The Transparent Society

Gianni Vattimo

ated by David Webb

Polity Press
Contents

1 The Postmodern: A Transparent Society? 1
2 The Human Sciences and the Society of Communication 12
3 Myth Rediscovered 28
4 Art and Oscillation 45
5 From Utopia to Heterotopia 62
6 Utopia, Counter-utopia, Irony 76
7 Disenchantment and Dissolution 90
8 Ethics of Communication or Ethics of Interpretation? 105
Index 121
From Utopia to Heterotopia

The most radical transformation in the relation between art and everyday life to have occurred since the sixties may be described as a transition from utopia to heterotopia. The sixties (certainly '68 above all, but the struggles of that year were simply the culmination of a movement that had begun shortly after the war) saw a broad range of views concerned with an aesthetic rehabilitation of existence, all of which more or less explicitly denied art its 'special' status as the 'Sunday of life', as Hegel put it. The most explicit and radical form of utopia is obviously to be found in Marxism, but it also has a bourgeois form in the ideology of design, which has been widely influential, most especially via the popularity of Dewey in European philosophy and critique in the fifties.' Like the Marxist theoreticians and critics (from Lukics to Marcuse and the heads of the Frankfurt school), Dewey too is of Hegelian descent. In his view, the experience of the beautiful is linked to the perception of a fulfilment that could not survive a separation from the concreteness of everyday life. For if there is such a thing as art in the narrow sense, it points
to a more general sensation of harmony rooted in our use of objects and the achievement of a satisfactory balance between individual and environment. As for the various forms of Marxism, they share the view that the independence of art and the specificity of aesthetic experience are features of the division of labour, which is to be abolished by revolution, or at least by a transformation of society in which the whole essence of humanity is reappropriated by the people as a whole. In Cukics, this view functions primarily at the level of critical methodology (realism does not simply mirror things as they are, but represents the age and its conflicts with implicit reference to emancipation and reappropriation). In ~dorno,~ the *promesse de bonheur* constitutive of art is presented in predominantly negative terms as an exposure of the discordance of the existent — along with the corresponding 'revolutionary' revaluation of the historical avant-garde, which Lukácsian realism regarded instead as symptomatic of pure decadence. But it is in Marcuse's dream of an aesthetic (sensory and sensuous) rehabilitation of existence as a whole that the full implications of the utopian revaluation of the avant-garde are set out most clearly. If, from the Marxist point of view, Adorno paved the way towards a positive attitude to movements of the avant-garde, particularly as formal revolutions in the languages of the various arts (Schoenberg's twelve-note scale, Beckett's silence), Marcuse's utopia is a 'synthesis' of other important aspects of the avant-garde, such as the general transformation of relations between aesthetic experience and everyday existence instigated by surrealism and situationism. In the background of all this stand some of the great names of critical Marxism - Benjamin for Adorno, Bloch for Marcuse, as well as figures such as Henri Lefebvre, more closely linked to the avant-garde.
From Utopia to Heterotopia

and its continuation right up to the early fifties, in situationism, for example.

The relative distance that now separates us from those years has seemingly attenuated the not insignificant differences between, for example, the ideology of design (the dream of an aesthetic rehabilitation of everydayness by an elevation of the forms of objects and the appearance of our surroundings) and the revolutionary approach of the various Marxisms. Amidst these differing points of view, the aim has always been to achieve a comprehensive fusion of aesthetic and existential meaning that could rightfully call itself a utopia. Utopia was, according to Ernst Bloch's famous 1918 work, the meaning of the artistic avant-garde of the early twentieth century. Although these movements were in many respects superseded by the ideology of design (historically, this was the case with the Bauhaus), over the course of a long development (from their rejection by Lukics, to Adorno and finally Marcuse) they became bound up with revolutionary Marxism (and at the level of the masses this bond is one of the meanings, or the meaning, of '68).

This grand utopia was to be an aesthetic unification of experience, and to bring together diverse political- and theoretical stances, inclining them away from what Nietzsche called 'the art of the work of art' towards either design or the revolutionary rehabilitation of existence as a whole. Yet little of this seems to remain now. As far as I am aware, it is rare these days for critique to pose explicitly the question of the meaning of art as such, along with that of the meaning and value of the work.

- What Adorno regarded as the essence of the avant-garde, namely its ability to place the very essence of art in question with a single work, no longer seems to be
the case today. It is as if the 'system of spirit'\(^9\), with all its distinctions and specialisms, were entirely back in place. Paradoxically, even Habermas's work, which presents itself as a defence of the permanent value of the modern programme of emancipation, sees no problem in taking its bearings from the Kantian distinction between different kinds of social action - teleological, rule-governed, expressive and dramatic, somehow reserving the aesthetic sphere for the last of these. Communicative action, which for Habermas is at the pinnacle of this typology, does not really put the distinction between the other three in question, indeed it serves as a transcendental principle on guard against any undue infringements (primarily by any of the interests expressed in the three forms of action to the detriment of communication, but probably also by any of the three types of activity upon each other). However, without discussing Habermas's *Theory of Communicative Action* in detail, I wish only to show that it contains an example of a certain theoretical restoration of the independence and specialization of the aesthetic realm that, according to a tradition of thought rooted deeply in modernity, is here drawn back to expressivity.

