

# Contemporary philosophy

A new survey edited by G. Fløistad

Volume 9

Aesthetics and Philosophy  
of Art

 Springer

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**Institut International de Philosophie  
International Institute of Philosophy**

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# La philosophie contemporaine

## *Chroniques nouvelles*

*par les soins de*  
GUTTORM FLØISTAD  
*Université d'Oslo*

Tome 9  
Esthétique et Philosophie de l'art

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# Contemporary philosophy

*A new survey*

*edited by*  
GUTTORM FLØISTAD  
*University of Oslo*

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## PREFACE

The present volume is a continuation of the series *Contemporary Philosophy*. As with the earlier volumes in the series, the present chronicles purport to give a survey of significant trends in contemporary philosophy.

The need for such surveys has, I believe, increased rather than decreased over the years. The philosophical scene appears, for various reasons, more complex than ever before. The continuing process of specialization in most branches, the increasing contact between philosophers from various cultures, the emergence of new schools of thought, particularly in philosophical logic and in the philosophy of language and ethics, and the increasing attention being paid to the history of philosophy in discussions of contemporary problems, are the most important contributing factors. Surveys of the present kind are a valuable source of knowledge of this complexity. The surveys may therefore help to strengthen the Socratic element of modern philosophy, the intercultural dialogue or *Kommunikationsgemeinschaft*.

So far, eight volumes are published in this series, viz. *Philosophy of Language and Philosophical Logic* (Volume 1), *Philosophy of Science* (Volume 2), *Philosophy of Action* (Volume 3), *Philosophy of Mind* (Volume 4), *African Philosophy* (Volume 5), *Medieval Age Philosophy* (Volume 6/1 and Volume 6/2), *Asian Philosophy* (Volume 7), and *Philosophy of Latin America* (Volume 8).

The volumes are, for various reasons, of unequal length. The obvious shortcomings, especially of Volume 5 on African and Arab philosophy, are to some extent compensated for in the present volume on *Aesthetics* (Volume 9), and in the forthcoming volume on *Philosophy of Religion* (Volume 10).

The present volume on *Aesthetics*, containing nineteen surveys, shows the variety of approaches to Aesthetics in various cultures. The close connection between aesthetics and religion and between aesthetics and ethics is emphasized in several contributions.

The chronicles are as a rule written in English, French and German. In the present volume eight surveys are written in French, ten in English and one in German. The bibliographical references, with some exceptions, follow the pattern introduced in earlier volumes. The bibliographies themselves usually follow at the end of each chronicle

arranged in alphabetical order. The bibliographies are selected and arranged by the authors themselves.

I am most grateful to a number of persons who in various ways have assisted in the preparation of this new series. My thanks are first of all due to the Secretariat, especially to Ms. Catherine Champniers, at the *Institut international de philosophie*. They have done the final proof-reading as well as put up the indices. My thanks are also due to Mrs. Kari Horn, who has greatly helped me in my correspondence with the contributors. « No » does not seem to exist in her vocabulary, even when my requests are presented on holidays.

My thanks are also due to the *Centre national de la recherche scientifique* (Paris), and to the *Conseil international de la philosophie et des sciences humaines* (UNESCO), and to the staff at Springer (Dordrecht).

University of Oslo, December 2005.  
Guttorm FLØISTAD.

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## INTRODUCTION

**GUTTORM FLØISTAD**

(University of Oslo, Norway)

What is aesthetics? If you put the question to philosophers in the Western tradition, you are today likely to get the following answer: Aesthetics is the philosophical study of our aesthetic experiences, involving studies of the aesthetic objects, of the bodily disposition and mental faculties enabling us to have such experiences, and a study of the language used to express and convey these experiences.

If you go to other continents you will find the same type of studies. However, the primary focus in Asian, Arab and African aesthetics and moreover in Latin-American philosophy, is rather different: they hold that the most important aspect of aesthetic experiences lies in their effect on the recipient and their contribution to communal values. They may liberate the individual from his selfishness developed in a growing culture of money, technology, media and consumption, leading to a moral enlightenment. Certain aesthetic experiences may even, as in India, introduce him to a religious experience. In Arab culture, the artistic writing of the Arab languages, serve as a legitimate picture of Allah: calligraphy is supposed to be a reminder of the revelations in the Qur'an. In Africa, art is tribal art and a necessary requisite for strengthening social ties. The arts, in a variety of forms, serve as a major contribution to the tribes' cultural identity.

