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Edited by Fabian Dorsch and Dan-Eugen Ratiu

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An Early Concept of ‘Psychological Aesthetics’ in the ‘Age of Aesthetics’

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ABSTRACT. In 1793 Johann Heinrich Daniel Zschokke (1771-1948), a young lecturer of philosophy at the university of Frankfurt/Oder published a book entitled *Ideen zur psychologischen Aesthetik*. It was the first publication that used the term ‘psychological aesthetics’ in the title of a scientific treatise. Since ‘psychological aesthetics’ as an empirical branch of research in aesthetics did not develop before 1870 (mainly initiated by Gustav Theodor Fechner and his *Vorschule der Aesthetik*, 1876), this booklet is an interesting document for the interdisciplinary open-mindedness of the ‘age of aesthetics’. Zschokke’s Ideas explicitly refer to Kant, who, in a footnote to the 2 edition of his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1787), had criticised the shift in the meaning of ‘aesthetics’ from a theory of experience to a critique of taste in the period after Baumgarten, and had suggested “to give up the use of the term [sc. ‘aesthetics’] as designating the critique of taste, and to apply it solely to that doctrine, which is true science—the science of the laws of sensibility [...]or to share it with speculative philosophy, and employ it partly in a transcendental, partly in a psychological signification”. Zschokke’s treatise represents an attempt to elaborate Kant’s suggestion by a concrete outline of the anthropological foundation of aesthetic experience. That means that the idea of a psychological aesthetics was not the result of a ‘scientific turn’ in the 19th century, but was already included in the broader understanding of the objectives of aesthetics in the early period of the ‘age of aesthetics’.

The common understanding of the term ‘psychological aesthetics’ refers to a paradigm in aesthetics, which, at the end of the 19th century, adopted the scientific methodology of empirical psychology and tried to apply it to the investigation of aesthetic judgements and experiences. The foundation of this approach is usually attributed to Gustav Th. Fechner, who, in 1876, published two volumes, entitled *Vorschule der Aesthetik*, in which he

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propagated an empirical “aesthetics from below” in opposition to the deductive aesthetics of German idealism. Five years earlier, in 1871, Fechner had published a paper entitled *Zur experimentalen Aesthetik*, in which he reported extensive results of the experimental investigations he had pursued in the decade before the publication of this report. In fact, Fechner’s experimental approach and his attempt to formulate the main principles of aesthetic judgement were a pioneering work at that time, and it is reasonable to acknowledge Fechner as the originator of psychological aesthetics.

However, the idea of a psychological aesthetics and even the term ‘psychological aesthetics’ can be traced back to the early days of aesthetics as a scientific discipline. It was Immanuel Kant, who, in the 2nd edition of his *Critique of Pure Reason* of 1787, explicitly reflected on the possibility of a psychological approach to aesthetics for the first time. In order to understand the intention of Kant’s reflexions, we have to briefly consider the historical background.

In 1750, Alexander Baumgarten defined aesthetics as *gnoseologia inferior*, which means the science of the lower faculties of knowledge, in that way distinguishing it from logics as *gnoseologia superior*, the science of the higher faculties of knowledge. That means that his conception of the new discipline “aesthetics” was primarily that of a science of sensual perception (*αισθησις*) and not of beautiful objects, of art or of beauty as an ideal value. Thus, his *Aesthetica* could have been the starting-point of a theory of aesthetic experience, which included those aspects that were the aim of psychological aesthetics in the 19th and 20th century. However, already by the next generation, for which Johann Georg Sulzer might be named as a representative, the subject matter of aesthetics was narrowed from sensitivity in general to the realm of art and beauty. Sulzer defined aesthetics as “the philosophy of the fine arts or the science which deduces its general theory and its rules of the fine arts from the nature of taste” (*die Philosophie der schönen Künste, oder die Wissenschaft, welche sowol die allgemeine Theorie, als die Regeln der schönen Künste aus der Natur des Geschmacks herleitet*). Interestingly enough, Sulzer did not distinguish between the faculties of sensory and rational experience as Baumgarten did (thereby following the Aristotelian tradition) but postulated two “independent faculties” of man, namely reason (*Verstand*) and moral sentiment (*das sittliche Gefühl*). Consequently it was the duty of aesthetics according to Sulzer, on the one hand

