

MOVED BY APPEARANCES

Towards a hypercritique of xenophobic reason

Summary

The complex relations between three lines of thought are indicated by the title and the subtitle of this dissertation: *Moved by appearances. Towards a hypercritique of xenophobic reason.* A wide-spread phenomenon is treated seriously: the modern individual's behaviour is deeply influenced by appearance, varying from the remnants of utopian imagination via the temptations of a spectacle and consumer society, to computer simulations. Being affected by these appearances however implies more than a merely mechanical manner of behavior according to the laws of a market economy or of biological survival. An epistemological reflection of being moved by appearances leads on the one hand to a radical critique of western metaphysics as a specific way of thinking: identifying and totalizing. On the other hand this reflection can be an inspiration for an ethico-political attitude: what historically was excluded, is not only tolerated, but moreover respected for its irreducible heterogeneity.

The connection of an ethical attitude to epistemological reflections is further accompanied by an aesthetically orientated view. This threefold approach throws a light on recent co-operations between artists and philosophers which are different from the usual conceptions. Our approach is not only an indication of a different position within philosophy, but it could also be indicative of another way of philosophizing. Although the predicate 'aesthetical' for this kind of philosophizing suggests at the first sight that it will be deprived of any practical implications, we will argue that such an aestheticization of thinking has positive implications in the ethico-political domain. In cultivating a specific sensibility of the Other and of Difference it parallels modernist art practice.

1 The structure of the debate and the position of its participants

The text consists of three parts. First of all, in the six chapters in Part 1 the works of Friedrich Nietzsche will be discussed. The main subject of this discussion is his critical reading of Plato's opposition between appearance and being. That there is an ambiguity about the crucial role of aesthetics (epistemologically expressed by tracing back the concept to the metaphor), which is the result of a critical Nietzsche reading, is the starting point of an analysis of his work from the perspective of a sensibility of the Other and the Different.

The thesis that aporetic, self-undermining writing and speaking are the epistemological implications of this aestheticization will be developed both systematically and historically. Provisionally the conclusion of Part 1 is as follows: Nietzsche does not invert the opposition appearance-being (and by implication a series of other oppositions), but he situates it against the background of an ineffable experience of existence. This experience, expressed in 'abyss thoughts' like the Will to Power, The Eternal Recurrence and the Übermensch, animates Nietzsche's discourse which is

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nonetheless a discursive one. A specific pathos - suffering and passion - keeps Nietzsche's 'linguistic feints' moving.

As Nietzsche has never expressed himself systematically and in epistemological terms about the opposition of appearance and being, extensive excursions are inserted into Part 1, in which this problem is analysed as it appears in the writings of Kant and Hegel, especially in respectively *Kritik der reinen Vernunft/Kritik der Urteilskraft* and *Phänomenologie des Geistes/Wissenschaft der Logik*. Moreover, those 'excursions' are inserted with regard to their importance as a contraposition to the Nietzschean orientated thinkers of difference: Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Jean-François Lyotard and Jacques Derrida. Their writings are the subject matter of the following chapters of this thesis. The issue is the following: all of their philosophical efforts, all of these 'essays' in a literal sense, have in common that they can no longer rationally legitimize their philosophical discourse, for they are using a notion of truth that they at the same time destroy in their own text.

The work of those thinkers is the main subject in Part 2 and 3. The mutual congeniality between their texts consists of the critical thought that western philosophy was never able to conceive of the Other or of Difference without ultimately subordinating it to an identity, to a law or to a generality. In their critiques, these thinkers of difference - or to put it more precisely: of differences - define the abovementioned crucial activity of occidental reasoning as identifying and totalizing. In their radical writings, which have been published since the early sixties, they open up, each in his own way, a discursive space in which the Other or Difference can be lit up. "To light up" is probably the most subtle metaphor by which differences can be expressed without losing their specificity, uniqueness and ephemeral quality. Because by definition the unique contains something that is inconceivable, its experience often involves a certain bewilderment. That this bewilderment can be experienced as threatening in an identity-orientated culture is one of the ideas that, in a critical sense, constitutes the ethico-political quality of their philosophy.

In retrospect it is not surprising that the thinkers of differences were inspired by the works of Friedrich Nietzsche. After all, Nietzsche, in pushing western metaphysics to its limits, opens our eyes to its aesthetical and physiological foundations: thinking is continuously traversed by images and affects. However, the ambiguous elaboration of this aesthetical insight leads to different evaluations of Nietzsche's critique: for some he is the last metaphysical thinker, for others precisely the opposite, i.e. the first thinker who goes beyond metaphysics. In order to clarify my own position in this debate several critics and opponents of Nietzsche are considered. Here again my decision to put them on stage is inspired by the idea that these critics of Nietzsche have nevertheless had a determining impact on the thinkers of differences.