Latin-American philosophy is presented in Volume 8 of *Contemporary Philosophy*. The majority of the contributors to the volume think that the main task of philosophy, aesthetics included, is to reconstruct a Latin-American identity following the withdrawal of colonial powers.

Similar effects of aesthetic objects and experiences are by no means unknown to readers of European history of philosophy either. For the sake of comparison between the cultures it may be useful to give a brief sketch of both ancient and modern European aesthetics, with a view to clarifying the various notions often used in the *Chronicles*. A few remarks on the literary aesthetics in European realism and naturalism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century will be included.

The philosophy of *beauty* has a central place in history. The history of the philosophy of beauty goes far back. In the Western tradition, and it reaches down to Plato and the *Prima philosophia* in the Middle Ages. In Indian philosophy it is even older.

A brief presentation of aesthetics in Indian, Arab and African philosophy presented in the volume follows. The chronicles on modern European aesthetics are presented at the end. I apologize for not being able to read Sanskrit as well as Arab and African languages. The common purpose of aesthetics in various cultures may, however, make the introductory presentations tolerable.

That modern aesthetics may function as a source for a harsh socio-cultural criticism should come as no surprise.

### **AESTHETIC IMPERIALISM**

Aesthetics in all parts of the world, as noted by Masahiro Hamashita, has been strongly influenced by European imperialism. Military, political and economic colonization also involved language, religious beliefs as well as customs and manners. Today the centre of colonization has moved to the United States, given the « attractive » name of *Global Free Trade*. Culture is defined as a commodity, subject to export and import.

A main problem is that aesthetic products, especially American, are exported almost all over the world in ways that are utterly insensitive to local cultures. The recent refusal of the Americans to sign an agreement concerning the right of every country to promote its own culture is just an announcement that the earlier European imperialism continues in full scale.

The destructive effects on the local cultures are felt everywhere, although the strongest effect is seen in The United States and the European countries themselves. Here the socio-cultural erosion has created masses of people suffering from loneliness, depression and violence. Some of the main reasons are easily detected: one is that most cultural productions in the West have often been reduced to superficial entertainment, mainly stimulating the senses of the individual, irrespective of any geographical location. Ethical components of such aesthetic experiences, characteristic of much traditional aesthetic in all cultures, have been lost in the technological money-oriented life. A second main reason is no doubt to be found in the view that economic growth and material culture is prior to caring for cultural identity based on communal values.

This volume on aesthetics may be a contribution to our cultural awareness.

## ORIGIN OF EUROPEAN AESTHETICS

Aesthetics as a philosophical discipline is sometimes said to have emerged from the European Enlightenment, in Kant and Baumgarten. In his *Critique of Judgement (CJ)* Kant shows in what way aesthetics is to be conceived as a discipline. He also shows, however, that his conception of aesthetics by no means is a discipline on its own. As a free play of imagination our aesthetic creations and experiences are dependent on metaphysics and ontology, epistemology, logic and moral philosophy. A key notion in his aesthetics is beauty. Kant stresses the difference between personal, private judgements about beauty of things (often related to « I like it »), and intersubjective or *a priori* judgements without any personal interest. The latter has the character of a disinterested appreciation and is concerned with the pure form (*CJ* § 8, § 11).

The *a priori* character of a judgement of beauty (*pulchrum*) and the close relationship with other disciplines recalls the medieval concept of *prima philosophia* – despite differences with the usages of a philosopher of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The basic notions of *prima philosophia*, one will recall, are *unum*, *verum*, *bonum*, *pulchrum*, *aliquid*, *re* (the nature of reality). The difference with Kant is, of course, that in the earlier philosophy the notions are integrated in an overall system (*unum*). Kant may be called a reduced leftover in modernity. The further isolation of beauty and the establishing of aesthetics as a discipline on its own, inspired by Baumgarten, were left to some of Kant's followers, Schiller, Shaftesbury, Schelling and Schlegel.

Baumgarten modified the traditional view that art imitates nature. The artist, he held, must have the opportunity to colour his work with his feelings and personal perception of reality. Schiller, inspired by Rousseau, related aesthetics to education (in his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*). Aesthetic education, he held, is an education to the enjoyment of « living forms ». This leads to the discovery of beauty, which in turn leads to freedom. And freedom arises when the forms are abstracted from the object to which they are tied. This happens in playing and in art. In this (almost Kantian) sense Schiller's theory is transcendental and idealistic.