Habermas's redeployment of the Kantian tripartite structure of reason is only a symptom of the general situation to which I wish to refer, and is not cited as a necessarily 'negative'\(^9\) phenomenon, nor as a theoretical and practical regression to be criticized (although, as I hope will become clear, I do not share Habermas's position and his strenuous defence of the currency of the modern). This aspect of Habermas's theory expresses the decline of utopia and the return to an untroubled acceptance of the independence of the aesthetic. Yet this is not the only, nor even the primary, way that the relation between art and everyday life has been changing.
in recent years. Habermas's revival of Kantian aesthetics could also be taken as evidence that his defence of the Enlightenment and modernity implies a specific deafness towards many phenomena concerned with the standardization of 'aesthetic' culture that Habermas does not 'wish' to see and whose significance he is reluctant to recognize. Art's retreat within its own borders, after the utopia of the sixties, is only one aspect of the situation that interests us, and that Habermas — as far as aesthetics is concerned — seems to single out in accordance with certain of his theoretical prejudices (such as his rejection of postmodernism).

The utopia of the sixties is in some sense coming to fruition beneath our very eyes, albeit in a distorted and transformed fashion. If, on the one hand, art in the traditional sense of the work of art reverts to order, on the other, the site of aesthetic experience in society is shifting: not simply towards the generalization of design and a universal social hygiene with regard to forms, nor even as a Marcusian aesthetico-revolutionary rehabilitation of existence, but rather in the sense of an unfolding of the capacity of the aesthetic product — nowise the work of art — to 'make world', to create community. From this point of view, the most theoretically appropriate and faithful interpretation of aesthetic experience manifest in recent years is perhaps that put forward by Gadamerian hermeneutic ontology. For Gadamer, as we know, the experience of beauty is characterized by mutual recognition within a community of those who appreciate similar natural objects and artworks of beauty. Judgement is reflexive, in Kantian terminology, not only because it refers to the state of the subject instead of the object, but also because it refers to the subject as a member of a community (to some extent, this is already apparent in certain pages of the
Critique of judgement). The experience of the beautiful, then, more fundamentally than the experience of a structure we simply find pleasing (yet on the basis of what criteria?), is the experience of belonging to a community. It is easy to see how and why such a conception of the aesthetic can present itself so persuasively today. For mass culture has magnified this aspect of the aesthetic's nature, rendering it macroscopic. Moreover, it has shown it to be inherently problematic, such that one cannot remain indifferent towards it. In the society in which Kant was thinking and writing, the community's consensus over the appreciation of a beautiful object could still exist, at least tendentially, as the consensus of humanity in general. For Kant, when I enjoy a beautiful object, I bear witness to and affirm my participation in a community, where this community is the community of humanity itself - albeit thought only as possible, contingent, problematic. Mass culture has by no means standardized aesthetic experience, assimilating the whole of the 'beautiful' to the values of that community which has felt itself to be the privileged bearer of the human - European bourgeois society. Instead, it has explosively brought to light the proliferation of what is 'beautiful', assigning the word not only to different cultures through its anthropological research, but also to 'subsystems' within Western culture itself. In fact, the utopia of an aesthetic rehabilitation of existence through a unification of the beautiful and the everyday has come to an end in parallel with the end of the revolutionary utopia of the sixties, and for the same reasons, namely the explosion of systematicity and the unintelligibility of unilinear history. When history became, or tended towards, universal history - as the excluded, mute and repressed found their voices - it became impossible to think of
it as genuinely universal, as unilinear and, directed ultimately towards emancipation. Even from an aesthetic perspective, utopia implied a framework of universal history as unilinear. Yet utopia has disappeared, even from aesthetics, with the advent of a certain 'universality' in the channels different models of value and recognition have found to express themselves. As regards aesthetic experience and its relation to everyday life, art has not simply 'retreated' to its place within the modern canon. In addition, a mass aesthetic experience has taken shape in the combined voices raised by communitarian systems of recognition and communities that show, express and recognize themselves in different myths and formal models. In this way, the 'modern' essence of aesthetic experience, which Kant described in the Critique of Judgement, is not only made plain as regards its full consequences, but also redefined. The beautiful is the experience of community; but community, when realized as 'universal', is multiplied and undergoes an irreversible pluralization. We live in a society that is intensely aestheticized in precisely the 'Kantian' sense of the word; that is, beauty is realized as the institution of community. Yet by virtue of this very intensification, it seems that the identification of the aesthetic community with the human community tout court, which is called for and is tendential at the very least, disappears.