“to support the artist in the invention, arrangement, and performance of his work” and, on the other hand, “to guide the amateur in his assessment and, by the same token, to make him more capable of reaping all the benefits of the enjoyment of the works of arts at which they are aimed” (“den Liebhaber in seiner Beurtheilung leiten und zugleich fähiger machen, allen Nutzen, auf den die Werke der Kunst abzielen, aus ihrem Genuß zu ziehen”). The main purpose of aesthetics was therefore to teach people to enjoy works of art in the right manner and to decide, by rational judgement, which was the right kind of art.

It was exactly this shift in the meaning of the term ‘aesthetics’ from a theory of experience to a critique of taste which Immanuel Kant explicitly criticised in his *Critique of Pure Reason*. In the chapter on *Transcendental Aesthetics* he defines this term as “the science of all the principles of sensibility *a priori*”, and adds in a footnote a short remark on the history of the term ‘aesthetics’. He writes:

“The Germans are the only people who at present use this word to indicate what others call the critique of taste. At the foundation of this term lies the disappointed hope, which the eminent analyst, Baumgarten, conceived, of subjecting the criticism of the beautiful to principles of reason, and so of elevating its rules into a science. But his endeavours were vain. For the said rules or criteria are, in respect to their chief sources, merely empirical, consequently never can serve as determinate laws *a priori*, by which our judgement in matters of taste is to be directed. It is rather our judgement which forms the proper test as to the correctness of the principles. On this account it is advisable to give up the use of the term as designating the critique of taste, and to apply it solely to that doctrine, which is true science — the science of the laws of sensibility — and thus come nearer to the language and the sense of the ancients in their well-known division of the objects of cognition into *aisthetá kai noetá*”.¹

Interestingly enough, in the second edition of this work (1787) Kant makes an additional plea “to give up the use of the term [sc. ‘aesthetics’] as designating the critique of taste” the remark “...or to share it with speculative

¹ Quoted from <http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/k/kant/immanuel/k16p/part1.html>

philosophy, and employ it partly in a transcendental, partly in a psychological signification”.

It was some years later, in 1793, that a young lecturer of philosophy in Frankfurt an der Oder, where Baumgarten had taught some decades previously, took up again this idea of Kant. He published a book entitled *Ideen zur psychologischen Aesthetik (Ideas on psychological aesthetics)*. As far as I know, this was the first publication that explicitly used the term ‘psychological aesthetics’ in the title of a scientific treatise. Johann Heinrich Zschokke was an interesting person: Born in Magdeburg, he attended the monasterial school of his home city, but ran away at the age of 17 and spent some time as a playwright with a company of wandering actors. In the same year, when he published his *Ideas on psychological aesthetics*, he also published a novel *Abällino, der große Bandit*, which was soon forgotten but at least was dramatised two years later by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe at the Hoftheater in Weimar. Since the Prussian government declined to make him a full professor in Frankfurt, Zschokke moved to Switzerland in 1796, where the authorities of the Kanton Graubünden granted him citizenship. Later on he held some important positions in the Swiss civil service and became popular as a reformer and author of historical and fictitious writings. In 1804 he started editing the popular journal *Schweizerbote* (Swiss Messenger) and was one of the most noticed voices of liberalism and enlightenment in Switzerland at that time. However, after the publication of his *Ideas* he never wrote anything else about aesthetics.