In his *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* Shaftesbury offers a passionate description of his experiences of beauty. Beauty can be seen everywhere in nature, in its great variety of forms. Animals are not interested in the forms of things, only in things in so far as they satisfy their needs. It is the privilege of man to enjoy the forms. However, he does not enjoy them by way of his senses. The experience of beauty is related to the infinite creative forces of nature

producing ever new forms, and these can only be grasped through man's spirit and reason. Shaftesbury marks the beginning of romanticism, clearly inspired by Platonic ideas, in opposition to the English empirists.

In German idealism *poetic fantasy* is a central notion. Poetic fantasy does not only express itself in art, it is the key to understanding reality. In his *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800) Schelling declared that art is the fulfilment of philosophy. In relation to nature, morals and history we are still living « in the halls of philosophy »; in art we enter « a sacred place ». The distinction between poetry and philosophy is not as sharp as we thought. Philosophy should enter the realm of poetic fantasy.

According to Friedrich Schlegel literature should transform itself into a new type of poetry, which he called « transcendental poetry ». The true piece of art is not the work of the artist; it is the work of the universe itself, a universe that is constantly evolving towards perfection.

Poetry, declared Novalis (Friedrich von Hardenberg), is what is absolute and real. This is « the core of my philosophy ». That is what makes poetry « the highest truth ».

This type of idealism and romanticism may be interpreted in at least three ways. Firstly, it is a reaction to the Enlightenment's specific concept of reason, the growing position of natural science, technology, professionalism, and materialism, and to the suffering of huge classes of people in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a result of industrialization. (« There is no complete man any longer », says Hölderlin. Another German moralist and dramatist, Heinrich von Kleist, is said to have committed suicide on the ground of this growing distance to « real life »). Secondly, it is a final attempt, it seems, to continue some main ideas in the history of European philosophy, like « road to perfection » and « absolute unity and truth », at the cost, however, of losing its integrative power in the culture and society at large. Finally, the ideal aesthetics in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it may be said, marks the beginning of privatisation of aesthetics and religion.

The idealist and romanticist aesthetics show both similarities and differences to aesthetic movements in the Indian, Arab, and African cultures. In these cultures major parts of aesthetics, it seems, are still united to religious beliefs to the effect that aesthetics still has retained its integrating power in society at large. However, the « arrogant Europeans », and now especially the Americans, exercise a constant pressure on these culturally more integrated societies, forcing them to adopt the idea of economic growth as more important than cultural identity. The effect of this disintegrating pressure on other cultures is already noticeable.

## AESTHETICS AND ETHICS

According to Plato and moreover to the later *first philosophy* aesthetic experiences are intimately related to ethics. One « secular », modern way of explaining this may simply be: if an aesthetic experience is shared by a group of people, the experience is likely to strengthen the interpersonal relationships and thereby contribute to the communal values in the group. And that is what ethics is about. If aesthetic experiences are to have this effect, however, they should presumably display themselves over some time. The Aristotelian *katharsis* cannot be achieved without being based on a sequence of actions over some hours. The Greek drama lasted sometimes several days. Gustav Freytag, German novelist and *Privatdozent* in Breslau, wrote in the 1880s a standard textbook (*Die Technik des Dramas*) in which he describes the five stages needed to call forth *katharsis*, or a liberating effect on the mind. The rules are all derived from the classical drama. It goes without saying that it is the slow, gradual build-up of the plot that gives the effect. The aesthetics of drama is thoroughly dealt with in the chronicle by *D. P. Chattopadhyaya*.

A promising attempt to bridge the gap between idealism and the « real world » is made in the aesthetics of realism and naturalism. The new trends represent a radical change of objects: from beauty as pure forms and as a spiritual source of knowledge of the universe as a whole to particular things in nature and in ordinary life. The purpose of great art is to make us see ordinary things and ordinary people's daily living in a genuine way, and appreciate them as they are. Balzac, for instance, wrote about the most insignificant traits of what he calls « the human comedy ». Flaubert made detailed analyses of the lowest characters. In some of Zola's novels we find extensive descriptions of the construction of a locomotive. Earlier on Goethe was most admired by Novalis because of the poetic passages in the opening chapters of *Wilhelm Meister*. The admiration changed, however, into disgust when Novalis discovered that Goethe, in later chapters, turned into a realist. The arts, according to Goethe, do not pretend to show the metaphysical depth of things. They stick to the surface. This surface is, however, not immediately given. The great works of art are needed to make us *see*. Thus, realism and naturalism lead to a deeper understanding of artistic creation – at the same time as they enhance our aesthetic experience and, due to the literary context, also the ethical relevance of our reading. The chronicle by Ioanna Kuçuradi further explains, how.