In aesthetics we experience something akin, albeit with different tone and dramatic impact, to what is happening in science, which has always seemed to be where the world is given as a single object (I am still thinking here of the way Habermas speaks of science, where teleological activity presupposes a sole 'objective' world). Our experience, then, is that the world is not one, but many, and what we call the world is perhaps only the 'residual' ambit and regulative horizon (but
From Utopia to Hetevotopia

how problematic) within which worlds are articulated. The aesthetic experience of mass society, the giddy proliferation of 'beautifuls' that make worlds, is likely to be significantly altered by the fact that even the unitary world of which the sciences believed they could speak has revealed itself to be a multiplicity of different worlds. It is no longer possible to speak of aesthetic experience as pure expressivity, as a purely emotive colouring of the world, as one did when the basic world was regarded as a given, open to scientific method of science. This leaves the problem of redefining the nature of aesthetics quite open, and perhaps makes it impossible to 'define it' by delimiting and distinguishing it: here too, it seems we find ourselves before an unforeseen, and perhaps 'distorted' utopia.

Yet the articulation of aesthetic experience as the experience of community, rather than as the appreciation of structures, only occurs in the world of mass culture, diffuse historicism and the end of unitary systems. This is why it is a matter not of a pure and simple realization of utopia, but of a realization that has been distorted and transformed. Aesthetic utopia comes about only through its articulation as heterotopia. Our experience of the beautiful in the recognition of models that make world and community is restricted to the moment when these worlds and communities present themselves explicitly as plural. Within this there may lie a normative guideline responding to anxieties that, if the beautiful is only ever the experience of community, we shall no longer have any criterion for distinguishing the violent community of Nazis listening to Wagner from that of rockers geeing themselves up for violence and vandalism, or the community of Beethoven or Traviata fans. In arguing that universality as understood by Kant is realized for us only in the form of multiplicity, we can
legitimately take plurality lived explicitly as such as a normative criterion. What Kant legitimately, and not just in the false consciousness of ideology, regarded as a call to the universal human community (the expectation that the consensus of each and every human being worthy of the name would coalesce around the values of bourgeois 'beauty'), has in the present conditions of the history of being become an explicit referral to multiplicity. Self-recognition by groups and communities in their models of beauty involves an intrinsic norm given by the manner in which art and the aesthetic occur, their Wesen, in the conditions of our historical destiny; namely, that a community's experience of recognition in a model must explicitly recall - that is, open upon - the multiplicity of models. Admittedly, this is probably to reinstate as exemplary the attitude described by the Nietzsche of the second 'Untimely Meditation' as typical of nineteenth-century man who, the product of an exaggeratedly historical culture, wandered like a tourist through the garden of history, continually seeking different disguises as though he were in a theatrical costumier's. Aesthetic experience becomes inauthentic when, in the context of this giddy plurality of models, a group's self-recognition in its own models is experienced and presented in the form of an identification of the community with humanity itself. That is, when the beautiful is experienced, presented, and recognized by the community in question as an absolute value. The possible 'truth' of late-modern aesthetic experience is probably that of 'collectionism', the fickleness of fashion and the museum. In the end it is the market itself, where objects circulate that have demythologized the reference to use value and have become pure exchange value - not necessarily monetary exchange alone, but also symbolic exchange, as status
symbols and tokens of group recognition. It would not be too rash, perhaps, to suggest that many of the theoretical discourses of philosophical aesthetics and art criticism today are explicable as attempts to prolong, in spite of everything, the validity of 'structural' criteria with respect to works of art. But not all theories are so exorcistical and regressively evasive. Beginning with Dilthey, whose theses are also found in Ricoeur, and still earlier in Heidegger, the capacity of the work of art to 'make world' is always thought of in the plural - thus not in the utopian sense, but in the heterotopian sense. Indeed, in 'The origin of the work of art' (1936) Heidegger no longer speaks of the world, as in Being and Time, but of a world (and so implicitly of many worlds). And Dilthey himself saw aesthetic (and historiographic) experience as deeply significant by virtue of its capacity to make us live, in the realm of the imagination, other possibilities of existence, thereby extending the borders of the specific possibility we realize in everydayness. For Heidegger, one has only to leave the still fundamentally scientistic horizon within which Dilthey operates in order to see the meaning of aesthetic experience in the opening of a world or worlds, where these are not just imaginary, but constitute being itself, that is, are events of being.

This reading, or rather outline, of the transformation in aesthetic experience over the last twenty years may be brought to a close, albeit provisionally, by setting out two implications of what has already been said.