A thoroughly systematic and historical analysis of the Nietzschean inspiration also clarifies one of the reasons for the recent Kant revival in the writings of thinkers of differences. Kant's issue of the sublime underpins Nietzsche's aesthetically orientated

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critique of western civilization. The tension between pleasure and pain, specific for the experience of the sublime, is incorporated by Nietzsche into his earliest work in the dichotomy Dionysian-Apollonian. However, in Nietzsche's early writings the tension between them is never resolved - as with Kant - in order to strengthen subjectivity. Rereading Kant by thinkers of differences from a Nietzschean perspective might well have been animated by the need to broaden the apparently amoral Nietzschean position in an ethico-political manner. By connecting Nietzsche to Kant the relations between epistemology, aesthetics and ethics are being reassessed.

Another modern thinker who is indispensable to a systematic understanding of the revival of interest in Kantian aesthetics is Hegel. The critique from thinkers of differences of the Hegelian dialectical line of thought, which is the model of identifying and totalizing thinking, concerns most of all his systematically founded reduction of difference to identity. As is worked out in the writings of Theodor W. Adorno, the critique of Hegelian dialectics in the later work of thinkers of differences gravitates towards a rereading of Kant from a Nietzschean perspective. For the first time since Kant and Hegel, Adorno raises the question of the relation between philosophy and aesthetics in a penetrating way. He sheds new light on philosophy's relation to art. With the occasional exception of Lyotard, thinkers of differences elaborate the analogous relation between philosophy and art, without referring to the work of Adorno or other members of the Frankfurt School. Two of them - Foucault and Derrida - have themselves explicitly been guided by the thoughts of Georges Bataille. In his oeuvre - he is also inspired by Nietzsche - discursive thinking, from a retrospective point of view, is always limited by a disruptive experience that can never be fully understood. Both, Adorno and Bataille, still remain connected to the Hegelian model. Thinkers of differences in the end go beyond dialectics; they also distinguish themselves from Adorno and Bataille by an insight into the constitutive value of language for consciousness. Nietzsche's insight into the grammatical temptation to metaphysics is here being rephrased in an actual way. I set out to show that this variant of the 'linguistic turn' persists in thinkers of differences in notions such as *textuality*, *discourse*, *truth games* and *writing* (écriture).

In the philosophy of differences, time and again a non-conceptual, non-discursive dimension appears to play a decisive role in thinking. This makes thinking vulnerable: a final foundation proves to be impossible. Thinking is deprived of the last word. It is this insight that is severely criticized by Jürgen Habermas. His reproach, directed at thinkers of differences, that their way of philosophizing leads to all kinds of aporias, is considered seriously. It is my appraisal of this aporetical refutation of all kinds of 'foundation' - or in other terms, this abyss quality - that makes Habermas my main opponent, since his valuations of the same data are diametrically opposed to those explicated in this thesis. In the works of thinkers of differences and their sources of inspiration (one could mention Nietzsche, Heidegger, Bataille and Adorno), Habermas argues, philosophy is no longer able to reflect on ethical and political issues. This philosophy has blurred the opposition between rhetoric and logic. In spite of this almost

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indestructible prejudice, however, it is my opinion that these thinkers not only have succeeded in their efforts to reformulate ethical and political issues, but they also force us to deal with contemporary social and political dilemmas from a different perspective.

Although Habermas criticizes the implications of the philosophy of Foucault, Deleuze, Lyotard and Derrida as being aporetic, it is obvious that their philosophy remains within the discursive practice. This becomes even more evident, once we take a close look at 'the philosopher of indifference', Jean Baudrillard. He argues that thinkers of differences still seem to be preoccupied by modernist views on ontology and epistemology. Therefore, it seems a legitimate option to situate them between Habermas' and Baudrillard's position. It then becomes clear that their texts can no longer be trivialized as mere literature, nor reduced to strictly discursive practices. Moreover, a specific analysis of Baudrillard's writings enables us to pinpoint the ethical and political content of their oeuvre more thoroughly.

By questioning the identifying and totalizing impact of western philosophy, that is, by opening our minds to irreducible differences, thinkers of differences have tried to show us that not only the Difference, but the Other as well, are indispensable to any kind of identity or community. Their insights focus precisely on the phenomenon of the Other as the Xenos (Stranger) that has always been destroyed, banned or superseded by western civilisation. A systematic reflection on the foundations of these identifying and totalizing tendencies must therefore result in a philosophy that turns against itself once it tries to reveal the 'essence' of the Xenos: it has to criticize the roots of its own xenophobic structures. We are no longer methodologically able to define this kind of self-reflection as a critique in the Kantian sense, since this 'critique' is determined to annihilate its own basis. That is the reason for calling this effort a *hypercritique of xenophobic reason*: the genitive 'of' has to be understood both in an objective and a subjective sense.