Although Zschokke’s *Ideas* were not noticed even by the scientific public of his time, they represent an interesting document of the variety of ideas characterising the “age of aesthetics” at the end of the 18th century. Zschokke’s treatise represents an attempt to elaborate Kant’s suggestion by a concrete outline of the psychological and anthropological foundation of aesthetic experience, for example when he traces the origin of art back to “the natural motivation of man to share his sensations with other people”. In this and other suggestions, Zschokke comes very close to considerations and wordings of the later theory of empathy and other concepts of psychological aesthetics. His outline of a psychological aesthetics is based on the concept of sensation and its crucial role for understanding the nature of all art-related human activities. He argues: Since art itself is directed to the evolution of sensations (“die Entwicklung der

Empfindungen”), aesthetics had “to make sensations a preferential topic of its investigations, if it will rightly bear its name”.

However, Zschokke concedes, the essence of beauty cannot be ascertained by psychological methods, since empirical investigation shows a remarkable variability of aesthetic judgement. It is, therefore, the phenomenon of the aesthetic sensibility of mankind itself, its sense for beauty that represents the basic fact for all investigations in aesthetics as a scientific discipline. That means that aesthetics should “not primarily focus on the constitution of objects to which we attribute beauty”, but rather “on the constitution of man as a *sensible* being”. This argumentation is very similar to that of Theodor Lipps, by which he tried to justify the primarily psychological character of aesthetics as a scientific discipline at the beginning of the 20th century.

The human being, which is the actual object of aesthetic investigation according to this line of reasoning, is characterised by Zschokke as “a marvellous amphibian living in the two big elements of the universe: sensorial and material nature”. Corresponding to this twofold way of existence, man is endowed with “two natures”: reason and feeling. In the interaction between these human ways of existence the individual notion of perfection arises only when the object of this cognition, acting or feeling is congruent with the rules of cognition, acting and feeling. That means that sensory perfection is not any concrete quality of the perceived objects but refers to congruence between the content of sensation and the faculty of sensation; it is constituted by the necessary rules and the form of sensibility (“*gründet sich in den nothwendigen Gesetzen und in der Form der Sinnlichkeit*”).

Although these rules and forms of aesthetic perfection have a crucial impact on aesthetic experience, they cannot explain it completely: The peculiarities of a rose as we can perceive it by rational judgment (in particular symmetry and proportionality), create of course the impression of perfection by the cognitive nature of man (“*für die erkennende Natur des Menschen*”), but “*by that* we are not yet permitted to say that it is beautiful; because beauty refers to *sensation*”. The essence of beauty, according to Zschokke, lies in the fact that something that is perfect in a theoretical, moral or physical sense engenders a new kind of perfection in the perceiver’s sensation, namely aesthetic perfection. The distinction between

aesthetic perfection and other kinds of perception corresponds to the relation between sensation (Empfindung) and idea (Vorstellung): An idea may be the cause of a sensation, but to the same extent as this sensation represents the dominant part in the soul ("*den dominierenden Theil im Gemüth*") the initiating ideas move to the background. Sensation, which represents the actual aesthetic activity of man, is therefore unable "to recognise any reason for its existence", whereas reason may recognise these causes but for reason beauty does not exist. Beauty may be the subject matter of science and in so far of reason, but this mental activity is no aesthetic activity in itself. Aesthetic experience is always bound to an experiencing subject.

Although there are some similarities between Zschokke's ideas and the ideas of Lipps and other partisans of psychological aesthetics a hundred years later -- in particular concerning the central role of psychology in the investigation of aesthetic phenomena -- there are also some differences: When Zschokke uses the term 'Empfindung', the meaning of this term is closer to 'sentiment', 'self-consciousness' or to the term 'self', as it was later used by Wilhelm Dilthey, than to the term 'Empfindung' in the sense of 'sensation' as it was conceived by the physiologists of that time and consequently also by Fechner's 'psychophysics'. Thus, there are different reasons why Zschokke's early concept of psychological aesthetics was not received by the scientific community of his time. Probably the most important was the early end of his academic career after his rejection by the Prussian authorities. Nonetheless, it would not be justified to disparage Zschokke's *Ideas* to a mere academic 'writing exercise'. Although his idea of identifying the essence of aesthetic experience with the subjectivity of 'sensation' was in contradiction to the normative tendency of the aesthetics of idealism, it represents an original conception, which, however, was more successfully elaborated a hundred years later by several authors in the context of psychological aesthetics. But it is obvious that his terminology was contradictory to that kind of empirical psychology which was developed in the course of the 19th century. Zschokke's concept of 'sensation' ('Empfindung') was clearly different from that of Fechner and Helmholtz, so Fechner's foundation of psychological aesthetics set a new starting point and did not continue Zschokke's early ideas.

