

## AESTHETICIZATION

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It. *Estetizzazione*; Fr. *Esthétisation*; Germ. *Ästhetisierung*; Span. *Estetización*. According to *The Oxford Dictionary*, the term dates back to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and its earliest use has been found in "The Jewish Quarterly Review" (from aestheticize + -ation). The label aestheticization can be schematically referred to a process or set of processes; to a phenomenon; to an age. As a process or set of processes, it consists in the transformation of objects, people, environments and experiences that at first did not seem to possess prominent aesthetic traits into something aesthetically relevant (i.e. generally, but not exclusively, linked to beauty, to what is perceptually pleasant and sensational). As a phenomenon, it does not only concern the aesthetic configuration on a global scale of everyday life as a whole, but it also concerns the modalities through which aestheticized elements are experienced and, circularly, the modalities through which experience is deeply and crucially shaped by them. As an age, aestheticization, due to its worldwide pervasiveness in the current context, can be reasonably described as the essential feature of the present stage of our history. Aestheticization is synonymous with priority and emphasis of the aesthetic as compared to other elements and values that may be involved in experience (ethical, ethnical, religious, cognitive ones, etc.)

### THE CONTEMPORARY DEBATE

In order to better understand both what aestheticization is today, and what are the main issues involved in the contemporary philosophical debate on it, it may be useful to provide a brief overview on the historical moments that have contributed to shape it as we experience it today.

The first one dates back to the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In this context, Malls and Universal Exhibitions open for the first time and formalize the nexus between aesthetics and economics, develop techniques of *mise en scène* of commodities, and introduce what we may call "proto-design" and "proto-marketing" elements in everyday contexts. The second one coincides with the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when technology and art, mass production and consumption increasingly become intertwined. The third moment can be located in the 1950s-1960s, specifically with Pop Culture, whose features are, for

instance, the impermanence of forms, the power of images in everyday life, the commodification of art, urbanization, artificiality and the elimination of cultural hierarchies. A fourth moment can be associated with the 1980s-1990s. Here such typically aesthetic categories as taste, pleasure, experience, style, appearance and creativity become central and predominant coherently with the growing importance gained by media, new technologies and consumption for the definition of both social and individual identities.

In the first three phases some elements start to emerge (1-2) and progressively become hypertrophic and widespread (3). In the fourth phase, they, so to speak, really begin to "settle", while it can be said that in a fifth phase that coincides with the 21<sup>st</sup> century they have become even more normalised and infrastructured into the everyday. All this theoretically translates into quite specific perspectives.

After the pioneering observations provided by Georg Simmel between the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, an excellent witness of at least the first two phases is Walter Benjamin (1936). Benjamin on the one hand stressed the risks of repression underlying aestheticization, but on the other hand also identified in the nexus new technologies-politics-aesthetics a potential emancipatory factor. Yet, the interpretation of the phenomenon in the following decades has been quite different. The development of Pop Culture has led specifically in the 70s to an almost exclusively negative conception of aestheticization, since it would represent a "disengaged" view not paying attention to more "seriously" political and social issues. What prevails in this context is thus an understanding of aestheticization as a predominantly alienating factor. One of the most renowned advocates of this view is probably Jean Baudrillard (1976). With the emergence of post-modern culture, and hence with the 80s, though, aestheticization has progressively been used as a more descriptive rather than a necessarily honorific or pejorative category. Nevertheless, it is specifically from the 90s until today that, oscillating between "residually negative" and "positively redeeming" perspectives, a growing number of scholars has started to deal with the topic of aestheticization (among the most prominent ones: Featherstone 1991; Welsch 1996; Postrel 2003; Michaud 2003; Nielsen 2005; Naukkarinen 1998 and 2012; Lipovestky and Serroy 2013; Reckwitz 2017; Matteucci 2016 and 2017).

The most exemplary case is Welsch (1996), perhaps the clearest explanation of what aestheticization is realized so far and that, as such, will be employed in this framework in a "simplified" version in order to introduce its main characteristics. According to the scheme provided by Welsch, aestheticization takes place on both a foreground, superficial level and on a deep-seated level. The first aestheticization level would correspond to a sort of global and incessant embellishment of everyday reality. Here Welsch notes how the world is becoming a *domain of experience* in terms of enjoyment and entertainment, where every aspect of everyday life is designed to provide immersive, pleasant, playful, unique and memorable experiences making hedonism the new matrix of culture. In the framework of this surface aestheticization, Welsch refers to such "superficial aesthetic values" as desire, amusement and enjoyment without consequence, while stressing the descriptive and not evaluative nature of the term "superficial", since these values are essentially informing our culture as a whole. Yet, with an almost critical attitude, he ascribes this "experiential turn" also to the contemporary art system (i.e. interactive, immersive art,

Biennials etc.) and symmetrically (and still quite critically), he describes art as the main source for superficial aestheticization processes. In these, according to Welsch, certain formal features are in fact borrowed from art and then trivialized, by means of their actualization in an everyday life-“levelled out form”.