In short, Part 1 focuses on the oeuvre of Nietzsche and the philosophical relationship with Kant and Hegel in order to evaluate a *philosophy of differences*. In Part 2, the texts and the main issue of thinkers of differences will be discussed. To give a more precise indication of their scope, several texts by Bataille and Adorno are analysed in excursions, whereas a separate chapter has been devoted to the criticism of Habermas.

While the discussion in the first two parts has a primarily critical character, the relation to art in the third part is explicated in an affirmative way. For that purpose chapter 11 refers to a few important art-theoretical and art-critical discussions against the background of the thinking of differences. The artist Kosuth, the critic Greenberg, theorists of art and aestheticians such as Jauss, Danto, De Duve and Welsch participate in these debates. This approach sheds light on the specific nature of the aestheticization that takes place in a philosophy of differences. By referring to the Nietzschean pathos dealt with in Part 1, Baudrillard's critique is called upon in the last sections of chapter 12 in order to neutralize the ethico-political sterility which the qualification 'aesthetical' adheres. In conclusion, in chapter 13, this *being moved*, this combination of suffering and passion, of pain and pleasure, is the starting point for tracing the ethico-political

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impact of the philosophies of these thinkers of differences.

2 Thematic outlines

From my perspective of Otherness, thinking of Difference (in both senses of 'distinction' and 'dispute') circles thematically around a few philosophical problems which articulate themselves on different levels within philosophical systematics: from the ontological through the epistemological to the aesthetical level. As a result, ethico-political implications can be derived. These are problems which have haunted philosophy since Plato. They are closely related to each other: the problem of appearance-being (ontology), the sterilizing impact of aporias on truth (epistemology), the ambiguity of philosophy's relationship to art (aesthetics) and the consequences for both individual and collective behavior (ethics and politics).

The analyses of the issues of appearance, aporias and a specific aesthetical experience within and of thinking form the framework of my argumentation. The three notions, which in the history of western thought have all become pejoratives, are transformed in such a way, that their negative connotations disappear without losing the tension.

2.1 Appearance

In Part 1, a discussion is staged about the status of appearance as treated in the works of, on one side, Nietzsche and on the other, Kant and Hegel. With his search for the essence of the truth of Being, which is hidden behind the world of the senses, Plato has opened occidental thought to the realm of metaphysics. Plato detested the Sophists who, in his opinion, ridiculed the truth by canonizing all sorts of linguistic paradoxes in order to affirm the appearance of the visible world. Given the priority of the Forms, and by means of splitting up or dichotomizing reality, philosophical thought is understood as metaphysics. This tonality still resonates in Descartes' "cogito ergo sum". In Descartes' philosophy, however, God is still the theological guarantor of a correspondence between consciousness and extension, between thinking and matter.

With his critique on metaphysics, Kant - in an epistemological sense - negates God as the guarantor of knowledge: "cogito ergo sum" separates and falls apart. It is only through the mediating function of his aesthetical judgement that he can connect knowing and willing. By means of this he is able to furnish a solution for the antinomies within reason. In spite of the epistemological dualism, language is for Kant philosophically relevant only as a bearer of discursive judgments. As such it is a transparent medium, that materializes the categories of reason. And although Hegel treats language as an anthropological and aesthetic phenomenon - it plays an important role in his programmatic considerations - in his formal ontological analysis language is by no means analysed as a constitutive moment for knowledge. Criticizing Kant's dualism, he attempts to reconcile thinking and being ('cogito' and 'sum') by considering reality and reason as coincident: the endless self-reflective movement of the Spirit.

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From his dialectical perspective contradiction as a transformed antinomy motivates thinking, but eventually is reconciled. By that means metaphysics as 'Formalontologie' finally reaches its most exhaustive, but also most exhausted figuration.

Nietzsche's revaluation of the opposition between appearance and being has repercussions for the central epistemological Kantian and Hegelian notions, respectively for the antinomies and the contradiction. While Kant and Hegel are still trying to find a systematic solution to these problems, Nietzsche promotes them to the core of his philosophy. For Nietzsche the foundation of reality is contradiction, or, from an aesthetic angle, a dissonance that can never be resolved.

2.2 Aporias

For Nietzsche the problem of appearance culminates in aporetical philosophizing. In my opinion an epistemological undermining is at the basis of the works of thinkers of differences. The revaluation of this aporetical tension is the central theme in Part 2. This self-undermining tension arises from its own understanding of its inability to grasp oneself and to grasp reality. Non-discursive forces are always playing a part. As a result aporias appear to be more than strictly epistemological figures. By enduring this aporetical tension, reality can be experienced aesthetically. In the case of Nietzsche this experience triggers the insight that a physiological orientation and all-encompassing imagination are necessary in order to complete the concept.