Nevertheless, Zschokke's *Ideas* is a good example for the broad variety of ideas that grew up in the "age of aesthetics", which is the topic of our

discussion. Thus, I would like to go a little bit more in detail in reporting his main arguments.

A further important aspect of Zschokke's theoretical argumentation is his distinction between beauty and the beautiful or, better, "the beauties", which are realised in everyday aesthetic experience. This part of his book reminds us of the aesthetics of the British Enlightenment, where we find many essays entitled "The beauties of [whatever topic]". In Zschokke's theory, the term 'beauty' refers to an anthropological fact, to a faculty of mankind, which is objectively determined by the nature of man. In contrast, the concrete "beauties" which we realise in nature and art are bound to the subjectivity of sensation. This is the reason why they are subject to influences of mood or fluctuations of the individual's life history. Consequently, it is not possible to define an ideal of the *beautiful* but only a concept of the beautiful; on the other hand it is very easy to draw up an ideal of beauty by imagining sensory experiences which represent something "which must be perfect for any *rational* nature" in a way "which might be most delightful for this or that *sensory* nature" ("indem das, was für jede vernünftige Natur vollkommen seyn muß, verbunden mit dem, was für die eine oder die andere sinnliche Natur den höchsten Reiz enthält, im Bezug auf Empfindung vorgestellt wird"). Again we find the distinction between the "two natures", reason and feeling, and due to the subjectivity of feeling all ideals of beauty are, for Zschokke, "just as relative as the beauties in reality themselves" ("ebenso relativ, als die wirklichen Schönheiten selbst"). This immediately continues the arguments of Kant in his *Critique of Judgment* but stresses the possibility of an empirical investigation in aesthetics, which Kant had just outlined as a future development of aesthetics, since his primary interest focused on the systematic conceptualisation of this discipline rather than on its empirical aspects.

Let us have a look at the last section of Zschokke's book which is entitled – rather irritatingly – *Asthetische Pathologie*. The aim of this chapter is not a systematic description of deviant aesthetic judgments, as the modern German usage of the term 'pathology' might suggest. In fact, the title refers to the Greek term 'pathos', which means 'passion' or passionate feeling. This is not my interpretation, but Zschokke himself refers to the physiologist Ernst Platner, who in an aphorism had suggested that sensation in the sense of a subjective experience was rather expressed by the

term 'pathos' in antiquity than by 'aisthesis', while the meaning of the term 'aisthesis' was rather that of a physiological sensibility, which Platner described as a "physical stimulation of organs" ("*körperliche Rührung der Organe*"). In this sense, Zschokke's theoretical conception might be better characterised by the term 'Pathik' or 'Gefühlslehre' than by the term 'Ästhetik'. A crucial feature of this conception may be seen in Zschokke's assumption of "a common urge of all sensitive nature to express its sentiments by the senses" ("einen aller empfindenden Natur gemeinsamen Trieb, Empfindungen sinnlich darzustellen"), which is based on "sympathy", that is, an inherited capacity to perceive the sentiments of others and to understand the common language of feeling. These ideas are very similar to those of the aesthetics of British Enlightenment at the same time, where the concept of 'empathy' played a central role, for example in the writings of Edmund Burke or Adam Smith. In Germany, the empathy concept was introduced into aesthetics by Robert Vischer in his doctoral thesis *Über das ästhetische Formgefühl* (On the optical sense of form) in 1873, eighty years after the publication of Zschokke's *Ideas*, at a time when Zschokke's book had already been forgotten for a long time. It took another two decades till empathy theory became a core construct of psychological aesthetics in the systematic works of Theodor Lipps and Johannes Volkelt. Thus, Zschokke may be regarded as an early forerunner of this theoretical tradition, although there is no direct line of tradition due to his biographical circumstances.