The most eye-catching feature of the passage from utopia to heterotopia is the liberation of ornament and the lightening of being which is its ontological significance. The liberation of ornament, or better still the discovery of the ornamental character of the aesthetic, the ornamental essence of the beautiful, is the very
meaning of the heterotopia of aesthetic experience. The beautiful is not a site wherein truth is manifest and finds sensible, provisional, anticipatory and educative expression, as the tradition of metaphysical aesthetics has often wished were the case. Beauty is ornament, in the sense that its essential significance, the interest to which it responds, is the extention of life's world through a process of referrals to other possible life worlds. These, however, are not merely imaginary, marginal or complementary to the real world, but comprise and constitute the so-called real world in their reciprocal play and as their residue. The ornamental essence of the culture of mass society, the ephemeral quality of its products, the eclecticism by which it is dominated, the impossibility of identifying anything essential - which often leads to talk of Kitsch in connection with this culture - fully corresponds to the Were of the aesthetic of late modernity. That is, it is not on the basis of a return to 'structural' evaluations, focused on the beautiful object, that one can be selective with regard to this culture. Kitsch, if it exists at all, is not what falls short of rigorous formal criteria and whose inauthentic presentation lacks a strong style. Rather, Kitsch is simply that which, in the age of plural ornamentation, still wishes to stand like a monument more lasting than bronze and still lays claim to the stability, definitive character and perfection of 'classic' art. It would not be an exaggeration to say that neither aesthetic theory nor critique seem equipped to achieve a selective orientation in the world of late-modern aesthetics juxta ypovpia pvincipia, that is, without the persistent and irremediably ideological reference to the structure of the object. Whether and to what extent this insufficiency on the part of aesthetics and critique actually exists is debatable. But if it does, which is my view, it probably
also depends on a failure to acknowledge the second 'implication' of the transition in aesthetic experience from utopia to heterotopia, namely the ontological consequences. This is the source of the extraordinary importance of Heidegger's 'ontology' for our thought. It alone seems capable of opening us authentically to the experience of late modernity without a persistent implicit reference to metaphysical canons and principles. In the case of aesthetics this may be seen precisely in the way it is wholly incapable of considering the aesthetic experience of mass culture not as a mere perversion of authentic values and essences but as a fateful opportunity. Benjamin's efforts in the essay on 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction' led in this direction, but were probably too tightly bound to a dialectical conception of reality for them to succeed. Heidegger, on the contrary, in his critique of the metaphysical identification of being with the object and the structural stability of the 'given', radically delegitimizes nostalgia for both classic form and evaluations based on structure. Only if being is not to be thought of as the ground and stability of eternal structures, but presents itself rather as event, with all the implications this carries with it - principally a fundamental weakening, whereby being is not, but happens — only on these conditions may aesthetic experience as heterotopia, as the proliferation of ornament, as unfounding of the world (in the sense of both its being placed against a background and its comprehensive de-authorization), acquire meaning and become the theme of a radical theoretical reflection. Without this reference to ontology, any attempt to read the transformations in aesthetic experience of the last two decades (or, indeed, of previous ages) as a calling and a 'destiny' would appear to be a mere historical whimsy, a concession to fashion, the weakness of one
From Utopia to Hetevotopia

who must at all costs keep pace with the times. Yet, as we know, that times have a pace and clear direction depends on their being read, interpreted. The wager on heterotopia, so to speak, will escape being merely frivolous, if it can link the transformed aesthetic experience of mass society with Heidegger's call to an experience of being that is (at last) non-metaphysical. oily if, following Heidegger, we can somehow gauge that being is precisely what is not, is precisely what dissolves, affirms itself in its difference insofar as it is not present, only then, perhaps, can we find a way amidst the explosion of the ornamental and heterotopian character of today's aesthetic.

NOTES


3 As well as W. Marcuse's classic Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud (Beacon Press, Boston, 1955), it is worth referring to the essays collected in Kultur und Gesellschaft (Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a. M. 1965), and The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics (1977), tr. and revised by H. Marcuse and E. Sherover (Beacon Press, Boston, 1978).


This 'distortion' is considered on the basis of a central term in Heidegger's philosophy, *Vewindung*. With regard to metaphysics, that is, the oblivion of being, thought can only carry out a 'twisting free' that also follows and accepts the tradition in some way. In connection with all of this, cf. the last chapter of my *End of Modernity* (1985), tr. J. Snyder (Polity Press, Cambridge, 1988).


Cf. the essays collected in W. Dilthey, *Der Aufbatr der geschichtlichen Welt in den Geisteswissenschaften* (Teubner, Leipzig, 1927), and *Strrdien zur Gvundlegung der Geisteswissenschaften* (Reichsdruckerei, Berlin, 1905).

[Cf. ch. 4 n. 9 - Trans.]