Heidegger gives western aesthetics a new turn, relating his interpretation both to his phenomenology of *Dasein* and to ancient Greek philosophy. In a way he renews the intimate relation between being, ethics, truth, and aesthetics. His favourite example is van Gogh's shoes. The pair of shoes clearly belongs to a farmer. They are field shoes, telling a long story in that they present a world of hard labour. In the painting, Heidegger would say, entire lifeworld comes into being. It shows itself in the painting. And this « showing itself » and « coming into being » are to Heidegger closely related to the pre-Socratic term for truth, *alétheia* (« removing our forgetfulness »). An aesthetic experience may to him be more or less « truthful ». In his essay, *The Origin of Artwork (Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes)*, Heidegger further relates a piece of art to a larger world of which we ourselves are parts. As every student of Heidegger knows, his philosophy remained incomplete. He shows, however, how knowledge, or understanding, involves an ethical component, also in understanding art.

A relevant question is, what happens to the « slow » ethico-aesthetic experience in the age of information technology (IT). In principle, it should be perfectly possible to take care of it, and moreover, to reach out to many more people. This is also what to some extent has happened. In addition, IT has made possible a great variety of new arts and new ways of creating art works. IT, however, took for the most part a different turn. It speeded up the sequences of pictures in that the emotions involved were hardly even allowed to rest and mature. IT, as Masahiro Hamashita remarks, created a flood of images and representations to the effect that « we were forced to accept » pictorial turn-away from conceptual language. We were « forced » into a virtual, illusionary world with its own aesthetic rules. A main difference between the aesthetics of the real and the virtual world is that the latter in many cases lost its ethical dimension. Ethics is the theory of values of communal life. The new aesthetics of the illusionary world is with some qualifications purporting to stimulate the individual senses only.

The point was nicely illustrated in the discussions in the American Senate back in the 1950s about the effect of the new media on the public. They all thought that the new media would again gather families together in that they all would be sitting together viewing the same program. Within a short period of time the scene changed. The family members split, sitting alone in their own rooms viewing programs more attuned to their individual interest.

## AESTHETICS AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

« Cultural identity » means belonging to a group of people, to their beliefs, their customs and manners, to their history and geographical location. « Belonging to » means being part of, caring for and paying respect to. They are all core values in ethical considerations. They are communal values. Aesthetic objects are culturally and historically determined. Even nature and natural objects differ – although the forms or the beauty of the various objects may be enjoyed trans-culturally. No culture is culturally « pure ». European languages, for instance, have adopted a number of words from Arabic and from Sanskrit. However, most cultures have so far kept their (relative) original profile. Whether European and American cultures still have a clear cultural profile, apart from their individualism and materialism, remains to be seen. The tragedy of people today, Christian Norberg-Schulz, professor and philosopher of architecture in Oslo, says, is that most of them have lost their belonging to other people, to religion and their places. Under the pressure of materialism people have lost their homes (cf. Beata Sirowy on Heidegger).

Religion and art are essential constituents in the shaping of people's cultural identity. In Anand Amaladass we read:

Religion and art go together almost in all cultures. Religion uses music in rituals and liturgies and develops architecture to suit their liturgical needs. Visual art depicts their religious history. Art shapes religion, affection, beliefs, memories, and provides symbols. Religion without art could become some ethereal spiritualism, and art without religion would turn into direction-less subjectivism, devoid of proper orientation.

Religion expresses itself in a variety of art forms, in ritual performances, in dance (Shiva) and architecture, and in calligraphy. All art forms announce the presence of God. In Islam architecture ranks as number one of the arts. Calligraphy, inspired by rhythm in music, shows how beauty transcends itself towards God. Souâd Ayada's topic is a philosophical reflection on the space and localisation of sacred buildings in Islam.

The relation of a building and its surroundings is increasingly a topic also in Western architecture, often as a reaction to a visual chaos, both in the cities as well as in the countryside. Functionalism, a dominant school of architecture in the West since the second quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, paid more attention to human needs (and to the needs of the architects) than to the interplay of a building and its environment.