While addressing this first level, Welsch also describes aestheticization as a fundamentally *economic strategy* linking in-built obsolescence, the need for continuous replacement, and aesthetic styling of products together. In the light of this, three major shifts are identified: from commodity to packaging, from essence to appearance and from hardware to software, hence testifying to the fact that the value of a product nowadays lies in its *immaterial* and *superficial* features. It could be said that a great example of this is afforded by fashion in virtue of the centrality that the brand has gained with respect to the “materiality” of fashion products: a customer, specifically a “fashion addict”, buys first and foremost the brand and the experience coming along with it, accomplishing a process of experiential identification with the related lifestyle. Advertising, marketing and new technologies play a central role for the diffusion of these dynamics.

Then, by stressing the immaterial and pervasive feature of aestheticization, the characteristics of its deeper-seated level are outlined mainly in terms of virtualization of social reality and experience, and of the development of aesthetic competence in individuals. In the first case reality appears “ubiquitous”, “shapeable” and “enhanceable” (or, in the worst case scenario, even “manipulable” and “derealized”); in the second case practical attitudes are fundamentally oriented by aesthetic values (i.e. beauty, taste, sensitivity, style, pleasure), rather than by binding, rigid standards (i.e. ethical, ethnical, political, religious ones) that cannot but produce fundamentalist ideologies, and hence, conflicts.

Along similar lines, but by deepening the anthropological feature that seems to connote aestheticization in particular if considered in its “deeper” forms, two levels of experience in which aestheticization takes place can be identified: a “hyper-aesthetic” and a “hypo-aesthetic” level of experience (Matteucci 2016). The first one corresponds to the spectacular and explicit modalities of configuration of the aesthetic that resemble those once exclusively promoted by the art system, but that on a larger scale are well represented by advertising and commodification processes while now being testified to by hedonistic and consumerist practices. The second one is labelled “hypo” precisely in virtue of its principally tacit (or: not necessarily spectacular or discursive) modalities that are rooted in human nature and hence are more ineffable while being testified to by basic everyday practices through which taste is shaped and expressed. As such, they shape also the first, “hyper” (see also Di Stefano 2012), level of aestheticity, suggesting the inadequacy of an equation between artistic and aesthetic which, quite surprisingly, today still prevails in contemporary aesthetics, although it has been widely acknowledged that art no longer possess the centrality that traditional aesthetics has generally recognized to it.

Stressing the priority of this second level, i.e. the fact that the aesthetic is the common root of human experience and hence of common sense, but also, more generally, considering aestheticization “physiologically”, so to speak, and not “pathologically” (see Carnevali 2012), seems then to afford the possibility to see it as an emancipatory rather than an alienating factor. This perspective may also

contribute to overcome a number of limits connoting some of the most recent debates on aestheticization (and that to some extent are actually evident in Welsch too).

An exemplary case is provided by Everyday Aesthetics, a recent sub-discipline of aesthetics that shares with aestheticization the same historical context. Nevertheless, it generally demonizes aestheticization (Saito 2007, Leddy 2012) by usually warning against it, distancing itself from it or without providing a sufficiently elaborated conceptual framework that could explain its current diffusion and entrenchment in everyday life (but see Matteucci 2017).

A second problematic approach to aestheticization is provided by those theories that seem to reduce it to what can be described as artification (but see Naukkarinen 2012), conflating *de facto* the aesthetic and the artistic. For instance, while being undoubtedly pioneering works for having identified and conceptually systematized an extremely dynamical and pervasive situation such as that which connotes our current aestheticized context, Michaud (2003) and Lipovetsky and Serroy (2013) respectively describe aestheticization in terms of *art à l'état gazeux*, or as a feature of the so-called "capitalisme artiste", without questioning the role of art as a criterion for the aesthetic.

A further distinction that should be made, and that may corroborate the positive role aestheticization can take on in contemporaneity, is that between aestheticization and aestheticism. Equating them would mean merely emphasizing the hedonistic and to some extent "contemplative" aspects that aestheticization could be endowed with, without taking into consideration some important aspects that actually make them two radically opposing phenomena. Aestheticism (Johnson 1963; D'Angelo 2003), in fact, greatly embodied by the figure of the Dandy, who aimed at making his own life a work of art, is an individual, "subjective", hence *elitist* phenomenon, while aestheticization, in its being a wide-spread, mass, common and, so to speak, "objective" phenomenon, appears as an *egalitarian* one (Matteucci 2016), providing a rather reassuring view on current life conditions.

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