We can find some interesting similarities – in particular to what Zschokke had called "aesthetic pathology" – to the physiological theory of aesthetic sentiments as developed, for example, by Alexander Bain and Grant Allen in England, in particular in Allen's *Physiological Aesthetics* of 1877. Zschokke had already emphasised the biological and physiological roots of aesthetic sensations, although he makes a clear distinction between a physiological and a psychological approach. It is not my intention to pursue these theoretical correspondences, in particular since there is no direct line of tradition. My intention is to show that some of these ideas, which we usually ascribe to the later decades of the 19th century, were already present in the "age of aesthetics", which is the topic of this discussion.

This is perhaps the main reason to remember the *Ideas* of Zschokke,

because a critical review of his work cannot overlook the shortcomings of this book. On closer examination, its originality turns out to be rather limited: Regarding fundamental questions of a critique of taste and of judgement it essentially repeats the position of Kant, with respect to the theory of art it depends on Sulzer and Heydenreich, and its reflections of the physiological basis of aesthetic sentiments refer directly to those of Platner. In so far as ethical or pedagogical aspects are concerned it is rather characterised by a tendency to support conventional prejudices than by empirical impartiality. It surely did not aim at establishing “aesthetics from below”, which was the intention of the empirical aesthetics of Fechner. However, when Zschokke argues that the question of “legality or illegality of a work of art” was not a problem of deducible moral principles but an empirical problem to be solved by an investigation on “the impact of particular objects on the moral character” despite its “probabilistic” character, this sounds definitely more modern than the idealistic “catechisms of aesthetic” of that time.

When Zschokke, in the final remarks of his book, pleaded for “a master’s hand” to perfect his ideas on psychological aesthetics, we may acknowledge this as a realistic self-assessment of his capacity as a theoretical writer. When he states in this context that psychological aesthetics was “one of the most poorly elaborated among all disciplines of human knowledge”, he precisely describes the situation of aesthetics at that time. His awareness of the theoretical development of aesthetics was very clear, and we can see from the references of his *Ideas* that he had a respectable knowledge of the relevant literature of his time. It is in fact a pity that he did not have the opportunity to continue his research in aesthetics.

Let me conclude with some considerations about the productivity of theorising in the “age of aesthetics” and what we can derive for the present situation and the prospects of our discipline.

I hope I was able to demonstrate by my reference to Kant and to the interesting text of Johann Heinrich Zschokke that the idea of a psychological aesthetics was not the result of a ‘scientific turn’ in the 19th century, but was already included in the broader understanding of the objectives of aesthetics in the early period of the ‘age of aesthetics’. It seems reasonable that the narrowing of the concept of aesthetics to a theory of beauty and the fine arts in the period after Baumgarten impeded the conceptualisa-

tion of an empirical aesthetics for a long time. Fechner was right, when he conceived the intention of his empirical approach mainly as a counterbalance or necessary complement of the deductive aesthetic systems of German idealism – he explicitly pointed to “Schelling, Hegel, and even Kant”.

The eighty years between the publications of Zschokke's *Ideas* in 1793 and Fechner's *Vorschule der Aesthetik* in 1876 are characterised by a dramatic development of psychological methods and methodology. Although some authors of the so-called “Erfahrungsseelenkunde” like Karl Philipp Moritz or Johann Nikolaus Tetens propagated a shift from ‘psychologia rationalis’ to ‘psychologia empirica’ already in the 18th century, and although Kant had denied the possibility of a rational psychology at all, ‘empiric’ of that time was limited to more or less accidental observation. It was mainly Fechner who introduced the methodology of systematic experiment not only into psychology but also into the investigation of aesthetic judgments, following thereby the increasing tendency of empirical psychology to adopt the methodology of the successful natural sciences, in particular of physiology. Whereas Zschokke's *Ideas* still represent theoretical speculation about “what psychological aesthetics could or should be”, Fechner's ‘principles’, as outlined in his *Vorschule der Aesthetik*, were directly derived from experimental practice – Fechner explicitly emphasises this fact by pointing to his “aesthetic logbook” (“ästhetisches Dienstbuch”) in the preface of his *Vorschule*, where he carefully listed the experimental projects he had performed from 1839 until the 1870's. If we identify the term “psychological aesthetics” with this kind of fact-based theorising, founded in experimental methodology, we have to award the title of the founder of psychological aesthetics doubtless to Gustav Theodor Fechner. Nevertheless, it is interesting that a general idea of this approach, which Fechner had elaborated in the second half of the 19th century, already existed long ago in the “age of aesthetics”.

