

The relationship between art and reality is one of the most widely discussed subjects in the history of aesthetics. The thing is, that the work of art seems to have a somewhat illusive character that makes its ontological and epistemological characteristics a bit blurry. It is namely obvious that it does not consist in a direct copying of reality, but rather seems to involve both the imagination of the artist and the perceiver in coming into being. Having this spirit of fantasy, how is it then possible that art can make us gain any kind of knowledge or meaningful experience about the world?

The illusiveness of art is pointed out in the quote by Lydia Goehr:

„A work of art takes place in and as a performance in which listeners or observers abstract the artwork out of the context of empirical or real world to render it purely aesthetic, an abstractive and active deed that requires them to achieve a state of self- or world-forgetfulness as they enter into a new world of the work of art“

This quote points out some very essential points about the nature of art: First of all it says that the empirical reality is left behind. This statement can first off seem somewhat contradictory to the essence of art since that art builds partly on sensual experience. The quote even mentions the perceivers of art as listeners or observers, hereby invoking the auditory and visual senses. In this way, it is made clear that the rise of the artistic experience involves the senses, but also that it transcends them. And this is a rather radical transcendence since it ends in forgetting both world and self, both perceived and perceiver.

To understand this at first look paradoxical statement it will be necessary to look back to the root of the aesthetic discipline. It was founded in the 17-hundreds by the German philosopher Baumgarten. He originated from the rationalist movement, and believed never in his career to leave it behind. However, he tried to broaden its range of perspective which led him into a rather different mode of thinking than the usual rationalists. He namely made the observation that even though knowledge is obviously achieved through logical argument, this is not the only sort of knowledge possible. He claimed that also so-called sensitive knowledge was possible – the study of which he called aesthetics. This is not to be confused with sensual knowledge, which has often been done by later interpreters. Baumgarten completely agreed with the fellow rationalists of his time that sensual experience in itself does not consist in knowledge since it does not change the way that the person who undergoes it sees the world. Sensuous was itself considered completely confused and for it to change our view on the world the logical faculty had to be invoked. This structured the multitude of sensory input into categories that could then

be organized and comprehended through sentences build after the rules of logic that since Aristotle had been developed so thoroughly.

Baumgarten however made the point that logic was not the only way to structure the sensual inputs, there was another option, namely the sensitive. Sensitive knowledge was to be build around the concept of extensive rather than intensive knowledge. The logical knowledge is intensive since it focusses on making a few, clear words that structures knowledge in a very organized and rational way. In this way, it is the inner depth and clear definitions of the words that makes it able to know the world. The sensitive experince is different. It consists not in an organized, but in a confused knowledge of the world. It rejoices in the mulititude of expression, percieves like a poem so to speak. The concepts that are formed are created through free association, no causal chains needed, building rather on similarity than causal facts. A multitude of mental faculties are invoked in this kind of experience – memory, senses, Ahnungen (a kind of reaching forward in a mixture of hope and expectation), imaginations, expectations and so on. It is not just a complicated process, but a completely confused one. However, it is clear. Because what make sensitive experience sensitive instead of just sensual is the idea of a unity in this mulitplicity. This formulations originates from Aristotle who found that for a piece of art to be successfull it had to bind all the different parts of it together into a greater unity, which in the end would rouse katharsis in the onlookers. However, this is not what Baumgarten means when he says a unity in the multiplicity. Aristotle's goal was mainly ethical, aiming to cleanse people and make them realize how to live properly and rationally, rather than to be randomly thrown around by their upcoming desires that often diverge from the prefferred middle way. Baumgarten however, does not aim for the good in his description of unity in multiplicity, but rather for the true. He namely things, that just like a logical sentence can express a true statement, so can a sensisitive experience be true in so far as it brings forward som kind of greater idea about the structure of the world. To use truth in this way is very foreing to modern philosophy, at least to the analytical strand, and it is obviously not truth in the sense of a justified true belief. Sensitive experiences are not at all capable of bringing forth such, they work in a completely different field of truths. It is in their nature that they lie without the sphere of argument. His proposing them is therefore build rather on a phenomenological than analytical method, even though he lived many years before the term was invented, and therefore did not explicitly use it himself – actually he tried very hard to keep his writing style wihtin the norms of the rationalist tradition. However, he did himself express the need for a new language to describe the sensitive experience and I think that the phenomenological tradition can be of great help in this aspect, especially the later hemeneutical strand of the „movement“. The thing is, that when Baumgarten argues for the validity of sensual experience, he points to the experience that people have when they for example reads a poem, watches a painting or enjoys the view of the sea. The experience of the beautiful, but not just in the narrow sense of living up to the academical and tasted based aestetical movements who try to build objective rules for beauty (this he would have perceived as a logical and not an aesthetical acitivity), but in the broader sense of this freely associative process that through multiplicity lets a nonexpressible unity step forth, and hereby he adheres to the fact that this is an experience that is just as clear to most people as the one of seeing a logical connection of a sentence.