« A house is a living machine » (Le Corbusier). In addition to neglecting the physical environment, the architectural profession, J. Till holds (in his article « Last Judgement », referred to by Beata Sirowy), also attempts to exclude social and cultural aspects to the effect that it loses « the relation with the user and the real world's problems ». This raises ethical problems for the profession – often owing to the general fragmentation of disciplines and in the modern society at large. The ethical problems are problems of the quality of a building's manifold relationships, taking care of people's life.

*Beata Sirowy* introduces the notion of existential *space* and quotes both Christian Norberg-Schulz and the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard: A home is the primary existential space, is « one of the great integrative forces in life »; here man finds his identity. The concept of man's dwelling plays a central role in the discussion. The key ethical concept is presumably « taking care » of the environment and thereby of himself. A house gathers in a way its environment.

The ethics of « taking care of » is evidently more perspicuous in the case of a temple, a mosque or a church. The beauty is not one of the building alone; it is the beauty of the building in its relationships. Of such buildings it may be said that they gather their members and their places in a great community pointing to God. Anyone who has visited, for instance, the churches in Rome will know that the paintings like the artistic writing in Islam announce a divine presence.

## **JAPANESE AND INDIAN AESTHETICS**

After contrasting the postmodern aesthetic of IT and its virtual world and traditional aesthetics, *Masahiro Hamashita* goes on to reflect upon the situation in Japan. It is paradoxical: Japan has developed one of the most advanced technologies in the world. At the same time Japanese families entertain traditional rituals in many areas of life, and Japanese firms have placed the holy shrine on the top of a building or in special rooms.

The tension created by the contrast of the two types of aesthetics is well known from other countries. Traditional aesthetics is usually local and national and sometimes continental. The virtual aesthetics of IT knows no border. Combined with the idea of global free trade the respect for local cultures is non-existing. « McDonaldization » has long since invaded most food cultures in the entire world (Hamashita). This is just a fraction of the Euro-Americanization of the world. In service of the global free trade in all areas, information technology, disrespecting local traditions, becomes a powerful instrument of an all-out dehumanisation of the world.

The tension in Japanese society may be part of the explanation of the eagerness with which Japanese scholars introduced Western philosophy in Japanese higher education.

To replace Shintoism, Confucianism and Buddhism by way of importing ideas from the West may work for an intellectual elite. A far more difficult task is whether ideas from the outside would enable the society at large to cultivate new customs and beliefs. Ideas, both from England, France, the United States, and Germany, were introduced in the period after the Meiji Restoration (1868). Hamashita mentions a number of Japanese scholars, some of whom studied at European universities. After much appreciation, the intellectual elite experienced a crisis. The idea that survived among some of the most important philosophers was the idea of individualism inspired by political philosophy together with Rousseau and Nietzsche. The European Enlightenment with its epistemological aesthetics, however, gave no answer. « Morality and knowledge have only relative value », holds Chogyu, one of the best known philosophers in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Japan. They control instinct. The true aesthetic life is the life where instinctual needs are satisfied. That gives you a sense of absoluteness. Instinctual needs are, however, satisfied in a variety of ways, by « intuitive, passionate and natural expressions such as running water, singing birds, blooming flowers, children's affection for their mothers and faithful warriors' offers to their lords or mother country ». Here, the new individualism meets with traditional Japanese values.

*D. P. Chattopadhyaya* draws attention to the views of the ancient Indian people. They did not recognize any sharp division between the aesthetics of « music, poetry, philosophy, and science ». The point is that the « musical articulation of philosophical and scientific themes » gave everyone some aesthetic enjoyment.

Drama and rhetoric are essential to most cultures. They are both natural expressions in the life of people. The most important work on Indian aesthetics appears, according to Chattopadhyaya, to be the *Nāṭyaśāstra* of Bharata. Bharata stands for a long tradition « spanning from the pre-Vedic to the Vedic period ». Drama appeared around the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC, but is supposed to have its roots in earlier traditions. It may also be influenced by Hellenic traditions and by the Sanskrit drama. Drama together with dance and music belong to rituals in all cultures.

*Rasa* is a key word in the explanation of aesthetic expressions. It is usually translated as feeling or emotion, but an exact translation of the Sanskrit word is hardly possible. As an aesthetic expression it is divided into a variety of emotions such as love, grief, pity, humans, heroism, fearfulness, disgust, and tranquillity.

