf. *Die Eitelkeit und Unsicherheit der Wissenschaften und die Verteidigungsschrift*. Ed. Fritz Mauthner, 2 volumes. München: Georg Müller, 1913.

whether or not there are strong possibilities of creation and whether the present of art is or is not what it could be. Similarly, from the presupposition of a mitigated aesthetic pessimism, we could pose the question of the future, answering it negatively: there is no future for the artistic creations and/or it is not at all promising.

It is interesting to note that the non-aesthetic stand, which in practice is often confused with a kind of radical aesthetic pessimism, normally coincides with a taking of sides by – or the closeness to – a certain point of view on the part of the moral dimension or of the epistemic dimension. In the former case, one denounces the aesthesia, seeing in it a supposed immoral trait (in the case of association with a religious belief, this trait could be called “sinful”); in the case of the non-aesthetic stand linked with the privileging of the knowledge of the scientific kind, the main charge one makes is that of irrelevance, i.e., all the realm of aesthetic perception – by extension, that of artistic creation – would consist, according to this point of view, of being absolutely dispensable and inessential to human life.

In the concrete history of philosophy there has always been interesting interrelations among not only the four defining points of view of this “aesthetics of aesthetics” (the possibility of pleasure, its pedagogic dimension and, especially when one refers to the works of art, to the present and future possibility of creations), but also among the moral and epistemic realms in the consideration of the specific stand of a concrete philosophical current: be it optimistic or pessimistic (and to what extent).

Kant can be considered, according to the hedonistic criterion, a very typical aesthetic optimist, since even in the empirical aesthetic judgments the possibility of a pleasure in the presence of a certain kind of thing is presupposed. This possibility is also present in at least three out of the four moments that characterize the reflective aesthetic judgment – the judgment of taste – because, the one relative to quality reinforces the need for this delight in affirming its aesthetic (and not logical) nature; the one concerning quantity calls attention to the aesthetic universality of the judgment of taste and finally, the moment associated with modality points to its necessary character.

We could argue that Kant is an aesthetic optimist also in the pedagogic sense, since, in light of the characterization of the judgment of taste, one can perceive that the objects to be classed as beautiful have a potential for improving human morality. In the conception of “disinterested pleasure”, associated with the first moment, a detachment from the more sensual and less reflective pleasure is signaled. As in the idea of “purposiveness without purpose”, explored in the third moment, the one of “relation to ends”, the subjective feeling of disinterest in the pleasure of reflexive aesthetic judgment, demonstrates the possibility of an objective counterpart associated with the form of the object to be recognized as beautiful. Nonetheless, as mentioned before, it is typical of Kant to have privileged the pedagogic dimension of the pleasure experienced in the presence of objects of beautiful nature, as the following passage attests:

The superiority which natural beauty has over that of art, even where it is excelled by the latter in point of form, in yet being alone able to awaken an immediate interest, accords with the refined and well-grounded habits of thought of all men who have cultivated their moral feeling<sup>2</sup>.

With respect to the third and fourth criteria aforementioned, Kant’s aesthetic optimism is less evident, since, as underlined above, the pure judgment of taste refers only to the naturally beautiful, while what is under discussion here is the possibility of artistic creation in the present and in the future.

It is for this very reason that Hegel seems to be the first great philosopher concerned with aesthetics, for whom the criteria about optimism/pessimism apply with greater propriety. In light of the hedonistic criterion, he is an optimist because he totally accepts that aesthetic objects – in a very special way, works of art – produce pleasure in the subject who perceives them. Similarly, according to the pedagogic criterion, he can also be considered optimistic, as, in a way that resembles the Aristothelian notion of *katharsis*, Hegel suggests that the great art promotes a kind of purification of spirits by enabling an ideal experience of limit-situations of the human existence (cf. VÄ 70-1).

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<sup>2</sup> KdU, A 165. English translation by James Creed Meredith (available in Internet at: <http://philosophy.eserver.org/kant/critique-of-judgment.txt>. Access on July 4, 2007).