Hereby it is seen, that Baumgarten and Goehr share the point that the aesthetical experiences occurs when one experiences something sensual but then manages to use this to gain access to a greater field of knowledge. This is seen in Baumgarten's dealing with the unity in multiplicity and Goehr's notion of leaving the empirical world behind. The word „empirical“ today, is however not merely used about sensuous experience, but also has connotations of the rational structuring of such facts through the scientific method. Science is namely today written in the language of mathematics, and thereby falls somewhat under the logical mode of gaining knowledge – it is about systematizing empirical facts to find underlying mathematical patterns. In this way, it is hinted that it probably is not just the idea of pure sensuous experience that Goehr puts the aesthetic experience in opposition to, but also the logical one, bringing forth another similarity with Baumgarten.

However we also see a clear difference between the two thinkers. Whereas Goehr seems to mainly focus on aesthetic experience as something that occurs in art that lets its own unreal world step forward, Baumgarten handles it as a general way of gaining knowledge about everything in the world. In this way, as before mentioned, art lies on the border of getting an illusive character in Goehr's description of it. I however, find this a dangerous path to walk down. If the aesthetic experience has the capability for us to gain knowledge of the world in a completely new way, and if philosophy is to be considered the love for knowledge, I would find it very necessary to keep on investigating the aesthetical experience just like Baumgarten wanted future generations to do.

However this is not to dismiss the relevance of Goehr's work. The thing is, that in the centuries between Baumgarten and Goehr a great development has happened in our understanding of what „world“ even means. In this way, it is not so that because Goehr says that the aesthetical experience brings forth another world than the „empirical or real world“, that this world is of lesser worth. The thing is, that Goehr sorta binds together the empirical (read: scientific) together with the real. This however, is a very modern notion of the term real. If we go back to the period before the renaissance, the platonic and neoplatonic strands in thinking were so strong that it was common to judge the material and empirical world as merely the lack of being, whereas real being was placed in a immaterial, unified source (the One or God) from whom everything else gained whatever being it had. This idea was the main reason for the rise of Baumgarten's notion of aesthetical knowledge. He thought of it in analogy to the divine process of creation of the world, since that in it the imagination of the perceiver was at play, and he thought of the artist (the so called lucky aestheticist) as reflecting on God's creation of the world. This analogy is however not confined to him – Immanuel Kant used it as well, even though he gave God a very different ontological status, as originating in the Vernunft of the subject – and the Romantics as well, even though they were much more radical and proposed the complete dissolution between the illusive ideas of a difference between self and world in this divine experience. Even in the medieval the job of the artist was to bring forth the light of God that was present in the created things, and in the antique era poetry was considered to be a product of when a person was taken over by divine powers to tell the transcendent truth of the universe. In this way, through history art has often been perceived as a way of

bringing forth knowledge or experience of the divine, not by argument or rationalism, but by means of experience that takes its outset in the sensual experience of the world around us but transcends it by means of other mental powers. However Baumgarten was the first to call this a process of gaining knowledge.