A broad experience of the meaning of *rasa* enables the poet to create « a magical spell » with his use of language. Without the *rasa*-driven experience of the poet he will not reach the highest level of poetic-linguistic creativity.

The term *rasa* was also applied to rhetoric, that is, to the figures of speech (the *alankāra school*). The many famous rhetoricians, like Vamana, Daṇḍin, Bhāmaha, Uṛḍaḥ and Rudraḥ (in the centuries after the Christian era) described a variety of figures of speech, some of them up to 36 different ways of using language.

The Greek and Roman rhetors were not the only ones who at that time cultivated the spoken word.

Aesthetics and religion are not identical from the Indian point of view. They are, however, closely related, in that the arts all have a divine origin. The arts, that is, the performance of rituals, music, dance, sculpture, and architecture, « recapitulate a cosmic creative process ». It becomes « a mode of worship ». *Rasa* as an aesthetic experience will bring you out of « the preoccupation of the limited ego » to an experience of repose (*visrānti*) and bliss (*ananda*). In Kashmir, Shiva is conceived as the original artist, representing the one true Reality. The way to achieve liberation from the ego and unification with the true reality is by way of a variety of rituals. The dancing Shiva plays a major role in the transition. He became the unifying factor in the history of Indian religion.

According to several Sanskrit texts, the God in Hindu religiosity has both masculine and feminine aspects. The Goddess is praised for her beauty. And people are asked to meditate the sublime glow of the beauty as another way of being liberated.

Drama may assist in the same process of transition to the higher self. Not the drama that lasts a few hours, but the life-long drama of emotional refinement. An advanced aesthetic sensibility will approach the depth of religious emotion.

## AFRICAN AESTHETICS

The interpretation of Negro-African art, according to *Jean-Godefroy Bidima*, most often centres on religion, both by African and European writers. Religion is the final foundation of African aesthetics (Engelberth Mveng from Cameroun). Others speak about the style: in the longer perspective the style does not change. The reason may be that all Negro art purports the same: to transfer the sacred to the social sphere guided by the vision of the collective (Jean Gabus). Leopold Senghor, the former president of Senegal and the author of several books of poetry, holds that rhythm is the ultimate foundation of African aesthetics.

Rhythm is « the architecture of African being »; it is the vital force and dynamism behind the variety of forms.

At the same time the vital force expresses itself at several levels, social, geographical, contextual, mythical, historical, and artistic. That is to say, the vital force, the One, which in all forms and levels is identical with itself, diversifies itself in a manifold – a clear reminder of Platonism.

African art is even more complicated. It expresses itself in a dynamic dualism. African art of whatever type is always in a state of transition. It changes its appearance, depending on place and context, everywhere trying to liberate its hidden essence, the vital force.

In the musical arts the melodic texts are composed of, and move between, a variety of elements, from mere playing to the sacred, political and pedagogical.

The art forms are never at rest. They are living forms. They change between the visible and invisible, between what may be said and the unsayable, between the audible and the inaudible. Hence there is always an element of uncertainty in African art. The uncertainty derives basically from the need to take care of their traditions combined with the need to create something new. African aesthetics displays itself in the realm of the possible. That gives *beauty* the character of transition as well. Beauty is an event and an achievement. It displays itself in contrasts, not only between past and future, but between what may be beautiful and what is not, and between harmony and disharmony. That is how the arts contribute to a living community.

## ISLAMIC AESTHETICS

Islamic aesthetics is taken care of in three chronicles. The authors all present and discuss aesthetics in relation to the history of Islam. *Souâd Ayada* clarifies the theology and aesthetics of Islamic architecture. *François Déroche* takes up the history of calligraphy in the Islamic world; and *Valérie Gonzalez* offers a closer interpretation of the religious meaning of calligraphy and other pieces of art.

Souâd Ayada's view on Islamic architecture gets support from Hegel in his work on aesthetics: architecture is the primary discipline of all the arts. Architecture is first in that it more clearly than anything else makes visible the invisible. The visible temple represents the invisible. The localisation of the mosques is most important. The place is sacred in that, together with the mosque, it announces the presence of God. The mosque is the messenger between God and man. The first temple was, for obvious reasons, placed at the site near *Kaba, the black stone*, facing both Jerusalem and Mecca. The temple, announcing the presence of Allah, calls upon and gathers the community of believers. The

temple becomes a centre for the entire site. The same applies to sacred buildings and sites in general. Aesthetics is turned into theology and ontology.