As for the criterion of the present possibility of the works of art, Hegel can be regarded as the first great aesthetic pessimist from the transition of modern to contemporary philosophy, since it is his the idea that “Therefore, our present in its universal condition is not favorable to art. (...) In all these respects art is, and remains for us, on the side of its highest destiny, a thing of the past”<sup>3</sup>. Besides the fact that Hegel considered his present unfavorable to art, there was nothing in his thought suggesting that this situation would be reversed in the future, which – following the fourth criterion – makes this philosopher an optimist aesthete in a certain aspect, and a pessimist in another.

It is interesting to note that both the optimistic and the pessimistic sides of Hegel’s aesthetics are connected to a historiologic optimism, according to which the triumphant march of the spirit coincides with the artistic development during a certain stretch of the way, overtaking it right after. The most clearly aesthetically pessimistic aspect of Hegel’s thought is that there is no trace of nostalgia for the end of art; on the contrary, the belief in the rational progression of the spirit outweighs the possible lamentations at the loss of substantiality in the artistic realm, the importance of which, precisely in accordance with the passage quoted above, was recognized by the philosopher himself.

It is obvious that the Hegelian prognosis about the end of art has had resonance in the contemporary opposition between aesthetic optimism and pessimism, seeing that, in a very special way, the grim predictions associated with that page of Hegel’s *Lectures on Aesthetics* have prevailed. I will concentrate on contrasting two philosophers from the twentieth century, who, both influenced by the Hegelian thesis of the end of art, reached opposite conclusions: one of pessimistic nature and the other of optimistic nature. The conclusion of the former type is more typical of Theodor Adorno, and the latter, of Arthur Danto.

As regards Adorno, it is important to highlight that, with respect to the first criterion, the hedonistic one, he could never be considered a pessimist: throughout his aesthetic

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<sup>3</sup> VÄ 25. English translation by bosanquet, In: Hegel, *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, London, Penguin Books, 1993, p.13.

philosophy, from the outset, the possibility that aesthetic objects produce pleasure in the one who perceives is implied, and, according to him this possibility constitutes an important element in the historical permanence of art<sup>4</sup>. Furthermore, in many passages, Adorno calls attention to the fact that, although aesthetic pleasure has historically been a target of ideological appropriation, it can, understood in a less immediate way, be important for demystifying the predominant ideology, projecting the possibility of a future reconciliation<sup>5</sup>.

As for the second criterion, the “pedagogic” one, it must be observed that Adorno, at first and for reasons that shall be clarified further on, reacts negatively to the demand for immediate applications of art for pedagogic purposes<sup>6</sup>. His observations tend towards a position which maintains that the objective of musical pedagogy, as in all artistic education in general, should be the discovery, by the instructor, of mediatory tools (*Vermittlungen*) that could allow the student to have a gradual access to the complex secrets of a highly developed aesthetic expression. Adorno points out his disagreement with the champions of the pedagogical music, however, by asserting that the only solution to the dilemmas brought about by this current, which is the object of his criticism, would be to “find the desired mediation in the very thing and concentrate every effort of musical pedagogy in it”<sup>7</sup>. Assuming that, when one talks about the pedagogic character of aesthetic experience, he/she has in mind the possibility of an ethical formation both of creators and experiencers of the aesthetic objects, here Adorno – in one more fierce defense of the “autonomy of art” – refers to the fact that any ethical element in art could only represent the inner relations of the works and not any kind of instrumentalization<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, „Zur Dialektik von Heiterkeit“, In: *Gesammelte Schriften 11: Noten zur Literatur*, p. 600:

<sup>5</sup> This possibility, applied to the art of music, is revealed in the following excerpt from “True Répétiteur”(Theodor Adorno, „Der getreue Korrepetitor“, In: *Gesammelte Schriften 15*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1976, p. 401):

<sup>6</sup> Theodor W. Adorno: *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 14: *Dissonanzen. Einleitung in die Musiksoziologie: Kritik des Musikanten.*, p 72.