However, this idea of the aesthetical experience being a way of reaching to the nonempirical grounds of the real world will to many people in modern philosophy sound much like speculative metaphysics or even religious dogmas. In the 18th century as romanticism slowly faded out, a materialist perception of the world won greater and greater hegemony since it showed itself so capable of bringing forth scientific results, boosting technological advances in society. It quickly became clear that science needed no explanation outside itself to work, and this coupled with the political and ethical demands for the release from religious dogmas meant, that everything with religious roots was slowly fading out of the sphere of the true. What started in the 13th century with Ockham's nominalism here met its final peak: Everything redundant must be cut away. This is the perception of „real“ that Goethe is dealing with, the real as the empirical, and when she thereby deals with the aesthetic experience she has to put it in another world, something that she is driven to call unreal, even though it seems obvious in her quote that the experience of it is as real as the empirical world, since it is capable of completely replacing it.

In this way, it is clear that the religious experiences have not been erased with the fall of the metaphysical systems. They are as real and present as ever the difference just is that they have lost their ontological legitimacy. We are no longer capable of talking of the experience of poetry as a mystical transcendence into divine, because our notion of divinity has lost its power. Instead they are dealt with as merely subjective experiences, that may very well be extremely real for us in their spontaneous outbreaks, but has to be judged as mere phantasms, matters of taste or psychological mechanisms when we look back at them.

I however, find this to be very pitiful, since as before mentioned, this is just a way of putting boundaries on our possible sphere of knowledge. Today we have tendency to put scientific knowledge in opposition to aesthetic or religious experience. It is considered as a matter of either-or. I mean, EITHER God exists and created the world OR he does not and the Big Bang happened, and depending on which one is true we have to completely different worlds – one in which aesthetical experience is a way of reaching the divine and one in which is a psychological phenomenon without any philosophical validity. However, I find this dichotomy very one sided. It takes for granted that God must be understood as an entity that can either exist or not exist, and in this way it already plays within a rationalist perception of the world. Perceiving God as an entity is a very modern notion¹, beforehand he has always been described not as a

¹ Of course there has also been a great rationalistic strand in theology, mostly present in the Medieval period's scholasticism and parts of the following catholic tradition. However, every thinker who in this period tried proving the existence of God was first of all dealing with him as pure Being in the same way as previously described, so it was more an argument about whether it makes sense to deal with such a term, and furthermore all of them admitted that these arguments were of less validity than the aesthetical experience of God through love and mysticism, and merely meant to make it easier for us to understand and thereby believe in God, since we as world bound souls find it much easier to believe logical arguments that refer to objects than the confused and unintentional aesthetical feeling.

being, but as pure Being. He is the principle through which everything else is, and in this way as long as we talk about that anything is, we are actually indirectly dealing with the question of the divine as it was understood in the premodern sense.

Therefore, it is not so that modern science is in any way capable of proving the existence or nonexistence of God. It would be putting an essentially aesthetical phenomenon in the sphere of the scientific and rational. The thing is, that when modern science through Ockhams razor dismisses questions about the divine they do not do it because God is in any way contradictory to science, but merely redundant since he is not in the sphere of it, and thereby not necessary for the system to work. However, as Baumgarten pointed out, staying in this comprehension of the world makes us miss out on quite a great deal of reality.

This point, I find, is in itself enough to study the aesthetical experiences in themselves seriously, since they are the ones capable of investigating the meaning of Being. This has also been done in the modern world, in traditions counting figures such as Martin Heidegger, Walter Benjamin, Georges Bataille, Emanuel Levinas and Maurice Blanchot. I consider them to have taken up the threads of Baumgarten in a very fulfilling way, considering how the experience of the „beautiful“ can lead us closer to understanding the principles under which things step into being for us as humans. I do not, however, have time to thoughtfully go through their systems of thinking which are not at all in agreement with each other even though they to a great extent are dealing with the same spheres of reality. The only point I want to mention is their common ground of the dissolution of the subject-object distinction, that has been one of the main logical ideas in Western thinking. Rather they work within the idea of something resembling the Heideggerian Dasein, that is not an entity but rather the possibility of possibilities, the in-der-Welt-sein, that both grounds and is grounded in the world. In this way in-der-Welt-sein is the fundamental mode in which humans exist, and the subject-object distinction is something that arises through Dasein as it identifies itself as a person, an identity, separate from other entities.² This point of subject-object dissolution is also mentioned in Goehr's quote (the self- and world forgetfulness), pointing to the fact that she is working with some of the same experiences as these thinkers, even though she places them in a different ontological position and merely relates them to art, whereas these thinkers in Baumgarten's spirit uses them in many different contexts and rather looks for the underlying principles through which they occur.