Christian Norberg-Schulz speaks in much the same way of buildings and houses in general (as described by Beata Sirowy). They are placed on a site with its specific *genius loci*. A site's *genius loci* is its character that is an integral part of the house as a *dwelling*, a home. It is the tragedy of postmodern man, Norberg-Schulz holds, that he does not belong to any place any more. His restlessness leaves family, personal friends and sites behind, a major problem in the age of « people on the move ». (The topic of the homeless man is well-known both in social philosophy and sociology: cf. for instance Peter Berger *The Homeless Mind* (1973).

Calligraphy, like the mosque, announces the presence of God in aesthetic writing. Aesthetics and theology belong together. That is no doubt a major reason why the Arabic language is written primarily for recitation. *François Déroche* writes on the history of calligraphy and the variety of types developed since the 10<sup>th</sup> century. It appears that to the same extent the type is dependent on geography, that is, on the site of the mosque. He draws attention to the striking fact that the first letter of the alphabet, *alif*, also is the initial of the divine name, Allah.

Ayada describes a variety of mosques and their sites. They all, in addition to announcing the presence of God, also represent God as the transcendent *One* and the unifying dimension of all mosques and sites. A number of the mosques carry inscriptions, mostly quotations from the Qur'an. Some are dealing with political and business matters, showing that man's life belongs to the one God. Similar instances of local integration can also be found, *mutatis mutandis*, in various types of Christian pietism in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. These traditions within Christianity have long since become the victims of the ongoing secularisation.

Man's appropriation of the presence of God is profoundly demanding. It is not just to listen to a recitation of the Qur'an. Belief in God is rather a never ending exercise. Valérie Gonzalez gives an in-depth analysis of what is involved. She approaches a variety of ways in which man may encounter God's presence, from pieces of art in museums, to calligraphy. In her interpretations she draws both on traditional sources and on methodological viewpoints in Husserl's phenomenology and Wittgenstein's philosophy of language.

God does not give himself easily away, as it were. A key Arab notion is *dhikr*, meaning an act of piety. Essential to the act is the memoration of God's existence by repeatedly pronouncing his name,

or, whenever you encounter the name God in texts or elsewhere, you should perform the same act. The mere reception is not enough. The utmost fulfilment of *dhikr* even requires that you engage yourself in the commemoration both physically and spiritually, both with your senses and your intellect. That may deepen your aesthetic experience of calligraphy and your attachment to the presence of God in the finite world.

It is in the interpretation of this process that some remarks by Wittgenstein (in his *Philosophical Investigations*) may be illuminating. If you recall, he says, the visual image of a word, you are also familiar with the sound of the word. Or, in reading, the letter and the sound form a unity or an alliance. Husserl's theory of the *noesis*, the intentional act, and the corresponding *noema*, the intentional object (*geistige Leiblichkeit*), confirms the mental constitution of any object. In its theological application this means that the presence of God (in whatever material) is reconstructed in consciousness in a finite mode. The ultimate objective of all ritualized behaviour involved in *dhikr*, in the act of piety, is the total dedication to Allah.

This experience of wholeness and unity is apparently not something merely imposed on people. I take it to be a manifestation of our innermost need, the need to belong to and to have a fuller identity. In the ongoing secularization and fragmentation process of all areas of life, on the other hand, we appear to counteract ourselves.

## EUROPEAN AND AMERICAN AESTHETICS

Returning to recent European and American aesthetics, the climate is changing. Obviously inspired by the Enlightenment and the culture of science, aesthetics became subject to the epistemological turn. A whole range of new challenges and questions arise: a disinterested judgement is a most complex notion, and hard to achieve.

Do works of art have a meaning and a reference? Are they true or false and just an imitation of a state of affairs in the real world? Or are they merely self-referential and constitute just a possible world, a world of fiction on their own? And what is the being of that which is just possible? Works of art are usually about something, and what is the relation between « being about » and « referring to »? And do works of art really embody ethical values – a question raised in some of the chronicles and sometimes answered affirmatively?

These are some of the problems that arise when epistemological issues are applied to works of art. *Abdullah Kaygi* offers a nearly complete review of the difficulties discussed in the philosophy of art.

