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LUXURY

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It. *Lusso*; Fr. *Luxe*; Germ. *Luxus*; Span. *Lujo*. A Luxury is a thing or way of life whose production, possession or practice involves a waste of time, resources or labour, or excessive technical complexity. Werner Sombart offered an apt and much cited definition in 1913: "Luxury is an expenditure that exceeds necessity" (Sombart 1996: 5).

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

A characteristic feature of the concept of luxury is that it is employed both descriptively and normatively, in everyday as in academic usage. That is: both in order to identify things as involving unnecessary effort as well as to evaluate them in light of this excessive effort. In its normative sense, the concept of Luxury can be used either positively, extolling something as noteworthy by calling it a luxury, or negatively, criticising such things for their wastefulness, thus rejecting them. Examples for each of the three usages luxury would be: if listening to records is called a luxury, it is, as a rule, merely a descriptive statement of the fact that an unnecessarily complicated way is being used to listen to music; if an advertisement describes a hotel as being a luxury resort, then it is to extol the immense efforts to which it is willing to go; if, on the other hand, a political report on poverty refers to the life of luxury of the rich, then their sumptuous way of life is being criticised as wasteful and reckless.

Although, historically, luxury has been praised (cf. eg. Hume 1993) as often as it has been condemned (cf. eg. Rousseau 1979), the fundamental question of what luxury actually is has not been one of the classic topics of philosophy. This is as much the case within aesthetics as for philosophy as a whole: its history offers no systematic discussion of luxury, preventing us from distinguishing any traditions or positions within an aesthetics of luxury. All there is are scattered and unheeded calls for such a systematic debate (Görland 1926). We are thus faced with the following situation: insofar as luxury has been the object of research in the humanities, it has either been from the standpoint of the social sciences (Bourdieu 1984;

Roberts, Armitage 2019) or, in a hermeneutical context, in literary and cultural studies (Roberts, Armitage 2016; Armitage 2020; Weder, Bergengruen 2011; Signer, Weder, Wittemann 2021). The latter attempt to understand historical conceptions of luxury and their respective social and cultural meanings, primarily by means of textual analysis.

THE CONTEMPORARY DEBATE

This traditional situation, which is thoroughly dissatisfactory from a philosophical or aesthetic perspective, has recently undergone a significant transformation. Luxury has become an explicit object of philosophical aesthetics. This shift, which is becoming increasingly apparent, is the result of two independent developments.

The first precondition for the discovery of luxury as an independent aesthetic phenomenon is linguistic in nature. More precisely: it starts with the growing acknowledgment of a pervasive linguistic confusion and attempts at its resolution. Both in everyday and academic usage the expression "luxury" was, and still is, also used to ascribe to a thing a high degree of comfort or a significant prestige value. Luxury is thus sometimes interpreted as a purely sensual phenomenon – as the experience of comfort and convenience – and sometimes as a purely symbolic phenomenon – as a form of social "self-presentation/self-aggrandisement" by means of conspicuous consumption. To refer to both phenomena of comfort and convenience and of prestige as luxury leads, however, to inaccuracies and confusion, as was already noted and criticised both by linguists (Mühlmann 1975) and by philosophers (Adorno 1981). In order to proceed with an examination of luxury, it must be distinguished factually and linguistically in two directions: luxury must neither be identified with comfort nor with prestige – even if this is often done, particularly within sociology (Bourdieu 1984; Veblen 1994). It is uncontroversial that the terms "Protz [pomp]" and "conspicuous consumption" can be used synonymously – and can thus be distinguished from luxury in the same way as prestige: if the extreme effort of a thing or practice serves the attainment of comfort and convenience or social self-presentation, then the extreme effort is a necessary one and not, as is the case with phenomena of luxury, superfluous and unnecessary effort.

The second precondition for the discovery of luxury as an aesthetic phenomenon *sui generis* is a break with the received opinion that only sensual acts such as seeing, hearing, smelling or, further, imagining can be performed for their own sake – that is: enforcement-oriented – and thus allow an aesthetic experience. This view is ubiquitous to the aesthetics of reception from Kant to the present (Seel 1997). Within academic aesthetics, the act of possessing something – which is quite distinct from the concept of ownership and property – has not hitherto been considered as a possible mode of intentional reference to the world that is carried out for its own sake and can thus afford the possessor an aesthetic experience through possession for possession's sake. This view has been called into question in recent years; the discovery of luxury as an aesthetic phenomenon *sui generis* is part of a larger movement within contemporary aesthetics that one might put under the heading "aesthetics of possession" (Ullrich and Wiesing 2018). From a historical perspective, the possibility of ascribing the formation of an aesthetic experience to the act of possession was first proposed by Walter Benjamin (1969). In this regard, the

numerous works of Wolfgang Ulrich (2008; 2016) are of particular pertinence. He analyses the phenomenon of “Siegerkunst [victor’s art]” as one in which possession is substituted for the traditional act of reception.

Within the aesthetics of possession an emphatically phenomenological account of luxury as a form of aesthetic experience has recently been proposed (Wiesing 2018; 2019). The central thesis of this account is that whether something is a luxury cannot be determined by means of a scientific examination of the object; as is the case for art, there are no measurable properties of an object that can be made responsible for something being a luxury, viz. a work of art. Luxury is a phenomenon because luxury is always *luxury for somebody* – namely for the person for whom the possession of an object is accompanied by an aesthetic experience. The aesthetics of luxury thus stands in the tradition of the “feeling of life [Lebensgefühl]” Kant propounds in the *Critique of Judgement*, a description of a lived experience “in which the subject feels itself” (2000: §1). In moments of aesthetic experience a human becomes conscious of the specific abilities that make them human and distinguish them from animals. Such an aesthetic experience as an anthropological feeling of life constitutes itself – quite in accordance with Kant (2000: §9) – after judging something to be purposeful. Something can only be luxury for somebody if they previously deemed it to be irrational, inappropriate, excessive and, therefore, unreasonable in the effort it involves. Things to which somebody considers themselves to be entitled or whose effort is deemed to be appropriate cannot be experienced as luxury by that person. The question of what these things actually are depends heavily on the social and historical situation: something that is excessively elaborate for one is a trivial commonplace for the other. *Qua* their humanity, however, all humans have the ability to react to the result of their judgement of the appropriateness of a particular thing. Nobody is forced to do what they deem to be appropriate and reasonable. The experience of luxury is the product of a statement on what is considered to be reasonable; it is the result of a gesture of defiance against the dictates of rationality and the conventions of possession. Since the conscious rejection of and transgression against the usual, the recognised, the fitting and, in particular, the bourgeois notions of what is appropriate, for the sake of aesthetic experience, is programmatic for Dadaism, one could describe luxury as “the Dadaism of possession” (Wiesing 2019: 51). Particularly in societies that are governed by strong notions of efficiency and effectiveness, possession of the unreasonably excessive is – according to Adorno – positively a chance for emancipation, an “escape [from] the slavery of utility” (Adorno 1981: 80). As an aesthetic experience of autonomy, luxury can, like all other experiences, be experienced in private and is thereby distinct from the necessarily public aesthetic self-presentation of pomp.

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