This by no means implies that thinking aims at aporia as a goal in itself. It is ultimately an unfruitful thought, that thinking could consciously intend an aporia, i.e. its own decline. Even if a certain inclination to 'thanatos' is not foreign to thinking, and although, given its identifying and totalizing effects, it tends to leveling or equalizing and sometimes even to indifference, the observation that thinking is aporetical seems to be the ultimate limit. Tracing a constitutive aporetical tension in thinking implies a deprivation of the last word. Facing an uncomprehensible experience, it imposes a temporary silence upon itself. What remains is nevertheless not a breathless stammering. Speaking has an equivocal relation towards the phenomenon it wishes to speak about. Speaking implies oscillating between evocations of an experience which cannot be articulated discursively and a deliberate restraint in discursive formulations.

2.3 Aesthetic experience

In Part 3, this aporetical philosophizing is related to the context of current art-critical discourses. The qualification 'aesthetical' has a pejorative connotation similar to 'aporetical' in philosophical discussions. Many philosophers consider the aporia a sterilizing figure, which expresses the impotence of the subject to legitimize itself in its claims of knowledge: aporias are considered a dead-end street, or a 'cul-de-sac', of western philosophy. In contemporary art discourses the notion 'aesthetical' in its turn gains the connotation of a sterile, external processing, which is considered more important than the content. 'Aesthetical' connotes pure formality and superfluous decoration lacking

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substance. Even in the avant-garde imperative of the autonomy of the art work with its dynamics of form, color and movement, form is still understood as an expression of an idea. From a position developed primarily by thinkers of differences, I reevaluate the qualification 'aesthetical', in a process which is analogous to the discussion of appearance and aporias.

As a result of a new self-definition of thought, a new position of the decentralized subject presents itself in the 'postmodern' condition. Self-conscious of its inadequacy to encompass reality, the self-consciousness - or the subject - positions itself within an *event*. This gives thinking a new tonality. Affective and sensory experience, i.e. sensuality, is inseparably connected to conceptual mediation. In the light of this new self-definition, an aporia turns out to be more than a logical figure: it is a conceptual form of an experience of an abyss. Shifting from a logical figure to this appalling experience, the notion of aporia is linked to the qualification 'aesthetical': philosophy acquires an aesthetical quality, it becomes an *aesthetical experience*. As soon as the self-consciousness depletes itself in aporetical philosophizing it acquires an aesthetical quality. However, the awareness of philosophers of the aesthetical and creative qualities of thinking is not a recent phenomenon: it is the outcome of crucial developments within modern philosophy since Kant. This is yet another reason for the recent interest in Kant's aesthetics.

3 The trial of thought

Time and again the diagnostical analyses of Nietzsche and the thinkers of difference are reproached for being immoral and of having developed a philosophy that, from an ethico-political perspective, is a dead-end. But this seems to be an inevitable aspect of an abstract work of art: real insight is only established once the dynamics of the work are physically experienced. Philosophy becomes an activity, a process that, as if the metaphysical intention were being parodied, produces and destroys its own foundations. No wonder that the critics of this way of philosophizing justifiably and continuously point out the aporetical, self-undermining impact. However, it usually escapes the notice of the same critics that this is exactly the crucial point thinkers of difference are trying to make. Being aware of the impossibility of producing universal truths or guidelines for collective behavior, they are conscious of the ultimate incomprehensibility, of the abyss dimension of their own discourse. All of their philosophical efforts, all of these 'essays' in a literal sense, have in common that they can no longer rationally legitimize their philosophical discourse, for they have ultimately an ambiguous relation to truth.

In this thesis, thinking is put to the test: how radically does philosophy dare to criticize itself? The new understanding that is the consequence of this trial is, to be sure, not a necessary implication, no more than a matter of taste. An attempt is made to demonstrate that what is strictly speaking *artificial* quality of the philosophies of thinkers of difference is self-conscious in being positively moved by appearances: this commotion implies an ethico-political (under)standing.

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In spite of the radical critique of the notion of truth - the inheritance of Nietzsche - they philosophize, just as did the sophists in the time of Plato, starting with the paradox of the necessity and the impossibility of speaking truth. They manoeuvre within appearances, produce feints with which they dodge past the scholar eager for truth. In order to play their language games they execute a style of writing, by means of which the objectified phenomenon is evoked at the same time as an appalling experience: Bataille describes dissipation by objectifying and activating it in his texts. This is true to the same extent for Foucault's notion of power, Derrida's 'différance', Deleuze's rhizomatic and Lyotard's deregulatory thinking. Thinking becomes an ordeal as well as a disquieting experience that cannot but move and disturb the reader.