A lot of the great names in the philosophy and history of art are mentioned, Ernst Gombrich, Sir Philip Sidney, Nelson Goodman,

Dante, Roman Ingarden, Paul Ricœur, and George Lukács. It goes without saying that commonly accepted solutions hardly ever can be found. The fault is hardly to be found in the works of art themselves, most probably in the application of different, or wrong, or insufficient criteria of judging art. Even the present collection of articles contains contradictory views.

Clive Bell, a prominent member of the Bloomsbury group in England, insisted on the irrelevance of representation in sculpture and painting. He coined what for him was essential in experiencing art: its significant form. A significant form causes an aesthetic emotion. It even opens up for religious experiences. This does not mean that it involves an experience of God, just that Clive Bell held that spiritual life is much more important than material life.

Art is an undogmatic religion that may even « assist man in the redemption from 19<sup>th</sup> century materialism » (*S. P. Rosenbaum*). The experience of art is an experience of what is good, which is much better than issuing a moral law. A major part of his book deals with postimpressionism and its history.

Aesthetic experiences are usually subjective. That may be one reason for the difficulty in locating ethical values in aesthetics. Ethical values apply to the real world and are inter-subjective. *Peter McCormick* asks: do all aesthetic experiences have to be subjective, or, is it possible to find objective elements in works of art? As to the latter question, McCormick thinks definitely, yes, and relates his argument to the notion of the *negative sublime*. The expression is inspired by, but not taken, from Kant.

The negative sublime is defined as an aesthetic experience of pleasure and displeasure « *in an exorable and endlessly repeated moment of having to strive and having to fail to articulate rationally the unthinkable magnitudes of innocent suffering and the unthinkable magnitudes of evil* ».

Having lived in the 20<sup>th</sup> century we all know the amount of suffering and misery have undergone people – in contrast with the joy of life. We are therefore well equipped to understand corresponding features in literary works of art. McCormick takes us to an interpretation of the old poem *Beowulf*, to the death of the hero. He focuses on two expressions, one from the messenger announcing the hero's death: « *the raven swinging darkly over the doomed* », and one from the poet's interjection, « *it remains a mystery where life may end* ».

McCormick lifts the interpretation of two expressions to a higher level, roughly to a contrast in *Beowulf* between the old European paganism and the Christian culture.

The constitution of this contrast between two cultures may certainly be said to establish an objective aesthetic experience. The constitution of cultural contrasts involving experiences of evil can only be personal. And a common, personal constitution of evil and its opposite may rightly be called a constitution of common values, involving both values and commitment.

The relation of art works to the world is notoriously a difficult problem in aesthetics. Paul Klee, in the presentation by *Reiner Wiehl*, turns the usual way of understanding the problem around: « *Kunst gibt nicht das sichtbare wieder, sondern sie macht sichtbar.* » (*Art does not imitate what is seen, but makes visible.*) Instead of reflecting or copying something in the world, art opens our eyes to reality. Due to this principle, Klee's philosophy of art, Reiner Wiehl holds, may be related to Whitehead's philosophy of nature: philosophy of nature has a similar function. It does not describe nature as it is given before us. We discover nature through philosophy. Some key notions in understanding nature are « organism », « rest » and « movement ». Nature, as well as Klee's paintings, are organisms. Peculiar to organisms is that they never rest; they are living and constantly changing. That is why Klee attacked Lessing in his *Laokoon*. Art should never present resting or fixed motives. Paintings are, as it were, living and acting. To grasp these movements, Wiehl holds, Whitehead's philosophy of nature may assist us in acquiring a proper understanding – in accordance with what we ourselves are.

The central theoretical starting point in both Whitehead's and Klee's philosophy of nature is an « organism ». An organism carries with it both an aesthetic and a religious dimension. Whitehead's mathematically derived cosmology is not itself organic, but contains all the elements out of which the wide spectrum of actual organisms are created – just as Klee's paintings show the elements on the basis of which creation takes place. Art was to him a symbol of creation, in much the same way as the earth is a symbol of the cosmos. As Klee was an accomplished musician, there is reason to believe that his paintings have a likeness to musical compositions.

What are the relation of his theories and ethical values? I cannot come up with any other answer than that anyone who entertains the model of organism has no need to. Ethics is part and parcel of his « organic » knowledge, related to the principle of self-preservation.

Does music have meaning? The answer appears to be yes and no. Constatijn Koopman and Stephen Davis say, yes, music has meaning in a broader sense. *Peter Kivy*, who refers to these music reviewers in his present article, argues, no. In a most general sense the word « music »

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