<sup>7</sup> Theodor W. Adorno: *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 14: *Dissonanzen. Einleitung in die Musiksoziologie: Zur Musikpädagogik.*, p.114. English version by Geraldo Magela Cáffaro.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 120:

As regards the third criterion about the “meta-aesthetic” feeling – the acceptance of the possibility of works of art in the present – Adorno’s stand is well-known: echoing the hegelian prognosis about the adversity of art in current times, the Frankfurt philosopher stresses a class of threats to artistic creation in contemporaneity that can be found, interestingly, not in dictatorial regimes, but in those societies which see themselves as democratic: I am referring to the cultural industry. Much as modern authoritative governments have tapped into similar resources to the ones used by the cultural industry, such as radio, cinema and – more recently – television, perhaps it might be said that its potential is only fully revealed in liberal democracies in which the masses are led to believe that what they consume is their own choice. In this process, it is central what Adorno, along with Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, called the “confiscation of schematism”. This means that the cultural industry’s “prime service to the customer is to do his schematizing for him”<sup>9</sup>, since the individual’s operations, which according to Kant were active in the sense of applying concepts and intuitions in the acquisition of valid knowledge, is no longer necessary in the perceptive process typical of the mass culture, in which the sensory elements are pre-schematized in the sense that they are imbued with subliminal ideological conceptions<sup>10</sup>.

Thus, we can conclude that, even if there is a continuity in the production of artworks, Adorno, acknowledging the enormous difficulties faced by artists in contemporaneity, can not be considered an aesthetic optimist according to the third criterion, that is, that of the belief in the unrestricted possibility of the existence of art in the historical present.

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<sup>9</sup> Max Horkheimer & Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. New York, Continuum Books, 1996, p. 126.

<sup>10</sup> Taking into account that the schematism – established by Kant to explain how the sensory perceptions are referred to the understanding – plays a role in aesthetic apprehension in general, even if the cultural commodities can, by no means, be considered works of art, it becomes easy to understand to what extent art in general is under threat in a scenario totally subject to the cultural industry: the standardized individual of late capitalism, who is spiritually exhausted by reified labor and whose income is barely sufficient for his basic sustenance ( and that of his family), finds his daily spiritual bread almost exclusively in the cultural commodity. Firstly, this is so because the price of a mechanically mass-produced article is infinitely inferior to the hand-made one arising from the highly skilled activity of the artist. The relatively lower price of the cultural merchandise comes in handy in a scenario of material scarcity in which the masses live, including in more developed countries. Secondly, the aforementioned spiritual exhaustion caused by the division of labor results in a potential intellectual fatigue of these vast layers of the population, in a way that the mental activity required for aesthetic experience strictly speaking is conveniently replaced with the consumption of the pre-schematized product, offered at very low prices by the culture industry.

Broadly speaking, the fourth criterion follows what has been established with respect to the third one, in so far as, for Adorno, if the present state of the world does not fully guarantee the survival of art, it is doubtful that – the adverse conditions of present art also being presupposed for the future – it will ever become concrete.

Moving on to revisions of Hegel that can be considered optimistic, the figure of Arthur Danto stands out, given his conception of the hegelian prognosis about the end of art as foreshadowing an era of auspicious possibilities of creation and appreciation of artworks. In light of this, with the likely exception of the second criterion (the pedagogic one), which is not explicitly affirmed, but not negated either, there is clear evidence to consider Danto a legitimate representative of aesthetic optimism in contemporary philosophy.

Up to the early 1960's, Danto was a promising analytical philosopher mainly focused on epistemic matters, despite having displayed some heterodox interests before. From then on, the challenge posed by *Pop Art* to the philosophic perspective led him to the conception of his famous article "The Artworld", in which the Brillo Boxes, by Andy Wahrol, are understood as a declaration of the end of art from inside itself. The continuity of this reflection led him, many years later, to explicitly refer to Hegel's aforementioned prognosis in his well-known essay "The end of art". In this text, Danto's argument does not reveal, at least at first sight, an optimism, but the author does reach some partial conclusions: "(...)Hegel's thought was that for a period of time the energies of history coincided with the energies of art, but now history and art must go in different directions, and though art may continue to exist in what I have termed a post-historical fashion, its existence carries no historical significance whatever".<sup>11</sup>.