Having pointed out this common ground for the thinkers, I would like to use the rest of my essay to focus on how these thinkers stand in relation to the early, religiously founded aesthetical studies. These thinkers namely range from the radical atheism with Bataille to Walter Benjamin's more symbolically religious language to the self-proclaimed Judaism of Levinas. However, even Bataille has a strong attraction to the religious world, going as far as making his own sect of students planned to sacrifice himself to something without the reach of linguistic expression. Such things shows an obvious

² It should be noted, that this is ideas found in the very early stages of Heidegger's thinking and that he and especially the later thinkers to a great extent left them behind or developed them into even less subjective-like ways of thinking about "humans", some such as Bataille even going to far as eradicating the idea of people as separate existences. I however chose to unfold this early part of Heidegger's thinking to show the origin of all these further thoughts.

rootedness in religious thinking, but somehow it is a thinking that has grown homeless, lost its direction. Every transcendence seems to be an immanent transcendence, and „experience interieure“, that is focused on investigating ones own finitude to reach into the sphere of the infinite. There no longer is a conception of God to reach for, the religious dogmas seem to have been dissolved, and this changes the aesthetical experience quite radically. They no longer use symbols such as the ordered sky or organic nature of floral patterns when trying to give form to the experience, such as it was often done in medieval or romantic times. Rather you see Blanchot's pictures of roaring oceans or Levinas' feeling of being completely dragged into the infinity of the night sky. Entering into the aesthetic experience of the grounds of Being no longer has the same promising safety as before, the feeling that the world is generally grounded in something friendly, rather it is felt as an abyss, dragging us further and further into something inexplicable, the sublime in the Kantian sense of the word. It is very obvious, that the romantic tension between fragmentation and wholeness has clearly dropped into the fragmentary pole. Even though this at first eye-glance might seem to have negative connotations, I would argue that the picture is not so simple. The thing is, that the descriptions of these states are not described as purely negative, such as we see it done in existentialist thinkers such as Satre's notion of Nausea. Rather, we do feel the sense of unity in the fragmentary multitude that Baumgarten pointed to, the experience of actually reaching into something higher that vibrates in mystical tones. Something that is both beautiful and scary at the same time. In this way, I think that modern thought has actually not just left the traditional religious one totally behind, but rather has brought forward a part of it early neglected – namely the multitude. It has always been the goal of the sensitive experience to go from the multiplicity to the unity, now however the multiplicity is brought forth in its own right. The language in the poems and essays of Blanchot always falls apart, Bataille wants to sacrifice himself and Levinas points to the everlasting abyss between different people. In this way, today we are still moving in somewhat the same field as earlier thinkers of the mystical tradition, just with a different focus that helps to bring forth parts of the aesthetical earlier neglected. This is in great part because of the so called death of God and dogmas, which made it more valid to be in the sphere of multiplicity and see how it makes the unity stand forth instead of the other way around. This is highly interesting and priceworthy, but I do however want to mention that it cannot happen in the forgetfulness of the tradition that went before. If it does, we will be back at only having the one side of the aesthetic – the fragmentary instead of the unitary – and this would be just as great a loss as had modernity never happened. So my final say must be to always be interested in furthering the horizon's of understanding, both in accepting the validity of the aesthetical experience as constituting knowledge (without throwing away the logic because of that) and further more to let the aesthetical experience take on as many forms as possible, both those of unity and fragmentarity, not condemning what came before but rather trying to understand them, because only thereby can we actually live out the love of knowledge by actually progressing instead of just replacing one thing with another in a long chain of forgetfulness.