I would like to add some short remarks to the question, why this early period of aesthetics was so productive and what this suggests for the prospects of this discipline in our time. I think that the productivity of this early period was at least in part the result of the thematic openness of the Aristotelian concept of aesthesis which had inspired Baumgarten in his conceptualisation of aesthetics as a discipline. As I suggested, this open-

ness was narrowed in the further development of aesthetics. This is the reason why Fechner's proposal to underpin philosophical aesthetics by an empirical foundation was not welcomed as a promising enhancement of this discipline but rejected by the majority of aestheticians at the turn of the 19th to the 20th century. It was interesting for me to see that during the past decades there was a growing interest in aesthetics to overcome these restrictions and to return again to a broader conception of our discipline. In his keynote at the Congress of the International Association of Aesthetics in Lahti, 1995, Wolfgang Welsch rightly criticised that "the *discipline* of 'aesthetics', [...] has restricted itself for a long time to questions concerning art – and more on conceptual than sensuous issues of art"; since "traditional as well as contemporary aestheticians seem to be held captive by the picture of aesthetics as artistic". Therefore, Welsch claimed for an "aesthetics beyond aesthetics", a new kind of aesthetics, which could actually grasp the broad variety of aesthetic phenomena.

In the meantime, this idea seems to be adopted by a growing majority of authors and researchers. Recent descriptions of the current development of aesthetics (for example Barck, 2000) point to a paradigmatic shift of aesthetics from a limited "philosophy of art" to a broader and transdisciplinary understanding of its objectives. This transdisciplinary understanding should, in my opinion, include a re-evaluation of the interrelation between psychological and philosophical approaches to aesthetic phenomena. Also in the new *Handbook of phenomenological aesthetics*, edited by Sepp and Embree in 2010, interdisciplinarity and intercultural discussions are emphasised as something that "could certainly spur fruitful phenomenological research", and in the following sentences "cooperation between phenomenological aesthetics and such diverse fields as art, history, sociology, political sciences, biosciences, and theology" are explicitly mentioned as an agenda for future phenomenological research. I surely appreciate such transdisciplinary endeavours. But as a psychologist I was surprised that of all sciences psychology was missing in this enumeration, even when it only was conceived just as an example. This is rather strange in view of the fact, that, for example, Moriz Geiger, one of the pioneers of phenomenological aesthetics, regarded psychology to be a genuine approach to an understanding of aesthetic phenomena. But also with respect to this neglect there exists a historical tradition: already at the first con-

gress for aesthetics and general science of art, almost exactly 100 years ago, Victor Basch, one of the most renowned French aestheticians of that time, felt compelled to protest against the “excommunication majeure” of psychology by the partisans of a metaphysical foundation of aesthetics.

I think that Zschokke’s intention to elaborate “ideas for a psychological aesthetics” is still challenging in view of the fact that our recent understanding of psychology is totally different from that in Zschokke’s or even Fechner’s time. In this context it is important to emphasise that psychology cannot be reduced to neuroscience or neuroimaging and not even to experimental psychology. There are interesting theoretical developments in cultural psychology or in modelling the emergence of aesthetic judgments, aesthetic emotions, aesthetic attitudes or aesthetic preferences. In this broader perspective, psychology can certainly find an appropriate place in aesthetic research.

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