Nevertheless, in the body and – mainly – at the end of this essay, Danto, convinced of the historical inevitability of the end of art, seeks to harmonise it with an optimistic perspective: "As Marx might say, you can be an abstractionist in the morning, a photorealist in the afternoon, a minimal minimalist in the evening. Or you can cut out paper dolls or do what you damned please. The age of pluralism is upon us. It does not

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<sup>11</sup> Arthur Danto, "The End of Art", In: *The Philosophical Desinfranchisement of Art*, p.84.

matter any longer what you do, which is what pluralism means”<sup>12</sup>. In the second half of the 1990’s, in the book *After the End of Art*, Danto further reinforced the implicit optimism in the aforementioned lines by carrying out a less strict evaluation of the reflections of the previous decades. He also reinforces the comprehension that “the end of art consists in the coming to awareness of the true philosophical nature of art”<sup>13</sup>.

In order to conclude my exposition and taking into consideration mainly the examples from Adorno and Danto, I must recognize the relative insufficiency of the characterizations of aesthetic pessimism and optimism: in fact, a truly philosophical approach to any question must be as faithful as possible to what is assumed as reality and to the possibilities it entails. As regards Danto, it can be noted that, since his first statements about “the end of art”, the firm belief in the existence of the possibilities hitherto inconceivable in the realm of artistic creation is not expressed without reservations: “(...)How happy happiness will make us is difficult to foresee but just think of the difference the rage for gourmet cooking has made in common American life. On the other hand, it has been an immense privilege to have lived in history”<sup>14</sup>.

On the other hand, Adorno, who could be considered an aesthetic pessimist – with the exception of the reference to the hedonistic criterion – since his early philosophical writings never abandoned the hope that the perverse reality of late capitalism could be radically transformed in a distant future not yet foreseen in historical terms. With respect to this, it is interesting to note that this stand is manifested exactly in that category,

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<sup>12</sup> “The End of Art”, op. cit., p. 114-5; cf. *After the End of Art*, Pinceton, Princeton University Press, 1997, pp. 36-7.

<sup>13</sup> *After the End of Art*, op.cit., p. 30-1

<sup>14</sup> “The End of Art”, op. cit., p. 115. Since the theme of the relationships between art and politics, as it is presented in his fierce essay “The philosophic disenfranchisement of art”, had long been a crucial concern for Danto, it can be stated that, after the excitement about the “post-historical art”, which reached its peak in *After the end of art*, the North-American Philosopher has expressed increasing apprehension about the fact that the freedom achieved in art finds less and less its counterpart in reality. This is a very exemplary stand in the exceptional *The Abuse of Beauty* (2003, passim), Danto’s last book of major philosophic importance ( the two following ones, *The Madonna of the Future* and *Unnatural Wonders* are collections of articles relative to the Danto’s immense activity as an art critic).

according to which Adorno could never have been considered a complete aesthetic pessimist, i.e., the belief in the possibility of pleasure in the presence of works of art<sup>15</sup>.

In light of this fierce defense of aesthetic pleasure, even considering its potential for ideological manipulation, we can retrospectively find more positive answers to the other questions of our “aesthetics of aesthetics”. Thus, the pedagogic criterion of the aesthetic experience could, as suggested earlier on, draw on from what is habitually known as the “emancipatory telos of art”, as long as its specifically aesthetic element remains superior to its supposedly didactic advantage. On the other hand, the criterion of presentness becomes acceptable, provided that the works created to overcome all the aforementioned difficulties reach the status of messengers for a reconciled praxis, which is certainly very far from its concrete realization. What applies to the present, for obvious reasons, could be extended to the future, which is the truly enlightening element both of the true artistic creation and of any authentic philosophical reflection to which it gives rise.

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<sup>15</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol 7: *Ästhetische Theorie*: p. 66.